EDUCATION IN AFRICA: For What? How? For Whom?

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> Our own reality - however fine and attractive the reality of others may be - can only be transformed by detailed knowledge of it, by our own effort, by our own sacrifices.
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> - Amilcar Cabral, late President of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea (Bissau) and Cape Verde.

The Parameters and Limits of Progress

The qualitative and quantitative problems of education in Africa should not be allowed to hide the fact that expansion of education has been one of many independent African countries' greatest achievements. Over half of African children now do attend primary school - virtually all in several countries such as Botswana, Tanzania, Kenya. Literacy while very uneven has risen and in, for example, Tanzania which has placed major emphasis on adult education has reached 70%. There are now far more African university graduates in Africa than expatriate experts (although this is not true in several countries).

Twenty years ago perhaps a fifth of children attended primary school. Adult literacy was usually under 20%. Expatriate experts outnumbered African graduates - except in a handful of West African countries - by at least 10 to 1 and in some countries by 100 to 1.

Qualitatively there is also progress. Access to schools is less restricted to the urban and the rich. Curricula bear a less distant relation to African realities. Technical and scientific education has expanded relative to literary and social science. Agricultural and adult education have in many countries begun to receive priority attention. Most primary education - and some secondary - is now in African languages with African written textbooks.

The Colonial Legacy

Education in Africa did not of course begin with colonial rule. Nor was all African education before the Europeans conquered informal. Koranic schools were wide spread. A noted university existed at Sonkore (in Mali) several hundred years ago. The then independent Merina kingdom in Madagascar introduced universal primary education in the 19th century before France did.

However, post colonial African education has been largely built from - and in the struggle to change - the European colonial educational legacy. That inheritance was a very dubious one indeed.

First the numbers educated were low even at primary level, very small at secondary and - except in Anglophone West Africa - minute at tertiary. African states at independence faced basically illiterate populations, a lack of educated citizens for middle and high level posts and an educational system on a scale inadequate to cope with either problem. This was despite a very rapid growth in the 1950s as colonialism first sought to co-opt Africans into the system and then to lay a basis for close post independence relations (what we now call neo-colonialism).

The purpose of the colonial educational system was basically to produce clerks, primary school teachers, catechists, semi skilled recruits to the lower ranges

of civil service and business enterprise hierarchies and pliable 'traditional' authority leaders. Only after World War II was the value of better educated Africans to sustain colonial rule or to provide an elite with whom to deal after independence recognised. Expansion of secondary education and creation of universities (with a very few exceptions eg Fourah Bay University College in Sierra Leone) dates only to that period. From the colonial point of view the system made sense. A limited number of Africans with a certain amount of education were needed to operate the colonial system. There were not many such posts nor were their higher level positions open to Africans. More or fuller education could only lead to trouble - a view particularly strongly held in settler colonies like Kenya and Southern Rhosesia and in very poor ones like Tanzania and Upper Volta.

The Eurocentric bias in education can be illustrated by two examples. Africans in French colonies learned (in French) about "our ancestors the Gauls." In the early 1960s a University of Ghana geology examination question on wind erosion was altered to delete reference to the Shai Hills (visible from the campus) and substitute the Thames Valley. Technical, scientific and adult education were particularly weak and vocational usually both narrowly defined and ineffective.

What secondary and tertiary education there was had a clearly elitist nature. In the first place securing a secondary diploma or a university degree virtually assured elite status for life. In the second the faculties and curricula were European dominated, as well as somewhat whimsically chosen (eg classics - meaning Greek and Latin, not Arabic - was among the first departments at the University Colleges of the Gold Coast and Nigeria while for a decade the latter lacked a department of economics). Finally these institutions quite overtly and omnipresently sought to create African models of French and

British elite institutions and - with considerable success - to socialise their African students and faculty into that worldview.

Of course the picture was not uniform. In some /territories - eg Uganda - mission based primary education did enroll a substantial proportion of that age group and did (to cope with limited funding) have more life related activities, less elitist luxuries, more practical work by students and staff. In a few colonies - eg Kenya - African independent schools provided an alternative and less Eurocentric parallel to the state system. In Portugese and Belgian colonies there was almost no tertiary or secondary education and in the former case primary enrollments of at most a tenth of the age group.

