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Higher Education and the Rise of Early Political Elites in Africa

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Abstract

Missionaries were the precursors of formal education in colonial times in Africa because schools were their main avenues for conversion. A Roman Catholic missionary in Nigeria indeed once said, 'Those who hold the schools hold the country, hold its religion, hold its future.' And a recent author has concluded that, 'Formal education soon became the bait with which the young generation was enticed to Christianity' in Africa. This article argues that Western education and more precisely higher education, was the launching path to political elite status in Africa.

Introduction

In traditional African society, power rested in the hands of traditional elites. These were kings, emirs, obas, chiefs, priests, influential people in society and people of wealth. These people had the power to make wars, administer punishments and judge cases. At the advent of colonialism in Africa, the various colonial governments used these ruling aristocracies as agents for controlling the local populations. However, half-way into colonial rule in Africa, power and authority passed into the hands of modern political elites who then began to broker power between the Europeans on the one hand and Africans on the other. These political elites included those with high levels of education, the intelligentsias, people with occupations which paid them living wages. Some of them had adopted European styles of dress and a few had acquired family wealth. Some of them maintain nuclear families though many still owed allegiance to the extended family system and majority of them were Christians (Bassey, 1999; see also Ajayi, 1965; Lloyd, 1966, 1967; Ayandele, 1967; Abernethy, 1969).

This article argues that the rise to political power of the early political elites in Africa was due in part to Western education but to a large extent due to higher education; thanks to the activities of the Christian missions in Africa. It has to be pointed out from the outset that the establishment of schools in Africa during colonial days was the primary responsibility of the Christian missions because the missions saw schools as the main avenues for conversion. Indeed, as Bishop Shanahan, a Catholic missionary in Nigeria once said, "Those who hold the school, hold the country, hold its religion, hold its future" (cited in Abernethy, 1969, p. 41). As Ekechi (1972) has

noted, "Formal education became the bait with which the young generation in Africa was enticed to Christianity" (p. 176). Achebe (1965) describes the impact of a missionary school in Umuofia on the people of eastern Nigeria as follows:

Mr. Brown's school produced quick results. A few months in it were enough to make one a court messenger or even a court clerk. Those who stayed longer became teachers; and from Umuofia laborers went forth into the Lord's vineyard. New churches were established in the surrounding villages and a few schools with them. From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand. Mr. Brown's mission grew from strength to strength, and because of its link with the new administration it earned a new social prestige. (pp. 166-167)

Without any doubt, the educational message of the missions was savory and inviting to many Africans who saw European technological development as the handiwork of higher education and were willing to make the necessary sacrifice to reap the rewards of European power. Also, higher education held great promise for the colonized Africans as well. For example, with the consolidation of European control, enormous opportunities were created for European-trained Africans who were needed to perform minor administrative duties. There was need for teachers, catechists, clerks, accountants, buyers and sales representatives by the missions, schools, government services and the emerging European businesses. As a result, Western education was seen by many Africans not only as an exciting opportunity but also as an investment. Consequently, schooling became an integral part of the social fabric of some African societies. Foster (1965) argues that, "The schools, by increasingly functioning as a gateway to new occupations, represented one of the few alternate avenues of social mobility operating independently of traditional modes of status acquisition." With the expansion of colonial government services and the high demand for educated Africans, visibility of higher education increased in Africa. Education came to play very strategic roles in people's lives. This fact must have prompted Lloyd (1966) to say, "In Africa... schooling gives the elite parents a very good chance of ensuring that his children will enjoy the same status as himself." He went on to add that, "well-educated and wealthy elite is tending to become a predominantly hereditary group" (p.57). Coleman (1965b) on his part concluded that, "upward mobility into the more prestigious and remunerative roles available to the indigenous inhabitants in the modern sector... was usually determined by educational achievement alone" (p. 37). Education therefore became the sole determinant of economic, political and cultural elite status in Africa.

