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African Education Systems, a postcolonial perspective

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Introduction

European countries such as Belgium, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain colonized countries in Africa during different periods. Colonization of Africa reached its height in the 1880s when in the Berlin Conference some European countries decided to share the continent. The 70 to 80 years after the conference was a time of suffering, struggle and finally liberation of these countries.

Colonial powers, in addition to their interest for raw materials and cheap labour, also focused on imposing their religious and cultural dominance on the people of the colonies. The missionaries played a vital role in preaching "the right" religion and imposing the cultural influence of the West through education.

The purpose of this paper is to critically scrutinize the education systems introduced by colonial powers to Africa. It will attempt to identify the effect of colonial education on the present education systems. It will further investigate what alternatives are available for the countries to change or improve their education systems.

To be able to find out about what happened, what is happening and in an attempt to look to the future, I would like to pose research questions that could guide me through the work. My research questions are:

What were the major motives for introducing colonial education systems in Africa?

What happened to the education systems after independence?

Are there needs and possibilities to change the education systems?

Theoretical Perspective

This work will use as its point of departure the postcolonial perspective. To be able to create some understanding of this perspective I would like to shortly recapitulate how some terms are defined by one of the writers in this field, Ania Loomba. In her book Colonialism/ Postcolonialism (2005) she defines colonialism as "…the conquest and control of other people's land and goods…" (Loomba,

2005, p.8). She further explains the relations between postcolonialism and neocolonialism as, " … A country may be both postcolonial (in the sense of being formally independent) and neo-colonial (in the sense of remaining economically and/or culturally dependent at the same time…" (Ibid. p.12).

Loomba, clarifies postcolonialism as follows:

> It has been suggested that it is more helpful to think of postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as a contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism. Such a position would allow us to include people geographically displaced by colonialism such as African-Americans or people of Asian or Caribbean origin in Britain as "postcolonial" subjects although they live within metropolitan cultures. It also allows us to incorporate the history of anti-colonial resistance with contemporary resistances to imperialism and dominant Western culture… (Loomba, 2005, p.16).

In addition to what Loomba presents above, Aschcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, presents postcolonialism as follows:

> … 'post-colonial' had clearly chronological meaning, designating the post-independence period. However, from the late 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization.

> …The term has subsequently been widely used to signify the political, linguistic and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies. (Aschcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2000, P.186).

Rizvi, Lingard and Lavia in their article on postcolonialism and education, by citing Fanon and Young emphasize, that postcolonialism should be used to understand the operation that is going on after the end of the actual colonisation. They take up Fanon's focus on the psychological effect of colonialism on the African intellectuals after the end of physical colonization of the African countries.

Further discussion on postcolonialism and education leads the above writers to the following comments.

> Postcolonialism's contentions surrounding the relationship between knowledge and power are linked directly to education, both as an institution where people are inculcated into hegemonic systems of reasoning and as a site where it is possible to resist dominant discursive practices. In this way, education has a systematically ambivalent relation to postcolonialism. On the one hand, it is an object of postcolonial critiques regarding its complicity with Eurocentric discourses and practices. On the other hand, it is only through education that it is possible to reveal and resist colonialism's continuing hold on our imagination. Education is also a site where legacies of colonialism and the contemporary processes off globalization intersects… (Rizvi, Lingard and Lavia, 2006, 257).

The "ambivalent relation" mentioned above expresses itself in different ways. On the one hand it was through education that colonisers negatively influenced the local cultural life and imposed their own language and cultural values. On the other hand it was through education that awareness was

gained to fight back colonialism and neo-colonialism. It is also through education and awareness it creates the future economically developed and democratic societies will be possible.

Method

To answer the questions raised in the introduction books, articles written in academic journals as well as some documents available from different sources were consulted. I used literature on postcolonial perspective to approach the subject. In addition to general texts dealing with this perspective, writings with specific focus on education in Africa were used to understand the past and the present and also for an attempt to predict the future.

As a supplement to the literature, what I heard from elders about schooling during the brief occupation of Ethiopia by fascist Italy (1936-1941) was used. My visit to some African countries also provided me with a useful knowledge and experience of these countries which could be relevant for this work. The method combines a literature review as well as heard and observed experiences.

