

# Democracy, Education, Literacy and Development

Kwesi Kwaa Prah  
CASAS  
Cape Town

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## **Introduction**

The ideal of democracy has in our times, taken the world by storm and successfully wooed large sections of the human community. In the contemporary world, its unquestionable superiority as an organizational principle of governance remains for most an unchallenged view. In the conscience of people it has come to mean the choice between constitutional and arbitrary authority, empowerment and marginalization, freedom and thralldom, voice and voicelessness. Thus as a global phenomenon, the general idea of democracy, both as theory and praxis has become inestimably seductive to practically all peoples and countries. With the exception of one or two, most governments and ruling parties claim that they are running democratic societies. Indeed, this has been the case for most of the last 50 years, or at least for as long as I can remember.

In our times, democracy is undoubtedly the most credible and valued principle of social organization. Today, it is premised on the ethical, pious notion and lofty hope that all humans are equal and should all have equal rights in the construction and direction of all activities affecting their social lives; that people have the right to articulate their views and their interests in an open and competitive fashion, without fear of falling foul or into disfavour with those in authority.

Some years ago, I had argued that, this supremacy of the democratic ideal has happened in the last hundred years. However, despite its unrivalled status, enormous divergences exist in theory and practice as to what the ideal means or should mean. While this is not the place to discuss this, it is salutary to remember that criticisms of “democracy” can be found on both the political right and left. From the traditions of the left, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Gracchus

Babeuf inveighed against, “the political sentiments held by a misled, indoctrinated and ignorant populace are not to be regarded as the people’s real will and that the establishment of a ‘real Republic’ involves acting (and writing) against the people, against the majority.”<sup>1</sup> For Babeuf, the institution of private property was *sui generis* evil. French revolutionary Jacobinism placed equality of all, above all else, but at the same time made a choice for sworn secrecy of an exclusive group as the directorate of the revolution. This idea was later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century rehashed by the Bolsheviks as “the revolutionary vanguard organization of the proletariat.” Marxists and Anarchists, from Marx himself to Bakunin, reject what they call “bourgeois democracy” as an undesirable expression of a narrow class-based system of rule. While the Marxists have preferred the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the “withering away” of the state, the Anarchists want the “abolition” of the state. From the right, the Fascists, like Hitler and Mussolini on the basis of the *Duce* or *Fuhrer Prinzip* saw themselves as the embodiment of the “people’s will.” The Hitlerian formula was *Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Fuhrer*. Similar sentiments were echoed in equal measure by the Spanish Falangist Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, and the earlier French ideologues de Maistre and Maurras. Notable fascist political parties include the Rumanian Iron Guard, the Hungarian Arrow Cross, the Croatian Ustashi and the Latvian Thunder Cross.

Other more sober and seriously academic arguments have been made, questioning some of the assumptions of the democratic ideal. Principal among these would be Robert Michels’ *Iron Law of Oligarchy*, Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca’s differing theories of the elite. Nearer our times, C. Wright-Mills’ theory of *The Power Elite* is generically the closest philosophical sibling of the ideas of the earlier three. All these three theoreticians suggested in different ways that, in fact, rule and government are always by minorities; democracy, as the rule of the majority, was for them, in part a tantalizing mirage, a myth. What, should be affirmed here is that, whatever questions we may critically raise against the democratic ideal, in its broad sense, it is an ideal whose time has come and has a motley crew of theoretical and practical adherents.<sup>2</sup> Its benefits are many more than its weaknesses, and certainly in as far as civil or human rights are concerned, it provides the best practical bases known so far to humanity.

### **The Parameters of Democracy**

The concept is generally understood in simple language to mean government of the people by the people. It involves the election of representatives of the electorate who represent the views and interests of the constituency in governmental structures. Thus representative democracy is government premised on the principles of popular sovereignty by the people’s representatives. While elected representatives are entrusted with the responsibility of transacting politics in the perceived interest of the people, they cannot be regarded as shiftless or unimaginative surrogates. Elected representatives are not expected to always pedantically act according to the unvarnished expectations of the electorate. They have scope and enough

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted here from, Maurice Cranston. Herbert Marcuse. In, *Encounter*. Vol. xxxii. No. 3. March 1969. P.44.

<sup>2</sup> K. K. Prah. Language and Freedom of Expression in Africa. Ghana Free Expression Series. No.2. Accra. 2001.

license to exercise decisive leadership. We can say that, the achievement of representative government is possibly the central accomplishment of modern politics.