With time, educated Africans were clearly aware that education and indeed higher education was the sine qua non for their continued political development as Africa joined the committee of nations. As we will see, almost all the political transformations that took place in Africa at this time

were largely the byproducts of the activities of educated Africans. And according to Coleman (1965b), whether as “activists, organization builders, ideologists, or members of literary class, the nationalists were those who had received one type of formal education or the other” (p. 37). Study after study shows that there is a positive correlation between higher education and political elite status in Africa because education had a major impact on political attitudes during the colonial period. As Grey (1979) puts it, those who were educated in formal schools had a higher propensity to participate in politics in Africa than those who were not because in colonial African societies, schools performed the task of political socialization and citizenship by emphasizing that their students belonged to one nation that cuts across the boundaries of family, tribe and village. In the schools, history was taught in order to stir interest in national affairs. Civics provided interest in government and created self-awareness. From knowledge gained in the study of subjects like political science, government and citizenship, higher education became avenues for agitation for self-government. However, in some instances, colonial schools modeled democratic practices that gave students insights into the workings of Western democracies. Ogunshye (1965, p.130) gives us some insight into the internal operations of some of the colonial schools in Africa and states, “Every class ...had its monitor and every teacher training college and every secondary school had its prefects.” He continues by arguing that, “By giving monitors and prefects varying degrees of responsibility in the class or school, a crude attempt was made to inculcate the virtues of self-government” (p. 130).

As Ogunshye (1965) notes, moral and characters training were enhanced in colonial schools in Africa by membership in the Boy Scouts. According to him, the Boys Scouts emphasized character-building, organization, cleanliness, truthfulness, readiness to help others as well as hardiness. He also says that team work, esprit de corps, moral training, inter-group competition and cooperation among students were enhanced by games, sports and athletics in schools. According to Hussey (1946) (who was a one time Director of Education in Nigeria and Uganda as well as an Educational Adviser to Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia), “as a result of education, Africans began to think more about personal and national problems and even to criticize government actions” (p.73). Important schools like William Ponty in Dakar, Senegal; King’s College, Lagos, Nigeria; St. Andrew’s College, Oyo, Nigeria; the Protestant King’s College at Budo in Uganda; the Catholic Colleges at Kisubi and Namilyango in Uganda and Achimota College in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) provided leadership training for students. These schools attracted students from all over the continent. Abernethy (1969) points out that the Hope Waddell Training Institute enrolled students throughout West Africa including Ghana, the Cameroons, Sierra Leone, Togo and Liberia.

There were students from as far away as the Niger Delta who attended St. Andrew's College, Oyo. Through their efforts of bringing students together from different parts of Africa, schools helped to broaden students' horizons and perspectives in political organization. It needs to be pointed out though that sometimes students even learned the art of political governance firsthand in their schools through hands-on activities and participation. In Methodist College, Uzuakoli, Nigeria, for example, Reverend H. L. O. Williams,

developed a student government that combined traditional and English patterns of government. The students lived in a large rectangular compound divided into four houses, each headed by a "Captain," and the equivalent of the Senior Prefect was known as a "Chief." The Chief, the Captains, and a few boys elected by the students themselves formed a "Cabinet," which held court fortnightly to try those charged with offenses. Trustworthy students called "Police Constables" served as prosecutors in these cases. (Abernethy, 1969, pp. 51-52)

There is little wonder that in the Eastern Nigerian House of Assembly elections of 1951, Uzuakoli had ten members elected to the State House of Assembly. Other Uzuakoli ex-students elected included a premier, a minister of education and four members in the Federal House of Assembly in Lagos (Abernethy, 1969, p.52). Indeed, Methodist Boy's High School type of arrangement was replicated by Mr. E. L. Mort, the principal of Toro College in Northern Nigeria. These early schools in Africa were followed by advanced institutions of learning. For example, Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone was established by the Church Missionary Society in 1827. Makerere College in Uganda started in 1925 as an Institute of Higher Education. Achimota College in Ghana began to offer university courses as soon as it was opened in 1927. In 1934, the High College at Yaba, Nigeria was opened which offered advanced academic, professional as well as technical courses. In the Sudan, the Gordon College which started in 1899 very shortly became an Institution of Higher Education. Similarly, the Institute of Education in Bakhter Ruda in the Sudan was very successful in training school teachers and in preparing students for citizenship.

