

# A CRITIQUE OF THE COLONIAL UNDERPININGS OF NIGERIAN EDUCATION POLICIES

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## **Abstract**

The paper engages in a historico-critical appraisal of Nigerian education policies to show how it has not broken links with its colonial past, even after years of political independence. It divides Nigerian educational policies into the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. It argues that the colonial education policies were based on the philosophy of cultural exclusion, dehumanization and economic exploitation. It further argues that the Nigerian post-colonial education policies with its over emphasis on basic education without a commensurate emphasis on higher education and research, especially into local contents for self-rediscovery after many years of dehumanizing colonial encounter is a continuation of the colonial policy of education. This policy which is geared towards making the student literate enough to read and write is not enough to form critical thinkers who can develop innovative ideas and technology to propel a genuine development of the Nigerian society. The conclusion is that our education policy should emphasize more on developing of local contents through higher education research and teaching. Our understanding of basic education should be reversed from the imperialist model that inculcates western values as a basic universal value that should be embraced by all, to one that fosters the relevance of local values and indigenous heritage.

**Keywords;** Education, policy, decolonization, indigenous values, cultural exclusion.

## **Introduction**

Right from the political decolonization of the African continent from the 1950s, there have been increasing calls for the decolonization of the African education system as part of the larger project of decolonization of the African mind. This project calls for addressing the cultural exclusion of Africa occasioned by the western demonization of everything African in their quest to dehumanize Africans for the total domination of the continent. In advancing an argument for decolonization of African education, Mazrui made a critique of the ideological foundations of African education and concludes that the African educational system is based on a neocolonial cultural dependency model which ensures that the African mind is perpetually fashioned to depend on the west.<sup>1</sup> By so doing, the contemporary African not only turn his back on his own cultural heritage by equally demonizing it, but also is hardly able to make any original contribution to human civilization.

A lot of scholars in line with this reflection on African education system have recognized the importance of this critique of colonial modeled education in Africa. D.C. Woolman (2001) did a good job at articulating these different critics in his paper *Educational Reconstruction and Postcolonial Curriculum Development; a Comparative study of Four African countries*. Woolman here acknowledges Ajayi's efforts in tracing the origins of African reactions to colonial education to the late 19th century when both James Johnson in Sierra Leone and Edward Blyden in Liberia criticized the neglect of African culture and history by mission schools. Johnson alleged that these schools caused Africans to lose self-

respect and 'love for our own race.' Both men called for inclusion of African heritage in the curriculum. Blyden urged the study of African languages that were repositories of tradition. As Woolman exposes further, it wasn't just Johnson and Blyden who saw the negative effects of this colonial modeled education on the African mind. Victor Uchendu, as Woolman captures it, "concludes that the purpose of all colonial education was subordination of Africans...What reached African colonies were not metropolitan educational transplants but ... adaptations which served to perpetuate colonial domination".<sup>2</sup> The modus operandi of this quest for domination is the demonization and undermining of local values, traditional systems and indigenous epistemologies, thereby isolating the students from their communal and immediate existential realities. As Woolman further avers, "Several Africans who experienced colonial education report that it had the effect of undermining traditional societies; on the one hand, by introducing an individualistic Eurocentric value system that was alien to African communal mores and, on the other hand, by isolating students from their local communities".<sup>3</sup>

This analysis so far does not only indict the African education system, but also shows the increasing relevance of cultural insights as the backbone of any philosophy of education that can shape the development of a worthwhile curriculum. Ofobuikwe in "The Relevance of Cultural Identity to Philosophy of Education and its Implications for African Development" argue that the colonization occasioned by cultural exclusion in the African educational system only breeds graduates and citizens who turn their eyes against their existential experiences and local environment in searching for solutions to the problems of their society. Cultural and existential insights which should lead way for the discovery of new ideas and opening of new vista of knowledge for understanding the problem of underdevelopment in Africa are neglected for supposed high paying blue-collar jobs.<sup>4</sup> This paper critically evaluates the development of formal education policies in Nigeria in order to show its poverty as a result of its continuing colonial link, which further perpetuates the exploitation and underdevelopment of the country and its resources.