Representative democracy is often contrasted with direct democracy, where representatives do not feature or are limited in power as proxy representatives. Major decisions are reached like the Swiss do through referenda. Other instrumentation such as proportional representation may in some instances be more desirable. At other times mixtures of proportional representation and constituency elections are preferable. Whatever the functional permutations and combinations may be, both proportional representation and the “first past the post” system yield serviceable results.

### **Varieties of the Democratic Experience**

During the era of the Cold War the East European states of the Soviet Empire all claimed to be building “proletarian democracies” through the organizational mechanism of “democratic centralism.” Sukarno in Indonesia vaunted “guided democracy.” In the 1960s and 70s, a number of African countries practiced what they dubiously called “one-party democracies.” Hardly any societies have outrightly and openly dismissed the idea of democracy, except Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Nazi regime. These latter two, avowedly scoffed at the democratic ideal suggesting that it amounted to no more than psycho-social infantilism and a perversion of the greater ideal of the *Übermensch*. Indeed, arguably, in the last 100 years, no system has without inhibitions and with supposed intellectual arguments openly challenged the very notion of democracy as theory and praxis as the fascist regimes; these include apart from Nazi Germany and Mussolini’s Italy, the Apartheid South African system, the Salazar/Caetano regime in Portugal, the Franco government in Spain and right-wing authoritarian political parties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The communist states of the twentieth century insistently asserted the pursuit of workers democracies. Even the Stalinist Soviet Union claimed democratic credentials. They were in fact, authoritarian and over-bureaucratized centralized states with little or no room for dissenting voices. In fairness, some, as in the case of Cuba and Vietnam, have managed to establish effective welfare societies which have uplifted the existential conditions of the broader sections of the population. Today, it is widely acknowledged that the health and educational systems in Cuba rival the best in the world. Vietnam, by leaps and bounds, is advancing and upgrading the living standards of its citizenry in a measure that is currently unequalled in Asia. China, under the Chinese Communist Party has become a vast developmental juggernaut likely, in the not too distant future, to become the leading economic powerhouse of the world.

Under Enver Hoxha’s forty-year rule, Albania industrialized but became also a drab, callous and ruthless dictatorship. We have today, in a place like North Korea, an almost farcical tyranny operating under the name of socialism in which atavistic dynastic rule is in actual fact the nature of the system and the name of the game.

We have seen non-monarchical dynastic systems touting democratic credentials in Syria, Togo and the Congo DRC. Egypt and Libya appear to be edging slowly in a similar direction. True monarchical anachronisms continue to live with us in, Morocco, Jordan, in the Arabian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, Brunei, Bhutan, Nepal and Swaziland. The message of a democratic constitutional democracy has for the time being been lost on them, although Morocco is often described as the only truly fledgling democracy in the Arab world.

Dictatorships dressed up as democracies through corrupted elections abound, in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Gabon, Zimbabwe, Central African Republic, Burkina, Equatorial Guinea, Sudan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and more. Some are ex-military states. Particularly in Africa, we have seen military regimes come into power through the barrel of a gun and then after a stint abandon the military fatigues for *mufti*. They contest so-called open and free elections which are often gross travesties of democratic methods combined with vote-rigging, bribery and all the rest of it. We have over the years seen such regimes in Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Sudan, Congo-Brazzaville, Liberia, Guinea and many other countries. Under the guise of democratic institutions, they operate self-perpetuating Caesaro-Bonapartist regimes.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, regarded by many, as the cornerstone of the democracies of the West, until the late-1960s, African-Americans were in large areas of the country barred from exercising their vote and enjoying other rights. In Northern Ireland, Britain oversaw the centuries old legacy of the Protestant ascendancy which deprived Catholics of some of their rights until the 1960s. Women's equal right to vote in Britain was not achieved until the Suffragist Movement was able to register their determination to fight for women's rights. The political movement towards women's suffrage began during the war and in 1918 the British Parliament passed a law (the Representation of the People Act 1918) granting the vote to: women over the age of 30 who were householders, the wives of householders, occupiers of property with an annual rent of £5, and graduates of British universities. Women in the United Kingdom finally achieved suffrage on equal terms with men only in 1928. The right to vote of American women was codified in the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the US Constitution (1920).

The memory of human rights atrocities which lynching in the US implied continues to haunt American democracy. During the era of the Cold War; "And are you lynching negroes"

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<sup>3</sup> They recall Robert Michels' words that; "Once elected the chosen of the people can no longer be opposed in any way. He personifies the majority, and all resistance to his will is anti-democratic. The leader of such a democracy is irremovable, for the nation, having once spoken, cannot contradict itself ... One of the consequences of the theory of the popular will being subsumed in the supreme executive is that the elements which intervene between the latter and the former, the public officials, that is to say, must be kept in a state of the strictest possible dependence upon the central authority, which in turn, depends upon the people. The least manifestation of liberty on the part of the bureaucracy would be tantamount to a rebellion against the sovereignty of the citizens ... Bonapartism does not recognize any intermediate links. Robert Michels. Political Parties. Free Press. 1949. Pp. 218 -219.

became a popular counter-accusation of Soviet voices against American criticism of human-rights violations in the Soviet Union.

