

Lecture 22 - Books: From Tools of Empire to Tools of Self-Liberation

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Those of us who grew up in rural Africa see the home, the village, the mountains, the valleys, and the rivers as educational and technological spaces where these innovations occurred on a daily basis. Such spaces are indeed the universities, the laboratories, or the factories of psychomotor activities within which many of Africa's leaders in politics, business, academia, sport, music, and many other endeavors are raised. The valley where children herd cattle, the pools where they fish, the forests in which they hunt and pick fruit, the dusty streets where they play with their self-made plastic football –all these are sites in which the African child is taught critical life skills through showing and doing, but not the exam or the pen. Out of them arises a spirit of experiment, adventure, risk-taking, and ambition, inspired by a desire to escape grinding realities of being born poor through sheer hard work and seeking answers in novelty even while one's feet are firmly planted in the elastic cultural traditions of one's ancestors.

The Coming of European Education: What Happened to this Practical Education?

If we listen to Robert Moffat, writing in 1833, there is doubt where the blame should go: “Their intellectual faculties seem so benumbed that it is astonishing to see how destitute they are of the principle of curiosity. This, of course, is easily accounted for from their habits of indolence and sensuality.” (Moffat in Chirenje, 1833). Failure, therefore, was a result of “the dull carnal apathy of a race sunk in sensuality.”

The British and the Germans considered even a minimal ability to read the scriptures the height of educational achievement. Girls outnumbered boys in LMS schools throughout the nineteenth century, as boys were required to go to the seasonal cattle posts while household chores kept the girls nearer home. School attendance was irregular because of household chores, pastoral, agricultural (heading cattle, watching over grain crops fields besieged by birds); the curriculum too detached from the values and economy of Africans –just too bookish to make any tangible sense. By 1900, only two thousand people were full members of the LMS church out of a population of over one hundred thousand –a sizeable number of Christians and traditionalists sent their children to LMS schools. For the latter, the white man's schools only supplemented the traditional education process which culminated in the initiation (*bogwera* for boys and *bqjale* for girls) and was indispensable to the transition from youth to adulthood. They brought with it pride and traditional wisdom; children who chose to become *bathu balehuku* (“children of the book”) and refused to participate in the ceremonies were venerated by the *bathu balechulo* (traditionalists) and caused considerable friction in Tswana households (Moffat).

The LMS tried to improve the quality of education by opening a teacher training school for evangelists at Kuruman in 1872. But the number of its graduates remained small and of low caliber for the rest of the nineteenth century; none of the Kuruman graduates became teachers. A report done in 1893 showed that all the twenty-seven students who had graduated since 1872 had left the profession. Some reverted to the more viable traditional occupations, such as cattle herding and game hunting; others drove wagons for whites or engaged in the lucrative business of conveying wood to the gold and diamond mines and ivory, feathers, and hides to various South African markets.

Denied influence in such matters as curriculum development, some Tswana parents expressed their disapproval by keeping their children home. Those who could afford the \$20 fee sometimes sent their children to Lovedale, run by the Free Church of Scotland at the Cape, and to the Paris Evangelicals' Morija in

Basutoland, two schools with a reputation for academic excellence. There was much self-criticism, calls for more teachers, less evangelists, and African demands for a better curriculum on the Lovedale and Booker T. Washington or Tuskegee model. In 1902, Rev Peter Kawa of the Church of England:

“We want that system of education which recognises the fact that “there is dignity in labour,” and we detest that system, where all the educated natives are expected to be either missionaries or school masters.... We want practical schools rather than these too many Normal Institutions. We prefer Agricultural Schools, where our Native youths would be led to follow the agricultural pursuits. I am not averse to literary education, and am strongly of opinion that these native lads who are able, should be taught the higher branches of study; for minds are not all alike... Let giant intellects have by all means what is generally termed “Higher Education,” but let the masses be taught to make bricks, tables, dishes, wagons, shoes, and above all let them be thorough with their spade and ploughs.”

And one Motswana chief summed it all up nicely: “The book learning is no help to give to the people to live; the books told us some of the things which we may expect when we...die... Now we find what is to be done and what the books mean; a new prospect is now opened before us.”

Industrial Education: Booker T. Washington in Africa

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), founder and principal of Tuskegee Normal Industrial Institute, Alabama, and an African-American, was convinced his self-help and industrial education philosophy was what blacks in Africa required to get civilized –through individual initiative and instruction in the principles of “a higher moral life.”

For him, the “native” of Africa, had to come to the tree of civilization, Tuskegee, and see, learn, return, and transplant the seed. Enthralled by this message, politically active and educated black elites in South Africa traveled to Tuskegee in the 1890s and 1900s to eat the fruit at source. ANC political organizer, Pixley Seme, captured the mood in a letter to Booker T: “We need your spirit in Africa.” The central figure in this exchange was John Langalibalele Dube, Zulu educator, first ANC president, who visited Tuskegee in 1897. When introduced to an audience and asked to say a few words, he declared: “The greatest need of my people is industrial education.” And Washington found Dube “superior material to take on an energetic Christian civilization,” someone who saw a pragmatic alliance with white paternalists in SA as essential for black economic participation in society and eventual political equality.