### **The Place of Philosophy in the Development of a Nations Education Policy**

Education and educational management/administration in every nation is guided by some laid down rules and regulations in order to fully achieve its aims and effectively realize its development potentials. This is the idea behind policies in education. Policies are important because they give form, shape and structure to educational planning, management and administration. Policy is a statement of action or purpose/ goal administrative directives which form the basis and justification for all action and decisions concerning education and any other meaningful endeavor. For Jenkins, policy is a set of inter-related decisions given by political actors in relation to the selection of goals and the means through which they would be achieved in specific situations.<sup>5</sup> An educational policy then, is a compendium of principles and laws that govern the administration and operation of education systems. As Haddad has it, educational policy making is the first step in any planning cycle; hence, planners must appreciate the dynamics of policy formulation before they can design implementation and evaluation procedures effectively.<sup>6</sup>

Just as education is guided by policy, so is policy aimed at achieving some goals. The goal(s) of a policy is articulated in the philosophy behind such policy. The philosophy behind a policy gives a normative structure and base for such policy. A nation's policy on education is the government's way of realizing that part of the national goals which can be achieved using education as a tool. No policy on education, however, can be formulated without first

identifying the overall philosophy and goals of the nation. This is the reason why the Nigerian educational policy is clearly stated to be based on the philosophy that; Education is an instrument of national development and social change, Education is vital for the promotion of a progressive and united Nigeria, Education maximize the creative potentials and skills of the individuals for self-fulfillment and general development of the society, Education is compulsory and a right of every Nigerian irrespective of gender, social status, religion, color, ethnic background and any peculiar individual challenges and Education is to be qualitative, comprehensive, functional and relevant to the need of the society.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Development of Education Policy in Nigeria**

Education policies in Nigeria can be effectively divided into the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial phases. While the pre-Western phase has to do with all the traditional and Islamic means of inculcating ideas or passing down ideas from one generation to the other, the colonial and postcolonial phases have to do with the kind of education that came with Nigeria's contact with the Western world.

#### **Pre-colonial Education**

Prior to Nigeria's contact with the West, the different parts of the country had their distinct and unique educational apparatus. In the North of Nigeria, Islam already held sway for years before the coming of the Westerners, and there was an educational orientation of a uniform Qur'anic education policy. The Southern part on the other hand was made up of different ethnic groups whose education was based on traditional and cultural values and beliefs. Here, each community had its own form of education which was based on the inculcation of traditional values, communal ethos and cultural beliefs. This form of education was functional in nature as it was meant to imbue in each citizen the necessary skills and attitude to participate in community life. The curricula in this phase of education in Nigeria was informal and was designed to groom the recipient in physical skill, character, intellectual skills, the skill of community living while inculcating respect for elders, and giving specific vocational training and the understanding and appreciation of the community's cultural heritage.<sup>8</sup> This was the state of affairs in education until the arrival of European missionaries in the 1800s. With their mission of converting the natives of Nigeria, they saw the need of introducing a new form of education, in order to effectively communicate with the people and make their mission possible. With this also came the different education policies that have guided the implementation of educational structures and practices to date.

#### **Colonial Educational Policies**

The history of formal education policy in Nigeria can be divided into the pre-independence or colonial and post-independence educational policy. While the pre-independence policies were spearheaded and controlled by the British colonial policies, those of post-independence were initiated by the Nigerian government and the need to reposition the educational resources of the country to the needs of the country. Prior to independence, the British Government administered education through the use of certain education ordinances and codes such as the 1882, 1887, 1916, 1926, 1946 education codes. While the 1882, 1887 and the 1908 ordinances are categorized as pre-amalgamation ordinances, those of 1916, 1926 and 1946 are post amalgamation, but pre-independence ordinances. The inability of the missionaries who had earlier been in charge of education to singlehandedly produce the adequate number of clerks and other manpower needed to sustain the colonial project led

to the British government intervention in the form of donations, grants and education ordinances and codes for the colonies. As Daniel-Kalio captures it, "In 1872 the British colonial government started to intervene in the educational system by giving donations to the missionary societies to support education. In 1877, the grant was increased and it remained so until 1882 when the government felt the running of the schools should not be totally left in the hands of the missionary bodies. This decision led to the laying of the conditions for the grant-in-aid and subsequently the ordinances."<sup>9</sup>

