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Christian Missions and the Development of Higher Education in East Africa: 1920-1960

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I African Traditional Education

Every culture has its own traditional system of education. Africa is not an exception. The form of education found in each culture is designed to meet the needs of the people of that culture. Traditionally, the main purpose of education in Africa was to maintain the continuity of cultural leadership by transmitting to successive generations accumulated knowledge, acquired values, and standards of conduct. As Halley observes:

> The African has his own methods of education in the form of character training . . . directed to fitting the youth to take his place in the traditional life of his group.[1]

The training which in most cases took the form of initiation rites had special value and meaning in African society. They served not only as rites of passage for adolescents, but as a school where the initiates received instruction for adolescent conduct and responsible living in adulthood.

The instructions given to the initiates by the Kikuyu tribal group of Kenya, East Africa, are typical:

> Reverence all members of your circumcision group. Guard your tongue. Do not associate with fools. Do not keep company with persons of underways. Fear everything bewitched or on which spell (or Curse) has been laid. Fear to draw the blood of near relations. He who is fleeing from justice need not trust to meeting a relative (he must not count on his help). He who keeps to himself avoids trouble. Wrong done in fun also brings its punishment. Do not go naked in the presence of your seniors. Be respectful to

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[1] William Malcolm Halley, *An African Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 1207.

elders and matrons.[2]

Among the Kipsigis, reverence for all members of a circumcision group was a highly important aspect of the teaching given to the initiates. They were instructed to have a deep respect for one another. This respect was carried on into their leadership roles in the society. They were also instructed to be careful of what they did.

A person who is responsible must think through the issues before saying anything. They were warned not to make friends with irresponsible people. They were also warned not to murder their relatives or any one who has not committed criminal acts. Among the Kipsigis, there was a high penalty for anyone who murdered his relatives. He had to give many cows for compensation. Respect for the elderly was firmly stressed. The instructions were similar in other ethnic groups such as Chagga and Masai.

The girls, similarly, received their instructions during their initiation. The instructions concerned their behaviour toward men and their role of being wives in their society. Naomi Smith explains this well when she makes the following statement about the Kikuyu community:

> All the time girls are in the initiation hut they are being instructed, that is to say, they teach each other what they know and an old woman is called in as their Mubudi (Instructress) . . . Before the girl may leave her hut, however, she has to be given final instructions as to her future conduct. . .[3]

According to Kenyatta, education of children among the Kikuyu was completely in the hands of the parents and the baby-tender. The mother and the baby-tender provided the early education for the babies through their lullabies and other songs which embodied the teachings of the African society regarding an individual's role and status.[4] In all tribal education, the emphasis was on a particular act of behaviour in a concrete situation. The boys worked with the father and the girls with the mother. The boys learned from their fathers and the girls learned from their mothers what their roles are in their families and society. The boys learn how to lead their families.

Leadership style is a cultural matter. It begins from childhood through observing the parents who serve as models. Our culture tells us how we should lead others. Kenyatta, who wrote particularly about the Kikuyu social tribal customs, stated:

> Growing boys and girls learn that they have one thing to learn which sums up all the others, and that is the manners and deportments proper to their station in the community.[5]

One of those things learned included leadership. The whole Kipsigis society was graded by age and prestige. This was done in such a way that young children were aware of it. The educational system started at home where the children were prepared for what was expected of them by society. From birth the child was prepared step-by-step. Just as in the western world, the child participated in the equivalents of pre-school, kindergarten, grade one and eventually on to college.

The example of the Kipsigis peo-

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[2] Naomi M. Smith, 'A Study of African Initiation Rites: in view of Offering an Adequate Christian Substitute' (M.A. Thesis, Columbia Biblical Seminary, 1961), p. 26.

[3] Smith, 'African Initiation Rites', p. 28

[4] Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: The Hollen Street Press, 1965), p. 101.

[5] Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, p. 106

ple demonstrates that the African societies had their ways of preparing and educating their youth to meet the needs of the society. In this form of education the society's values were internalized with less effort. These values then tended to dictate the behaviour of one's life.

