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Education and Literacy

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CHAPTER 17

EDUCATION AND LITERACY

CAROL SUMMERS

IN 1935, the educationist C. T. Loram summarized the aims of education and literacy in colonial Africa by asserting that 'education is the process by which a human being is changed from what he is to something that those in authority wish him to be'. Loram argued that 'the objective of education in Africa is to produce the good African—the Native who is proud to be an African, appreciative of the finer elements in his culture, willing and anxious to accept European culture in so far as it is complementary and supplementary to his own, quite unwilling to be an imitative or unoriginal White man'.¹

Loram's definition of education as planned by the powerful for the social construction of useful and 'good' Africans, along with his implicit concerns about bad or disruptive literate individuals, represented the views of many educationists during the colonial era. Such views, moreover, survived the end of colonial rule, re-emerging at the centre of shifting debates over how educational institutions and pedagogies should either persist or be challenged. Social utility defined education, not its specific content in reading, arithmetic, religious faith, business, or gardening. Struggles over educational planning were less over whether it was a form of social control than over what sort of future should be planned: either one in which educated elites led Africans towards a European-style model of civilization, or one rooted in an adapted form of education that emphasized established African identity and sought gradually to develop the masses in locally appropriate ways with an emphasis on community cohesion and social peace. Yet these alternative pathways only very partially capture the lived experiences of schoolchildren and teachers, parents and administrators, graduates and dropouts, in formal and informal schools across Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Recent histories of education and literacy in modern Africa have drawn less on the elaborate plans of experts and more on the experiences of individuals who acquired and deployed the technologies of literacy for their own purposes and who struggled to access, escape from, or transform schools. These newer histories pay attention not simply to official intentions and institutional structures but to people such as the Tanzanian speaker who told secondary school graduates in 1992 that 'Any parent who loves a

child... will do everything possible, if it is to sell their banana grove, if it is to sell a cow, if it is to sell a shirt... so that the parent can pass on education to the child... we do not have any valuable inheritance that we can give our children that is more valuable than education.² For the speaker, it was education itself, rather than a more abstract civilizational goal, that was important enough to demand parental sacrifices that upended social orders based on land, cattle, and patriarchal authority. New histories which place students and parents at their centre in many ways echo colonial warnings of how schooling and literacy might unleash unintended and unsettling social change. Yet they routinely celebrate the resulting transformations as evidence of creativity and possibility in a volatile and changing world.

COLONIAL LEARNING

The beginnings of literate education in much of Africa in the nineteenth century represents a key development in the continent's modern history. The libraries of Timbuktu containing manuscripts in Arabic and *ajami* (i.e. vernacular languages written in Arabic script) and those of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church containing works in Ge'ez are important symbols of precolonial African literary culture. They lack direct continuity, however, with modern writing, books, schools, and literate communities that emerged on the continent in the context of the encounter with European missionaries, traders, and colonial states. Knowledge transfer, intellectual activity, and most other valued aspects of life are, of course, possible without literacy. Intellectuals both within Africa and beyond, though, have seen distinctively *modern* selves, communities, and politics as fundamentally connected to a world of printed books, documents, and news, usually accessed through some sort of formal schooling. From at least the nineteenth century, as in some earlier cases, African intellectuals sought mastery of literacy in both European and vernacular languages and saw education as a way to make the continent modern and strong, transforming it from a source of human captives to a centre of new ideas and renewed civilization. The Sierra Leonean doctor James Africanus Horton, for example, exhorted the youth of Africa in 1868 to 'study... to obtain the combined attractive influence of knowledge and wisdom... book-learning and virtue, so that they may... bring their happy influences to bear on the regeneration of their country'. Pioneering pan-Africanist thinker Edward W. Blyden went even further in his inaugural address as president of Liberia College in 1881, delineating a curriculum organized around educating young men as the future leaders to take forward his idea that 'the African must advance by methods of his own'.³ Even within West Africa's nineteenth-century jihadist states such as the Sokoto Caliphate, recent scholarship has emphasized that literate education and propaganda was as key as military power in transforming territories seized into properly Muslim parts of new Islamic realms.⁴

By the beginning of the twentieth century, literacy and education in Africa were more firmly connected to Christian missions and European imperial ideas of

civilization and progress than to concepts of continent-wide regeneration or Islamic purification. Mission adherents across the continent were popularly referred to as 'book people' or 'readers', as Protestant missions routinely required basic literacy for baptism and even Catholics sought converts through education.⁵ Mission schools taught the elements of literacy and colonial practice, catechizing the young and their elders throughout the week and then holding Sunday services that were often mandatory for school-goers. Successful graduates reaped real rewards in colonial systems as they mobilized new skills to become not simply evangelists and teachers, but also government-appointed interpreters, clerks, and chiefs. Historical anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff, impressed by the meticulous records kept by both missionaries and Tswana converts in nineteenth-century southern Africa, have seen this as the core of a hegemonic colonial project. Literacy—a basic ability to read vernacular translations of the Bible and other religious and moral literature—was a key element of conversion and aim of the mission educational project. But even in the earliest years, literacy and schooling were linked to secular employment, social mobility, class formation, and cultural transformation. Curricula thus explicitly incorporated timetables that would introduce students to colonizers' ideas of time. Teachers championed new sorts of clothing and consumption patterns that included suits, soap, and square houses, educating bright youth to be useful as servants and workers in colonial enterprises. And successful students internalized the messages of transformation, routinely emerging from these schools with ideas of themselves as progressive leaders of their people.⁶