Trade Unions, Youth Movements and Political Developments.

Advanced and higher education provided opportunities for some Africans to assume leadership in trade unions, student unions and youth clubs. Shortly before the end of World War 11, several trade unions, student unions and youth clubs emerged in Africa which served as "vehicles of new ideas and a proving ground for political leaders" (Tordoff, 1991, p. 57). During this time, many trade unions and youth organizations in Africa transformed themselves into mega organizations with ties to nationalist movements. Wallerstein's research (2005) has pointed out that voluntary associations were in many ways responsible for nationalist movements in Africa. In Guinea, for instance, Sekou Toure, who was the president of Parti Democratique de Guinee (PDG) was a product of the trade

union. Similarly, the Union Generale des Travailleurs d'Afrique Noire (UGTAN) was an amalgamation of many trade unions which later played an important role in the Guinean independence. Trade unions in Kenya were strongly affiliated with the Kenya African National Union (KANU). As is well known, the Kenya Federation of Labor (KFL) led by Tom Mboya "conducted a holding operation for KANU" (Tordoff, 1991, p. 58). Ahmadou Ahidjo as leader of the Union Camerounaise piloted the people of French Cameroons to independence in 1960. Political crystallization and liberation of Africa became the primary preoccupation of some of the trade unions in many parts of Africa because the trade union leaders envisioned that their economies were geared to foreign commercial interests, therefore the standard of living of their people and workers would not be improved until they (the union leaders) were able to wrestle political power from the hands of foreigners (Tordoff, 1991). Indeed, in Tanzania, not only were trade unionists allowed to join the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), union leadership was drawn largely from party hierarchy. As Tordoff (1991, p.63), puts it, the 1930s "saw the emergence in ... Africa of territorially based trade unions, youth movements, congresses and leagues," which later became full-fledge political parties. He names some of the youth movements that were converted into political parties and associations to include, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), which was formed in August 1944, the Rassemblement Democratique Africain (RDA). This was an international party established in 1946 in Francophone Africa. Others were the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) founded in 1947; the Northern Rhodesia African Congress founded in 1948. A number of political parties which emerged from cultural or voluntary organizations included: Parti Democratique de Cote d'Ivoire (PDCI) founded in Ivory Coast in 1946. This party started as an organization of African planters which was called "Comite d'action politique" of the Syndicat Agricole Africain. The Egbe Omo Oduduwa became the birth place for the Action Group (AG) in Western Nigeria. Jamiyyar Mutanen Arewa, a Hausa cultural organization formed the nucleus of the Northern People's Congress (NPC). Indeed, the Sierra Leone People's Party was the brainchild of the Sierra Leone Organization Society while TANU was the offshoot of the Tanganyika African Association (Tordoff, 1991, pp.65-66). The leaders of these trade unions and youth movements were all without exception Western educated elites.

Higher Education and Political Development in Africa

Ajayi (1961) argues that Christian missions were the harbingers of the modern African political elites. He states,

Christian missionaries introduced into [Africa] the ideas of nation-building of contemporary Europe. They also trained a group of [Africans] who accepted those ideas and hoped to see them carried out, and later began to use these ideas as a standard by which to judge the actions of the [European]

administration. In doing this, the Christian missions sowed the seeds of [African] nationalism (p.197). On his own part, Coleman (1965a) makes the point that Western education and precisely higher education is a clear determinant of political elite status in Africa because “the relationship between higher education and the formation of the new political elite in African countries is so clear-cut.” He goes on to argue that, “because higher education has come to be viewed as presumptively determinative of political elite status, students now in school are uncritically regarded as preordained members of the second or third-generation successor elites” (p.4). A number of studies conducted in Africa have shown a high correlation between higher education and political elite status as well as political participation and political consciousness in Africa. Some of these studies specifically note that those who are highly educated are “more aware of the impact of the government on individuals...more likely to report that they follow politics and pay attention to election campaigns...have more political information...have opinions on a wide range of political subjects...are more likely to consider themselves capable of influencing the government” (Grey, 1979, p. 161; see also Almond & Verba, 1963). Grey (1979) also pointed out that “Africans with higher education have greater insights into their political potentials than the less educated,” and they “feel that they have resources appropriate to influencing politics and can afford to spend these resources to maximize their well-being” (p. 161). He also emphasized that Africans with higher education have skills and competences including those skills and competences which would enhance successful participation in politics. And Coleman (1965b) concluded that,

