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# ●LD ROOTS IN AFRICAN EDUCATION

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"Only where man feels himself to be heir and successor to the past has he the strength for a new beginning."—J. Jahn

It is customary among Euro-Americans to conceive of all human thought as deriving from the Western European mind. Non-Europeans, especially Africans, are supposed to have made few significant contributions to modern thought, except as acquired from the period of European colonial control of the African continent. On the contrary, African intellectual achievements date much earlier than those of Europeans. A good part of man's scientific and humanistic achievements were initiated in Africa several thousand years before the dawn of European civilization. When Europeans were still looking up to their forest gods for guidance in groping their way through the woods of Western Europe, North Africans were already using complicated mathematical techniques to restore landmarks which had been destroyed by the periodical inundations of the Nile River and to chart the movements of the stars.<sup>1</sup> Before the Greeks were able to create a Hippocrates, Africans had developed advanced medical techniques.<sup>2</sup> Also the first zodiac calendar was developed in Africa, out of which emerged the present scientific concept of the regularity of time. It was in Africa that some of the earliest techniques of mining, iron smelting, and casting were invented.<sup>3</sup> It is well-known that one of the earliest forms of writing was developed in Africa, namely, the system of writing called hieroglyphics.

Archeological and historical evidence point to Africa shortly after 3000 B.C. as the place and time of birth of a number of scientific devices which later became crucial in the development of technology in the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup> If for a number of centuries African technology remained rather stagnant, if not downright backward, the reasons could be derived more from the normal up-and-down cycles which typify human technological development than from racial inferiority, as some might wish to conclude.

The present upsurge of educational interest in Africa will revive rather than initiate the African involvement in scientific pursuits.

### ***Formal and Informal Education***

Education can be conveniently classified into two types: *formal* and *informal*. All human societies have both types in different degrees. All societies use more of the informal than of the formal methods of educating their young, for obvious reasons. In some societies informal methods of education do predominate over formal ones, but to the unpracticed eye the latter do not seem to exist. Formal education can simply be equated with schooling; while informal education consists in overt training by elders, in the emulation of older children by younger ones, in observation at ceremonies where only the mature are active participants, or in sitting by while parents or their surrogates go about their daily tasks and watching what is done. The latter form of education includes the inculcation of moral values and proper conduct, by the correction of an infringement of an accepted code by admonition, ridicule, or corporal punishment. This system uses both positive and negative measures in bringing up a child. In many African societies praise is lavished on the child who successfully performs an act, and various ways of encouraging him to do things he may be hesitant to try are also used.<sup>5</sup> In some West African societies bells are attached to the ankles of an infant who is learning to walk, so that he will increase his efforts.

When the author of this paper was a young child, he was taught the history of his clan informally, through practical inferences relating to actual situations which he was experiencing. In many African societies the name of every newly born child has to be related to a historical event or situation or to that of an important member of the clan. As the child grows he is given every opportunity to know and respect, sometimes love, the individual after whom he was named. If the child's namesake was an outstanding individual, which is most often the case, he is encouraged to live up to his standards.

In simple rural communities, this system of education is adequate in preparing the young adolescent to fit into the day-to-day living of his

society. But as society grows large and the simple means of production become inadequate, it is necessary to develop more formal systems of educating the young. In Africa this situation developed several thousand years ago, especially along the Nile river valley and in various regions of the continent. The earliest of these systems are the so-called *initiation schools*, prevalent in so many African societies. Also the African *secret societies* perform the same functions and can be considered as embryonic formal institutions in which schooling is given to the young. Every secret society provides, in its initiation rites, a certain amount of social knowledge and instruction which enables the individual to cope with his immediate environment. The initiation or "bush" schools, such as the Poro and Sande societies of Africa, are undoubtedly the veritable educational example, formally recognized as such within their communities. Their object is to turn immature boys and girls into full-fledged members of the adult community. Their aim is to convert the individual into a man or woman with all that these terms imply within the given society.<sup>6</sup>