By the late nineteenth century, in elite schools from Sierra Leone's Fourah Bay College to South Africa's Lovedale College, young men left schools with explicitly modern identities. These individuals wrote in English and other languages, including Yoruba, Luganda, Sotho, Xhosa, and Zulu, grappling with the politics of language, community, and identity and in some cases becoming the pioneers of an indigenous print culture. The missions that saw literacy as basic to Christian identity actively translated scriptures and liturgies, and sponsored local printing presses that also produced books, pamphlets, and newspapers. Colonial and Christian influences began to impact upon the reformulation of local identities and visions of the past and the future, inscribed in publications that became iconic for subsequent generations, such as Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* (1921, but completed 1897), Apolo Kagawa's *Basekabaka be Buganda (The Kings of Buganda)*, 1901), and Tiyo Soga's journalism and Xhosa translations.

The strong association between Christian missions and schools could cause problems for Muslims. Quranic schools during the colonial era generally lacked the social prestige or usefulness of Christian or secular schools, a distinction which reshaped the class basis of mixed societies like Uganda, where Muslims without government-recognized schooling were pushed out of government posts and grew to dominate trade. In regions dominated by Muslims, such as much of French West Africa, which often had few if any Christian missions, Western education was therefore sparse. Government schools, often begun as elite institutions for the 'sons of chiefs,' provided an amalgam of Western and Islamic education that often satisfied no one.⁷

Schools in colonial Africa, whether affiliated with missions or not, were at the centre of hopes and fears of social change and disruption for missionaries, officials, students, parents, and others. Conventional typologies of colonial schooling in Africa emphasize conquering states' distinct ideologies of education and development: British colonies emphasizing vernaculars in the service of indirect rule, French colonies assimilating students through French curricula and culture, and the Belgian Congo paternalistically developing an emphasis on primary education coupled with a rejection of secondary and higher education.⁸ Detailed studies across the continent, however, show more nuanced, often overlapping patterns of educational policy and provision, as all colonial governments and educators struggled with limited material and human resources and widespread fears of unrest. Loram and others might see schools as basic to colonial development, but colonial states routinely left them underfunded. Colonized Africans, however, increasingly sought schooling for their children and sometimes themselves, often supporting schools when colonial state funds proved inadequate. At times, this moved school practices far from the intentions of colonial planners. In Uganda, notables taxed themselves and their clients and provided money and land for schools, from a flagship college built on Buganda's coronation grounds to simple rural classrooms sponsored by local chiefs. Even in tightly regulated Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), students rejected government limits on their education, pushing for—and achieving—post-primary education. By the middle decades of the colonial rule, parents and patrons often valued schooling. Children's work experiences, apprenticeships, and initiation might continue to provide important knowledge, but school mattered enough to justify forfeiting children's work to provide time for education, paying fees and buying supplies, or donating labour and resources.

Even as students, parents, and community leaders demanded school places, capacity remained limited even for basic primary schooling, let alone secondary education. Many students worked as servants or taught lower level pupils as part of their training, with limited time for their own lessons. Teachers' qualifications varied dramatically and pedagogy could be basic, with students subject to corporal punishment. Parents usually contributed tuition fees, but expense did not, sadly, guarantee educational quality: government inspectors in Southern Rhodesia in 1923 reported community-supported schools that spent most of their two-hour days on attendance taking and Bible stories, had less than one slate for every ten attending students, lacked classrooms, and taught students to memorize wall syllable charts rather than actually learning to read them—producing 'deadening monotony' and 'parrot-like repetition.'⁹ Seniors at elite schools such as King's College, Budo, in Uganda and Domboshawa in Southern Rhodesia often also initiated new students with buying rituals or 'hazing'.

By the interwar years, early mission endeavours had become increasingly secularized and two models of colonial education emerged among experts who agreed on the need for African transformation, but differed over how best to plan education to manage change. Planners categorized educational plans as emphasizing either quality or quantity: elite, often assimilationist colonial-language education versus mass, 'adapted', vocational, and usually vernacular training. In French West Africa, and to a lesser extent

in those parts of British colonies such as Uganda, Sierra Leone, and the Gold Coast that possessed strong local pressures capable of influencing colonial policy, education policies approximated those of the metropole in the provision of elite schools that taught in the metropolitan language and trained small numbers of carefully chosen students. In French- or in Portuguese-ruled Africa, education offered a tiny number of the most successful youth the possibility of legal assimilation.¹⁰ In British Africa, graduates of elite Anglophone 'public' schools such as King's College (Budo) in Uganda, the Prince of Wales' College (Achimota) in the Gold Coast, and Gordon College, Khartoum, in the Sudan viewed simple assimilation as below them: instead of seeking equality with Britons, they planned to lead the country.¹¹ For advocates of elite schooling, any mass expansion of education would come only *after* a corps of highly qualified Africans had been trained. French administrators believed, according to Louis Brenner, that 'if future generations of African leaders... were imbued with the values of French culture, and facility in the French language, the... colonial project would be assured'.¹²

In a speech to a 1938 conference discussing the establishment of Makerere University College, Uganda's governor Sir Philip Mitchell echoed such calls for elites to be taught as colonial aristocrats:

No civilization in the world has arisen... upon any other foundation than... an aristocracy of culture... The widespread education of the masses... may be a consequence of that, but cannot precede it, indeed I should regard with horror as a crime against the people of these countries the partial education of great numbers... unless at the same time we were making every effort to provide for them, in their own environment, a means whereby there may be produced the leaders and guides of their own race... Our task, indeed, if we have any faith in our civilization and in ourselves, is boldly to lead the African peoples forward along the road we are ourselves following, confident that if we do that we shall have discharged our duty.¹³

Combining faith in the superiority of his own civilization with an equally strong sense that Africans were somehow different, Mitchell did *not* suggest that Britain should create some sort of inferior or second-class education system, but that it should teach what it knew best, even if such teaching could reach only small numbers.

