Judeo-Western Tether on Kenyan Education: A Neo-Marxist Discourse

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Introduction
It is common knowledge that colonial education was for many African nations, a political weapon for socio-political dominance, economic exploitation and cultural degradation. This is even more so for a country like Kenya, which for the most part, was exposed to western education purely through the channel of colonialism. This fact is exemplified in the nature of instructions obtained in primary education through secondary school. Education, then, for many Kenyans is an extension of the colonial legacy. Thus, even today, the education obtained in Kenya cannot totally be separated from what was obtained during the era of colonialism.

Colonial Impact
The impact of colonialism was great. Mazrui (1986) contents that colonialism and Christianity brought a different moral order, whereby important western and Christian ethical factors entered the domains of Africa thought system. This conflict or friction was felt when colonizers asked questions such as, whether it was right for a man to have more than one wife, or whether sexuality outside marriage was sinful. It is clear in such contacts that the West was using its cultural lenses to view African cultures. Tarr (1994) takes this notion of colonialism as it pertains to misconceptions, and warns that “cultural filters inhibit clear perception” (p. 62). These were major moral dilemmas for Africa. They indicate the permanent change as brought by colonialism and Christianization, which prompts Mazrui (1986) to ask, “how then could their impact be anything but an epic drama?” (p. 14)

Mazrui’s argument is that it is unfair to use one’s cultural lenses to measure the standards of another culture. In line with the Kikamba aphorism, “You cannot see the picture, while you are in the frame.” Asante (2003) in his pursuit of Afro centricity contents that Europe should not always be the center of the universe.

Colonial legacy
In order to discuss the colonial legacy, we need to look at colonialism from three perspectives: colonial, post-colonial, and neo-colonial phases. From the perspective of certain Neo-Marxist critics, most of what is happening in Africa and indeed in the developing world today is as a result of the colonial legacy. Themes of Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 2004) still remain our concern for social justice and education in the developing world. He argues that education is a subversive force. In particular education is both subversive and real when it is liberating. When we examine colonial education particularly in developing nations, we find that education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students with the ideological intent of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression. On the other hand, I believe, liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information. Colonizers did not want to offer education which would serve the interests of the oppressed as no oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question. In essence, the oppressors did not want the oppressed to think for themselves or to offer education based on experiential learning as this would be an empowerment for the oppressed.
The colonial legacy carries both constructive and negative ramifications, the latter being the case most of the time. For example, the European model of education was introduced in Kenya and clashed with the informal education of Africans. Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. Celebrated African creative writer and literary theorist, Wa Thiong’o (1986) asserts:

The colonialists most area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control through culture of how people perceived themselves and their relation to the world. (p. 16)

This statement is true because there was the tendency for the African child to begin looking at himself/herself from the “outside” where the subliminal assumption was and still remains that the bourgeois Europe was always the center of universe (Asante 2003). We have two situations--the coming of a European model of education, which does not have room for our storytelling, and the existing traditional model of informal education, which thrives in a storytelling model. Therefore, these two models (European and African) get mingled together, and in search of being “western” (Fuller, 1991), the African storytelling model becomes marginalized.

However, the works of Ngugi, Achebe and Laye in storytelling form find their way into the more advanced grades. The European model works against traditional ways. For example, every minute of the day is planned and structured, but Africans are not used to learning that way in their informal setting. Therefore, this becomes a situation of confusion, as schooling becomes less traditional and more formal.

Informal Education clashed with Indigenous Education

The idea of informal education had been established in many African societies, including the Akamba people, before the coming of the Europeans. In public discussions and meetings, wisdom was acquired and spread freely and equally to all members of one community. This knowledge, much of which had been assembled practically through one’s experiences, was then passed from one generation to another by word of mouth. Some scholars would call this “informal” education, because it was not institutionalized. The Kenyan first president, Jomo Kenyatta (1966) noted that informal education begins at the time of birth and ends with death.

