

Full Length Research

The Africans' Attitude Towards Western Education Case Study: Sierra Leone (1800 - 1920's)

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Africa was viewed by the Europeans as an appropriate place for missionary work and an ideal area for the spread of Western education. Christian missions were very active in Colonial West Africa. It was through their establishment of educational institutions that people had access to Western education. The latter was the means through which Christian missionaries reached their objective that was teaching Africans to read the Bible and secure them to their faith. Effectively, their work bore a great success in Sierra Leone, which had certain significance in the sense that it was the first land on which the British missionaries set foot, and people had access to education. The target of this article is to clarify whether the bulk of the people were for or against Western education. What was Sierra Leoneans reaction towards the spread of this kind of education?

Key Words: Western education, Christian missionaries, Sierra Leoneans, schools, reaction, attitude.

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INTRODUCTION

The portrait of Africa painted by the colonial powers was one of a benighted people who were primitive and without history and culture. Europeans believed that they were the first who brought the light of civilisation to the African continent. But, they were profoundly wrong for the fact that education was not a new innovation for Africans. In fact, values and social behaviours could be also acquired through the daily life within the community as it was the case of African traditional education. Children were expected to learn correct speech and good behaviour from mothers and other teachers including all members of the extended family and the community as a whole. Through observation, imitation and participation, they learnt how to cope with their environment. For example, they learnt to farm, hunt, cook and build houses.

Broadly speaking, education can also be acquired within schools and colleges. So, it is in these educational institutions and through professional educators that all

the education deemed appropriate for the learner is available. In the Sierra Leonean colonial context, this form of education is called Western or European. It was a monopoly of the Christian missions who provided people with education through the erection of schools because of their enquiry, especially in the urban centers. For most of the Christian missionaries, providing secondary or higher education was not so important, since they reached their aim in elementary schools. However, that did not mean that secondary and higher education were not offered. Indeed, most of these schools were boarding and physically separated from indigenous communities. But despite that, missionaries succeeded to some extent to form a Christian community comprising people of diverse origins who accepted the combination of Christian faith and Western way of life. So, what was the Sierra Leoneans' response to the spread of Western education?

Sierra Leoneans' Attitude Towards Western Education

Education was not a new innovation for Sierra Leoneans. While, the animists acquired it through non formal institutions including parents, elders and secret societies⁽¹⁾, Muslims acquired education through the teaching in Koranic schools. At the coming of colonialism, traditional education was not given a great importance in the colonial government's policy, which gave the priority to Christianity and endeavoured to spread Western education at any cost. This task was left almost entirely to the private enterprise of Christian missions⁽²⁾. Religious differences had directly affected access to Western education, in the sense that throughout the nineteenth century, the bulk of the people had diverse reactions towards the new European culture and civilization. Some were in favour of Western education, whereas others found it alien and couldn't adjust with it.

The Colony Residents' Attitude

In fact, there were antagonist attitudes among Sierra Leoneans, some welcomed missionaries with an open heart and this was due to their long contact with European traders and the need to learn their language and acquire their knowledge. Those were the Colony residents, the Creoles who found in Christianity an opportunity to get rid from their traditional culture⁽³⁾. By definition the term Creole is used to refer to the descendants of Settlers and Liberated Africans in Sierra Leone and to others who had cultivated their habits and had come to accept their way of living⁽⁴⁾. According to the historian J. B. Welbster, the Creoles had the ability to fill a buffer role in Great Britain's advance into Africa and they were the "interpreters of Western culture to Africans"⁽⁵⁾.

Since they were in favour of Christianity, they undoubtedly accepted missionary education for the facilities and advantages it offered. Therefore, they accepted to adopt the new religion so as to get access to the white men's civilization. Effectively, they had access

to education at Fourah Bay College (F. B.C.), which helped missionaries to fulfill their educational task. The fact that F.B.C. emphasized within its curriculum on learning Greek and Latin attracted them. Consequently, they became familiar, not only with British history and culture, but also with the history and culture of indigenous ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, as well as other parts of West Africa⁽⁶⁾. Since the Creoles praised Western education and welcomed missionaries' presence in Sierra Leone, the number of mission schools grew more and more.

Mission Schools and the Missionaries Educational Services

The Grammar School provided them with a curriculum containing subjects in English grammar and composition, Greek, mathematics, geography, Bible history, astronomy, English history, writing and music and the focus on Christianity. Later on, algebra was also introduced to the curriculum⁽⁷⁾. Missionaries provided cheap and efficient educational services. They taught them new values and new way of life because they tended to see everything un-Christian as 'uncivilized'⁽⁸⁾. In their initial instruction, missionaries focused on the use of the vernacular as a vehicle of communication. So, the Sierra Leoneans' response to the use of the vernacular was not what the missionaries had expected. People were not keen on the utilization of the native language in mission schools. They were in favour of English language because it was necessary for their commercial activities and a key tool to the European civilization. For them these schools were the means that would give them access to the secrets of the white power⁽⁹⁾. The knowledge of English was then the tool that assisted them to cope with the changes that took place in colonial Sierra Leone. Consequently, English was used, then it became a Lingua Franca, so as to link the different tribes and expand education in West Africa as a whole⁽¹⁰⁾.