Changes and Continuities

The two decades since independence in many African countries have seen changes. The much shorter periods since independence in Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea (Bissau), Zimbabwe and Mozambique (see box) have been marked by even greater and especially more rapid changes. Access - especially at primary level - has risen. Universal primary education is a stated goal backed by serious efforts to get to it in a majority of African states and an acheived reality in perhaps a quarter to a third. Syllabus content is much less overtly Eurocentric and book lists usually include some volumes (though often not the main texts beyond primary level) grounded in the local context. A much greater variety of institutions/courses exist with scientific, technical, artisanal and sometimes agricultural secondary and tertiary education receiving more emphasis. and

But much has not changed, or at any rate not enough. African education still looks to the metropolis (and through it rather than direct to other African countries). Zaire's students know Belgian history better than their own let

alone that of the neighbouring Congo or Angola. (Amusingly one result is the - not wholly whimsical - view that intense ethnicity or tribalism in Zaire is in large part a Flemish-Walloon colonial export.) The Eurocentrism does reinforce a rather superficial and uncritical quest for modernity especially in science and technology with rather baleful results both in attitudes toward agriculture and views on what constitutes "rural development" (tractors, yes; ox ploughs, well maybe for a bit; improved hoes, definitely not).

Elitism remains, transmuted to fit the needs and self view of the new African establishments and/or the would be establishments of the students. At secondary and tertiary level this appears most true of vehemently anti-government students - their support for workers, peasants and democracy is an odd mix of Plato's Republic and Trotsky (both of which they have often read) as opposed to a blend of personal thought and direct involvement with worker and peasant communities. Unfortunately the initially colonial biases against dirty hands and non-metropolitan life have often (not always) grown deeper - a factor in the weakness of upper secondary/lower tertiary technical and quasi-professional education and especially of agricultural education even at degree level.

The bias against women's education and the peripheral role of adult education (beyond formalistic and usually ineffective mass literary and auxiliary elite sustaining 'university extension' work) is eroding - but slowly and unequally. In Tanzania about half primary students are girls (predictable with universality) but formal and 'informal' (specialized institutes in land management, bookkeeping, finance management, secretarial, sugar technology, etc) secondary is perhaps 33% and tertiary 25%. In basic adult education over half the students have been women but in continuing adult and folk college work under a third. In countries with less breadth and emphasis the per centages

are much lower. This is of course a positive shift - in the 1950s 10% primary, 5% secondary, 5% university female proportions were not uncommon.

Adult education - with notable exceptions such as Kenya and Tanzania - has not become central to national educational strategy. This is partly because all education (at least when handled by Ministries of Education and/or Manpower - sic - Development) tends to be formalistic - related either to preparation for advance in a primary - secondary - tertiary pyramid or for training in specific high (eg lawyers, doctors, accountants) or middle (eg legal paraprofessionals, rural medical aides, bookkeepers) skills. The relevance of adult education to - say - agricultural extension and health education is only fitfully grasped. This is true despite a few brilliant successes like Tanzania's Mtu ya Afya ("Person is Health") radio/discussion group campaign on environmental sanitation one of whose most dramatic effect was the construction of improved pit latrines by at least a quarter of all households. Extension workers (and the institutions that educate them) in health, forestry, water, construction and - especially - agriculture are only beginning to comprehend that they are educators, need to know and use educational skills, can benefit from literate workers and peasants who not only 'learn' (ie memorize and replicate) but also question, internalize and teach.

Education As Liberation

In one sense Africans have always perceived education as liberation. That has been true from the days when Junker Afrikaaner of the Windhoek Kingdom, Shaka of the Zulu Empire and Menelik of Ethiopia followed the earlier examples of The Merina and Kongo royal houses in seeking European teachers - especially of technical subjects. Education has been perceived individually and in the family as a means to liberation from penury and drudgery. (The idyllic life of the typical peasant close to the soil is a European arcadian concept not

shared by African peasants nor by those of its proponents who actually try living it under African conditions.) Politically education was seen as the means to political liberation from colonisation because it (and Christianity) - whatever was intended - raised questions, provided knowledge, broadened outlook and gave organising skills. Furthermore, nationally education is seen as liberating from dependence on omnipresent, permanent cadres of foreign 'experts' - a dependency even very conservative elites detest whatever its material advantages to them may be.