At the age of six, the children were trained to get up at sunrise and take their breakfast between seven and nine o'clock. When there was no shortage of food, the children were fed three times a day — in the morning, about four in the afternoon, and again in the evening after dark. In those days there was no lunch as we know it today.

As the children grew older, they were taught how to look after lambs and kids. They brought them to their mothers for feeding and returned them back to their proper places as their mothers continued grazing in the fields. Children soon became experts at tethering the most obstreperous goats to pegs inside the house. Until they were old enough for initiation, they herded the sheep. They learned the division of labour at a very early age. By adolescence, the boys were expert at a man's job and girls at a woman's job.

Besides looking after the stock and manual work, children were taught to observe nature. Orchardson tells us that they show endless interest in the plant, animal and insect world among which they spend their days. Quite small children can name almost every tree, bush, grass or weed and describe where they grow and what their flowers and seeds are like; how the insects behave; where the birds nest and what they say when they sing.[6]

As in every culture which is self-reliant, children had their own play. The Kipsigis children had their popular pastimes of swinging on a swing made of strong vine from the forest and sliding down a slide made with wet earth. A special form of amusement among the Kipsigis children was asking hundreds of riddles. These were evidently of very ancient origin, as they were couched in archaic language.

Music seemed a natural habit, which was enjoyed from early childhood onward. Girls and boys learned to sing continuously while at work in the fields. Orchardson pointed out that after supper, the singers assembled by arrangement in the house of a person who was popular with children. Girls seem to excel as singers, and their dance movements were both more pronounced and more graceful than those of boys. There was no licentiousness. Orchardson tells us, 'Such conduct is not natural to the Kipsigis and is a most serious offence among children. Should it occur, the parent of the offender has to pay a cow as a fine, but it is very rarely necessary to invoke the punishment.'[7] All these were included in the Kipsigis educational system.

African education was not head knowledge only but was an experience. Education was supposed to develop a life style: how one fits and live in his or her society. It was education which was responsible for the formation of a world view. Within the Kipsigis society, the family served as an educational centre.

The question might be raised, what does this has to do with the Christian mission and its work in higher education? It is well known that higher education is geared to prepare peo-

[6] Q. Ian Orchardson, *The Kipsigis* (Nairobi, Kenya: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1979), p. 49.

[7] Orchardson, *The Kipsigis*, p. 49.

ple for a life style, and not merely the world of work. It is important then to study and understand how societies, such as those living in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans, prepared their people for a living.

II European Education (1920-1945)

Nature and Purpose

European education brought a new direction. The education that the Europeans wanted Africans to receive was manual training. Training is not education but the development of skills for a particular job such as pushing the wheelbarrow. The environment of the Africans was modified by influences to which they themselves were culturally strangers. Halley pointed out that the Europeans, particularly the British colonialists, designed schools to equip Africans with the knowledge to deal with that modified environment and to equip them to survive under a new set of conditions. Therefore, the methods of education had to be changed. Halley informs us that the method of education had to be new, it had to be institutional and could not follow the traditional form of tribal instruction.[8]

Accordingly, the African child was introduced to a world of thought, of achievement and of conduct outside the experience of his parents and of his community. This access to new ideas was bound to make a break in his life. This was the beginning of African head knowledge divorced from life style. This was also the beginning of African educational dependence on the foreigner's knowledge and creativity.

The content of instructions given in African schools was coloured by the political objectives which the British colonialists wanted to achieve. For example, Sanneh tells us that education in the hands of missionaries was used as an instrument of conversion to Christianity and nurture. In the hands of conservative and some liberal philanthropists, education was conceived as a means of social control to instil in the African a proper attitude of subservience toward the white overlords, usually in connection with tilling the land and producing the raw materials needed to feed western industries.[9]

This was a kind of education which did not prepare people for a living, but instead it was a utilitarian education. It was not education that stimulated the mind to question issues in life, but it was education which taught the learner to follow the rule.