Democracy is best indigenized. It succeeds best when it wears and acknowledges the specific historical and cultural realities of the society in question. It is itself a development process. Democracy has best chance of institutionalized success when it is homegrown and enjoys the active participation in its development by the society as a whole. Some measure of elasticity, openness and variation should be permitted to definitions of democracy, in both its synchronic and diachronic comparative manifestations. For, democratic systems can themselves be historicized and seen to be products of specific historic situations. This implies that democracies change over time; that they are contingent on social specificities and will in future be different from what they now appear to be. We need to remember that the much lauded classical Greek democracy was based on a social structure of slavery. No society has achieved the ultimate of democratic organization. But, obviously some societies are more democratic than others. This also means that democracy can improve with time. This is however not automatic. Democracy is achieved and won through struggle, protest and change. It is invariably the result of mass demand and action. It is hardly ever conferred as undemanded beneficences.

The idea of freedom of expression constitutes one of the most important pillars in the edifice of democracy, fair, open and good governance. The more important issue or question however is, what instrumentalities and institutional tools exist for the exercise of the right of freedom of speech and expression? Religious freedom, secularism, tolerance and the rule of law are also necessary ancillary features which strengthen and enhance the development of democracy. Theocracies whether under the Mullahs of Iran, the erstwhile Taliban regime of Afghanistan, or the pontiffs and cardinals of the Vatican cannot express the best in the idea of free and open societies as we know them to be, today.

In the increasingly globalizing and culturally crowded world that we live, our collective survival can be only assured if we are able to live together as good neighbours. That means that we should be able to share both geographical and cultural space which allows all to be celebrated and permits peaceful coexistence of the different peoples and cultures which make our world. The cultivation and celebration of diversity requires also that we deepen the culture of tolerance and mutual accommodation. Rule of law ensures that no one and no institution is above the law.

Without doubt, modern democracies flourish best under conditions of economic well-being. The most robust of them are modern economies and provide in law, inalienable civil and group rights. I would also argue that, the growth of middle classes in our era has been crucial for the consolidation of liberal democracy. Thus a feudal society cannot be immediately transformed into a fully functioning democracy. Another point worth making is that, democracy in itself does not translate into economic growth, but democratic and open

societies provide greater opportunities for individuals to test and effect their economic creativity.

Also, modern democracies require literate and relatively educated populations. Decades ago, Russell made the point that “without science, democracy is impossible.”<sup>4</sup> The democratic potential of modern societies cannot be actualized if the population remains uneducated and consequently uninvolved in the collective communicational life of the society. In today’s world, democracy cannot survive without an uninhibited, undaunted and unfettered Fourth Estate. We need also to point out that democracy cannot be imposed. It cannot be imperially decreed or effected by bombing societies into submission, as we have seen in the case of Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

As earlier said, democracy is best homegrown, although its institutionalization can be catalysed or externally aided. It has often been asked that, if democracy cannot be externally imposed by force and coercion, how do we explain the cases of post-2<sup>nd</sup> World War Japan and Germany? While all the factors responsible for the success of these two cases cannot be elaborated here, without doubt a key reason is that socio-structurally they were relatively advanced societies with strong middle classes. In the case of Japan, the feudal integument tied to Mikado veneration and feudal land-holding was removed to open the way towards a post-feudal democratic order. In Germany, it must not be forgotten that the Hitler regime came to power through democratic elections and then proceeded to dismantle the institutional foundations of democracy. The post-war order was therefore a restoration of democracy rather than an initial institution of democracy.

### **Citizenship, Democracy and Literacy**

Modern citizenship is, at best, an educated condition, and democracy is its most credible and enabling condition. Thus citizenship is a requisite feature of a successful democratic system. When we say a socio-political system is democratic we are also saying that the system is sensitive and responsive to the interests of the citizenry and also that this citizenry operates the routinization of government through an institutionalized elective process which gives them a share in government, however removed they may be from the immediate area of political leadership and decision-making. Furthermore, modern citizenship eschews the idea of superior or inferior citizens. All are equal before the law, all have equal voting rights, without exception all are free to engage in the activities of citizenship, and all are in the expression of their political rights free to express both individual and group interests.