The 1882 Education Ordinance was the first set of education policy crafted by the British government for the administration of the entire British West African areas. Also known as the Gold Coast Education Ordinance, it established a General Board of Education which had the prerogative of establishing local Boards of Education to coordinate critical issues like establishing new schools in the villages, certification of teachers, determining the eligibility of schools for government grants-in-aids support, etc.<sup>10</sup> This policy also saw the designing of a formal curriculum content for schools which was centered only on reading, writing, arithmetic, religion, English language and needle work for girls. Schools in this era were either government owned or government assisted mission schools and they were only focused on primary education. Education in this era was generally problematic as there were proliferations of mushroom schools which lacked quality, content, standard and inadequate learning facilities to run the schools. The blackboards, chalks and slates were in shortage while materials for teaching and the primers were largely religious tracts or information unrelated to local background<sup>11</sup>. It was the attempt to mitigate these failures that gave rise to the 1887 education ordinance. The period from 1889 –1906 saw the gradual transformation of education in which the government and the missionary partner in the provision of education for Nigeria and administrative management of schools. The 1887 education ordinance championed the separation of the Lagos educational management from that of the Gold coast saw the establishment of more schools, provision of scholarships, secondary education and an improved and diversified curriculum which included more subjects like Geography, History, Yoruba Language, Drawing and Sewing for girls. Other subjects include: Latin, Greek, Mathematics, Bookkeeping, Botany, Chemistry, Physics, French, Physiology, National History, Photography etc.<sup>12</sup> Though the 1887 education policy was mainly for the Lagos colony, it had influence on the other areas of southern Nigeria, which were initially a separate colony from Lagos (with separate school managements). However, the merging of Lagos colony (which included Lagos Island, Ebute-meta, Yaba and Badagry) and the Southern colony in 1908 gave rise to the 1908 ordinance for the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, in which the only difference from that of 1887 was the creation of Department of Education which replaced the separate Education Board.<sup>13</sup>

With the amalgamation of the Southern and the Northern Protectorates in 1914 by Lord Fredrick Lugard, the 1916 education code was enacted. The 1916 education code was not much different from the previous one. Its major achievements were that; It was the first education ordinance that took care of the whole Nigeria, there was better co-operation between the government and the missionaries, it was also a major government move to control and take over all schools, and it brought increased form of commitment on the part of the colonial government.<sup>14</sup> Due to complaints and criticisms of the colonial form of education offered the Nigerian people, the Advisory Committee (The African Education Commission and the Phelps-Stokes Fund) charged with studying native education in tropical areas of Africa, recommended that the government had the right to inspect schools and that education should be adapted to local conditions in Nigeria. This led to the formulation of the

1926 education ordinance with emphasis on native education. The report of this committee not only led to the decentralization of education, but also the training, registration and accreditation of indigenous teachers, the expansion of schools to include Secondary, Vocational, Technical and Industrial schools, Adult Education and Universities. The principles outlined in the 1926 Education Ordinance guided educational development and policy of Nigeria between 1926 and 1945.<sup>15</sup> The 1926 education ordinance was the first education policy by the colonial government which attempted to incorporate the cultural and vocational values of the Nigerian people and also made emphasis on girl child education beyond domestic training.

Following the 1926 education act is that of 1948, which was majorly aimed at preparing Nigerians to take over the administration of the colony, as most of the British colonial administrators were being retrenched due to insufficient funds arising from the economic difficulties that came with World War two. It was this education act that prepared for the establishment of higher education institutions in the country with emphasis on research. The education legislation covered the whole of Nigeria and spelt out specifically the administrative methods of running all levels of schools in Nigeria. It equally laid emphasis on training, qualification and classification of teachers and it provided for the health and welfare of school children.<sup>16</sup> The education act from 1952 to 1960 took advantage of the division of Nigeria into three regions to establish regional education acts that guided the education of each region. These regional education plans which were mostly focused on Universal Primary education paved way for the 1959 Ashby Commission set up by the Nigerian government to conduct an investigation into the Nigeria's manpower needs and higher education development over the next twenty years (1960-1980). The Minister of Education, other Nigerian educationists and their counterparts from Britain and America in the field of education were able to review the needs of Nigerian education system and offer practical suggestions. The recommendations of the Ashby Commission paved way for the development of higher education in Nigeria.<sup>17</sup> Also, the recommendations of the commission was one of the catalysts for the National Curriculum Conference in 1969 which birthed the first National Policy on Education in 1977 and its revisions in 1981, 1998, 2004, 2007 and 2014.<sup>18</sup>