Tignor tells us that when the British became interested in African education, they created education based on stereotyped, racialist and educationalist ideals found in Europe at that time. The educational goals proposed by the British educationalist were training Africans to know how to develop the rural areas for the purpose of producing raw materials for British industries. British colonialists did not intend to educate African to read and write, but to learn how to clear the bush, build gutters, and to push the wheelbarrow.[10]

Some European farmers were

[8] Halley, *An African Survey*, p. 1207.

[9] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: 1989), p. 127.

[10] Robert L. Tignor, *The Colonial Transformation of Kenya* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 205.

unhappy about this kind of education because they were more interested in training Africans for agricultural services, that is, training artisans who would be employed in European agricultural sectors.

Missionary Schools

The colonial educators were sceptical of missionary education because of its emphasis on literacy training. Tignor tells us that a literary training for Africans was perceived by Europeans as not suited to the stage of African mental development as it existed at the time because it was thought the Africans were not yet ready to cope with highly abstract forms of thinking.[11]

Holding this view of Africans' the colonial government, particularly in Kenya, started Machakos Industrial School in 1915 and tried to ignore missionary schools. The director who was in charge of African education then felt that the missionaries would not create the model schools that the colonial government wanted and that only the colonial government could create schools to serve as models to other educators in Kenya. Machakos Industrial School was intended to foster British colonial educational philosophy.

In this school, there was an emphasis on eye-hand training, and the school was run under a military style discipline. This discipline was imposed because of the belief that Africans were not yet ready for individual responsibility and required constant surveillance. This approach failed and the system of education in Kenya was broken down into three types of schools. The first type included schools which were intended to serve European needs. The second type was primarily the mission schools which were intended to bring about conversions and to get rid of African traditions. The third type of school included those intended to be established in African reserves and to serve African needs—modernizing and improving village life.

The British colonialists were in favour of fostering the third type of schools, and viewed mission school as disruptive. However, the commissioner of education defended mission schools even though he was a European colonist. He believed that Christianity was an indispensable stabilizing force.[12] He formed a commission composed of settlers, missionaries and government officials to suggest guidelines for Kenyan educational policies. The Africans were excluded from this commission. The commission rejected the idea of creating African teacher-training schools, and recommended increased government support for missionary schools.

The mission schools had an important role in shaping the education of Africans. The colonial government believed that Christianity would instil morality in African society. Because of this, the missionaries became the main providers of African education and they were aided by the colonial government.

The evangelical churches in East Africa were established by evangelical missionaries during the latter part of nineteenth century. The evangelicals were then defined as those who were scornful of secular education and other innovations which were believed to be not in line with their Christian faith. Almost all the early

[11] Tignor, *Colonial Transformation*, p. 205.

[12] Tignor, *Colonial Transformation*, p. 207.

missionaries sent to East Africa, particularly Kenya, came from the northern part of the United States. Many of them appeared to have been reared in rural communities and came from religiously conservative families that were Bible centred and mainly concerned with whether one's soul was saved.[13]

Studies show that between 1900 and 1914, of the 218 missionaries who were sent to Africa only three had attended universities and the rest attended religious institutions. The Bible institutes offered education which can be described today as narrow training. The two-year programme placed a strong emphasis on evangelical theological doctrine. These institutions were designed to prepare men and women for careers as Christian workers, Bible teachers, gospel singers and evangelists. The missionaries who were sent to East Africa carried the same views of education to their field of labour. Influenced by the doctrinal philosophies of these Bible institutes, the missionaries created very narrow and very strict evangelical institutions for Africans. This approach led to a belief that Christians should be confined to religious training, evangelism, theology and music.

Any other education that would improve one's intelligence, skills and worldview was viewed as worldly. This type of education influenced evangelical church leaders and other African leaders in general. Many of the later difficulties arose from the missionaries' insistence on these narrow and strict views. Missionary control of African education and Christianity was so inextricably interwoven, one had to be a professing Christian to be allowed to enter the schools, even though one had no real desire to become a Christian. In this way, the role of the mission in determining African education was firmly established.