For democracy to flourish there is need for a constant state of social and political interrogation and debate between those in and out of authority. Representation must be

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<sup>4</sup> Bertrand Russell. *On Education*. George Allen and Unwin. London. 1926. P.42.

<sup>5</sup> In the Iraqi case it is interesting to note the revelation made by the former Chairman of the United States Federal Reserve Bank, Alan Greenspan in his book, *Age of Turbulence*, that the Iraq war from the US side was motivated by oil interests and financial gain.

accountable and must institutionally provide for eventual recall. For citizens to meet the challenge of questioning and seeking information on matters affecting them, literacy is crucial. It increases the information flow. It puts people on indelible record. Print and access to print is therefore vital for the cultivation of a citizenry, which is alive to these possibilities.

In an earlier address the point was made that, “conditions crucial to the cultivation of a democratic culture in which the idea of freedom of the press has a fuller meaning are that there has to be a high level of literacy in the languages of the masses; a level high enough to make newspapers, intellectually, realistic propositions. It is also possible to say that, newspapers in languages, which come easily to them, will enhance the literacy levels of the people. For Africa, for as long as media work is pre-eminently in European languages, they will be unable to reach a substantial section of mass society. ... this condition will steadily undermine the development of a more fully fledged democratic culture. Furthermore, it will continue to inhibit the potential of the citizenry to participate in state-wide decision-making.”<sup>6</sup>

In a practical sense, citizenship is incapacitated if citizens are illiterate. Their ability to understand social policy processes is seriously curtailed. Subtleties of policy and politics are lost on many. For the teeming masses in Africa, Asia and Latin America who are politically and socially crippled by illiteracy, practically meaningful citizenship remains out of their grasp. Illiteracy has also profound economic implications. India’s current efforts at development are grievously compromised by the fact that at least 30 percent of the population is illiterate and mired in a backward caste system, scheduled ethnicities, and other institutional disabilities.

Adult literacy, the form and type of literacy, are invariably also major benchmarks or indicators of status, wealth or poverty. The transition from predominantly oral cultures to literate ones runs parallel to the shift from pre-modernity to modernity. In today’s world, there are hardly any exclusively oral social or cultural systems except in very small corners of the globe. All societies are more or less in transition from orality to literacy. In this transition process, or proto-literacy as it is sometimes called, some achieve the transit much faster than others. All have to deal, as part of the instrumentation of this transition, to different degrees, with issues of adult literacy.

Thus orality as a predominant social condition cannot carry a modern, politically sophisticated, societally discerning, and intellectually empowered citizenry both at the individual or collective levels of social life. Where the informed knowledge base of the citizenry is limited and challenged by illiteracy, civil society is unable to fully develop as a modern institution. Illiteracy therefore structurally excludes prospective learners in the educational, political, economic and social process. For those who have entered into adulthood and who for a variety of reasons have been excluded from the ranks of the literate,

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<sup>6</sup> K. K. Prah. Language and Freedom of Expression in Africa. Ghana Free Expression Series. No.2. Accra. 2001

reality is shrouded in a mist of incomprehension, superstition and ignorance dominate the mind, knowledge is limited to immediately available memory, and memory as an individual faculty, as we all know is unreliable, especially with adulthood and age.

Frequently, when the argument for the need for mass literacy education is made relatively weaker attention is paid to the issue of the language of literacy. Therefore, the endorsement of the idea of the undeniable desirability of literacy often gives credence to theoreticians and practitioners who pursue literacy goals in languages which are foreign to mass society. These are generally languages, which have been introduced through different types of colonial encounter and imperialism. When linguistic imperialism (*linguicism*) is carried into literacy education and training it succeeds to reinforce a neo-colonial cultural infrastructure and arrests the ability of mass society to operate as historically and culturally free agents able to draw fully on their historical and societal belongings, and able to relate their heritage to modern challenges. Thus the resistance against neo-colonialism in culture implies, for us, the negation of literacy practices, which proceed on the basis of imposed, hegemonic, or elitist speech forms. We are saying that *linguicism* and the hegemony of colonial languages in post-colonial societies, particularly in Africa, militate against the development of democratic cultures.

Inclusivity with respect to literacy means among other things that, the languages of mass society should be the instruments of literacy education, that as much diversity if not all should be an object of literacy education, so that social and cultural diversity are permitted scope to be collectively celebrated for the benefit of as many as possible. The neo-colonial turn of mind even affects the way we count literate and illiterate members of our societies. In Africa, very often, counts of literate and illiterate leave literates in African languages uncounted.