### **Post-colonial Education Policies**

Nigeria at independence was faced with the challenges of post colonization and nation building and so the government was tasked with the responsibility of placing the nascent nation on a secure foundation for future prosperity. Realizing the obvious importance of education for such task, education as a social service and investment in manpower was given top priority by the government<sup>19</sup>. The goal was to use educational policy and schools to develop manpower for economic development and Africanization of the civil service. The education policy on ground was grossly inadequate for this task as it was faced with such criticisms as; being narrow in scope and did not meet the hopes and aspirations of Nigerians, irrelevant curricula, obsolete methods, high drop-out and repetition rates, and the fact that many graduates were dependent, and low on initiative.<sup>20</sup>

The above considerations led to the convening of the 1969 the National Curriculum Conference which reviewed the educational system and its goals, and identified new national goals for Nigeria which would determine the future and direction of education in the country<sup>21</sup>. In a bid to build on the momentum of this conference, the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1973 instituted a Seminar of distinguished experts to deliberate on

a truly Nigerian national educational policy. The report of the outcomes of the seminar was presented as the draft National Policy on Education after due consideration by the States of the Federation and other interest groups. It was this policy (with a couple of revisions) that has served as Nigerian official statement on education ever since. The latest of this policy which is the 2013 edition listed the specific goals of education in Nigeria as follows; ensure and sustain unfettered access and equality for the total development of the individual; ensure the quality of education delivery at all levels; promote functional education for skill acquisition, job creation and poverty reduction; ensure periodic review, effectiveness and relevance of the curriculum at all levels to meet the needs of the society and the world of work; collaborate with development partners, the private sector, non-governmental organizations and local communities to support and fund education; and promote information technology capability at all levels<sup>22</sup>. Even though the 2013 policy has the same goals as the previous ones, the few changes in it were made to accommodate changes and reflect the commitment of the Government to implement international protocols like the Education for All (EFA), the United Nation Millennium Goal (MDGs), the Home-Grown Medium-term Development Plan and the National Government Empowerment and development strategy (NEEDS). The achievement of these were mostly anchored on providing universal basic education whose goals are; to provide the child with diverse basic knowledge and skills for entrepreneurship, wealth generation and educational advancement; develop patriotic young people equipped to contribute to social development and in the performance of their civic responsibilities; inculcate values and raise morally upright individuals capable of independent thinking and who appreciate the dignity of labor; Inspire national consciousness and harmonious co-existence, irrespective of differences in endowment, religion, color, ethnic and socio-economic background; and provide opportunities for the child to develop manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capability.

The purpose of the 2014 NPE was to make education an aggregate tool of empowerment for the poor, and the socially marginalized groups, an effective means of developing the full capabilities and potentials of human resources, as well as the development of competent workforce through the acquisition of practical life skills relevant to the world of work as a veritable means of developing sound intelligent learning societies, fit and relevant to the 21st century<sup>23</sup>. All these goals are quite admirable, but how do we hope to achieve them? How appropriate are they to the needs of the society? How do these goals effect a change and transformation in a mind that has been so much deformed through years of colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism? Can these goals be appropriate enough to liberate Nigerians from the shackles of modern slavery and opportunistic money mongers?