Yet Mitchell's perspective was a minority one in British colonial circles and controversial even amidst the more 'progressive' missions. Such elitist goals represented one model of education, but the other drew heavily on ideas developed in the United States by African American educationist Booker T. Washington and advocated by the Phelps-Stokes Foundation, which produced influential surveys of educational practice in Africa.¹⁴ Phelps-Stokes intellectuals criticized the pretensions of elite Africans and instead emphasized mass vocational education. Rather than educating a tiny elite to European standards, such planners called for community education and development. Education, it was asserted:

should be adapted to the mentality, aptitudes, occupations and traditions of the various peoples... Its aim should be to render the individual more efficient in his

or her condition of life... and to promote the advancement of the community as a whole... The first task of education is to raise the standard alike of character and efficiency of the bulk of the people.¹⁵

The most concrete policy initiatives of this sort emphasized agricultural and industrial education or other forms of community development, such as those in Togo associated with Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute or those sponsored in Kenya, Southern Rhodesia, and elsewhere by the Anna T. Jeanes Foundation. Community-centred development education sought to go beyond slates and sums and use demonstration techniques to model new economic initiatives. Schools would become centres for community debate and the dissemination of new ideas not just about curricula and pedagogy, but everything from how to wean a baby to the management of scouting troops.¹⁶ While voicing an ideal of progressive methods and gradual community adaptations for orderly development, such initiatives sometimes provoked serious clashes as they mobilized factions who struggled over authority, land, and propriety.

Official British policy from the 1920s explicitly privileged mass over elite education, despite difficulties in applying this policy choice. Planners criticized 'aristocratic' systems that might produce over-ambitious individuals able to demand equality of opportunity with metropolitan officials or professionals. Phelps-Stokes models of an apolitical development-centred educational policy, however, proved utopian. Such programmes were unsettling and expensive, government efforts to build technical schools costing more than the distribution of modest grants-in-aid to established mission schools. Policies promoting a mass applied education via community development proved unpopular and unworkable.

Looking back at policy-makers' arguments over elite education versus locally adapted mass education, it is easy to see both the merits, and the problems, of each approach. Elite education was, accurately, associated with the development of a new class of Africans with expensive needs and wants, new aspirations, and sometimes only limited and tense connections to their home communities. Joyce Cary's novel *Mister Johnson* (1939) captured the essence of this colonial critique by portraying the array of awkward problems raised by an intelligent, articulate, ambitious, and even loyal educated Nigerian who had learnt to refer to England as home. The figure of Mister Johnson might be an exaggerated creation, but his educated and alienated colleagues have been staples of African creative writers from Camara Laye to Tsitsi Dangarembga. For many observers (including those who experienced it), elite colonial education produced loss as well as opportunity: it involved leaving home and family but in a context where membership in a race-blind community was not viable. For the educated individual, results could be tragic.¹⁷

Despite such dangers, both colonial planners and ambitious Africans understood that the alternative—adaptive, mass education—sought to limit students' individual ambitions and the emergence of an elite class of upwardly mobile Africans. In the Belgian Congo, official rhetoric might emphasize social welfare, but actual policies aimed to divert political challenges into ideals of community welfare, domesticity, and public

health, without offering students access to secondary and tertiary education.¹⁸ In South Africa, such policies were even blunter and more explicitly racist. They culminated in the Apartheid regime's efforts to develop a system of 'Bantu Education' that brought unprecedented numbers of African children into schools but restricted their access to English, facilitating economic growth but preserving the racial order.¹⁹ Education for girls and women was often a part of adapted models of education, as teaching girls offered administrators a way of acting to provide potentially volatile educated men with wives, and preventing them from challenging white political or domestic power.²⁰ Adaptive education for both genders taught basic literacy and faith along with messages about health, work, and obedience, but students, parents, and teachers generally wanted more than training as, in the often repeated phrase of the colonial era, 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'. Student activism, ranging from routine strikes in interwar Southern Rhodesia to the establishment of independent schools in the Kikuyu region of Kenya and the dramatic clashes of the Soweto uprising of 1976, testified to students' rejection of education as a non-political route towards development without revolution.²¹ Across the continent, students and their parents repeatedly blocked educational planners' efforts to use schools as centres of social control and guided development.

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The idea of using education to define and plan the future persisted into the era of anti-colonial nationalism and the emergence of new independent African states in the 1950s and 1960s. Education was one of the most popular demands to emerge from the grass-roots of nationalist movements, and educated individuals from a variety of backgrounds were prominent as political leaders and as the inheritors of new nations. These individuals, belonged, as Brenner notes with regard to Mali, to a social class 'invented during the colonial period primarily through the process of Western schooling.'²² The efforts on the part of nationalist leaderships to develop new ideas of education often reiterated colonial debates about elite and adapted community education, and they were subject to many of the same political and economic pressures that had shaped the choices of colonial planners.