### **The Dimension of Education**

Like many of the problems of Africa and the wider under-developed world, the problems noticeable in the educational sphere have history and are tied to the patrimony of the colonial period. I need however to immediately point out that I am not suggesting that all blame for the difficulties we face in Africa should be deposited at the doorstep of the colonial heritage, and that Africans now do not share responsibility for the sustained survival of these problems beyond the colonial period. It is for most African countries almost half a century after the colonial era. Therefore, fifty years after the colonial era, to continue blaming colonialists or colonialism for the extended lease on life of these problems and the social institutionalization of neo-colonialism would amount to suggesting that Africans have no ability to correct the foibles and failings of the colonial heritage. This is a position we reject. But, when that has been said, we need also to be able to diagnostically appraise what the legacy is, what it consists of, what it amounts to, in order to suggest panacea for their correction.

Indeed, it can be further argued that to single out the colonial bequest in the explanation for Africa's continued woes in education may also leave the impression that the pre-colonial

system of education had impeccable merit, which could have survived to the present without drastic alteration. In my view, this implication would be equally flawed. Let us look at the facts.

### **Defining Education**

Education is "the process of cultural transmission and renewal," the process whereby the adult members of a society guide the development of younger members of the society into adulthood and initiate them into the culture of the society. For infants and young children, education often takes the form of programmed inculcation, that is, the process of pressing and prodding the child to carry out various learning activities at different times. These varying coercive processes socialize the child to respond in harmony with societally acceptable standards. The processes of socializing children are largely the preserve of adult members of the society. Outside the school compound and classroom context, all adult members of the society are to varying degrees and at different times concerned with tasks and roles which complement school functions. Thus new members of a society or a group are socialized to learn to act in accordance to the norms and institutionalized habits of the society or culture in question so that ultimately the moral and social order is maintained or improved in line with societal norms. Education is thus, in every cultural setting, an instrument for the maintenance of the continuity of the cultural system. But it is at the same time also an instrument for social change. To understand and appreciate the implications of the concept of Education, we must study it as it functions, ensconced in the culture of which it is part. When education is understood in this way, the wider relationships between school and community, educational and social systems, education and cultural milieu become more transparent. Modernity comes with the need for and the development of occupational skills. It is indeed cogent to argue that increased differentiation in skills development is an essential benchmark of the journey into modernity.

### **Education in Pre-Colonial Africa**

Pre-colonial Africa consisted for the most part of preliterate societies. Orality was the standard means of education. In general, the African child was raised by the community and educated in the culture and traditions of his or her people. The child was generally regarded as a boon of the community. Therefore, all members of the community, played roles in the education and socialization of the child, even though the child may not be an offspring or relative of the adult in question.

Traditional indigenous education prepared children to play their roles in the family, clan and the ethnic group as a whole. In precolonial Africa, education served as an important tool for the conservation and transfer of time-tested skills, customs and knowledge from generation to generation. It was indeed through their education that young people learned to appreciate and value the heritage of their forebears. Institutionalized age-sets and age-grades were the structures in which what formal education there was took place.

For much of the non-western pre-colonial world the above was generally true except for the very important factor that many of the societies were literate in autonomous indigenous expressions. India, China and the Arabs are leading examples of this. This indigenous literacy base and the culture it encompassed could not be seriously dismantled by the colonial interlude. It has provided cultural self-confidence and resilience in ways that have not been the case in Africa.

Arguably, a major limitation of African traditional education is that it focused societally inwards and restrictedly prepared its members for external contact. Practically, this meant that the skills and knowledge possessed by a given ethnic group could not be readily transmitted to another group. The absence of literacy implied that the accumulated knowledge and skills could not be preserved in a written form.

The UNESCO has offered the following definition of literacy: "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society." Many policy analysts suggest that literacy rates are a crucial measure of human capital. This claim is ostensibly made on the grounds that literate people can be trained more easily and less expensively than illiterate people; that they generally have a higher socio-economic status.

### **Colonial Education**

In the history of empires, education or the inculcation of social habits have always followed the objectives of imperial power. The Roman empire, the British empire, the Chinese empire, the Moguls in India, the Arabian caliphates, the Ottomans all followed educational and linguistic policies which supported and reinforced their power as imperial overlords.

In his prologue of the *Castilian Grammar (Granidtica Castellana)* published in 1492, Antonio de Nebrija writes that; "Language has always been the perfect instrument of empire." This view of Antonio de Nebrija, Bishop of Avila, proved prophetic in the following years, as the Spanish Empire extended its reign across the Atlantic. It was prophetic, in that throughout the conquest of the Americas, and the centuries of colonialism, language was used by the Spanish as a tool for conquest; to consolidate political power, to spread the Catholic faith, and to unify the empire. Sometimes Native American languages were used as subsidiary adjuncts for administrative purposes.