Among F. B. C. graduates Samuel Crowther, who welcomed the Europeans and praised Western education and encouraged the spread of Christianity. In addition to his own language, he started studying the Temne language as a means of communication with the people

⁽¹⁾ Magnus O. Basse, (1999), *Western Education and Political Domination in Africa*, Westport, CT, p.16.

⁽²⁾ Ronald Oliver and Atmore Anthony, (1994), *Africa Since 1800*, Cambridge University Press, Great Britain, 4th ed, p. 124.

⁽³⁾ Elezabeth Isichei, (1976), *History of West Africa since 1800*, Macmillan, Cambridge University, London, p.255.

⁽⁴⁾ Kup, A. P., (1975), *Sierra Leone: A Concise History*, London, David and Charles Newton Abbot, Canada, p. 114.

⁽⁵⁾ Irving Kaplan, (1976), *Area Handbook for Sierra Leone*, Washington, p.10.

⁽⁶⁾ Daniel J. Paracka Jr, (2003), *The Athens of West Africa: A History of International Education at Fourah Bay College, Freetown, Sierra Leone*, Routledge, New York, p.7.

⁽⁷⁾ History of the Grammar School.

<http://www.members.aol.com/matinc/Slyshistory.htm>

⁽⁸⁾ A.P. Kup, op.cit., p.63

⁽⁹⁾ Magnus O. Basse, op. cit., p. 54

⁽¹⁰⁾ Michael Crowder, (1968), *West Africa Under Colonial Rule*, London, Hutchinson & COLtd, London, p. 386.

of the hinterland of Sierra Leone⁽¹¹⁾. He continued to have contact with John Raban, one of the few missionaries in Sierra Leone who gave a great importance to African languages. He realized that Yoruba, Crowther's mother tongue, was a major language. As a result, Crowther became an informant for Raban, who published between 1828 and 1830 three little books about Yoruba⁽¹²⁾. Besides, Samuel Crowther admired English language and praised its use, but this intention towards missionary education was not the same for all F. B. C. Members. While some of the African students were in favour of the instructions provided in this institution, others were against such view, among them Obadiah Moore, who was born at the village of York in 1849⁽¹³⁾. He reminded students,

“You're African students in Africa. Your country expects much from you... study therefore from the African's point of view and not from the European's point of view. You have to change, clarify and carry forward our people's way and method of looking at things”⁽¹⁴⁾.

In 1858, the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) began to have problems of staff, consequently, from 1859 to 1864, Fourah Bay College was closed. From the 1860's onwards, Sierra Leoneans in Southern Nigeria brought into circulation the Slogan “Africa for the Africans”⁽¹⁵⁾. This new self-awareness was heartily welcomed by the educated Africans in Sierra Leone. As a result, at the beginning of the 1870's, there was a desire among Sierra Leoneans to have their own university⁽¹⁶⁾.

The Protectorate Residents' Attitude

The Mende Ethnic Group Attitude

The Mende were another ethnic group extremely responsive to Western education. Effectively, the Mende like the Creoles welcomed missionaries' work because they envisioned Western education as the tool that delivered them from obscurity and gave them a new vision about the world. In fact, Christians especially the Creoles and the Mende were given more opportunities to

education through the spread of mission schools and they occupied high posts in government services.

Muslims' Attitude

This eagerness to mission schools was not present everywhere, for few Muslims had access to Western schools and were less privileged than Christians. As a result, they couldn't afford the jobs provided by the colonial administration and their task was restricted to the teaching in Koranic schools⁽¹⁷⁾, which propagated Islam in that area, where teachers applied an educational system that varied from the recitation of the Koran by heart to instruction in reading and writing in Arabic⁽¹⁸⁾. As a result, the output of the Koranic schools was the emergence of a small elite who “could read with ease classical Arabic, write it fluently and know how to comment with great insight and feeling on the most difficult texts of Arab authors, translate them and devote themselves to writing poetry, literature or theology”⁽¹⁹⁾.