For the Akamba people of Kenya, informal education was functional, because the curriculum was relevant to the needs of the society. For example, Akamba education was family-and community-centered because the family and community were fully interdependent. Education was thus the core of cultural durability in Akamba society, (Kabwgyere & Mbula, 1975; Mbiti , 1969).

Colonial Education and Christianity

The introduction of western education to the Akamba people, much of Akamba traditional or informal education was destroyed, learning was institutionalized and professionalized. Parents sacrificed a lot in order to have their children acquire knowledge, which missionaries and the colonial administration described as enabling them to earn more. However, the oppressors basically did not wish for the oppressed to think for themselves; similar to how advertisers attempt to plant ideas in the consumer’s subconscious mind and give him/her notions about providing for the ease of things being done for them, pre-made. The education had been designed to make the African a faithful subject to the colonizer. What the colonizer wanted was an educated labor force to help develop the colony’s economy and provide chiefs and assistant chiefs capable of participation in “indirect rule” applied by the British. The missionaries, for their part, wanted the Africans to be able to read the Bible for easier conversion to their beliefs, and initially the education provided was
related to reading the Bible and preparing for baptism. Therefore, Christianity demanded extensive social and cultural change.

Those who were getting converted into a new faith, started looking at themselves through the eyes of “outsiders.” Tar (1994) explains that when an African student of his was going for his theological studies in America, he was advised by his church: “Go to America and learn to preach like the white man preaches ... do not come back here telling stories like untrained tribal preachers and pentecostals do” (p. 13). This apparent misconceptualization of the purpose of western education made many Africans believe that their traditions and storytelling were primitive, and that the white man never used stories in preaching. Not that the Europeans did not value storytelling, but I think their acts of storytelling were based on the European model. Moreover, their stories had no frame of reference that was vivid to the Africans, because every story carries the unique features that characterize the society where it is narrated. Unfortunately, this ideology or perception, still remains among some Africans.

Wa Thiong’o (1993), in his recent book, *Moving the Center*, stresses the same notion from a different angle. He explains that, under colonial rule, native cultures were repressed while, through the school system, other imported traditions were encouraged. Using his own personal experience as an example, he writes, “for instance, in the school that I went to, Scottish country dances were allowed even as the so-called tribal dances were banned” (p. 88). The colonial and Christian interventions were interwoven. For example, the Christian intervention into people’s cultures is explained by revealing the adage heard all over Africa again and again. As Mendelsohn (1962) asserts:

The missionary came to us and said, we want to teach you to pray! So the missionary told us to close our eyes. We closed our eyes and learned to pray. When we opened our eyes, there was a Bible in our hands, but our land was gone. (p. 21)
I may apply this cliché to the near annihilation of storytelling of the Akamba people by saying that when the Akamba people opened their eyes, there was a Bible in their hands but their storytelling was gone.

Therefore, western education was aimed at converting the Mukamba to a new culture and a new faith, and those who came to it had to renounce certain aspects of Akamba culture and religious life. The setting of education was changed. The individual no longer learned from the family and community, and the western educated individual was cut off from the family and community, since the education was acquired outside the home. Parents did not know what their children were learning. This western education was part of the change in the enlargement of social scale and this enlargement was not part of continuity, but a process of change. As a result, in learning the new, the old had to be challenged, discarded, or completely modified. Traditional storytelling was deemed primitive and thus useless. Old people were no longer viewed as sources of wisdom. In a nutshell, western capitalism had set in. The imperial powers attempted through schooling to train the colonized for the roles that suited the colonizers.

**Post-Colonial Phase**
The move by African countries to attain independence was very swift, starting with Ghana in 1957. Kenya attained her independence from Britain in 1963, and Jomo Kenyatta became the first president. So, a post-colonial era began, and Kenya expanded national systems of education to the fullest financial capacity. There was an economic need to train manpower to take over vacant positions formerly held by foreigners. This was a process of Africanization in the sense that
positions formerly held by foreigners were going to be taken by Africans themselves. Initially, though, the Africans in Kenya did not accept western education easily (due to its demands as explained in the section above on the colonial era), and it took some time before they changed their attitude towards education. Why did Kenyans finally accept western education? A major factor in this move was the conviction that the monopoly of high positions in the modern urban sector held by the Europeans and Asians during the colonial era was as a result of the type and quality of the education they had received. So, Kenyans felt that if they themselves were to exercise real power in their country after independence, they had to acquire an education similar to that of the Europeans.