International rhetoric increasingly rejected the racism that once sought to justify European leadership and a second-class status for Africans. Elite students took up opportunities to study not simply in Africa, where from the late 1940s new universities began to be established in some colonies, but in increasing numbers in France, Britain, and the United States. Such newly educated men and women, though, tended to move into administrative and technical posts or into private enterprise and generally failed to transform the very basic schools where increasing numbers of ordinary students experienced standards of education that were similar to, or even a deterioration from, the standards set in colonial-era mission schools. Despite the establishment of teachers' unions and calls for professional respect, elementary schoolteaching

remained a relatively underpaid job with little prestige, serving the upwardly mobile as a way-station towards better things and the less ambitious as a fallback.²³ New nationalist regimes, like their colonial predecessors, routinely saw education as expensive, potentially destabilizing, and capable of creating a dangerously demanding citizenry. Departments of education, faced with vigorous demands for schools from both parents and children, often operated overcrowded schools that resembled those of the colonial era: they taught discipline, demanded physical labour, and emphasized (not always successfully) deference to the country's leadership.

Ironically, men and women who had been successful students demonstrated the socializing power of colonial education as they became nationalist leaders and teachers. Like their predecessors, they believed in schools as possibly transformative institutions that could be centrally planned and directed to achieve a new social and cultural world. Elite education—of almost any sort—provided a qualification for leadership in this brave new world as teachers, lawyers, doctors, and others sought power. These elites eagerly seized international scholarships and opportunities offered by competing Cold War powers during the 1960s and 1970s, Nigerian, Ghanaian, and other students being sent off to higher education in the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere. They also imported international faculty and expanded the new universities established in the late colonial years. The new elite was increasingly transnational, able to move between Africa, Europe, America, and sometimes even Asia. As in the colonial era, though, the price of this global status was high—and not simply in economic terms, as individuals sought resources to support the soaring levels of personal consumption that they considered basic to their newfound prestige. Most also retained connections to their families and broader home communities. As the hopes of their communities, demands on them for patronage, payback, and salvation produced complicated and contradictory pressures that fundamentally undermined ideals of impersonal meritocracy.

Ideas of adapted community education also survived the transition from colonial to national departments of education. After the Second World War, during the period referred to as the 'second colonial occupation' underwritten in British colonies by the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, all European powers had sought to expand investment in schools as loci of 'community development'. Grants-in-aid were increased to support growing numbers of mission schools with more highly qualified teachers and improved infrastructure. In Nigeria, for example, official spending on schools doubled from 1941 to 1942, doubled again by 1947–8, and again by 1950–1.²⁴ Universal education, however, was considered unaffordable.²⁵ Ironically, the globalized educated elite emerged in newly independent African states in parallel with a vision of adapted education as a resource for cheap nation-building. Nationalist propaganda could be as blunt as that of colonial powers in using school materials to convey political messages. Some of the crudest uses of such educational propaganda came from armed revolutionary movements. The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), for example, produced reading primers with cover illustrations of young guerrillas toting guns and English grammar lessons that consisted of such useful phrases as 'we have guns', 'the settlers are few', and 'grandmother is fighting for Zimbabwe'.²⁶ Outside a context of warfare, the

assertively progressive government of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana sought to use state-sponsored schools and curriculum, supplemented by new youth organizations such as the Young Pioneers, to produce a new national culture in Ghana that would block ethnic or local loyalties otherwise likely to challenge the central state and party.²⁷

Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's teacher-president, offered in 1967 what was perhaps one of the most thoughtful analyses of postcolonial education. While acknowledging that schools were one of the principal demands of people in Tanzania, Nyerere argued that:

It is now time that we looked again at the justification for a poor society like ours spending almost 20 per cent of its Government revenues on providing education...and began to consider what that education should be doing...it is impossible to devote Shs. 147,330,000 every year to education for some of our children... unless its result has a proportionate relevance to the society we are trying to create.²⁸

Training teachers, engineers, and administrators for membership of an educated elite did not, according to Nyerere, fit national policy. Instead, he emphasized that education should:

foster the social goals of living together... inculcate a sense of commitment to the total community, and help the pupils to accept the values appropriate to our kind of future... [It] must emphasize cooperative endeavour, not individual advancement; it must stress concepts of equality and the responsibility to give service... And, in particular, our education must counteract the temptation to intellectual arrogance.

An educational system inherited from the colonial era, he continued, was designed 'for the few who are intellectually stronger than their fellows; it induces among those who succeed a feeling of superiority and leaves the majority of the others hankering after something they will never obtain... It induces the growth of a class structure in our country'. Nyerere called instead for self-supporting schools engaged in production and emphasized that students must work as well as learn. His roadmap towards affordable education in socialist Tanzania substantially retraced colonial experts' calls for community development and schools as collective effort rather than individualism.

Neither Nkrumah's efforts to cultivate unity through progressive schooling in a national culture nor Nyerere's plans to teach harmony and productivity through work and community orientation proved especially effective in producing communal cohesion. Instead, people routinely sent children to school and hoped education would be what they imagined it as in the colonial era—an almost magical way of gaining access to success (usually measured in money) in the modern world. Reformist ideas failed to transform the culture of schools characterized by rigid hierarchies, rote learning, and competitive examinations. From the 1980s, with the rise of World Bank-IMF structural adjustment programmes, austerity, and neo-liberalism, most governments and international overseers across Africa had abandoned radical ideas of education as

an inexpensive way to catalyse political change and community development. Instead, like colonial critics, they calculated the cost of schooling populations with accelerating proportions of children and youth. Education might be important but it was a budgetary elephant: huge, powerful, and potentially damaging or destabilizing.

