

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN AFRICA:

Some Problems of Class Formations

by

Akin Olu Sanda

*...what has been the use of so much education?  
Now I am divorced from my people and from myself,  
an exile among Africans, out of touch with the  
past as well as the future.*

The Confessions of Jothan Simiya

I. EDUCATION AND SOCIETY: AN OVERVIEW

In numerous considerations of social change in Africa, the change-inducing power of education is accorded recognition. Whether the focus is on the traditional patterns, or upon the educational forms imported into Africa and regardless of the content of education or the nature of the learning process, the role of education as an agent of change is widely recognized by social scientists. For example, the extent and nature of economic development in a nation has been found to be connected with the diffusion of education and degree of literacy in that society.<sup>1</sup> Also, the degree of political awareness and the frequency of challenges to the status quo are seen to be on the increase with greater spread of education.<sup>2</sup> And African peoples' attitudes toward agriculture, fertility and toward numerous aspects of traditional African culture are perceived to vary inversely with the people's level of education. These and similar findings indicate the change-inducing power of education.

However, much of this paper's concern will be with the more profound changes occasioned by formal education in African societies. This latter category of changes have resulted in the main from the nature of educational conferments (certificates, degrees, diplomas, etc.) and the attendant benefits or perquisites (wages, material possessions, etc.). These are considerably important in any attempt to diagnose the current problems of education in Africa. This paper will discuss the extent to which actual or potential tensions between social groups in African societies can

be understood from a sociological perspective which focuses on the social and structural consequences of planned education in Africa. The said objectives can be seen as connected with the examination of problems and patterns of social change in African societies.

#### A. Education in Pre-Colonial African Societies

A great deal has been said by social scientists concerning the fact that African traditional educational process was in the main informal and that schools were a colonial heritage. Such an understanding of African traditions of education seems incomplete; for in many African societies of the pre-colonial era (especially in states like Buganda) specialized forms of education were provided for different categories of individuals away from their homes, and in preparation for positions of responsibilities which they were to occupy subsequently. Apart from the informal and imitative processes which went all the time in the domestic environment of the child, there existed well structured systems of apprenticeship in trades, crafts, state administration and the like.<sup>3</sup> Besides, numerous Koranic schools which were highly formalized, were spread all over the continent, especially in the Moslem communities. For instance, by the time of British arrival in Northern Nigeria, 20,000 Koranic schools were existing in that section of Africa alone. In addition, a university which antedated the colonial era existed at Sankore. Combined with educational establishments and cultural centers like Djenna, Walata and Timbuktu, these structured educational centers catered to the needs of many inquisitive minds. Oral transmission as well as vocational emphasis featured prominently at all levels and aspects of the traditional African system of education. The latter aspect (vocational emphasis) derives from the philosophy of African education which places considerable premium on the child's ability to cope with problems of living, survival or adaptation, a philosophy which induced considerable emphasis on "imparting skills," as well as moral armament.

Even though there were achieved inequalities in wealth and status usually resulting from the fortunes of war, trade and farming, the general nature of social stratification in pre-colonial societies did not give rise to distinct social classes whose members cultivated a different style of life from that of the rest of the masses. In most cases, there were no segments of the society whose members, deriving from their educational prowess developed political and economic power which could be said to have set them apart from the rest of the masses. In fact the group-orientation and

basis of education, the nature of property ownership which tended to be based on membership in social groups like the lineage or the extended family, the salience of the latter and the cultural norms deriving from all these, all nullified any tendency toward a class basis of individual and group identification and in fact reduced the extent of visible differences based on educational, economic or cultural differentiation of society.

In spite of the nature of traditional African educational patterns, those who were involved in prolonged and disciplined education still retained the essentials of what could be regarded as the African system of thought. From the latter, a great deal of the values and cultural beliefs of African people, already instilled into the educated minds through proverbs, poetry, songs, folklore, and by way of major processes like rote learning, conscious or unconscious imitation, apprenticeship and specialized education, remain to direct their orientations in life in the same way that these same principles are operating with the rest of the masses. Where the Ulemas constituted a quasi-status group they still retained the essentials of Islamic culture, science and tradition. Where the military elites were also the rulers, or where they shared many of the political responsibilities of government with the kings, emirs, chiefs, or elders, they still remained part and parcel of the masses in the sense that they did not manifest a way of life or a 'class culture' which differed from that of the rest of the masses. The introduction of Western forms of structured education shortly before and during the colonial period was later to radically alter the situation.