In 1848, there were some 2,000 Muslims in Freetown : Mandinka, Susu, Fula and Aku. Muslim Creoles sought the same benefits as Christian ones. Some of them functioned from 1840 to 1870 as interpreters for the government such as Mohammed Sanusi, an Aku, literate in both Arabic and English and was also a collector of West African Islamic Manuscripts⁽²⁰⁾. Moreover in the protectorate, the Temne of the North, who were converted to Islam in the early eighteenth century⁽²¹⁾, were less receptive to Western education. Therefore, they were prevented from the educational opportunities offered to the South⁽²²⁾. Furthermore, when Crowther was appointed a schoolmaster to serve in the new villages founded to receive liberated Africans, he was encountered by the opposition of the representatives of Islam and the indigenous religions⁽²³⁾.

Actually, Muslims' attitude towards missionary education was unlike that of the Christians, in the sense that they didn't accept the religious-oriented education provided by missionaries. There was no compromise between Muslims and missionaries in religious matters. Moreover, they were not in favour of Christianity and mission schools because they had little contact with the outside world and considered missionary education as

⁽¹¹⁾ Andrew F. Walls, (1994), *Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1807-1891) Foremost African Christian of the 19th c*, the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Jan, 92, Vol 16 Issue 1,p.15-21, edited by G.H.Anderson, p. 10.

⁽¹²⁾ Andrew F. Walls,p.10.

⁽¹³⁾ Daniel J. Paracka Jr, op.cit., p.13.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Ibid.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Quoted by Geiss Imanuel, (1974), *The Pan-African Movement*, London, Methuen & Co Ltd, London, p.105.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Quoted by Geiss Imanuel, p.105.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Elizabeth Isichei. op. cit., p. 248.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Michael Crowder, op. cit., p. 23.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Quoted by Michael Crowder, p. 373.

⁽²⁰⁾ Quoted by Michael Crowder, p. 64.

⁽²¹⁾ Michael Banton, (1957), *West African City : A Study of Tribal life in Freetown*, London,

Oxford University Press, I Badan Accra, p.17.

⁽²²⁾ John R. Cartwright, (1978), *Political Leadership in Sierra Leone*, London, Croom HelmLtd,

London, p.42.

⁽²³⁾ A. P. Kup, op. cit., p. 156.

disruptive for the traditional society. Therefore, few of them attended mission schools and as a result, missionaries didn't have a great impact on them. According to A. Babs Fafunwa, Muslims refused to send their children to Christian schools because they were established mostly to convert children to Christian religion, which was considered as a threat to their religion⁽²⁴⁾. Also, they refused Western education because they regarded it as irrelevant to their needs and would lead to a neglect of both local arts and crafts, as well as to a lowering of moral standards and a corruption of Islam⁽²⁵⁾. Besides, they didn't allow their kids to attend missions' schools because they had no desire for their sons to be taught manual work, which could be introduced at home⁽²⁶⁾.

Furthermore, many parents didn't permit their girls to attend school beyond the age of twelve because they were afraid that they would occupy the professions traditionally held by men⁽²⁷⁾. As a matter of fact, they were more reluctant to let their children go to missionary schools because they realized that missionaries believed in the superiority of their religion and the European civilization as well. They also recognized that missionary work alienated them from their culture and did not fulfil their aspirations. Their schools were not complements to traditional African education because they were based on Western models and taught by expatriate teachers, who denied the knowledge of the local environment.

Government Measurements to attract Muslims to Western Education

In order to attract Muslims to Western education, before 1900, the government attempted to introduce some subjects related to Muslims' interest such as Arabic in mission schools. In 1891 Muslim Youth had access to education at F.B.C with a grant to pay the teachers and in 1899, an elementary school was opened, so as to teach English and Arabic⁽²⁸⁾. In 1903, Muslims in the colony petitioned to have their marriage, and their inheritance laws recognized⁽²⁹⁾. Abdallah Quilliam, a Turkish Muslim, visiting Freetown, wrote in 1903:

⁽²⁴⁾ Magnus O. Basse, op. cit., p.41.

⁽²⁵⁾ LaNette Weiss Thompson, *The Non Literate and the transfer of knowledge in West Africa*.

http://www.chronologicalbiblestorying.com/articles/non-literate_chapter_1.htm

⁽²⁶⁾ Elezabeth Isichei, op. cit., p.256.

⁽²⁷⁾ LaNette Weiss Thompson, *The Non Literate and the transfer of knowledge in West Africa*.

http://www.chronologicalbiblestorying.com/articles/non-literate_chapter_1.htm

⁽²⁸⁾ A. P. Kup, op. cit., p. 64.

⁽²⁹⁾ Ibid, p. 65.