Therefore, the British educational pattern was confidently copied in Kenya after independence. By the same token, the British curriculum was duplicated but, in this context, this type of curriculum lacked relevance and imagination for the Kenyan people it was intended to serve, and indeed the Akamba people, as I will explain later. It is during this era when, since I was a student and a teacher, my personal experience will aid me a lot. Dewey (1964) stresses how important it is for the curriculum to be relevant to the child’s experience. He asserts,

The child is taken out of his familiar physical environment, hardly more than a square mile or so in area, into the wide world—yes and even to the bounds of the solar system. His little span of personal memory and tradition is overlaid with long centuries of history of all people. (p. 340)

It is also at this point I feel the need to bring in the notion of culturally relevant pedagogy as a vital tool in teaching and learning. Ladson-Billings (1994) treats this notion with great expertise and explains the approaches applied by some successful teachers of African-American children. When the teaching does not build upon the child’s cultural understanding of the world around him/her, the teaching is bound to fail. Ladson-Billings (1994) writes:

By building bridges or scaffolding that meets students where they are (intellectually and functionally), culturally relevant teaching helps them to be where they need to be to participate fully and meaningfully in the construction of knowledge. In contrast, assimilationist teaching assumes that the students come to class with certain skills and suggests that it is impossible to teach those who are not at a certain skill level. (p. 96)

This explains the point I am trying to make about the British curriculum, whose goal was to expose Akamba children to cultures for which they had no frame of reference. For example, the Akamba children were exposed to alien concepts heavily clothed in British patterns and traditions. The child’s environment and his/her cultural frame of reference were not considered. Children read primers depicting the British country side and English animals, trees, and seasons. For example, children would be reading sentences like: “Jim and Sue were making a snow man under a birch tree while a bear trotted by.” s/he has no idea what a birch tree or a bear look like, neither would the child know what snow is. Kamuti (1992) gives a more vivid and personal example as a Kamba student himself, under these circumstances:

One American teacher told us that on every Christmas Eve night, Santa Claus flies in his sled drawn by eight reindeer and goes down the chimney of every house delivering gifts in colorful boxes tied with ribbons to give to good children. We had no idea what he was talking about. (p.132)

The kind of stories read by the Akamba children were so detached from their environment that learning was difficult. The storytelling was baptized and referred to as “composition, writing of passages, essay writing, and dictation.” In other words, the African storytelling was deemed primitive just as the people themselves. School examinations were still imported from Europe and were set by
people who were removed from the immediate child’s environment. Another crucial issue was that of teaching methods, which were repetitive and laborious. In fact, an authoritarian and impersonal attitude characterized the social contact between teacher and pupil, as I am about to explain in my discussion about the teacher and student relationship.

Teacher and Student Relationship
Suffering from the colonial mentality, African teachers did not connect with their students’ feelings. Some humiliated their students both physically and psychologically. Like the colonial masters, teachers made sure that their presence was felt by their students. I can recall, during my primary schooling in the late 60s, teachers calling us all kinds of names. If we did not understand an alien concept, the teacher would call us names like monkey, donkey, or cow. The kind of questions they had for us were not guided to help us use our creativity or imagination. If a teacher asked a question, in most cases there was only one answer, which was based on the teachers’ train of thought. This brings to memory a personal experience in my next paragraph.