LIBERAL LITERACY AND LEARNING

In 1997, President Museveni of Uganda publically pushed the World Bank to spend money in Uganda on feeder roads, not on schools. If people wanted education, he argued, the best way to get it was to foster economic growth and prosperity that would allow people to afford the sorts of education they found useful.²⁹ Museveni's energetic neo-liberalism sat awkwardly with international donors' perspectives on educational investment and he soon gave way and put forward a programme for universal primary education.³⁰ But his government maintained pressure on institutions to act entrepreneurially, particularly at university level, where not just trade schools but the nation's flagship, Makerere University, admitted private fee-paying students, paid staff on a piecework basis, and left departments to generate their own funds from students and donors by developing practical degree programmes in subjects such as 'Organizational Studies' or Tourism.³¹

Museveni's reluctance to see centrally planned and funded schools as basic for social development and cultural control reflects the actual (as opposed to theoretical) significance of literacy, learning, and education in modern Africa. New historical research, which is now looking beyond mission, imperial, or government initiatives to the lives and struggles of ordinary people, has begun to offer a vision of the development of education in modern Africa centred not on institutions and ideologies but on the new sorts of selfhood forged by literacy and the ways these self-identified educated men (and a few women) built connections and networks through new forms of knowledge, writing, literature, histories, and values.

This emerging approach starts with the people who were necessary but dangerous to planners' visions of education for social control: those who successfully learnt for themselves both in schools and beyond. These literate individuals, far from being unformed children remade by schooling, could more accurately be characterized as entrepreneurs of a new sort of consciousness. They experimented with new resources of literacy and print culture, both for themselves as individuals and for the communities they belonged to and, in many cases, actively built.³² As we have seen, these sorts of new men and women were emerging from new outposts of literacy at early as the nineteenth century. In West Africa, literate networks of traders, brokers, and interpreters spread inland from the coastal towns of Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, and Nigeria, becoming the educated notables and clerks of newly formalized colonies.³³ On the other side of the continent, Malagasy-reading and writing individuals cultivated an Indian Ocean community

that linked regions as disparate as Mauritius, Madagascar, and Cape Town.³⁴ Inland in Buganda, ambitious youth in the royal court learnt to read and write, mobilizing their status as readers and converts in the 1880s to build political factions to the point that a threatened King Mwangi had dozens tortured and burnt to death.³⁵ Literacy, as a technology of communication and recordkeeping, as a way to access, understand, and disseminate new ideas and resources, could be transformational and revolutionary.

Recent scholarship has therefore emphasized that education and literacy, rather than being simply imposed by colonial planners, could be a freely chosen and potentially liberating path, especially for those who lacked other options. In the Igbo region of south-eastern Nigeria, for example, schooling was notoriously associated with *osu*, low-status individuals often of slave background, who lacked the resources and support of more elite members of society. Similarly, the young men who vied with each other to improve their translation and writing skills in Kenya were often those lacking cattle and land, so needed an alternative route to livelihood and self-fulfilment. And far from being colonial pawns, readers in the Gold Coast 'produced distinctive cultural meanings for themselves' through their literacy in ways that served local aesthetics rather than imported or imposed structures.³⁶

The records of literary societies and debating clubs from South Africa to the Gold Coast show us the creativity of African readers, as they imported Western literature either in translation or in English and sought to make it meaningful to local cultural contexts. Southern African intellectuals saw imported materials as valuable resources for individuals and groups confronting rapid social change. Tiyo Soga, for example, published his Xhosa translation of Bunyan's evangelical allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* in 1868, complete with an introduction that offered advice on how to read and a contextualization of the work's production that made it directly relevant to many of the controversies in contemporary South African politics. As Isabel Hofmeyr shows in her fine study, Soga, rather than perceiving the work as alien, translated it in a way that allowed subsequent generations of South African students in both formal classes and less formal literary societies to negotiate their place in the world.³⁷

Stephanie Newell, writing about the Gold Coast, demonstrates how central books and reading became to the construction of elite male identity and sociability from the late nineteenth century. Formal schooling in the Gold Coast was far from widespread: even in 1920, only 42,339 students were enrolled in recognized primary and secondary institutions, a number that only rose to 91,047 by 1940. But books in English had been sold from at least the 1850s and in vernacular languages from the 1860s to an expanding class of literate men with money. Protestant missionaries established book depots and presses for the local market, and by 1892, the Wesleyan Methodist Mission's depot alone reported annual sales of a thousand pounds. These initiatives sought to meet local demand for 'good Christian literature' and provide an alternative to 'books not suitable', according to the first manager of the Basel Mission's Accra book depot.³⁸ Depots and presses became bookstores and publishers, readers established book clubs and private libraries, and sociability around reading expanded. Products included Christian devotional materials and self-help manuals but also

increasing ranges of both locally produced and international publications, from local primers to British detective thrillers. Newell documents nearly eighty literary societies or clubs in the Gold Coast from 1831 to the 1950s. One member, Henry Ofori, recalled clubs being what one did when posted to rural locations: the need 'to relieve the tedium of that rural place, where you would be coming home to nothing at the end of the day'.³⁹

Mr Ofori's account provides hints of how books and reading culture moved beyond the reworking of a religious canon described in Hofmeyr's study of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to the making of a literate class who rewrote themselves and their world through their textual activities. Whether using English or vernacular languages, these individuals distinguished themselves from the 'tedium' of less literate, ordinary places, privileging clubs and words over more material or traditional versions of home. Beyond reading, they also wrote. Leading Gold Coast intellectuals in the early twentieth century such as J. E. Casely Hayford and Kobina Sekyi produced both fiction and non-fiction that expressed new sorts of class values and new cultures. The readers who bought, circulated, discussed, interpreted, and in some cases eventually wrote the books were part of a minority but vibrant culture rooted in literacy and self-directed learning. Both readers and clubs often had links to elite Gold Coast schools such as Achimota and Mfantsipim. But their members brought to their intellectual lives habits of apprenticeship, initiation, and ongoing adult learning.⁴⁰