Christian education produced two kinds of Africans. The first were those who accepted the role of subservience to the policies of the missionaries. These people were never innovative in terms of church activities and education. They could be described as 'yes' people, who sought the approval of the missionaries before initiating any project in the church.

The second type of Africans were those who were educated in mission but never became subservient to the wishes of the missionaries. They became innovative and creative in their thinking and raised questions regarding their destiny. Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, and Julius Nyerere are good examples of this type. Kwame Nkrumah, for instance, went to the seminary to study to be a priest, but he later changed his goals and became a political liberator in Ghana.

The missionaries were the ones who brought changes in African traditional systems because they believed that the acceptance of Christianity required complete renunciation of the old traditions. A statement issued in 1938 by the interdenominational missionary council revealed the intensity of this belief. Hendrik Kramer, a professor of History of Religions at the university of Leiden in Holland, stated:

> The missionary is a revolutionary and he has to be so, for to preach and plant Christianity means to make a frontal attack on the beliefs, the customs, the apprehensions of life and the work by implication . . . on the social structures and

[13] Tignor, *Colonial Transformation*, p. 19.

bases of primitive society.[14]

The education provided for African evangelical Christians was and has continued to be very narrow in nature; the African themselves had no part in designing the curriculum. This is evident in an ongoing debate between African Christian leaders and missionaries. This debate centres on which form of education the Bible Colleges should embrace, that of the traditional western Bible Institute or that of the liberal arts college. The liberal arts education which is needed today in East Africa is often resented by some Christian nationals and expatriates on the grounds that it does not conform to the evangelical Christian point of view. It seems that many evangelical Christians are making the mistake that Tertullian made in the early church of separating the mind from the spirit.

Often some national and expatriate evangelists have quoted Acts 4:13 to defend ignorance for Christians. It seems that the rulers in Jerusalem wondered how the untrained laity could be able to speak with confidence, freedom and openness before the rulers, priests, Sadducees and others who had formal training in rabbinic schools. I am sure all of us would be amazed if a blue collar worker or a 'red neck' as American people might prefer to call them, walked into Harvard or Oxford or Kenyatta university and give a comprehensive lecture on the ontological argument for God's existence to a group of well informed scholars, and did it well. The scholars would raise the question, how did he learn this? I am sure that this was what happened to the Sadducean party in Jerusalem.

Acts 4:13 was not, however, intended to dismiss the importance of Christian Education as some pastors and missionaries have taken the words to mean. Education is a tool to be used for good work. Sometimes, education has been used in wrong ways. For example, before the 1960s there were three groups who tried to dominate decision-making for African education in Kenya. The first, of course, was the colonial government, the second were the settlers, and the third were the missionaries. Each one of them had different goals for African education. The colonial government was more interested in keeping the people where they were. This interest was evident in a major controversy between the Indian and the European settlers over land, immigration and political representation.[15] The European settler farmers demanded that Africans be trained to take the place of Indians as clerks and artisans. The Indians, who had been imported from India to work on the railway, had gone on strike demanding better wages and better living conditions. It was also more expensive to import Indians from their homeland. This led the Europeans to demand that Africans be given a technical education.

Some mission agencies, such as the Church of Scotland missions, were supportive of this view, while the Africa Inland Mission was not. The many interests attached to African education generated conflict between the settlers, the missionaries and the colonial government.

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[14] Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1969), p. 342.

[15] Tignor, *Colonial Transformation*, p. 227.

Delamere, the representative of the settlers, argued that the country was not getting its money's worth in African education. He suggested that the students trained by the missionaries were of inferior quality and could not serve the settlers.[16] Delamere was particularly critical of mission schools and argued that government grants should not be provided for them. Because of this disagreement, two kinds of education emerged in Kenya—technical and industrial education. Technical education was the kind of education in which Africans were trained to read and write and to acquire some knowledge of mathematics. This type of education would benefit the settlers who were interested in having Africans serve as clerks and bookkeepers on their farms. Industrial education consisted of manual training designed to improve life in African reserves and clear the land for the production of raw materials for British industries.