## B. Western Education and the Colonial Situation

The Western type of structured education was not designed to be particularly functional for the Africans; it was in its inception designed both as an instrument of alienation, and as a vehicle for exploiting the governed, as well as for the realization of the colonizers' cultural imperialism.

The nature of restructuring of African societies which followed the advent of Europeans derived from the objectives of the three main categories of colonizers that came to different parts of Africa either together or in succession. The missionaries were openly committed to the spread of the Gospel and hence their most immediate needs were for interpreters and indigenous lay preachers who could read and write and teach the words from the Bible. The merchant traders

were mainly concerned with exploiting the natural resources of the continent, but they needed middlemen, as well as clerks and elementary teachers who would keep records, make simple additions and subtractions and re-interpret commercial policies in ways that would placate the more dynamic of the African population. And the administrators were mainly concerned with keeping the flag of the home country flying in the African colonies as well as in "civilizing" the supposedly uncivilized "natives" even though the economic and military-strategic potentials of the different colonies were also sufficient incentives. All the three categories of colonizers were not in any way or at any time working in isolation from one another; in fact each represented a part of the whole process of colonization.

The pragmatic needs of the colonizers therefore dictated the spread of literacy and general education with the minimum of arithmetic, an emphasis on de-traditionalization or de-Africanization of the African. The nature of economic and material or symbolic incentives which accompanied the introduction of Western education as well as the nature of the relationship between the earliest of the colonizers and the indigenous peoples of different parts of Africa determined the extent to which Western education became accepted and diffused through the different segments of the African population. The Hausas of Nigeria and the Ashanti of Ghana for instance had hostile and in fact war relations with the British and hence refused to subject themselves to the influence of the missions until relatively recently. Consequently they were late comers to the race for Western education. By contrast, most of the coastal peoples like the Yorubas and Ibos, of Nigeria, the Fanti, the Akwapim and the Ga of Ghana all had earlier and commercial relations with the colonizers before the open declaration of the purpose of the various colonizers.

The contemporary significance of this uneven exposure to Western impact is observable in the nature of recent intra-state competitions in many African nations. The usual measures of receptivity or no receptivity to change seem to have less to do with the nature of these competitions and the differential levels of educational and economic development in these African states than the nature, period and length of contact, with the colonizers or their agents before the formal apparatus of colonialism got established.

According to D. Scanlon about ninety-eight percent of the schools were being operated by the missions prior to World War I.<sup>4</sup> Consequently the transmission of Western education

to Africans not only involved the transmission of new skills, and new knowledge, but also the transmission of an alien religion, as well as an alien culture. The significance of this aspect of the introduction of Western education to Africa will be clearer below when we consider the cultural aspects of recent class formations in African societies.

In fact some authors believe that the whole emphasis of French colonial education policy was on learning to be French.<sup>5</sup> The same element is however dominant in Portuguese Africa where the colonies were and are regarded as extensions of Lisbon. Similarly the Belgians in the Congo and to a lesser degree the British in West and East Africa exhibited similar aspects of cultural imperialism in their colonial educational policies. But a more salient aspect of colonial education system in Africa was its elitist orientation combined with its presentation as a liberal avenue of socio-economic mobility.

That certain educated Africans got to be regarded as "evolues" and "Black Frenchmen" in the French colonies, "Assimilados" in Portuguese colonies, or "African Europeans" or "Been-Tos" in British Africa, is evidence enough that certain segments of the African population through their education became acculturated (Westernized) into the culture of the colonizer. The well-known paternalism of the Belgians, the assimilationist policy of the French and Portuguese and the Spaniards, and the mixtures of assimilation and indirect rule of the British all exhibited the same elitist orientation in their colonial education policies, though to varying degrees. The monetary incentive (wages) which is the strongest base of this new educated class created a basis for subsequent social divisions of African societies not only into the literate and the illiterates or the educated class and the uneducated class, but also into the wealthy, culturally distinct, spatially segregated, educationally distinguishable class and the poor, uneducated, "primitive" tradition-oriented and socially alienated class of peasants.