Newell's work documents the growth of this new class on the Gold Coast, but similar patterns characterized other regions as well. In both Southern and Northern Rhodesia, successful middlemen understood learning as central to both personal and professional identities, pursuing it at high cost and investing in it for their families.⁴¹ In Uganda, young men who graduated from the country's top schools and went to work throughout the country organized Old Boys' Associations that brought together religious, professional, civic, literary, and cultural aims. The vernacular newspapers they supported became so popular that by the 1950s observers joked that subscribing to them and reading them publically to both literate and non-literate audiences was one of the new duties of chiefship.⁴² In Natal, South Africa, Zulu intellectuals paralleled Gold Coast men in their intense constructions of identity through writing.⁴³ Historical accounts of such groups remain rare, outnumbered by histories of schools and nationalist politics. Such associations appear, however, to have been an elite or bourgeois alternative to modern identities grounded in straightforwardly religious, economic, or political associations such as churches, trade unions, or networks such as southern Africa's Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) or Uganda's Bataka Union.

Those men and women able to buy books, as well as those who aspired to do, also wrote letters and kept journals. Caches of letters, diaries, and other ephemera—so-called 'tin trunk' writings—remain rare and require careful interpretation and contextualization. But as anthropologists and historians have increasingly looked beyond official archives to unofficial and personal papers, materials that might once have been seen as too difficult to interpret now support new ways of thinking about self-development and networking among correspondents.⁴⁴ It is now apparent that,

in South Africa, letter writing was crucial not only to the formation of elite Christian identity, but spread beyond to migrant labourers, medical workers, and religious entrepreneurs. Parallel patterns of letter writing, greeting card exchange, and journal-keeping have been reported for the Gold Coast: one A. K. Boakye Yiadom collected seventy years of journal-keeping and correspondence in a special glass-fronted bookcase—a 'shrine to literacy' for a man who was otherwise an undistinguished clerk of the high colonial era.⁴⁵ Nor were such literary selves and relationships solely the constructions of men. Lynn Thomas and Kenda Mutongi have documented how romance could define the modernity of young women, both through love letters and those written to *Drum* magazine's 'Dear Dolly' column.⁴⁶

The elites of newly literate societies fashioned one sort of new selfhood, complete with the ability to refer to the classics and the great works of English literature; ordinary women and men, meanwhile, employed writing and print cultures for their own ends. But these were not the only identities constructed from written words by entrepreneurial readers in the colonial era. Another major genre built by writing was that of 'tradition'. From the 1980s, a wave of historical work on the invention of tradition has challenged older assumptions about ethnicity and cultural identities as primordial and organic.⁴⁷ Instead, historians now look at how literate Africans, sometimes in conjunction with colonial rulers, missionaries, ethnographers, and others, imagined and wrote such identities into reality.

An early and well-documented example of such cultural construction was Yoruba identity. J. D. Y. Peel's work offers a careful history of the process of making identity through text and words. Peel shows that the ethnonym 'Yoruba' began to take on its modern meaning when the Reverend Samuel Crowther used it in his 1843 publication *Grammar and Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language* and the Church Missionary Society and other missions accepted it as a name for the language and people they sought to convert. Peel is careful to note that this was only part of what made Yoruba identity. But words, and especially publications ranging from Samuel Johnson's landmark *History of the Yorubas* to more recent works such as those of playwright Wole Soyinka, have been essential to pulling together the pasts of diverse city-states and peoples, varied religious beliefs and practices, and energetically competitive social groups, into a recognizable, self-conscious whole.⁴⁸ Indeed, Soyinka's memoirs of his father's intensely bookish family intimately portray how this process felt.⁴⁹

Peel portrays literate Yoruba Christians as writing an identity as an alternative to the more violent methods of the war-torn regional city-states or the encroaching British Empire. On the other side of the continent in Buganda, the literacy of early converts similarly allowed key individuals to negotiate with British agents to determine the shape of the protectorate. The literacy of the country's discontents, with their own version of history, also allowed Ganda to transcribe a vivid history and litigate over lands and rights throughout the colonial period and beyond. In Shambai in Tanganyika, too, education and schooling provided a basis for educated peasants to challenge the king and chiefs, seeking literally to overwrite one version of tradition with a new one that linked previous traditions of protest to new ideas of modernity. Recent analyses of the work of

early literate entrepreneurs in such disparate regions have begun to offer insights into their work of reimagining the past and codifying 'custom'.⁵⁰

Derek Peterson explores similar themes in the history of the Kikuyu people of Kenya. Peterson portrays a process in which landless, subordinate young men used literacy and language entrepreneurially to achieve personal social status and then went further to build identity (and fight for it) through orthography, spelling, and discussions of loan words and grammar, as well as more usual clan histories and traditions.⁵¹ For both Peel and Peterson, as well as other scholars who have looked at work by 'organic intellectuals', writing, translation, grammars, vocabulary books, and canonical histories remade Africans' worlds under colonialism in ways that have persisted since. All this was connected to the formal institutions of schools and missions, but it spread out catalytically, beyond the wishes or the control of imperial authorities. Readers and writers, with their words and institutions, built new selves, new associations, new consumption patterns, new faiths and values, and even new histories and identities. The new historiography demonstrating the power of literacy seeks to document all of these complex processes. Even where transformations were limited to narrow literate elites, those classes shaped aspirations, actions, and access to resources not just during the years of colonialism, but after.