### **Critique of the Colonial Underpinnings of Nigerian Education Policies**

The philosophy behind colonial education policies cannot be divorced from the philosophy behind colonialism itself. Even though the colonizers came under the cover of a civilization mission, it is obvious that their real intention was that of the economic exploitation of the African homeland as necessitated by the economic explosion that came with first the industrial revolution. The major aim of these education policies where to prepare the African mind for this colonial task, which required the demonization of African values, history and heritages. David Woolman did a good job documenting the thoughts of different authors on the effect of this; In Woolman's account, some scholars recall that schools and

education provided by the colonial educators drive a wedge between the students and the life and needs of their community, whereas others highlight economic exploitation, economic inequality, social stratification, cultural and intellectual servitude, devaluation of traditional culture, and curricula that were irrelevant to the real needs of society as the devastating effects of this colonial education model.<sup>24</sup> While these scholars accounts are from a social and economic point of view, B. S. Kwakwa reported on the social divisiveness of schooling in Ghana as he writes:

The effect of the Western type of education has been to produce ... three nations in one country, each unable to communicate effectively with the others ... the 'educated,' ... many who do not understand the ways of the 'educated,' ... then ... a third group, the 'half educated' who understand neither the ways of their own indigenous society nor those of the 'highly educated.'<sup>25</sup>

Ali Mazrui expresses similar sentiments as he narrates it from the perspective of how education causes and reinforces the rural-urban divide thus; "Western education in African conditions was a process of psychological de-ruralisation. The educated African became ... a misfit in his own village ... when he graduated ... his parents did not expect him to continue living with them, tending the cattle or cultivating the land."<sup>26</sup> This kind of education does not give one insights on how to go back home and apply his education in the rural trade in order to provide better and more useful services to the immediate community through such efforts, but rather to turn ones back at such skills and service which when improved upon, can bring solutions and easier life even for the urban communities, all the while providing services that would ultimately be of more service to the economic exploitation of the indigenous communities. This rural-urban divide in educational provision was interpreted by Moumouni (as captured by Woolman) as an extension of the same economic exploitation practiced under colonialism, a cut-rate education ... for peasant children ... will ... prepare the way for a more profitable exploitation of the peasant masses by the leading classes ... acting in the name of their selfish interests and those of their neo-colonial masters.<sup>27</sup> Has this state of affair changed much since the independence of African nations? The answer can hardly be in the affirmative for my country, Nigeria, as all the education policies from independence seem to produce this same effect of graduates who do not know their environment and its values enough to be able to grapple with challenges that face it.

One of the numerous ways by which this situation has been entrenched in Nigerian postcolonial history is through the country's basic education program. Successive educational policies since 1977 have laid so much emphasis on basic education. Each policy has made effort to implement programs that can get more children to school to improve the literacy rate of the country. This on its own is quite admirable; however, the issue with this is on the kind of education or content of basic education provided. The question of what constitutes basic education for a postcolonial nation has never been truly addressed by these education policies. In fact, the content of these education policies has been based on that of the colonial model which does not pay much premium to one's study and understanding of both his indigenous environment and its histories and heritage. This is evidenced by the fact that the curriculum of these policies has nothing much to say about indigenous history, values and experiences of Nigeria. Where anything of such nature is mentioned, it is presented as if the true history of Africa began with our encounter with the West. The West and even colonialism is still being presented as the savior of Africans in our

education system, hence entrenching the colonial consciousness which reinforces hatred for one's own indigenous realities. In some other accounts of traditional and indigenous Africa, much attention is laid on internal conflicts and intercommunity squeamishness that existed within Africa rather than on some of the excellent values and social institutions and organizations that helped sustain African societies before colonialism. Our basic education programs still show high level of inadequate and balanced account of life in indigenous societies to be able to ground the students in the areas that can be improved upon for a better society. The solution it presents the student is that of disregard of this indigenous environment and social life and an embrace of Western life as the civilized life.

The nation's emphasis on basic education has always been predicated on foreign policies which have been shown to serve the West better than the African homeland. From being part of the conditions for obtaining foreign aids, to being a signatory to the millennium development goals, sustainable development goals and for the recent education policy (2013 policy), the education for all policy, the Nigerian education policies and its quest to educate the public has been prompted by these international and modern colonizing policies which have been shown to focus far too narrowly on increasing access to formal education, without attending to the quality of learning actually taking place in schools. In other words, there has been a failure to ensure that schooling actually leads to education.<sup>28</sup>

Apart from lip service to the quality of education, these international policies are meant to co-opt African nations into striding along with other developed nations in areas they are ill equipped to be. Any gain made by these policies only serves the global capitalist enterprise which has more value to developed nations than underdeveloped ones like Nigeria. This situation serves one purpose only, the continuation of the colonization of African for onward economic exploitation. The Nigerian education policies by paying lip service to an in depth research on indigenous values and knowledge economy, and by paying more attention to basic education which lacks adequate indigenous content, plays into the politics of colonizing the African mind, thereby denying it the true opportunity of being of service to the liberation of the African, economically and otherwise.