One day, a teacher came to our third-grade class and said, “If I give you two cats today, and three cats tomorrow, how many cats of yours will you have altogether?” We raised our hands, and he chose me to respond. “Six,” I said. The whole class was shaking with suppressed chuckle as he approached to hit me, since according to him and the class, I had not responded correctly. However, I explained that my father had given me another cat at home; and if he the teacher, gave me five cats, added to the one I already had, I would end up with six cats of my own!

This incident, viewed from a different angle, can explain the power of a short, witty story in contesting irrational authority. In his book, Decolonizing the Mind, Wa Thiong’o (1986) writes:

Berlin of 1884 was affected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of chalk and blackboard. The physical violence of the battle field was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. (p. 9)

Neo-Colonial Phase: Language Problem
Next I turn to the language issue and show how our Kikamba language was also suppressed by the school system. The students were made to feel ashamed of their own mother tongue, and this affected the state of storytelling. Language is a very sensitive topic or issue, and has raised heated debates in many cultures. In the United States, like in many societies of the world, it is even a political topic of discussion. For example, some of the former conservative presidential candidates like Pat Buchanan, had argued for the need to make English the official and sole language of the U.S. Questions like which will be the official or national language of any given society are entertained all the time in many societies. Views that language can be divisive or unifying can both be considered myths, according to Ayo Bamgbose, the Nigerian scholar who argues:

There are five major myths about language in Africa, namely: many languages divide, one language unites, imported language is neutral, imported language is more efficient, and, finally, African languages are inadequate. (Public lecture, UW-Madison, March 6, 1995)

I argue that language issue affects storytelling in education among the Akamba community. Nobody can talk about language issues and escape the mention of both colonialism and Christianity, which are the pillars of ideologically loaded concepts such as racism, prejudice, imperialism, capitalism. To this end, Wa Thiong’o (1986) writes:
“The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe” (p. 4).

Every major European language, such as English, French, German, or Portuguese, used in any African country, was not the choice of the Africans themselves; rather, the language was imposed on them by the colonial powers. As I have mentioned before, Akamba storytelling occurred in the evening around the fire side in the Kikamba language. Children listened to the struggles against nature and other animals, which reflected real struggles in the human world. Cooperation as the ultimate good in the community was a constant theme. Our storytellers made the stories come alive through the use of words and images and the inflection of voices. We therefore learned to value words for their meanings and nuances. So Kikamba, for us, was not a mere string of words but had suggestive powers well beyond its immediate and lexical meanings.

When the Akamba child went to school, this harmony was broken, as the language of his/her education was no longer the language of his/her culture. Our Kikamba language was deemed inferior to English. It was only in lower grades that vernacular was taught, and as a student moved to upper grades, his/her language was suppressed. One of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Kikamba in the vicinity of the school. The child was severely punished by way of corporal punishment which ranged from three to six strokes of cane on the buttocks! Or, the culprit was made to carry a piece of wood around the neck with inscriptions such as, “I am a donkey”, or “I am a cow”, or “I am stupid.” In short, we were made to be ashamed of our own language and our creativity and imagination were curtailed. When I became a teacher in the mid-seventies, I fell into the same brainwashing and insisted that Kikamba should not be spoken in the school compound! That is why I would never buy the argument that the colonial impact was shallow. The physical presence of the colonial administrators was brief, but the effects or impact of their domination last to this day, in some ways, however subtle they may be. We were made to read stories from other cultures and our own stories were marginalized. How in the world could Akamba storytelling survive in the formal setting under these conditions?

On the other hand, English was encouraged and those who excelled in it were highly rewarded. As one would imagine, the education system in Kenya, or in Africa in general, has had the structure of a pyramid: a broad primary base, a narrowing secondary middle, and an even narrower University apex. Parents also reinforced the learning of English, because they thought the more their children acted like Europeans, the more opportunities they would have (Mutava, 1981). So, the fate of storytelling in education among the Akamba people was not only the result of the language aspect per se, but the entire change of attitude towards our culture. The attitude was negative because people had internalized claims that they were inferior, and that their language and culture were inferior, as everything dealing with tradition was deemed primitive and backward. Children stopped communicating with their parents, because they were now not sharing the same mental world. This reminds me of a little Mukamba boy who once came home boasting, and wanted to prove to his father about his competence in math in a foreign language. He said, “father, two and three the son of a bitch is five, two and four the son of a bitch is six!” When the enraged father complained to the teacher on the following day, it was revealed that what the teacher had taught was “two and three, the sum of which is five”!