NEO-LIBERALISM AND ITS LIMITS

Much recent historical and anthropological scholarship on education and literacy fits surprisingly well with today's dominant political and economic narratives of neo-liberalism. Recent works acknowledge state rhetoric, interests, and power, but show the lives of individuals and groups who bent school resources to meet their own goals. Kristen Cheney, for example, explains Ugandan teachers' insistence that students pay fees in defiance of the government's Universal Free Primary Education policy not simply because schools need the money, but also from a strong sense that education should come from individual and familial sacrifice. Catie Coe describes how school practices—from teachers' refusal to teach the government cultural curriculum to Christian messages in state schools' drama competitions—subverted the nationalist plan that understood schools as sites for forging Ghanaian identity. And Amy Stambach has noted that 'education for self-reliance' in Tanzania has in practice generated discussions amongst women about forms of self-reliance not envisaged by its official proponents, such as leaving patriarchal or marital homes to establish their own households, thereby subverting the emphasis on socially conservative ideas of tradition and domesticity.⁵²

Such work emphasizes the gap between the ambitions of planners and the realities on the ground, offering analysis of where and why grandiose visions of the potential of education can go astray. It emphasizes—often with vivid anthropological detail—the creativity of individuals and networks of people who sought schooling, acquired literacy, and used it as capital to pursue their own goals rather than those of the state. As in

discussions of literacy in colonial Africa, recent depictions of educational practice have found much to celebrate in individual triumphs over inadequate resources and competitive, conservative school structures. These postcolonial case studies not only point to the failure of planning to shape intended results, but also provide evidence of the intense conservatism and parochialism of an educational system that is driven by efforts to belong to a privileged elite and to maintain the distinction between the privileged few and the rest.

Recent studies such as those of Cheney, Coe, and Stambach, especially when combined with novels by Chimamanda Adichie, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, and Helon Habila, serve to delineate the ongoing centrality of literacy and education to modern Africa.⁵³ Poverty, debt, corruption, illness, infrastructure problems, and sheer lack of access to opportunities have been and remain real problems that education and the literate may propose solutions for, but often lack resources to solve. Today, education in Africa succeeds neither by the standards of its official planners, who wanted it to change people from what they were to what those in power wish them to be, nor those of the parents, sponsors, and entrepreneurs willing to sacrifice security and wealth, banana gardens and cattle, to provide their children with the basis of success. At once a crucial resource and a source of frustration and disappointment, it remains a central arena for those who struggle to reshape identity and opportunity anew in each generation.

NOTES

1. C. T. Loram, 'Fundamental Principles of African Education', in *Report of Interterritorial 'Janes' Conference held in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia on 27 May to 6 June 1935* (Lovedale, South Africa: Lovedale Press, 1936), 7–14.
2. Quoted in Amy Stambach, *Lessons from Mount Kilimanjaro: Schooling, Community and Gender in East Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 30.
3. Quoted in W. H. Worger, N. L. Clark, and E. A. Alpers, eds, *Africa and the West: A Documentary History from the Slave Trade to Independence* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press, 2001), 168–72, 189–94.
4. See Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000), 76–91.
5. See J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000), 130.
6. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. 231–6; also Michael West, *The Rise of an African Middle Class: Colonial Zimbabwe, 1898–1965* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2002), esp. 36–67.
7. On Uganda, see A. B. K. Kasozi, *The Life of Prince Badru Kakungulu Wasajja* (Kampala: Progressive Publishing House, 1996), 46–60, 82–4; on French West Africa, Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (London: Hurst, 2000).
8. See e.g. Bob White, 'Talk about School: Education and the Colonial Project in French and British Africa (1860–1960)', *Comparative Education*, 32/1 (1996), 9–26.

9. Quoted in Carol Summers, *Colonial Lessons: Africans' Education in Southern Rhodesia, 1918–1934* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), 6.
10. See Jeanne Penvenne, '“We are all Portuguese!” Challenging the Political Economy of Assimilation: Lourenço Marques, 1870–1933', in Leroy Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1989).
11. Gordon McGregor, *King's College Budo: A Centenary History 1906–2006* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2006); Heather Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003).
12. Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge*, 39; see also Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).
13. *Proceedings of the Inter-territorial Conference Held at Makerere, Uganda, 21–24 May, 1938, to Examine the Practical Steps Necessary to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission on Higher Education in East Africa for the Establishment of a Higher College* (Entebbe: Government Printer, 1938).
14. Thomas Jesse Jones, *Education in Africa: A Study of West, South, and Equatorial Africa* (New York: Phelps-Stokes Fund, 1922) and *Education in East Africa: A Study of East, Central and South Africa* (New York: Phelps-Stokes Fund, 1925).
15. Advisory Committee on Native Education in the British Tropical African Dependencies, *Memorandum on Educational Policy in British Tropical Africa*, Cmd 2374 (London: HMSO, 1925).
16. See Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton: PUP, 2010); Summers, *Colonial Lessons*, 117–43; Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), 99–103.
17. For depictions of the alienation induced by education, see Camara Laye, *The Dark Child*, tr. J. Kirkup and E. Jones (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971 [orig. 1954]) and Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (London: Women's Press, 1988).
18. Nancy Rose Hunt, 'Domesticity and Colonialism in Belgian Africa: Usumbura's Foyer Social, 1946–60', *Signs*, 15/3 (1990); Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 38–9.
19. Jonathan Hyslop, *The Classroom Struggle: Policy and Resistance in South Africa 1940–1990* (Pietermaritzberg: University of Natal Press, 1999).
20. See Summers, *Colonial Lessons*, 176–96, and Carol Summers, '“If You Can Educate the Native Woman...”: Debates over the Schooling and Education of Girls and Women in Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1934', *History of Education Quarterly*, 36/4 (1996).
21. See Summers, *Colonial Lessons*; Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 139–62; Hyslop, *Classroom Struggle*; Baruch Hirsion, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash* (London: Zed Press, 1979).
22. Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge*, 13.
23. See Summers, *Colonial Lessons*, 87–116, 197–202.
24. David Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma of Popular Education: An African Case* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1969), 95. Later figures become more difficult to track with the rise of provincial education depts.
25. See Joanna Lewis, *Empire State-Building: War and Welfare in Kenya 1925–52* (Athens, O.: Ohio University Press, 2000), 326–32, which shows that policy moved from 'mass

