

A STUDY OF THE ENGLISH PUBLIC SCHOOL TRADITION IN
THE FORMER EUROPEAN SECONDARY BOARDING SCHOOLS IN
KENYA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON OTHER SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Summary

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The study traces the development of colonial attitudes and outlook in Africans educated in the English Public Boarding School tradition in Africa. It shows the repercussion this has had on the country in its attempt to grow into a united and truly African country; and it suggests that the difference between the African socialist philosophy accepted by the government and the educational practice of these schools can be considerably narrowed if these schools become "Sixth Form Colleges", providing an easier social milieu for inter-tribal mixing.

Report

The thesis traces the English public school tradition in Kenya and notably in the former European secondary boarding schools. It is the author's hypothesis that aspects of the English public schools were apparent in these European schools to a much higher degree than in other secondary schools. Undoubtedly it was natural that English settlers and administrators wished to provide an education comparable to the very best they could find in England - the English Public Schools.

The main aspects of the English public school were thought to be independence, selectivity and boarding with the additional assumptions of the English public school tradition: -

- (1) A belief that the main purpose of education is character training and that it should be primarily based on religion.
- (2) A conviction that the function of a public school is education for leadership which in turn stresses the importance of service.
- (3) The qualities of character training, leadership and service, can best be developed in the communal life of a boarding school.
- (4) Close associations of family, school, and university should be preserved.

Numerous schools in Kenya were taken as a basis for study; the closest study was naturally made of the former European secondary boarding schools because on these the author's hypothesis rested. What criteria distinguished them from other Kenya secondary schools? Firstly, they possessed superior buildings, extensive playing fields and other excellent amenities. Secondly, they charged higher fees than most other schools (higher cost schools). Thirdly, they tended to meet periodically for concerted action over common problems, on their own initiative and without government sanction. Fourthly, they were staffed by the cream of the European Colonial Service who were civil servants and predominantly Oxbridge graduates. Lastly, their house systems, internal structure and ethos were typical of the English public schools.

In other Kenyan secondary schools there were many facets of the English public school tradition, evolved and transmitted by English public school minded principals and teachers. Government boarding schools for Africans such as Machakos, Kagumo, Kisii, Kakamega, Shimo-le-Tewa, Kapenguria, Kapsabet, Tambach, etc. established predominantly in the late 1940's possessed European government officers as headmasters. The day schools for Asians which were government maintained such as Allidina Visram, Mombasa, the Duke of Gloucester and Duchess of Gloucester Schools, Nairobi, circulated an English type of culture because the English tradition was the accepted social frame. In the missionary schools, which mainly catered as 'central schools' for surrounding primary schools, the English public school tradition was watered-down and not so strong as the government schools because of the missionary sympathy and empathy with African aims and aspirations. Sometimes the English tradition was almost non-existent because the missionaries were of Dutch, French, Italian, and of other national origin.

Although religion dominated the missionary schools, a bias of religious character training permeated the government secondary schools in conjunction with the stronger elements of the English public school tradition. One must sympathise with African children during the colonial period because they were forced to adopt, as the price of a formal education, either a firm English culture tinged with religion, or a denominational religion tinged with foreign culture. In retrospect, the Africans preferred the latter. Today, Africans rarely resent the colonial influence of the missionaries: the missionaries were friends of the people (wananchi) in their struggle for nationhood. ¹ However, it should be noted that when expatriate teachers teach African children, regardless of their subject or missionary zeal, they inevitably colour the child's mind, in fact Europeanise them to a certain degree, dependent on the psychological background and family circumstances of the child; the effects of school organisation generally, and the boarding school particularly, are important contributory factors in this process.

Overall, the truest reflection of the English public school tradition was in the higher cost schools because of their colonial government backed independence and selectivity, their relatively high fees, their boarding aspect with lavish amenities, their very English organisation and administration, and their high esteem and prestige which exerted considerable influence on other sectors of education and life.

¹ "President praises job done by missions," Page 1, East African Standard. November 28th, 1970. Report of a speech on the opening of new extensions to Alliance High School, by the President, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta.

With Independence in 1963, the new Kenya Constitution abolished all discriminatory laws, and, instead of separate racial sectors in education, one unified system became the aim and essence of Kenyan education. The new political philosophy of African Socialism stressed co-operation and unity rather than the English tradition of competition and stratification. As a result there were many aspects of education in conflict: a unified secondary school system versus independence for a school or a group of schools: centralisation versus decentralisation: social aims and needs versus individual ones: selection on academic ability versus selection on race or wealth: African culture versus English culture.