Colonial education policies as has been argued earlier were mostly focused on training the student enough to facilitate their usefulness in the economic exploitation of Africa; hence, education was limited to economic utility. There is no doubt that education that cannot help one overcome his economic challenges is an incomplete one. However, an education that emphasizes economic liberation alone is not a complete one either, especially when the economic liberation such education can afford its recipient is limited to that of being a proletarian or exploited worker in the Marxist sense of political economic analysis. Nigerian successive education policies tow this colonial line of education for economy by equating education with economic gain. For instance, in 2014, the International Organization for Migration reported that academic education was still widely preferred to technical or vocational routes. Also, Nigeria's economic transformation blueprint, Vision 2020 states that one of the primary goals of education is to provide adequate and competent manpower for economic transformation. So, the success of post-independence reforms has been hindered by a system that continues to align with the ideals of the colonial regime. Worse still, the Nigerian education system through its policies has failed to facilitate a situation where its recipient can be a true owner or creator of wealth. This is why many years after independence the country still leaves the exploration of its numerous natural resources in the hands of expatriates. These education policies have not prioritized grooming graduates who can truly take charge of Nigerian major economic activities,



thereby entrenching the colonial model of education where the African is not involved in the major and technical aspect of the economic activities which promise more economic reward.

For a nation that had a long history of dehumanization through slavery and colonialism, Nigeria is yet to duly confront its colonial experiences in order to begin a process of healing and rebirth. The curriculum outlined in these policies has not been designed to really address the colonial questions and the question of the African cultural and existential image that was derided by this experience. Rather it has enabled the continued teaching of history and heritage of Africa in the images the west created of Africa. Adequate effort has not been made through these policies to reimagining the African to remake his damaged consciousness and self-esteem in order to redeem himself from the inferiority complex that makes him deride his own heritages. This quest for reimagining Africa and Nigeria in particular can only be made possible through advanced research in our ivory towers. Successive Nigerian education policies have not made adequate arrangement for such. Even though the current education policy indicates that attention be paid to indigenous knowledge creation, no dedicated plans have been made to implement such vision. This is simply because Africa and indeed Nigerian education system is yet to see colonialism and neocolonialism as a problem that requires immediate attention. This underestimation of the African colonial experience has made it difficult, if not impossible to raise troubling questions with regards to issues of curriculum, Pedagogy, and research, especially concerning Western-centric knowledge biases which reinforces colonial notions of culture, power, development and progress. Until these issues are cast in the proper light, education in Nigeria can hardly be at the vanguard of national development and nation building.

### **Conclusion**

The paper, set out to make a critical exploration of Nigerian education policies, its deficiencies and its link to our colonial past. The paper analyzed the philosophical bases of these policies and the different visions and missions the successive policies set out to initiate in the Nigerian society. In doing this, it is revealed that according to the National Policy on Education, the philosophy of Nigerian education is based on the national objectives of the country, which include self-realization, better human relationship, individual and national efficiency, effective citizenship, national consciousness, national unity, social, cultural, economic, political, scientific, and technological progress. However, after over 60 years of political independence and indigenous control of Nigerian education system, little to no effort have been made to truly delink the education system from its colonial past. What this paper has done is to try and reveal some of the ways in which the Nigerian education through its policies unwittingly perpetuates and consolidate the predatory and exploitative colonial project of rubbing its recipients of the sociological awareness necessary to inspire a sociological imagination that can help the country make its education relevant to its problems. With this, it can be seen that there is a huge schism between the national goal of self-realization and national efficiency and the educational apparatus with which such goal can be realized. It is the conclusion of this paper that the whole of Nigerian education system need to be overhauled with the intent to radically expunge all traces of predatory colonial heritage in its philosophical base. This will pave a way for a truly indigenous spirit and ideal that can not only expose students and citizens to not just an awareness of their life world, but also inspire in them a radical sociological imagination required to be problem solvers in their society.

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