Among many African societies the psychological effect is secured by a combination of symbolic and practical means. The Poro initiate, for example, is made to imagine that he is being swallowed by the spirit as he enters the bush, as marks are made on his back signifying the spirit's teeth. At the end of his period of training he is delivered by the spirit and reborn.<sup>7</sup> The discipline imposed on the initiates in the "bush" school includes stress upon obedience to the rules of the society and to the social regulations of the larger community. This is achieved by various impressive ways beginning with the entry into the bush. As Kenneth A. Little puts it, "Throughout the session every opportunity is taken to enhance the mysterious and terrifying characteristics of the Poro spirit itself in the minds of the initiates. The boys learn their lessons in this atmosphere, and are made to feel at the same time that they are absorbing something of the spirit's own qualities. Through connection with the spirit, they have intercourse with the supernatural world, and hence with a special source of power which carries the stamp of validity. A thing is true, therefore, because it has been learned in Poro."<sup>8</sup>

The elders and senior members of the society act as teachers and they are responsible for effecting the proper psychological basis of the ceremonies and rituals that the young initiates undergo. As much as possible the social life of the bush school must approximate the social life of the larger community; that is, the initiates learn their roles as men in an immature world of their own. What sounder pedagogical method would one wish to have even in present-day education?

In many ways the organization and the method of the African secret

societies resemble those of modern European and American societies, such as scouting, Greek letter societies, and the like. As in modern scouting, Poro societies do not allow their initiates to bring with them any modern equipment. They must provide all their material requirements, including part of their food, from their own ingenuity. They are put through a series of tough situations, including little sleep, hard labor, singing in groups, long walks, and uncomfortable living quarters. The training may also include a certain amount of traditional law and customs, with practical examples provided by mock courts and trials in which the initiates enact the roles of their elders. In some initiation schools the young are taught arts and crafts, agricultural techniques, fishing, hunting, etc.

In girls' initiation schools the instruction includes, *inter alia*, attitudes toward their husbands, other men, and their fellow-wives, aside from some complementary techniques of homecraft, mothercraft, and various duties which a housewife is expected to perform.<sup>9</sup>

A common characteristic of all initiation schools is the inculcation of a general sense of comradeship. Initiates tend to obtain a feeling of participating in a national institution. As Kenneth A. Little says, "The common bonds of the society unite men with men, and women with women, as fellow-members over a very wide area, and to an extent which transcends all barriers of family, clan, tribe, and religion. It is this corporate sense arising largely out of the memory of experiences shared at an impressionable age which is mainly responsible for the extra cultural significance of Poro and Sande. It is something quite apart from a person's social status and position, upon which he or she can draw at any time for mental and moral reassurance."<sup>10</sup>

### ***African Education During the Colonial Period***

Before one can begin to discuss the relevance of the traditional system of education, it is necessary to give a brief survey of the influence of the various colonial traditions imposed upon the African during the last one hundred years. Therefore, any description of African social life as viewed from any angle, and any attempt to forecast the future of educational policies and practices of Africa, must involve an assessment of European colonialism. This should include an analysis of the impact upon the African school of European philosophies and techniques of teaching. One common factor in this situation was that in practically all African societies education was controlled by people whose cultural outlook was altogether foreign to Africa. This in itself had a significant bearing not only on the policies and methods used in framing and carrying out educational policies, but also in the kind of psychological atmosphere in which the African child had to study.

In this connection, this writer has to resort to his own experience for some illustrations. Of the total of 30 years of schooling, the author spent almost one-half of it in a purely traditional environment, in which he acquired most of his basic education. In that first period, his education was given against the background of his people's historical, mythical, religious, and customary influences. Everything fitted into a world picture that had coherence. But when he entered European-controlled schools he found himself overwhelmed by philosophies and practices which had little relevance to his life. It took him much longer than normal to enter into the logical structure of the culture which composed the educational milieu in which he had to learn. In this new cultural environment he was forced to downgrade a large part of the wisdom of his ancestors; the meaning of his religious traditions had to be watered down into superstitious beliefs; his concept of his people, and therefore of himself, had to shift into a much lower category than was good for him.