The settlers, led by Delamere, condemned mission technical schools and as a result mission education goals were jeopardized. Because of these conflicts, a new educational code was established by the colonial government in 1924. An advisory committee, composed of settlers, government officials and missionaries, was created to deal with African education. At this point, the colonial government took control of African education, and mission schools were marginalized.

To this day the perception that mission schools are marginal has remained, and this situation has been harmful for Christian institutions. It is often thought that those students in Bible Colleges are not good enough for anything else. Is this true? Not at all! They are just as intelligent as any one else. They love the work of God and that has led them to make that choice.

III Christian Education

But what do we mean by 'Christian higher education'? We are talking about a well rounded education that provides all kinds of information to the learner, giving the learner the responsibility to make value judgments on how to use it.

In Africa we are calling for a broader Christian education for our young people. We find few liberal art colleges in Africa, although we have many traditional Bible schools which have served their purposes. The African Christians must make their own decision regarding Christian higher education without the influence of outsiders.

Many African Christian colleges remain in a close relationship with their western founders, who generously provide assets and services for their operations. While this is perceived as being liberal action, it is easily converted into a means of insidious control. Goran Hyden, social science research advisor to the Ford Foundation in Nairobi, wrote: 'A person's ability to control or influence somebody else resides in control over the things that the latter values or needs.'[17]

African colleges need services and finances provided by Christian friends. These activities should not be accompanied by the same kind of imperious controlling attitude which is

[16] Tignor, *Colonial Transformation*, p. 210.

[17] Goran Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1960), p. 31.

seen in the secular world in such bodies as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). For Christian Higher Education to be effective in Africa, the decision on the content and method of teaching must rest solely with Africans themselves. This education must prepare people for a living.

However, the vocationalized curricula of traditional Bible Schools does not seem to attract students today. The marginalization of Bible Colleges started with colonial education and has continued up to the present time. The perceived marginalization and lack of diversified curricula in these institutions have contributed to failure of Christian Higher education in mission schools.

The Christian educators of today should approach the world of education as reformers. The curricula must be designed with a vision to influence society. Jesus used two symbols to describe the influence that Christians should have on a non-Christian society. The first symbol is salt and the purpose of salt, as we know is flavouring and preservation of foods. Thus Christians are instructed to make their influence felt in society. They must work tirelessly to preserve Christian values in these changing societies. The second symbol is light. Jesus declared 'I am the light of the world' (John 18:2). He told the disciples: 'you are the light of the world'. So Christians are to shed the light of God's truth and compassion in the world.

If we adopt the position that we are educating Christians who can approach society's issues with the Christian worldview, then we must work tirelessly to create Christian theological colleges which are accredited and accepted in the world of academia. Christians should be involved in shaping the worldview of secular academic life with a Christian perspective on issues facing society.

Inevitably, Christian colleges guided by this aim and wishing to confer respectable degrees must take account of the financial costs involved. This raises questions of fund raising and support, which is often sourced overseas. They need to avoid situations where this kind of funding is dependent on the supporting body approving of the programme and aims of the college. It would be unfortunate for African institutions to find themselves financially embarrassed because their philosophy and activities were judged to be unacceptable to their donors. Instead, the colleges should be encouraged to rely more fully on the prayer of faithful Christian people who understand and support the role of the colleges in providing a genuine Christian higher education for their African constituency.

The Long Weekend

We live by the conflation of Friday and Sunday,
Products of the fusion of the act and the event.
Born of the life-sapping action that was Calvary,
And quickened by the life-giving event of the Empty Sepulchre.

From *Becoming . . . (poetry reflecting theology)* by Garry Harris, Adelaide, South Australia. (used with permission)