Education in pre-colonial Africa

Before the arrival of the colonial powers Africans in different communities had a system of socialization in place. These systems fulfilled the needs of these communities in a similar way that modern education is serving its society. The indigenous education system prepared young people to be full-fledged members of their community by training them in economic activities such as farming, animal husbandry, hunting and so on. They were also taught norms and values of their community. To defend their territories and if necessary to attack or confront their "enemies" usually the men were trained in the art of fighting. In general the education was "holistic", "integrated" and "comprehensive" by its nature (Irele & Jeyifo, 2010, p.333).

This education was based mainly on sharing practical skills. The older generation passed their skills, knowledge and experiences on to the new generation. The traditional education was gender based and boys were trained by their fathers and other community male figures while girls learned their skills from their mothers. The process involves, in addition to both parents, the community at large (Ibid.).

Woolman, in his discussion of the pre-colonial education mentions that the education takes place "in the context of family, community, clan and cultural group". He emphasised that it is based on "learning by doing" and considered mainly the needs of the community and transmitted through "observation, imitation and participation". According to him "…The content included all of the activities, rituals, and skills required to sustain the cultures and life of the family and community…" (Woolman, 2001, p.31).

The colonial education and the African reality

During the colonial era, the European type of education was introduced mainly by missionaries. The main objective of the missionaries for introducing their education system was to enable people of the colony to read religious scripts. The missionaries were out to convert these people to Christianity.

Muzvidziwa and Seotsanyana in their discussion of the education system in Lesotho cited the following from a material they encountered:

> The primary focus of the finest school was the acquisition of literacy and the study of the bible, the spiritual values and teaching of the church, including religious observances and participation in Christian community. European cultural values were also emphasised, the adoption of a biblical name, the use of European clothing, eating, and living habits (Muzvidziwa and Seotsanyana, 2002, P.2).

The idea of converting local people was based on the missionaries' belief in the superiority of their own religion over the religion of the local people. The local people were encouraged to leave their heathen practices and to follow the religion of the "civilised world". They were taught to believe that they were inferior and that their life experience, worth nothing.

In some African colonies missionaries education encountered resistance from the population. The people wanted a qualified secular education given by government. The secretary for Native Affairs in North Western Rhodesia in 1907 wrote about the resistance. He wrote," It is abundantly clear, that the elders recognize the value of technical education and have long been dissatisfied with the teaching of the missionaries which is confined to the Bible, singing and a smattering of imperfect English" (Ranger, 1965, p.63).

The new mission education and the education later on introduced by the colonial governments were not related to the realities of the colonies and the needs of the indigenous population. The system mainly used to train some administrative assistants and labourers who could work in the colonial economic sector. An article on the French mandate in a former German colony of Cameroon, says, "The French rulers needed African clerks and other junior staff, like other colonial governments…" (Derrick, 1980, p.258).

Education with the focus on the social-economic and political development of the colonies was not on the agenda for this education system. Even if there were clear needs for improving the agricultural, animal husbandry, the trade and other sectors of the society, the focus of the colonial masters was on exploiting resources in the colonies.

According to Coleson, "…The education system that was imported, according to the British and educated Africans was that of the English Public School with its classical emphasis and aristocratic traditions. This meant of course that science, technical training, the trades, and common labour were neglected or by implication were stigmatized as inferior." (Coleson, 1955, p. 174). Tikly(2001) cites Cowen, who refers to the colonial education in Africa as a "distortion" of the modern European education.

The introduction of this limited and theoretically based education was not thought to benefit the colonized people. In addition to the inferior position given to practical skills training, there was a

conscious plan not to allow advanced technological skills to subjects in the colonies (Pankhurst, 1972). Walter Rodney´s explanation of the situation in Congo can be used as an example for the deliberate denial of further education for the subjects in the colonies. According to him the Belgian government and the Catholic church´s reasoning for not allowing secondary school education for the people of Congo was, "…The African "native" was to be gradually civilized. To give him secondary education was like asking a young child to chew meat when he should be eating porridge…" (Rodney, 1989, p.268).