## II. EDUCATIONAL CHANGE SINCE INDEPENDENCE

Many significant changes have taken place in structured education since the colonial era. For instance, beginning with an initial colonial government financial support of educational initiatives of missionaries and voluntary agencies, the state gradually acquired complete control of both the administration and general direction of educational activities

in Africa. And even though a considerable percentage of the educational institutions in Africa (excluding the universities) are mission directed, the African governments have gained the upper hand in the general overall control of the states' education systems. With the result that where diversity and division had characterized the educational system and where racially segregated schools had previously existed as in Tanzania, considerable centralization as well as desegregation of the educational institutions have now been accomplished under the post colonial governments.

A more obvious as well as significant change in the African educational system since the colonial era lies in the rate of enrollment in the schools which have now shown that considerably rapid expansion of enrollment has taken place. This has been partly due to the African governments' response to popular demand by the electorates and partly due to the implicit recognition of the role of education in national development. At all levels, therefore, the enrollment figures have soared considerably. Most of the increase tends to be very obvious at the primary level of education. However, the market value of this (primary level of education) has decreased considerably with the passing of the years. The consequence of this trend is observable in the contingent of unemployed primary school leavers who flood the cities.

TABLE I\*

Growth of Education in Nigeria; Number of Pupils at Different Levels in the Years Indicated (in thousands) Educational of Institutional Levels

Years	Primary	Secondary	University	Technical and Vocational
1959	2775.9	110.7	1.8	2.6
1960	2912.6	129.4	2.1	3.6
1961	2803.8	161.2	2.4	4.3
1962	2834.0	185.9	3.1	4.8
1963	2896.4	201.0	3.6	5.2
1964	2850.0	205.0	5.1	n.a.
1965	2912.0	209.0	6.7	n.a.
1966	3026.0	211.3	7.7	9.9
1968**	3100.0	215.0	12.0	8.6

Source: Statistics of Education in Nigeria Ser. 1. Vol. VI, Federal Ministry of Education, Annual Digest of Education Statistics 1967.

\*The purpose of this table is to indicate the trend in the expansion of education from the year preceding independence to the period of the military takeover.

\*\*Federal Republic of Nigeria: Second National Development Plan 1970-74, Lagos, Nigeria, 1970, pp. 235-36.

In the sphere of the relationship of education to the individual's earning power as well as in the colonial elitist tradition of education, considerable continuity has characterized the structure of African education. The obvious effect of this characteristic of contemporary African education is seen in the extent to which Africans believe that unemployment, poverty and such problems lie not in the nature (the content) of education which the individual has imbibed but in the educational level which he has already or which he is about to acquire. In Nigeria, for example, one only has to visit the external examination centers to meet with familiar faces who repeat examinations for the G.C.E. (General Certificate of Education), the R.S.A. etc. Or else the number of percentage of workers taking correspondence courses from Rapid Results College and Wolsey Hall in London.

The relevant point in this regard is the fact that certificates are made an end by themselves and the content or even the pragmatic or functional aspect of education is ignored. In the past, any Bachelor's Degree certificate enabled the holder to secure a steady administrative position in the Civil Service; and a primary school certificate guaranteed a clerical position in the public sector. But with the rapid turn out of graduates at all levels, individuals who fail to secure employments in the establishments become dependants on even those who had never been to school. This is more than a pointer at the relevance or irrelevance of the content of education in many African educational institutions.

For those who make it, however, structured education remains the most rapid and most rewarding mechanism of upward mobility as well as the most successful avenue of escape mentally, physically and culturally from the community of other Africans. In Ghana, for instance, influence, power, wealth and status are becoming more and more concentrated in the hands of members of the new elite--the educated class.<sup>6</sup> In Nigeria a similar situation prevails. The educated class constitutes a drain on the economy mainly because of the disproportionate relationship between their contribution and their rewards. In most African countries between seventy and eighty percent of the active population are farmers. These farmers contribute more than 61% of the nation's wealth.<sup>7</sup> They pay a disproportionately large percentage (about 75%) of the taxes but remain one of the poorest sections of the population. There are a few wealthy cocoa farmers in both Nigeria and Ghana, but these are so few that they are almost negligible. Compared with the

educated class, these cocoa farmers though wealthy remain part of the African masses, in outlook and way of life even though their wealth differentiates them from the rest of the masses. And in fact much of what could very well be legitimately regarded as the potential wealth of the farmers is used to support an educated class in society.