- education' to a model of 'community development' that officials hoped would depoliticize education and be less expensive.
26. Julie Frederikse, *None But Ourselves: Masses vs Media in the Making of Zimbabwe* (Harare: Anvil Press, 1982), 14–15. Compare these with the colonial era Luganda grammar for British administrators, which in lesson one offers the following for translation: 'I strike', 'I rebel', 'you distribute', 'we guard', and 'they rule': J. D. Chesswas, *Essentials of Luganda Grammar* (London: OUP, 3rd edn, 1963), 3.
 27. Cati Coe, *Dilemmas of Culture in African Schools: Youth, Nationalism, and the Transformation of Knowledge* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), esp. 60–70.
 28. Julius Nyerere, 'Education for Self-Reliance' (1967) in *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (London: OUP, 1968).
 29. *World Bank: The Great Experiment*, part 1 (dir. Peter Chappell, 1997).
 30. See Kristen E. Cheney, *Pillars of the Nation: Child Citizens and Ugandan National Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 75–100.
 31. For a vivid depiction of this process, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2007), 57; for a general history of Makerere, see Carol Sicherman, *Becoming an African University: Makerere, 1922–2000* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005).
 32. The term 'entrepreneur' is that of Derek Peterson in *Creative Writing*.
 33. For examples, see Peel, *Religious Encounter*, 123–51.
 34. Pier M. Larson, *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009).
 35. J. C. Ssekamwa, *History and Development of Education in Uganda* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1997), 25–45, offers a basic textbook history of the episode. The martyrs were later canonized by the Catholic Church and Mwangi's surviving Protestant enemies, notably Apolo Kagga, went on to dominate Buganda's politics and intellectual life in the early colonial era.
 36. Misty Bastian, 'Young Converts: Christian Missions, Gender and Youth in Onitsha, Nigeria, 1880–1929', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 73 (2000); Peterson, *Creative Writing*; Stephanie Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: 'How to Play the Game of Life'* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2002), 7.
 37. Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton: PUP, 2004), 113–36.
 38. Newell, *Literary Culture*, 9.
 39. Mr Henry Ofori, founding member of New Tafo Club, quoted in Newell, *Literary Culture*, 35.
 40. See Stephen Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2005) on how apprenticeships, working as servants, and learning on the job were as important as official schooling for many men.
 41. Terence Ranger, 'Are We Not Also Men?': *The Samkange Family and African Politics in Zimbabwe, 1920–64* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995); Summers, *Colonial Lessons*; Anthony Simpson, *Half London in Zambia: Contested Identities in a Catholic Mission School* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2003).
 42. Carol Summers, 'Catholic Action and Ugandan Radicalism: Political Activism in Buganda, 1930–1950', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 39 (2009) and 'Radical Rudeness: Ugandan Social Critiques during the 1940s', *Journal of Social History*, 39 (2006).

43. Paul la Hausse de Lalouvier, *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula and Lyman Maling* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001).
44. See the essays in Karin Barber, ed., *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2006).
45. Stephen Miescher, '“My Own Life”: A. K. Boakye Yiadom's Autobiography', in Barber, *Africa's Hidden Histories*.
46. Lynn Thomas, 'Schoolgirl Pregnancies, Letter-Writing and “Modern” Persons in Late Colonial East Africa', in Barber, *Africa's Hidden Histories*; Kenda Mutongi, 'Dear Dolly's Advice', in Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas, eds, *Love in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
47. See the chapter by Richard Waller in this volume.
48. Peel, *Religious Encounter*, 284, 304–13.
49. Soyinka even refers to his father as 'Essay': Wole Soyinka, *Isara: A Voyage around Essay* (New York: Random House, 1989).
50. Holly Hanson, *Landed Obligation: The Practice of Power in Buganda* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003); Carol Summers, 'Grandfathers, Grandsons, Morality and Radical Politics in Late Colonial Buganda', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 38 (2005); Stephen Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 138–45.
51. Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 80–5, 97–134; for other examples of writing and ethnogenesis, see also Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola, eds, *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Athens, O.: Ohio University Press, 2009).
52. Cheney, *Pillars of the Nation*, 88–97; Coe, *Dilemmas of Culture*; Stambach, *Lessons from Mount Kilimanjaro*, 49.
53. Chimamanda Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003); Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2009); Helon Habila, *Measuring Time* (2007).

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