The decline and fall of the Roman Empire along with the dissolution of Latin has lessons for us. The national emergence of the components of the empire and the emergence of national cultures only became possible after the demise of Latin. As with the Romans, the need for language policies surfaces when a government attempts to unite under one central authority, peoples who speak different languages. Often, the presence of more than one language is seen to be a threat to national unity, and there is therefore a tendency toward monolingual policies

in empires, resulting in the suppression of minority languages or the languages of the indigenes.

Imperial domination in Vietnamese history (Chinese and French) and linguistic influences illustrate how language-use is closely related to emancipation, freedom and democracy. Vietnamese was linguistically influenced primarily by Chinese, which came to predominate politically in the 2nd century B.C.E. With the rise and expansion of Chinese, political dominance was effected through the importation of Chinese vocabulary and grammatical influences. As Chinese was, for a long period, the only medium of literature and government, as well as the primary written language of the ruling class in Vietnam, much of the Vietnamese lexicon adopted and adapted Chinese words (Sino-Vietnamese). In fact, as the vernacular language of Vietnam gradually grew in stature and prestige towards the beginning of the second millennium, the Vietnamese language was written using Chinese ideograms adapted to write Vietnamese, in a similar pattern as used in Japan (Kanji). Korea (Hanja) and other countries in the Chinese cultural legacy area. This form of writing reached its apogee in the 18th century.

As Western influence and contact, (mainly Portuguese) developed, the system of Romanized writing emerged in the 17th century. When France invaded Vietnam in the late 19th century, French gradually replaced Chinese as the official language in education and government. Vietnamese adopted many French terms, and many Sino-Vietnamese terms were devised for Western ideas imported through the French. However, the Romanized script did not come to predominate until the beginning of the 20th century, when education became widespread and a simpler writing system was found more expedient for teaching and communication with the general population. After the Vietnamese defeat of France in the 1950s, Vietnamese totally replaced French as official language and completed the enhanced structural democratization of culture.

The case of India is also revealing with respect to the aims and impact of imperial cultural and linguistic overlordship. In his famous *Minute on Indian Education* of the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1835, Macaulay argued that, “we must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” Looking back, with the wisdom and advantage of hindsight, this in effect is what colonial education has achieved, in and out of India. Elsewhere, the following year, in a letter to his father dated 12th Oct. 1836, in self-congratulatory language he wrote that; “our English schools are flourishing wonderfully; we find it difficult to provide instruction to all. The effect of this education on Hindus is prodigious. No Hindu who has received an English education ever remains sincerely attached to his religion. It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respected classes 30 years hence. And this will be effected without our efforts to proselytize; I heartily rejoice in the prospect.” Macaulay’s simple reasoning was that through the agency of the English language, the Hindu

or Muslim will be disengaged from his or her traditional religious moorings to the advantage of Christianity. As he clearly announced, he “heartily rejoiced” at that prospect.

Macaulay clearly underestimated the strength of Hindu religious culture and the literacy base of the Brahminate, which sociologically carried it. A hundred and seventy years later most Indians who have received English education remain, in Macaulay’s imagery, “idolaters”, and they are none the worse for it. Indeed, India is charging forward towards modernity on its own cultural terms. It is interesting to note the similarity in the above respect between French and British linguistic and cultural policies in the very early colonial period. The French consul Faidherbe in founding the first chiefs’ school at St. Louis, Senegal, in 1856 argued that the intention for this school was to form “*quelques indigenes d’élite pour nous aider dans notre œuvre de civilisation.*”<sup>7</sup> Pursuing the logic of the Macaulays, Faidherbes and Kiplings of this world a little further we can only conclude that the ideological, educational and cultural devices conceived and executed by colonialists in the service of colonialism were thus rationalized as the westerner’s Christian-inspired magnanimity to the less-fortunate half of humanity. Thus colonial exploitation was rationalized as charity towards the colonized. These views in present day forms continue to “die hard”<sup>8</sup>

### **Neocolonialism in Education**

In Africa, after decolonization in the 1950s and 60s, the emerging African elites continued to follow the European models of education. World pressure for modernization was mounting, and the ruling elites believed the only way to modernize was to continue with a European formal education system. Leonard Barnes described the colonial elites which became post-colonial elites as “spare parts;” in the sense that they have been servicing unreformed and unreconstructed social and economic structures inherited from the colonial era. In as far as the education of post-colonial elites represents replications, both formally and content-wise, of colonial inheritances these elites must be seen as mis-educated elites. Development is impossible under the aegis of mis-educated elites. Education is today a human right and some cynics may add that, it is a human right to choose or impose mis-education.