The wealth which the beneficiaries of formal education acquire is used to construct "modern" houses in the periphery of the cities, creating at least some physical distance between their quarters or elite reservations and the living quarters of the rest of the population.<sup>8</sup> Such neighborhoods inhabited by the new educated class invariably enjoy the best of everything, including sanitation, health, government facilities and general environmental beauty.<sup>9</sup> That environmental sanitation varies along a socio-economic ladder measured by income and education has been well demonstrated by Okediji and Aboyade in the Nigerian case where five different towns (including Ibadan and Lagos) and villages were studied. Income and education operated together to determine the degree of environmental sanitation as well as the degree of spatial segregation of the population.

In addition to the above, there remain the emptiness and cultural aloofness as well as different attitudes to various aspects of African tradition, all of which are discernible in the educated class. The function of education or rather its dysfunction from the African point of view can therefore be said to lie in its alienating power. In many African societies the alienating power of education is harnessed the more by the over-emphasis on the boarding school and the hostels. The students grow accustomed to the privileges of the boarding house or halls of residence, with ready and sumptuous meals at regular intervals, three times a day, with all the facilities for social, mental and physical development in superfluous supply, and with a living quarters and mental set that distorts the reality of the wider society.

Many studies have however revealed other aspects of cultural cleavages going on in the African society, and such cleavages have been noted to be directly associated with the level of educational attainment. In the realm of differential fertility patterns in African societies Professor Okediji observed differences in the "outlook, attitudes regarding number of children considered ideal, in actual number of births and in contraceptive usage" of his subjects, and noted that such differences tended to vary with the level of educational attainment as well as with the income level

and occupations.<sup>10</sup> Dr. P. Olusanya too observed similar variations along socio-economic ladders. Education was specifically employed as an index of social status in this latter study, and the findings confirm the hypothesis that education is virile cultural differentiating mechanism in African societies. Within the educated class there remain variations that are very insignificant if compared with the gap in attitudes and styles of life between the relatively few educated class and the rest of the masses.

TABLE 2

Nigeria: Differential Contribution of Educational Levels to the Labor Force for the Year 1965

Educational Level	Number	% of Labor Force
1. Primary	420,644	88.5%
(a) Drop-Outs	274,149	57.6
(b) Completers	146,495	30.9
2. Junior Secondary	30,874	6.6
(a) Drop-Outs	8,652	1.8
(b) Completers	22,222	4.8
3. Senior Secondary	19,546	4.1
(a) Drop-Outs	5,335	1.1
(b) Completers	14,211	3.0
4. Tertiary: Non University Drop-Outs and Completers	2,114	0.4
5. Tertiary, University	2,114	0.4
Total	475,292	100.0%

The significant point to emphasize here is the fact that just as the educational structure has been relatively institutionalized in its pyramid form, the occupational structure and the socio-cultural spheres deriving from the preceding two are also rapidly becoming very much peaked: with the few members of the educated class on top and the masses at the base. (See Table 2)

That there is a positive correlation between the educational structure and the occupational as well as income dimensions is mere common sense observation which interested researchers can investigate. But that on the basis of the former, cultural bifurcation is taking place in many African societies is a proposition that is worth further investigation.

However, formal education has also created a gap both between the educated and the uneducated in the urban centers, as well as between the urban centers and the rural areas. This has been found to be the case in Ghana and the Ivory Coast.<sup>11</sup> The same is true for Nigeria and most of the other African countries. In Nigeria, for instance, apart from the fact that urban centers are the loci of educational institutions, the quality of education, if this could be estimated from the qualifications of the teachers, deteriorates as one moves into the rural areas. About 93.8 percent of primary school teachers in Nigerian rural villages with populations of between 0 and 700 have no Grade II certificates and this percentage decreases with increasing size of the community. Rural towns in Nigeria have 76.5 percent and Ibadan City has 60.6 percent of her teachers without any Grade II teachers qualifications. In the same way the drop-out rate increases with the extent of ruralness of the community. In villages with populations of about 700 and under, the primary school drop-out rate is 84.9%: in rural towns it is 47.2% and in Ibadan it is 20.0%.<sup>12</sup> The same picture can be painted for the standard of living differential between the educated and the uneducated and between the urban and the rural areas. In all these spheres there appears to be a division of society into differing cultures based essentially on educational attainments.

### III. EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE: Problems in Class Formations

We have attempted to catalogue the various dimensions of the revolution which is presently occurring in some African societies. Whether or not these are irreversible is another question. But the significance of the whole investigation of the effect of Western-type formal education on African societies may be grasped the more if a brief review of the percentage of the population belonging to the different classes is undertaken.