He further gives some examples of the focus of colonial education systems. According to him the British used the content of lessons given in some of their colonies for the glorification of their royal family. The French put their efforts in imposing their language and cultural values on the colonized to have an upcoming elite to forget its own culture and assimilate into the French values. The Portuguese promoted a policy of looking separately on the elite and the ordinary people. They emphasized that the assimilados/civilisados are closer to the Portuguese culture than the ordinary natives (Ibid.).

Pam Christie discusses how the British in their colony of South Africa used education as follows:

> …They wanted to use education as a way of spreading their language and traditions in the colony – and also as a means of social control. They declared English to be the official language, and they attempted to anglicise the church, the government offices and the schools. They set up a number of schools in the British tradition, and they brought over teachers from Britain…

Another researcher, Colin B. Collins, who wrote on history of schooling in South Africa refers to a letter of Cape colony Governor Sir George Cathcart to the Birtish Colonial Secreatry in the 1950s. Sir Cathcart writes:

> "The plan I propose . . . is to attempt to gain an influence over all the tribes . . . by employing them upon public works, which will tend to open up the country; by establishing institutions for the education of their children .. ."17

> and again

> ". . . we should try to make them a part of ourselves, consumers of our goods, contributors to our revenue, in short, a source of strength and wealth for this colony, such as Providence designed them to be." 18 (Collins, 1983, 367)

Italians wanted in addition to their languages to propagate about the great Roman civilization, about their great leaders and other themes that showed the positive aspect of their country. The colonial administrators were instructed not to include in the lessons, the history of conflicts and fights before Italy became one united country (Pankhurst, 1972).

When Ethiopia was occupied from 1936 to 1941, the occupier was both a fascist regime and a colonizing power. Some Ethiopian children who had completed higher grades were forced to go back to 4th grade during this period for two major reasons. Firstly, they were told their education in English was not worth anything under the occupiers. Secondly, natives were not allowed to attend classes higher than 4th grade. According to sources Pankhurst used the already educated elites were undesired by the fascist-colonial regime. Pankhurst writes:

Action against the Ethiopian intelligentsia was conceived even before the occupation of Addis Ababa. Two days earlier, on 3 May 1936, the Duce telegraphed orders for the summary execution of the so-called Young Ethiopians, who had been mainly educated at universities in Europe, the United States, and the Middle East… (Pankhurst, 1972, p.373).

Resistance to allowing advanced knowledge for the local population was common in the colonies. In extreme cases of the bad combination of fascism and colonialism there was an attempt to eliminate the whole elite of a country.

According to Said, "…One of the purposes of colonial education was to promote the history of France or Britain, that same education also demoted the native history…" (Said, 1993, 270). Rodney, summarizes the education system by saying, "…colonial schooling was education for subordination, exploitation, the creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment." (Rodney 1989, 264).

The colonial education system was by any means not meant to develop any of the countries or to improve the life of the people of the colonies. It was dissociated from the reality and the daily life of the people in the colonies.

The postcolonial education system

When the colonizers were forced to leave Africa, they made sure they left power in the hands of loyal semi educated local elites who were supposed to continue on their foot path. In most of the countries the same ineffective education system continued with some modification or as they were during the colonial years.

The Addis Ababa Conference of African state in 1961 indicated that the content of education "is not in line with either existing African conditions (or) the postulate of political independence…" According to a UNESCO report cited by Jansen, the conference recommended reform on "curricula, textbooks and methods, so as take account of the African environment, child development, cultural heritage and the demands of technological progress and economic development" (Jansen, 1989, p.220)

Insufficient reforms took place and there are several reasons for that. Firstly, the few African elites who fought for independence were educated in the West and believed in the education system introduced by the colonisers. Due to this, they modified and kept it as it is. Secondly, even if in some countries the new governments believed in having another suitable system for their countries, they lacked manpower as well as financial and material resources needed for undertaking reforms. The third and very relevant and even actual problem today is the language problem. As most African countries have many languages, it wasn't possible to prepare learners to participate in the education system through their own mother tongue due to the existence of the dominant colonial language and a lack of preparedness to use local languages as a medium of education.

The problem is huge and needs attention and understanding to tackle it. Phillipson cites Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o who says that Ninety per cent of the population in the continent speaks African languages. He further indicates the language problem by saying, "…English-medium education in post-colonial

education systems is likely to produce an elite which is progressively alienated from the rest of the population…" (Phillipson, 1996, 166). Another author Tikly (1999) indicates the effect of globalization of the colonial languages on indigenous languages. That the colonial languages expand by undermining indigenous languages.