At the present time within the colony of Sierra Leone there are three distinct classes of individuals: Pagan races, Muslims and Professing Christians. As the law now stands the law courts of the Colony practically bastardise and disinherit the first two classes, who form more than 95 per cent of the total population of the area...⁽³⁰⁾

But, despite the government's attempt, it couldn't affect them and get them away from their own religion. This reaction didn't mean that Muslims were not aware of Western education. They showed their awareness when they enhanced the government to establish schools for their children. In 1900, Governor Charles King Harman established a department of Mohamedan education to attract Muslims to Western education without affecting their religion and by 1911, five Muslim schools received government support⁽³¹⁾.

Concerning Bo school, since most of the Mende and Temne pupils were Muslims Alpha Ahmed Tijan was appointed to the staff as Arabic teacher and he became as an intermediary officer between the European staff and the pupils⁽³²⁾. By the end of the first five years at the school, the native teachers became boring as interpreters because they were surpassed in the educational field by some of the top class students. As a result, in 1911 the appointed prefects assisted in the actual teaching. To help them, a prefects' class was established to teach them more advanced lessons, including literature, elementary mathematics, general science, geography and political economy⁽³³⁾.

In the mid-twenty century, Muslims realized that they should provide their children with some kind of European education without neglecting their own religion. To fulfil this task, some Muslim bodies were involved so as to develop among Muslims a Western type of education. There were for instance, Madrassa Islamia and various friendly societies such as Murkaramin and the Temne Progressive Union founded by Kund Burah. In addition to that, he sponsored the Ahmadiyya Muslim Movement in Freetown⁽³⁴⁾, which played an important role in establishing schools with Western type curricula among Muslims⁽³⁵⁾. Through these organizations eleven mosques were built to cater for the religious needs of his people⁽³⁶⁾.

⁽³⁰⁾ Ibid

⁽³¹⁾ A. P. Kup, op. cit., p. 65.

⁽³²⁾ History of Bo School.

<http://www.obba.org.uk/his.htm>

⁽³³⁾ Ibid

⁽³⁴⁾ Sierra Leone Heroes, 'Achievement of Independance' Sierra Leone Web

⁽³⁵⁾ Elizabeth Isichei, op. cit., p 249

⁽³⁶⁾ Sierra Leone Heroes, 'Achievement of Independance' Sierra Leone Web

The Animist Attitude

Unlike Muslims, the Animist did not represent a big obstacle to the spread of missionary education as Islam did. Traditional religions, on the contrary varied from one tribe to another. So, they couldn't form a contradictory force for missionaries' task. In this case, the link between religion and education was apparent here. Effectively, African traditional education was relevant to the needs of the African society because according to A. Babs Fafunwa, "African society regarded education as a means to an end and not as an end in itself" ⁽³⁷⁾. Accordingly, education is a life experience. It is a continuous process that should start at home, be formalized at school and continue to exist after school period during the human's experience in life. A Sierra Leonean educationist, the late Professor V.E.King (1967:2) had stated the basic philosophy of West African education:

The individual is a member of a family and a community whose continuity is essential for the survival of the tribe.....The land is the principal bond of unity, it being....the begetter of the unborn, the upholder of the living, the custodian of the dead....It is imperative, therefore youth should learn all this and, especially how he fits into the pattern of life ⁽³⁸⁾.

CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, the Creoles had a higher level of education compared to that of the people in the Protectorate. Their acquisition of education opened for them avenues for jobs. In the early 1890's, they had occupied nearly half the senior posts in public service in Freetown and they dominated high positions in the government's sphere as clerks, doctors, lawyers, administrators etc ⁽³⁹⁾. Among them Samuel Lewis (1834-1903), the most famous of the early Krio lawyers, who accepted to be among the membership of the Legislative Council in 1882 so as to serve his people honourably, James Africanus Horton (1835-1883), the distinguished Army doctor and John Ezzidio (1810 - 1872), a recaptive Nupe, a big merchant and member of the Legislative Council in 1863 ⁽⁴⁰⁾.

As regards the protectorate, the Southern Provinces of Sierra Leone welcomed to a large extent missions work.

Thus the first lawyers, doctors and all those who had higher degree of formal Western education belonged to the Mende and Sherbro areas, including Dr. Milton Margai (1895-1964), Dr. Albert Margai (1910-1980), Siaka Stevens (1905-1988), in addition to other intellectuals⁽⁴¹⁾. It is noteworthy that, the seeds of missionary work were watered and actually bore fruitful results, since most Sierra Leoneans embraced Christianity and praised Western education. But, afterwards they became conscious of their race and considered missionary work with a critical mind.

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⁽³⁸⁾ Ohuche R. O., (1991), *The Centrality of Education in Igbo Culture*, Institute of education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, p.2.

⁽³⁹⁾ John R. Cartwright,p.42.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Unknown, *Sierra Leone*, Africa Today, p 1128.

⁽⁴¹⁾ John R. Cartwright, op.cit.,p.42.

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