At the 11th General Conference of the Association of African Universities in Cape Town, February 2005, President Thabo Mbeki urged academics from across the African continent to be part of the “vanguard of change” sweeping the African continent whereby Africans were

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<sup>7</sup> Lord Hailey . *An African Survey. A Study of Problems Arising in African South of the Sahara.* Oxford University Press. London. 1938. P.1265. See also, K.K. Prah. Keynote Address, *Language of Education in Africa Conference (LEA 2006), University of Oslo. 19 –22 June 2006.*

<sup>8</sup> Faint echoes of these views filter through to our times. In a recent article, written in the wake of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, Stanley Kurtz, suggests that; “The British devised an educational program that made the study of English literature and the British humanistic classics the core of the curriculum. Long after the British had disappeared from the subcontinent, Macaulay prophesied, an Indian elite educated in this programme would embody an “imperishable empire” of British values. While Indian cultural values remain strong in India, Macaulay in a sense got his way, as well. See, Stanley Kurtz. *After the War. City Journal.* Vol.13. No.1. Winter, 2003. See also K.K. Prah, *Ibid.*

resolving the problems of Africa on their own initiative. He urged the academics not to fall into the colonial trap of becoming “educated natives”, not quite becoming part of the community of those who educated them, but nevertheless “becoming detached” from their African roots and their fellow Africans. Mbeki said, instead, African academics should strive to be “African intelligentsia” who identified with the political, economic and developmental challenges that the continent faced and identified with “the masses.” He also urged them “not to have a second address in Paris.” Underscoring this point, Mbeki said that during a visit to one of the states of Africa, he had been escorted around by a cabinet minister. At the end of the trip - embarrassed that he could not remember his name - he had checked out the minister's business card on the plane trip home. He had found that the man had an address in the African country but another address in Paris. “So if you can't find his office in his own country ... phone the other number.” Mbeki observed that Africans were going through “a process of saying who we are ... and rediscovering our African identity.” He recalled that, as a child, had attended the Lovedale institution at Alice in the Eastern Cape where the Scottish missionaries had educated black people to be “educated natives” - which, to further titters from the mainly black crowd of academics, he said “is a difficult thing to be. .... What that does to you is to distance one from the rest of the natives but you can't quite get to where they (the educated colonists) are.”<sup>9</sup>

The legacies of these imperialist education policies and the rationalities they served continue to live with a good part of the former colonial world, particularly in Africa. In Asia, relatively, more systematic attempts have been made over the decades to overhaul the inherited education systems. In places like Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and to a lesser extent India and Pakistan significant departures have been made from the colonial educational bequeathments and intellectual hand-me-downs.

Much of the difficulties and problems facing African education and language of education policies can be attributed to the inadequacies of the African elites. These elites, which over the decades have been reproducing themselves, have shown no consistent wish and little political will to address these problems. Arguably, they today represent more extensions of the metropolitan cultures of the world than extensions of the societies from which they derive. African formal education today replicates to a grievous fault assumptions and conclusions reached in Western society and which have little relevance for the realities of Africa. We can say with little doubt that Africa is trailing behind Asia with regard to both the content of education and the language policies that are necessary to drive a suitable education policy which is development oriented.

### **Marginalized Groups**

In many countries where wide differences in economic circumstances exist on the ground from region to region and where educational facilities and infrastructure are unevenly

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<sup>9</sup> See, Jeremy Michaels. Africa must take blame for inaction in Rwanda – Mbeki. <http://www.adminnews.uct.ac.za/docs/8cfc4fadd149ae428831cc22e20eb6d.pdf>

developed some ethnic or cultural groups find themselves marginalized through historical circumstances from the mainstream of the society. These marginalized groupings are almost invariably characterized also by illiteracy on scales higher than the more privileged regions and sections of the overall population. This sort of condition can be found in the Quechuaphone and related areas of the Andean states of South America, the Hill tribes of India and Bangladesh, among the Dalits of India, Native Americans, or the San communities of South Africa, Botswana and Namibia. There have been suggestions that national minorities in the inner Asian frontiers of China, like Sinkiang, Tibet and Mongolia are not in dissimilar positions. In Ethiopia, in the past, the dominance of Amharic has to a degree stunted the linguistic empowerment of other groups. The imposition of Tswana on Kalanga areas in Botswana has on occasion triggered tensions and resentment.