In some African countries we can see further complications related to language questions. If we consider Mozambique as an example, it uses the Bantu languages, Portuguese and English (Lopes, 1998). The majority of the population uses Bantu languages. Even if Portuguese is an official language, English was gradually introduced as a national language due to its relevance for communicating with the neighbouring countries which were former British colonies and also for international communication.

According to Makati (1999), in colonial Mozambique indigenous languages were forbidden. He cites a pupil who was punished for speaking his mother tongue instead of Portuguese in school. He also mentions how a colleague was reprimanded by the school principal for using an indigenous language to explain a concept he was teaching in Portuguese. He further gives an explanation by a person who tells him people are taken seriously if they speak in Portuguese rather than their indigenous languages with officials (Ibid).

In recent years even if there is progress in the expansion of education, still there are quite a large number of children of school age that are not attending school. The shortage of material and financial resources compromises the rights of children to attend school. Schools functioning in different parts of the continent are over populated, lack qualified staff and the necessary textbooks and other material resources to properly undertake their work. HIV/AIDS, internal wars, corruption and foreign aid dependency, etc hinders the progress towards achieving a successful education sector.

The future of African Education

The present education systems in most of African countries do not sufficiently consider the reality of the countries and are not contributing to the development of these countries and the continent. The future education should consider using local languages for the first few years. It should also be based on the reality of the countries and should also provide the educated young people work opportunities.

After further discussion of the colonial education systems deliberate devaluation and isolation of the indigenous African education systems, Nekhwevha says the following on language problem,

> Indeed it can be argued that no country ever achieved high level of economic and cultural development where a large number of its citizens were compelled to communicate in their second and/or third languages. Unless Africans hasten to develop their language for scientific and technological communication these languages might be marginalised forever from the discourse of development in Africa. This of course will have direct consequences for the future of Africa… (Nekhwevha, 1999, P.503).

As it is indicated above, the languages of communication, science and technology are second languages. The political, economic and social realities of the countries are dealt with in different medias by using foreign languages. It is only those who speak these languages who could get access to what agenda is on discussion and participate in the dialogue or the debate. The majority of the populations in these countries are isolated from these processes.

Education systems in most of the countries are influenced by realities of the countries. In addition to the factors directly related to education, lack of sufficient budget, political instability, different types of war, etc. hinder the progress of education. The future of education depends on the future of other sectors in the different countries.

Concluding remarks

In pre-colonial Africa there were indigenous socialisation systems. Systems which were developed through time to transfer to the young generation the necessary knowledge and skills needed for the survival of the communities. It also helped the young generation to acquire the social norms and values of their society.

Later on with the colonial expansion non-indigenous education was introduced by missionaries under the premises of preaching Christianity. In addition to teaching religion, it also focused on neglecting and undermining the local way of life. The new converts were introduced to the "new and superior" life style.

The education system was not focused on the need of the people of the colonies. Their social, political, economic and other needs were put aside or totally ignored. The education system rather focused on European type of education. The priority for the education system was to produce semi-educated manual labourers and some administrative assistants.

Elites, who got their education during the colonial times within their own or in the colonizers' countries, took over the rule of their countries during the postcolonial period. The new rulers kept the colonial education systems as they were or with some minor modifications. They believed in the European type of education which helped them to gain power and grab the lion's share of their countries material wealth.

The masses in these countries did not gain from these education systems. Because of the different colonial languages the education systems used, the population was not benefiting from it, they were rather excluded from the processes. In addition to using foreign languages, the education in these countries was far from dealing with the day to day problems of the population. That is why today there are voices demanding that the education system in Africa should be given in the language people understand, enable employment opportunities for the young generation and focus on improving the life of the people of their respective countries.

The present realities of the countries need to be improved and the education systems also need major improvements. Some specific measures to be taken are: To increase the use of local languages to reach the masses; to produce adequate texts and teaching materials locally; to focus on content relevant to the local context and integrate some themes that could provide sub-regional, continental

and international experiences; and the education should aim towards producing, conscious, critical, democratic and productive citizens.

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