The ethos of the former European secondary boarding schools did not change abruptly on Independence, and they continued to provide character training for leadership and service in the sense they had done so in colonial times: these schools were geared by their seniority and house systems to produce leaders who did not participate in menial tasks; 'fagging', the use of laundries, servants and cleaners, were not abolished, and the services were utilised for a multiracial atmosphere including African students. By the late 1960's these elite secondary boarding schools were predominantly African in race, but the products from these schools possessed a far different mentality in attitude and outlook from other African students, especially those students from the new 'harambee schools' which had mushroomed throughout Kenya during this period to boost Kenya secondary education output several fold.

African politicians are now realising this problem in the 1970's: the Secretary-General of the leading political party, the Kenya African National Union stated, "the danger facing Kenya today is that there is growing a small tribe of English-speaking Africans who do not know anything about their own language or culture. This small tribe think in English ... when they fight, they use English, and when they dream, they dream in English."¹

This problem would never have arisen if the strong and all-pervading character training emphasis of the English public school tradition had been realised. There will be other problems, mainly economic and socio-political in content which stem from the tardiness of the Ministry of Education to act promptly. Firstly, it is now difficult to eradicate the high cost schools because they have become entrenched with what can only be denoted as "Black European" ideas, and with almost ten years of Kenyan independence there is African vested interest to consider now. Secondly, the majority of former European secondary boarding schools are Nairobi-based, and the African students there mix with cosmopolitan influences; some of these may be salutary, but others are distinctly un-African: Western hippie-attitudes, drug-taking, crime, permissiveness, affluent teen-age parties. These are not for imitation by African students who are intent on

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Mr. Matano addressing the Kenya Press Club on the introduction of Swahili as the national language, reported Page 5, East African Standard, November 11th, 1970.

national development in a country with a predominantly agricultural economy. There are expensive schools in Kenya outside the State system, but the high cost schools are government assisted schools (similar to the direct grant schools in England), and this means the Kenya government condone different fees in different secondary schools.

The considerable difference between African Socialism philosophy and educational practice could be narrowed considerably if these élite secondary boarding schools became VI Form Colleges for the following reasons: -

- (1) They have prominent academic staff (still predominantly expatriate), excellent buildings, superior facilities, and out-standing amenities.
- (2) It would centralise Kenya's limited resources and increase efficiency at this level for higher grade manpower.
- (3) There are many practical advantages to large VI Forms - the larger size can offer a variety of subjects: special interests and abilities can be catered for with a wider range of extra-curricular activities. There is less duplication of expensive specialised equipment, e.g. fully equipped science laboratories, computers, language facilities, internal television systems.
- (4) The VI Form College is an easier social milieu for inter-tribal mixing. There should be no need now, for the ubiquitous English public school tradition of prefects; mutual social responsibility could be achieved more easily by the institution of a VI Form Society.

Meanwhile, the government has decided to establish VI Forms widely scattered throughout the country. This system does not encourage national unity, rather it causes political frictions in the choice of area and school for extension of VI Forms. From the academic and financial points of view, a proliferation of small VI Forms seems inadvisable and can be positively wasteful; moreover, to leave the former European secondary boarding schools in their present form and function of producing a different social class based on wealth is contentious and damaging, to say the least, to the social philosophy of the country.

It is significant that two recent government Commissions - Ndegwa,¹ and Bessey² have both raised the question of the VI Form College but they may well be ignored on this question as were the International Bank for Reconstruction Mission³ in 1963 and the Kenya Education Commission Report⁴ 1964.

¹ Pages 156-157, Report of the Commission of Inquiry (Public Service Structure and Remuneration Commission) 1970-71. Chairman, D.N. Ndegwa, Republic of Kenya, Government Printer, Nairobi, 1971.

² Pages 202-217, A Study of the Curriculum Development in Kenya. by Gordon S. Bessey. The report of an advisory mission under the terms of an agreement with the International Development Association and the British Overseas Development Association, Nairobi, 1971.

³ Page 233, The Economic Development of Kenya. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1963.

⁴ Para.41, Kenya Education Commission Report, Part I. Government of Kenya, Nairobi, 1964.