The introduction of modern educational system in colonial areas had significant political consequences. It was the single most important factor in the rise and spread of nationalist sentiment and activity. From the modern educational system emerged an indigenous elite which demanded the transfer of political power to itself on the basis of the political values of the Western liberal tradition or the ethical imperatives of Christianity, both of which had been learned in the schools. (p. 36)

Furthermore, he observed,

... Designed essentially to serve only evangelizing or imperial purposes, Western education became a prime contributor to the emergence of new independent nations. Intended not to be a structure for political recruitment, it in fact called forth and activated some of the most upwardly mobile and aggressively ambitious elements of the population – elements most determined to acquire political power, most confident in the rightness of their claim, and most convinced of their capacity to govern. (p. 37)

Foreign aid and assistance from the United States and the USSR played a significant role in Africa’s political development because as students went abroad to study or were placed on foreign exchange programs, they became acquainted with the political developments in the West and the

East. These experiences, according to Coleman (1965b), emboldened the students to challenge the status quo on their return home. Coleman (1965b) made the point that, "As new generations of persons return from abroad with more varied educational experiences, and with degrees from a variety of foreign educational systems they increasingly challenged the colonial system" (p. 45) Higher education made political activism possible among African educated elites because it enabled them to communicate with a very wide audience. It is little wonder then that almost without exception, all the early political elites in Africa were those endowed with one form of higher education or the other.

The list of African early nationalists is long. It includes Dr. Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1996). Dr. Azikiwe was born in Zungeru in Northern Nigeria of Igbo parentage. He studied at Methodist Boys' High School in Lagos, Nigeria. Azikiwe went to the United States to study at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He graduated from Lincoln University in 1930. Dr. Azikiwe obtained his Masters degree in 1933 from the University of Pennsylvania. After a long stint of working in the United States, Ghana and Nigeria as a journalist he left the career of journalism for politics and co-founded the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) with Herbert Macaulay in 1944. He was elected to the Legislative Council of Nigeria in 1947. Zik of Africa, as he was popularly known, became Premier of Eastern Nigeria in 1954. He became Governor General of Nigeria in 1960 and the first President of Nigeria in 1963. Another political elite to consider here was Dr. Kwame Nkrumah who attended Achimota College in Accra, Ghana. He studied at a Roman Catholic Seminary in Ghana before proceeding to the United States for further studies. He received his Bachelor's degree from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1939. His Master of Science in Education and Master of Arts in Philosophy degrees were obtained from the University of Pennsylvania in 1942 and 1943 respectively. After a few years of studying and working in the USA and in England, he returned to Ghana after having helped to organize the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, England in 1945. In Ghana, Nkrumah formed the Convention People's Party (CPP) which had as its slogan "Self-Government – Now." Nkrumah took his country to independence on March 6, 1957. Higher education propelled Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Dr. Kwame Nkrumah to political elite status in Nigeria and Ghana respectively just as it propelled other African political elites to political limelight in their own countries.

Others were Dr. Joseph Danquah in Ghana, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Sir Alhaji Ahmadu Bello - the Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and Herbert Macaulay in Nigeria, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, Joshua Nkomo, Ndabaningi Sithole and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia, Hastings Kamuzu Banda in Malawi, Patrice Lumumba in the Republic

of the Congo, Amilcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau, Holden Roberto in Angola, Tom Mboya and Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, Albert Lutuli, Dr. Pixley Ka Seme and Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Modibo Keita in Mali, Felix Houphouet-Boigny in Ivory Coast, Leopold Sedar Senghor in Senegal, Ahmed Sekou Toure in Guinea, Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia, Ahmed Ben Bella in Algeria, Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara in the Gambia, Seretse Khama in Botswana, Sir Milton Margai in Sierra Leone and Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, just to mention a few.

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