But this is a somewhat maimed concept of liberation, in part because of formalism and elitism in education but even more because of the same characteristics in most African societies and polities (as in most Asian or Latin American or European societies and polities - elitism, classism and sexism are hardly African inventions!).

> Development means liberation. Any action that gives the people more control of their <u>own</u> affairs is an action for development, even if it does not (directly) offer them better health or more bread.

declared Tanzania's mass party in its 1971 guidelines. That political ideology has clear implications for education as well as for State and Party institutional, communication and decision taking structures and practices.

It is the reason Tanzania has sought to achieve universal adult literacy (20% in 1961, 70% today), to develop continuing adult education in a variety of programmes (many rural in location and orientation) and broaden the range of para-professional post primary courses (whose enrollment is now larger than that of the 'main line' public secondary school system). The interaction of a mass party, village and workers councils and diversified, relatively open access education related to vocational and participation skills is hard to quantify but clearly significant.

The stress on a life related, diversified education for liberation is even clearer in SWAPO (the Namibian Liberation Movement) educational work. The most dramatic figures are those showing over 3,000 secondary and tertiary students - far more than the performance of the South African occupation regime's schools. But this is not what is by itself what makes SWAPO's educational programme different from more standard, formalistic approaches.

The first difference is the pre-independence decision to choose a new national language (English) as a unifying medium (to overcome the divisiveness of local languages) and a symbol of the ending of colonial rule (as opposed to Afrikaans or German) and to devise programmes (beginning with refugees) to ensure that all Namibians will come to be able to communicate in it.
The second is the systematic integration of work and education (literacy, vocational, para-professional, environmental) in the everyday life of the refugee settlements. There are nurseries and primary schools but these are not the whole of the programme - especially not for adults. The third is the leading role played by women in the educational and health programmes as designers and decision takers as well as teachers and pupils. Even at tertiary level the main institution - the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka - has 40% women students, the highest in Africa.

Education for liberation - especially as designed with and participated in by peasants and women - necessarily implies a commitment to the view expressed by President Nyerere on rural peoples development in 1979:

> If the people are to develop they must have power. They must be able to control their own activities within the framework of their village communities... people do know what their basic needs are... if they have sufficient freedom they can be relied upon to determine their own priorities of development.

To do so they need education - to communicate, to organise, to internalize particular skills so these need not be obtained from outsiders and elites. Most African education - and indeed most education anywhere - is relatively far from focusing on liberation and peoples power in that way. In part this is the result of formalism and of a hierarchical structure within education. But at a deeper level it relates to hierarchical and elitist social and political structures. Precisely because education can liberate colonial and indigenous elite regimes wish to limit it, to shape it in safe technical forms, and to control access while deeply repressive ones seek to break down its independence of thought as well as of institutional structure.

In Beginning

To write a conclusion on African education after at most two decades would be both presumptuous and unduly pessimistic. It is "in beginning" and not, perhaps, by any means as weakly or badly as some critics suggest. The need to explore new ways implies the inevitability of mistakes; the quest for contextually based approaches requires time to identify - test - adapt them; the attempt to develop African standards necessarily has costs in terms of some 'universal' (ie European) standards.

The back to the earth critics who advocate pulling up African education and starting again - eg Rene Dumont - are, even if unconsciously, quite as paternalistic and unwilling to let Africans learn by building their own insights - in part through learning from their own mistakes - as were the colonial educationists. The more reflective Third World educationists with deep African involvement - eg Paulo Freire - are much more philosophical and hopeful, even when lamenting set backs or slow progress.

Perhaps - at least as a precept and a goal, and in part as a description - a quotation from the Senegalese poet David Diop is the most appropriate summation:

> The tree that grows
> There splendidly alone
> Is Africa, your Africa. It put forth new shoots
> With patience and stubborness puts forth new shoots.
> Slowly its fruits grow to have
> The harsh, strong taste of liberty.