This situation was definitely a handicap for the proper educational atmosphere in which the African child was expected to compete with the European child. This was aside from the handicaps occasioned by the fact that the medium of communication was an altogether foreign language and the textbooks used were written for European children.

Another important fact to be considered is the multiplicity of cultural agencies which were directing and controlling education during the colonial period. The first and most important of these was the European governments controlling the various parts of the African continent. These can be divided into two main categories, namely, the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin governments. The latter can further be divided into the French-speaking governments of France and Belgium and the Hispano-Portuguese governments of Spain and Portugal. Each one of these governments had a different educational philosophy consistent with its national life and traditions. The Anglo-Saxon colonies, for example, were guided by an educational policy which reflected the prevailing way of life in the British Isles, where the various ethnic groups are allowed to stress their own cultural traditions. We are referring to the systems of education as they apply to the English, the Welsh, the Scots, and the Irish.

It is possible to view the influence of this outlook from both the positive and the negative points of view. Viewed positively, this outlook on education tended to encourage national and cultural pride in all African societies in which it was applied. At the same time, it could have been responsible for the encouragement of a negative kind of tribalism, by enabling each linguistic and ethnic group to inculcate in its young a sectarian view of life. However, it must be admitted, there

has been little evidence of the negative effects of this kind of outlook on modern African life, especially when compared to the balkanization which followed Latin-European colonialism.

In Latin-European colonies there tended to be a concentration of cultural values favoring Europe, and consequently downgrading those of Africa. In this system schools were viewed primarily as agencies for the spread of European languages and culture. The educational policies followed by these European powers, therefore, reflected their governments' unique concept of their colonial responsibility, namely, to work toward integration of the Africans within their control into French, Portuguese, or Spanish culture and society, rather than toward the goal of eventual self-government. In order to achieve this, these Latin-European governments encouraged the spread of Christian missionary institutions, the use of only the official European language in all instruction, and the direct inculcation of national values of the European power in control.

Some of the consequences of these systems of educational control have yet to be analyzed. There seems to be a somewhat violent reaction against this Latin cultural domination. We are referring to the vehemence with which French-African *values* claim to have some mystical power called *Negritude*, which is supposed to derive from a combination of some properties of African culture and "blackness" and which enables the possessor of such properties to behave in ways that are intrinsically different from other racial groups. Leopold Senghor defines *Negritude* as "the whole complex of civilized values—cultural, economic, social, and political—which characterize the black peoples, or more precisely, the Negro-African world."<sup>11</sup> This is a political mystique probably meant to rally the African masses for a more effective push against European colonialism. In a way, the British-educated African perhaps means the same thing when he speaks of the "African personality." Since in both Latin and Anglo-Saxon colonial systems the educational systems were dominated by foreign philosophies and methods, it may not be surprising that "la *Negritude*" and "the African personality" had to be invented as tools for boosting African self-respect. As Senghor says, "Paradoxically, it was the French who first forced us to seek its essence, and who then showed us where it lay . . . when they enforced their policy of assimilation and thus deepened our despair. . . . Early on, we had become aware within ourselves that assimilation was a failure; we could assimilate mathematics or the French language, but we could never strip off our black skins or root out our black souls. And so we set out on a fervent quest for the Holy Grail: our Collective Soul."<sup>12</sup>

One of the major forces which have been used by European colonial

powers in the education of the African people is the Christian missionary effort. As in the countries of Western Europe, so in their African colonies, formal education was first conceived as a function of the Christian churches. The earliest European-controlled schools in Africa were instituted by Christian missionaries in the sixteenth century. It was at the mission schools in practically all parts of Africa that the first steps in education were taken to teach systematically the three R's. This interest was enhanced by the desire to convert the African to Christianity. Most of the educational effort by Christian groups was initiated, financed, and staffed from Europe and North America. The missionaries were often organized as farm colonies, as medical aid posts, but always they established some sort of school, however rudimentary. Even now a large proportion of African schools are still under the control of these missionary institutions. It can even be said without exaggeration that the Christian missions were responsible for demonstrating to the rest of the European people that Africans were also capable of engaging in the same intellectual pursuits as all other racial groups. For quite a long time Christian missions bore alone all the responsibilities of planning, financing, and running the schools in Africa, with little help from colonial governments. Even today in Portuguese colonies most Christian missions receive no subsidies from the government.<sup>13</sup>