Young people stopped respecting their culture. When I taught at Kiangwa Primary school, in my village of birth, I organized groups of pupils, and the boys and girls and I composed folksongs. We sang these folksongs on special occasions or just for enjoyment. The songs were themselves like
interesting stories, which the community understood and appreciated very much, because the songs touched their lives. Some of my teacher colleagues disrespected my methodology wondering how an “educated person” could lower himself and sing like the traditional women who were not educated! Teachers were not alone in this view, because some members of the community, while not rebuking me, asserted that I could have become a “witch doctor” if I had never gone to the Western school.

I am not arguing that the learning of English should not have taken place. I am advocating the respect for the child’s mother tongue, Kikamba, which should aid the learning of any other foreign language, without making children feel ashamed of Kikamba. I think any language policy, whether internal or external, would be damaging if it denies a child the opportunity of using his/her mother tongue as a starting point in understanding the world. It is like swimming upstream. Teaching in the mother tongue provides vital links among the home, the community, the local environment, and the school. The importance of a mother tongue is explained by Okech and Hawes (1986) when they say this:

In order to investigate the most appropriate language policy for the efficient primary education of Yoruba children in Nigeria, the University of Ife, in association with the ministry of education, set up the Ife Six Year Project. The project confirmed what common sense would probably have suggested, namely, that children enquire, enjoy and participate when they are learning in a medium they understand (Yoruba) and are far more passive when they are struggling with the medium of a foreign language (English). (p. 100)

Our “Cultural Filters” Construct Our World View: Kenya/U.S.A

We understand the world around us through our cultural lenses. It becomes difficult when we find ourselves exposed to different cultural frameworks, as I am about to explain. For example, I came to the United States in 1986, and lacking proper guidance, I registered for a course in political science at UW-Whitewater, Wisconsin. I did not know anything about the culture of the United States, let alone its politics. Our professor used terms like liberal, conservative, far left, far right, moderate democrat/republican—terms which were alien to me, and which had no frame of reference in my upbringing. I had no idea what he was talking about. I barely got a “C” grade in that course. I would like to explore this concept of culturally relevant pedagogy from a different perspective. I have already discussed how difficult it was for us African children to learn alien concepts from a European perspective. Now, would the “West” experience the same frustration if the teaching offered to them was outside their frame of reference? In order to answer this question, I will use my personal teaching experience both in Kenya and in the U.S., using storytelling as my teaching methodology, and the aspect of relevance or irrelevance will be depicted in the process.
I started teaching in the mid-seventies, and after teaching at Kivyuni, Wingemi, and Ikutha primary schools, I was finally transferred to Kiangwa primary school, in my village. I taught the highest grade, which was seventh. Either from the respect for my culture, or some other inner motives, I felt that our students needed to read something they could relate. Between 1974 and 1976, I wrote seven stories, but I will use just one of the seven to illustrate my point. There were no typewriters in our school, and there was no duplicating machine either. I used my hand to write over forty copies throughout the night in order to have each of my pupils have his/her copy of my story as I wrote the questions on the blackboard the next day.

In almost every story question, my seventh graders scored very highly, and they were interested in the stories. They could relate to some of the themes in my stories. When I talked about lizards getting into my house as I slept, they had seen many lizards in their homes as well. When I mentioned in my story about my garden helper missing, not only did they understand, they also knew him by name. I was talking of a world they knew, because we shared the same experience. They were only struggling with the aspect of the analytical and grammatical parts, which were good exercise for their brains as I helped them out in their understanding of the grammatical challenges. My “storytelling” to them was culturally relevant, Ladson Billings (1992).

