

LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE — RE-FRAMING THE DISCOURSE ON AFRICAN EDUCATION

Timothy Lintner

Africa, the "Great Dark Continent," the "Continent of Great Misunderstandings," is rapidly becoming the "Continent of Great Opportunities."¹

A Language Learned

When looking into the African past, the symbiotic relationship between language and effect is easily unearthed. Indeed, the purpose of colonial discourse was to depict the colonized (African) as racially degenerate in order to justify conquest and establish appropriate systems of control, administration and instruction.² This colonial discourse was laden with comparisons and stereotypes. For example, "the highest form of human life was portrayed in the statuary of ancient Greece...the lowest grade of humanity appeared to be the African."³ Africans were described as "a brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful and superstitious people."⁴ These descriptions were used to support commonly held contentions or, in many cases, to create debasing images of their own. It was a language of justification, a language of subordination, and a self-righteous and self-serving language that was often masked in benevolent rhetoric. The foundation of this rhetoric was built upon the passionate language of morality and the calculated language of science.

¹ Jones, T. J. (1925), *Education in East Africa: A Study of East, Central and South Africa* by the Second African Education Commission under the auspices of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, in cooperation with the International Education Board (Edinburgh House Press: London).

² Mangan, J. A., (1993) *Images for Confident Control: Stereotypes in Imperial Discourse*, in Mangan, J. A. (ed.) *The Imperial Curriculum: Racial Images and Education in the British Colonial Experience* (Routledge: London).

³ Lyons, C. (1975), *To Wash an Aethiop White: British Ideas about Black African Educability, 1530-1960* (Teacher's College Press: New York) p. 29.

⁴ Long, E. (1774), *The History of Jamaica*, in Lyons, C., p. 32-33.

One would speak of compassion and salvation, the other of truth and reason. They both spoke to an audience poised to listen.

The Colonial Conversation: A Measured Benevolence

The language of morality was a colonial construct used to justify educating Africans. "It is imperative that we Christianize this savage African race. There is just one way to do this: educate him of God."⁵ Language adopted a moral necessity, a paternalistic urgency, and a redeeming and liberating tone. "Let us try to elevate his character and to educate him."⁶ Yet the benevolence of this marriage between education and morality can certainly be called into question. For behind all this moral posturing — indeed at the core of its very existence — lay notions of cultural, political and, of course, intellectual superiority. Education was meant to save and to enlighten. It was a "gift" to the African ignorant. Colonial morality spoke of civility and salvation and in doing so inherently spoke of division and difference. Equality, the cornerstone of biblical belief, was compromised and redefined.

Just as the language of morality dominated colonial educational discourse, so too did the language of science which served to construct an intellectually and evolutionary inferior African. Science would serve as an ideological vehicle that influenced colonial educational policy and practice. Cranial capacity was analyzed; "[t]he brain of the Negro has proved to be smaller than in the European [thus] ... [t]he Negro is inferior, intellectually, to the European,"⁷ and scientists studying human evolution stated that "[t]here is a good reason for classifying the Negro as a distinct species from the European."⁸ This language was measured and quantifiable and steeped in scientific rhetoric which "proved" the African's diminished capacity for educational attainment. For the skeptics, science would compliment prevailing sentiment which espoused the belief that educating the African was careless at best, futile at worst. "I do not think that any amount of education will make

⁵ Buchanan, C. (1809), *The Star in the East: a sermon preached in the parish-church of St. James, Bristol, for the benefit of the "Society for Missions to Africa and the East,"* (Portsmouth, NH: Oracle) p. 22.

⁶ Reade W. (1863), in Hunt J. (1863), "On the Negroes Place in Nature," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, 2.6, p. xix.

⁷ Hunt, J. (1863), pp. xv-xvi.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. xvi.

them anything but what they are."⁹ Colonial educational discourse was a language of morality and hegemony, of restriction and empiricism; it was a purposeful and detached language that isolated, alienated and conveniently compartmentalized. It was colonial Africa's *lingua franca*.

The Modern Word

The ideological tenets of Africa's educational language — a patronizing morality and a biased science — are just as prevalent today as they were in the past. Aid is given with a graciousness constructed from the well-worn premise of African helplessness. A sense of pious conviction is evidenced in Africa's educational arena which accentuates the paternal need to "edify" or "assimilate." Education is still seen as the savior of Africa's incivility. And science, though less dependent upon physiological pseudo-empiricism, nonetheless subordinates notions of liberation and empowerment to the "new" science of expenditures and return rates. Thus, African education is derived and discussed through the use of statistics and spread sheets. Whereas colonial science linked the physical to the intellectual, modern practice links the outcome to the investment. The language of morality and science are alive and thriving within the circles of African education.

Other remnants of colonial discourse are flourishing in modern Africa as well. Similar stereotypes are used to describe African education as "weak," "ineffective," "unsustainable."¹⁰ Images are created concerning the viability and vitality of African education which is labeled "...a system of education that is both out-of-touch and obsolete."¹¹ We adhere to the language of the past while attempting to describe the dynamics of the present. We use a convenient, ageless language.

Yet who or what dominates the present discourse concerning the "language" of African education? With donor nations and international agencies contributing to Africa's educational cause, a certain "voice" is inherent in the gift. These economic entities create and perpetuate the

⁹ Dr. Seeman in Hunt p. xviii.

¹⁰ World Bank Finding #10, "African Universities: The Way Forward," January, 1994.

¹¹ Mungazi, D., *Personal Interview*, June 19, 1996 (Flagstaff, Arizona).

language used to describe Africa's educational world. With such economic control comes the dictation of policy and practice.¹² Thus, the language, the message, if you will, concerning education in Africa may be influenced more by economic imperatives and bottom-line results than notions of individual empowerment or collective liberation. The "corporate line" of the present is the arrogant and paternalistic manifestation of the old cliché, "money talks."

Forging A New Language

To break this language of deficit, instigated by colonial powers and perpetuated by bureaucratic powers, the language used to describe African education must be reevaluated. A revised set of semantics must be employed to produce a new characterization of African education.¹³ Shifting the paradigm from deficit to asset, from neglect to recognition, will facilitate more than a linguistic renaissance; it will develop and dictate educational action. For the language that is used, the constructions created by this language are often the ideological foundations upon which policy is erected. This "new language" should challenge accepted dogmas built upon the hegemonic mythologies of the past. It is only through a discourse of hope and possibility that enlightened reflection and empowering action will occur.¹⁴

Language must seek ownership of its own truths and its own meanings. For far too long the pessimistic language of "others" has defined African education. Language will never liberate if it is spoken by others to others.¹⁵ It must delineate and defend its own autonomy. Therefore, the voice of the African concerning African education is imperative.

In this light of self-determination and self-definition it is incumbent upon those impassioned by African education to re-examine the language we use. Only through a language of commonality, and by way

¹² Philip Coombs (1985), *The World Crisis In Education: The View from the Eighties* (New York: Oxford University Press).

¹³ John Henrik Clark (1985), *Education of a New Reality in the African World*, keynote address presented at the annual meeting of the National Alliance of Black Educators (New York, New York, November 14) Educational Reproduction Document Service No. 290 203.

¹⁴ Paulo Freire (1970), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum), p. 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 68-73.

of a unifying and liberating voice, can we begin to reinvent a new vision of African education. Language is born of conviction and is premised on the ideal of action and response. It is in this light of responsiveness that we must put into practice this new language we preach.