The main purpose of Christian mission education is to convert the African. Consequently it is no surprise that the philosophy guiding the Christian mission school has tended to be more in keeping with European Christian morality than with African principles. In so far as African society was being directed toward a European system of life, and in view of the fact that forces were at work bringing about an industrial, i.e., Western European civilization, the molds upon which African education was being cast could perhaps be defended. However, viewed from the vantage point of the present day, Christian mission schools left a great deal to be desired. As we pointed out above, the African has had his own methods of education which missionaries should never have ignored. Character training and instruction in crafts, or in case of girls, training in the duties of domestic life, were always part and parcel of African education. The initiation ceremonies or "regimental training" mentioned above are usually the culminating point, and the system is directed toward fitting the youth to take his place in the traditional life of his people.<sup>14</sup> Lord Hailey summarizes the situation thus: "Social obligations form the core of all teaching given by tribal elders. It would be wrong to overlook the value of this indigenous type of education, and there have been some who have sought to adjust its methods to the needs of a more formal type of in-



struction which modern conditions have seemed to require. It may well be that their chief difficulty has been to reproduce the atmosphere, so essentially African, in which traditional instruction of this type is usually given." 15

Let it not be concluded that we are pleading for the renewal of an educational philosophy that would fit the African to an outdated way of life. Far from it. All we are insisting upon is that no educational philosophy is worth its salt if it ignores the main elements of the way of life of the people it purports to serve. If it has to be admitted, as it must be, that the environment of the African is being radically changed by influences emanating from various directions, then his education must be designed not only to equip him to deal with these changes, but also to enable him to find a base upon which to orient himself. Logic alone would dictate that that base should be as close to the African soil as possible.

The conclusion made by some Christian missionary groups and, by most European colonial governments, that African cultures were not suited to provide the proper moral basis for modern education, was rather presumptuous, to say the least. Pedagogy, if nothing else, dictates that the African child be introduced to the world of thought, of achievement, and of conduct which lies ahead of him through the backlog of his own cultural experience. Anything short of this will be the continuation of the European idea of creating an élite of *assimilados*, *evolúes*, and the so-called "civilized Africans." Modern Africa needs educated Africans who not only understand, but live in the spirit of their continent.

### ***Old Roots in African Education***

The "old roots" of which we speak in African education are not remote ideas gleaned out of ancient texts; they are the ideas and sentiments which guide the lives of millions of people today. They are the ideas and sentiments which served as motivating forces for millions of people over centuries. For almost one hundred years, however, during the colonial interlude, those ideas and sentiments were downgraded, and attempts were made to deliberately discredit them in the eyes of the young. Now that Africa is fast gaining her political independence, an effort must be made to regain intellectual and cultural self-respect. This cannot be done except through the work of African men and women. Already an effort is being made by African scholars to reinterpret their own cultural heritage in such a way that their young will be able to derive intellectual and spiritual nourishment from it. The final product of this reinterpretation, however, will reflect in many ways the impact of European presence in Africa. Therefore the

old roots of African education will re-emerge, but the plants which will grow out of them will tend to be hybrids combining Western European, Christian, and African systems of thought.

The African educator who will accept this responsibility of pointing out the "old roots" so that they may be watered and given the proper modern fertilizers must have as clear a conception of his culture as possible. He cannot wait for the non-African scholar to point them out to him. For more than one hundred years Africa has had to suffer under the conception of the African past formed by Europeans. The present and the future of Africa must be determined by the conception formed by an African mind.

To those of us who have had the privilege of studying it, African culture appears as an unbroken line, and as the only legitimate heir of tradition in our continent. As Janheinz Jahn wrote, "Only where man feels himself to be heir and successor to the past has he the strength for a new beginning."<sup>16</sup>

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
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