In one of his recent book, Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms, Wa Thiong'o (1993) treats this same notion under the title “Freeing Culture from Eurocentrism.” He explains about his own schooling at Makerere University in Uganda, where they read the writings of the British Isles from the time of Chaucer, Spencer, and Shakespeare up to the twentieth century of T.S. Elliot, James Joyce, and Wilfred Owen. He writes:

It was actually at Makerere University College, but outside the formal structure, that I first encountered the new literatures from Africa and Caribbean. I can still recall the excitement of reading the world from a center other than Europe. Even titles like Peter Abraham’s “Tell Freedom” seemed to speak of a world that I knew and a hope that I shared. (p. 4)

I brought all my original stories to the United States and, in the Fall of 1988, UW-Whitewater sent me to Parker High School in Janesville, Wisconsin, to start student teaching. My areas were English and theater, dealing with seniors in high school. I chose the shortest and simplest of all my seven stories and gave it to the school secretary to type it for me. Parker High School students did not score as high as my seventh graders in Kiangwa Primary School had scored many years back. The highest score was 18 out of 20, i.e. 90%, and the least score was 5 out of 20, i.e. 25%, for the scores. The students were unhappy, and they lost interest in re-reading the story for our corrections. I could see frustration on their faces. Some even said that the story was “stupid” and did not make sense to them. There is no better example for me than this, to explain how culturally irrelevant pedagogy can impede the learning of an individual, be it a child or an adult.

Let us look at my story more closely. It was loaded with my cultural baggage, most of which was alien to these white, middle-class high school students. For example, the “beauty and behavior” assertion, in connection with marriage in my second paragraph, had no cultural frame of reference for them. Marriage by “customary law,” third paragraph, was an alien concept too. In my fourth paragraph, the notion of somebody’s wife entertaining the entire family, husband’s friends, relatives, and parents, might have been an insult to the
female students at Parker High School! Marriage in the Akamba society is a union between two families/relatives, while in the west; it is a union between two individuals.

Finally, the style of questioning was itself different. Now, I was asking “West” to look at the world not from their center, but from a different center. As a result, they concluded that the story was “stupid,” a term that culturally shocked me; for in my 13 years of teaching experience in Kitui, Kenya, I had never heard a student term his/her teacher’s work “stupid.” These stories are powerful tools in demonstrating the notion of culturally relevant/irrelevant teaching/learning.

Conclusion
I believe that there is no culture superior to another one, and that we understand the world around us through our cultural lenses. There is no serious lack of knowledge about Africa at this time and age, but what I believe is lacking is reliable quality in the knowledge that is available. Anyone who is seeking knowledge may be overwhelmed by what has already been gathered and stored away in a variety of sources and a variety of languages. However, much of this knowledge ranges from indifferent scholarship through rumors, to deliberate falsehood. Of course there are some enlightening studies as well.

There is no defensible reason I think, for promoting research and writing on Africa unless such endeavor is to lead to a genuine understanding of Africa. About two decades or so, of intensive and extensive research and writing have done much towards eradicating some of the worst myths and stereotypes about the image of Africa. In fact, in some areas, scholarship has shifted from total denigration to uncritical praise. It is my hope that the truth should be found somewhere in the middle, where Africa is not beast nor super human, not devil nor archangel, just human and at home in the universe, generally making a mess of some of life’s preoccupations but doing remarkably well at others.

The emergence of folklore as a recognized respectable academic discipline in America, Scheub (1998), has coincided not only with the growth of African Studies here in the US, but also with the growth of “healthier attitudes” among African and African American scholars towards their own cultural traditions. Up until recent times, under misdirection of Colonial and Christian -educational programs, few scholars of African decent would consider the oral traditions of their people worth the attention of scholarly research. They had been brainwashed. Ironically though, many of them were at the same time condemning almost every foreign work on African culture. Ngugi Wa Thion’o of Kenya is among the pioneers who have led African scholars to “decolonize” their minds.

References