If literacy is taken as a rough index of education, then it is possible to classify the literates into one class and the illiterates into another. In Nigeria about 88.5% of the population are illiterate.<sup>13</sup> Within Nigeria, however, as is also the case within all African countries, variations exist in the degree of literacy in the population.

However literacy and illiteracy are two broad dimensions each of which embraces too broad a spectrum to be adequate for the purpose of the present analysis. Perhaps the type and nature of occupations may throw some more light onto the picture. But even before then, one must recognize the fact that considerable continuity has characterized two other aspects of colonial education apart from the latter's elitist orientation. One was the relatively few people who secured the opportunity. And in Nigeria as of 1970, primary school enrollment within the country varied from 4% in some areas to about 70% in others. And secondary school enrollment was even more restricted to fewer numbers, the enrollment percentage varying from 0.4% in some areas to about 12% in others.<sup>14</sup> And in the universities the restrictive nature of admission and selection into the school system is more obvious.

TABLE 3

University Education and Number of Students Graduating Per 1,000,000 Inhabitants

Year	Number of Graduates per Inhabitants
1961	0.8
1962	2.0
1965	3.0
1966	2.0

Source: UNESCO Yearbook, 1970

However as already indicated, the occupational differentiation of society could throw some light on the class basis of society resulting from the nature of structured education and the related pattern of monetary rewards. (Also see Table 2) Dr. Olusanaya has shown the extent to which occupational status is closely connected to spatial and residential patterns in some suburban areas of Nigeria.<sup>15</sup> For example, 93.5% of his sample were white collar workers, while others were traders in the high class residential area of Bodija in Ibadan while in the poorer community of Sango, most of the population consisted of laborers (over 38%) farmers, craftsmen, traders and artisans. However for the whole country, 78.2% of the labor force consists of farmers. A similar picture can be painted for most of Africa, where over 90% of the population in French speaking areas and over 70%

of those in the English speaking areas are in agriculture. The elites are obviously in the minority. And a concomitant income gap characterizes the various segments of the population, between the educated and uneducated, between the urban and the rural. In Nigeria for instance Professor Lewis notes the income gap between the rural and the urban centers, and suggests that urban incomes are 50% higher than rural incomes.<sup>16</sup>

However, the area in which the current class differentiation of society may be more disruptive has already been indicated--the area of social distance and cultural cleavages. Some authors have suggested that the colonial power gave a common culture to the peoples of Africa. Perhaps it will be more correct to suggest that the colonizer gave a common culture to the new classes of African nations--the educated classes. As put by Anderson,

*Educated men are isolated by schooling and by career mobility from the life of their natal communities, losing progressively understanding of the local affairs from which emerge relationships that administrators must deal with.*<sup>17</sup>

A similar suggestion is contained in Dr. Biobaku's contention that African education that will integrate the African into his community is yet to be discovered.<sup>18</sup>

The nature of structured education has consequently operated, not only to detach the African from, rather than integrate him into, his community, but also it has served to create jobs for a relatively few, and joblessness for large sections of the masses. The nature of unemployment problems which are not unconnected with the nature of structured education can be indicated by reference to the figures in Table 4. According to some writers, some unemployed people, who constitute wastage of human resources, remain jobless for two to three years. The threat of the increasing numbers of such unemployed students to the political stability of African nations is a problem worth debating by national leaders.

TABLE 4  
Percentage of Labor Force Which is Unemployed (Nigeria)

1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967
6.9	13.7	15.1	16.8	20.7	20.9	26.6	20.0

Source: United Nations, Statistical Yearbook, 1968.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made to delineate different dimensions of the process of class formation in Africa while focusing essentially on the contribution of structured formal education to the process. And just as Hurd and Johnson found out about Ghana, it has been suggested here that social cleavages are developing in many African societies, notably in Nigeria, and that the nature of the distribution of educational attainments as well as the remunerations associated with the latter are to a considerable degree responsible for the class formations. What is the significance of all the above for the understanding of intergroup animosities, tensions and possibly violence in Africa? One can provide a tentative answer by suggesting that inequalities which are not only manifested in economic dimensions but also manifested in its cultural and symbolic dimensions are more likely to encourage polarization in society. The recent peasant revolts in Western Nigeria (the "Agbekoya" Movement, 1969/70) is a pointer at what the repercussions of such polarizations could be for individuals and society at large.

#### Footnotes

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