In a report on literacy in the United States which provided a first look at the results of the National Adult Literacy Survey, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's *National Center for Education Statistics*, it was revealed that Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander adults were more likely than White adults to perform in the lowest two literacy levels. Of all the racial/ethnic groups, Hispanic adults reported the fewest years of schooling in the US (just over 10 years, on average). The average years of schooling attained by Black adults and American Indian/Alaskan Native adults were similar, at 11.6 and 11.7 years, respectively. Adults in prison were far more likely than those in the population as a whole to perform in the lowest two literacy levels. These incarcerated adults tended to be younger, less well educated, and to be from overwhelmingly minority backgrounds.<sup>10</sup>

The report further explained that individuals demonstrating higher levels of literacy were more likely to be employed, work more weeks in a year, and earn higher wages than individuals demonstrating lower proficiencies. Adults in the lowest level on each of the literacy scales (17 to 19 percent) were far more likely than those in the two highest levels (4 percent) to report receiving food stamps. Nearly half (41 to 44 percent) of all adults in the lowest level on each literacy scale were living in poverty, compared with only 4 to 8 percent of those in the two highest proficiency levels.<sup>11</sup>

### **The African Education Crisis**

The inherited and unreconstructed formal education system is not working in the majority of African states due partly to economic deficiencies and inadequacies and principally to the failure of these systems to meaningfully incorporate African languages, culture and knowledge into the curricula.

In many parts of Africa, there is a drop-out rate of 70% before students reach 6th grade. While there are many factors that contribute to the crisis in African education, a major issue

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<sup>10</sup> <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=93275>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

is the lack of government financial support for education. After World Bank and International Monetary Fund sponsored structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 90s were instituted, public funding for schools dropped dramatically. This combined with the mismanagement and misallocation of the little funding that existed contributed to the growing educational crisis in Africa and resulted in insufficient infrastructure, books, desks, teacher's salaries, etc. In societies where over half of the population lives on less than one US dollar a day, general poverty makes formal education an expensive and unrealistic choice for parents, and even more so when governments are unable to provide infrastructure and educational inputs.

Lack of funding is not the only problem with African formal education systems. Another, perhaps even greater problem is that these systems exclude traditional African education methods, cultural values, and social structure. Parents are alienated from their children's educations, especially those parents who were excluded from the system themselves. Another problem is that students that make it through the system often find it difficult to use or apply the knowledge they obtain through formal education in their own societies and communities, and as a result, often leave their countries to seek employment elsewhere.

Today, about half of all adults in Africa are illiterate, and the majority of these are women. While reading and writing are not necessary for leading a fulfilling and productive life, illiteracy is a handicap in a world where information exchange and development in general are based on the written word. As global trade grows, illiteracy puts people at a great disadvantage, preventing them from realizing added value to their products. Perhaps even more strategically disturbing is the fact that, the vast majority of students who make it through the education system leave, or want to leave Africa to find work elsewhere as economic migrants often masquerading as refugees.

### **Development**

If we assume development to mean not simply the quantitative designation of aggregations and amalgamations of infrastructure and human resources we can say that beyond these easily quantifiable considerations at the qualitative dimensions, development implies also the increasing ability of individuals and groups to achieve the wherewithal to maximize their aspirations and satisfy their perceived needs both materially and non-materially. An attractive definition of development which appeared a couple of years ago suggested that development should mean “freedom from the vulnerability to social dynamics beyond one’s control.”<sup>12</sup>

In discussions about development, too often cultural and linguistic factors are missing. Language is the main pillar in any cultural system, and literacy in a given cultural system represents the most important feature in the development of a capacity for a language to work either as a repository of past knowledge or as a basis for the development and integration of

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Hyltenstam and Christopher Stroud. Multilingualism in Development. SIDA Policy Document Proposal. Stockholm University. 2005.

new knowledge into the society or cultural system. In all societies which are able to advance forward scientifically and technologically, primacy is vested in the development and use of languages indigenous to the people. This is true not only for non-Western societies like China, Japan, Thailand, Cambodia or Indonesia, but is equally true for countries, in the west, like Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, France or Germany.

Each case that can be referred to as an example of an advancing and developing society would be a society which works with its own language and develops its culture and knowledge on the basis of the language or languages of the masses. It needs also to be said that the transfer of knowledge from outside a given cultural system into an indigenous cultural system, to be efficacious, needs to adapt the imported knowledge into the cultural system of a people in such a way that the imports and adaptations blend into the existing culture of the people.

Development cannot be achieved in circumstances where the cultures of the masses are steadily abandoned in favour of cultures which are totally foreign to the masses and which are familiar terrain for only small sections of the elite. This point needs to be emphasized because it is the absence of cultural relevance and the need for cultural adaptation of external inputs into African development planning which in our minds constitutes the major obstacle to success in development planning and implementation in Africa.