Dube went on to establish his own institute: the Zulu Christian Industrial School, in 1901, outside Durban. Students wanting to enroll first toiled in the institute’s 30-acre fields growing ground nuts, corn, potatoes, bananas, beans, oranges, and peaches to pay their teacher’s salaries. They learned arithmetic and English to be able to function in the workplace, and gave a certain amount of labor to the Institute during their enrollment. John Dube’s motto was: “As in Booker T’s institution, so here... no money is expended for outside labor which the pupils can be made to do for themselves.” He also went on to establish a Zulu language newspaper, *Ilanga lase Natal*, to articulate black issues and advance the industrial education ethos.

Let’s be clear about why Booker T’s model was popular in Africa among the colonial authorities.

The school was a site for the engineering of African children into disciplined (read: subservient) colonial subjects. Children were made to recite racist poems like “Bongwi the Baboon,” sing “Christopher Columbus was a Great Man” who went to America on a sauce pan, serenade David Livingstone, the great man who discovered the *Mosi oa Tunya* (Victoria Falls), and understand the *valungu* (whites) “truth” that the black person had no history (Chinodya 1989). Official games like “PT” (physical training), soccer (boys), netball (girls), running or athletics (boys and girls), high, long, and triple jump, and choir or singing comprised the staple of inter-house (intra-school) and inter-school competitions.

As social engineering tool, “Native or Bantu Education” was designed for the “uncivilized” (blacks), and to mark their differences from the “civilized” (whites). In one race, a child was born uncivilized; in another, a child was born civilized. Education had to be beaten into the uncivilized, hence corporal punishment was applied instead of persuasive incentive in white schools. The white education officers encouraged physical assaults of children in the name of discipline. Colonialized as well as patriarchal parents encouraged it (Matibe 2009). This was a substantial difference with indigenous knowledge.

Turning the Colonizer’s Tools into Instruments of Self-Liberation

Booker T’s other famous protégé was Davidson Jabavu, educationist, graduate of University of London. In 1913, the South African Minister of Native Affairs commissioned Jabavu to go and study the “methods being used” at Tuskegee “with a view of adopting them in connection with the education of the natives of South Africa.” Jabavu would be a key figure in founding South Africa’s biggest “Tuskegee,” the National College at Fort Hare, today’s University of Fort Hare, the laboratory that would churn out many an African leader in the 1930s-50s, including Nelson Mandela, Albert Luthuli, Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere, Botswana’s Seretse Khama, Zambia’s Kenneth Kaunda, Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, and Desmond Tutu as chaplain. Z. K. Matthews was one of the African faculty members from 1936 to 1958. Fort Hare was a melting pot of Christian convictions, communism, and Pan-Africanism; out of this concoction African nationalism emerged.

The University of Fort Hare was the bridge between Black America and Black Africa. Visiting black intellectuals (African and African-American) from Howard, Fisk University (Nashville), Penn School (South Carolina), Hampton, and Tuskegee visited Fort Hare to lecture and debate issues of black struggle.

Fort Hare was of course not unique. In Southern Rhodesia there was St. Faith’s Farm in Mutasa, where Christianity, liberalism, and self-reliance met. In South Africa itself there was Lovedale, Adams College, and, of course, Dube’s Industrial School. Adams, St. Faith’s, and Fort Hare became hotbeds of African nationalism from the 1940s onwards. St. Faith’s was shut down in 1959, only to resurrect as Cold Comfort Farm, which would itself be closed in 1964.

Ironically, institutions like Fort Hare had been built to stem the spread of communism and anti-colonial resistance through an industrial education that frowned upon intellection, but ended up becoming hubs of Pan-Africanism and African nationalism. Booker T’s protégés Seme, Dube, and Jabavu had an anti-labor pro-capitalist, anti-Marx mentality; they were the black capitalists, who felt it was not their place for blacks to defer to protest in order to change society. Rather, they should equip themselves with the weapons to compete and outwit the white man at his game of civilization. Jabavu argued that Africans attracted to Bolshevism and revolution should be directed to a needed antidote –the Young Men’s Christian Association! And institutions like Fort Hare, designed for just such a purpose, became quite the opposite. Later on in the 1960s, this Christian Marxism would be very pronounced in the work not only of African nationalists, but also churches and individual priests supporting guerrillas and the masses struggling for independence. The World Council of Churches (WCC), Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, the Catholic Institute for International Relations, and individual priests like Adrian Hastings (Mozambique) and Donal Lamont (Zimbabwe) are good examples. At the same time, some churches and bishops were passionately supportive of colonial regimes and loathed national liberation movements, whom they dismissed as agents of the Anti-Christ (communism).

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