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Domestic and international power relations in a Cameroonian mission school system

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Abstract

This paper is a critical ethnography of mathematics teachers in a Cameroonian private, mission school system. Findings from in-depth interviews with secondary mathematics teachers indicate that most of these teachers perceive their educational situation as disconnected, in several ways, from their cultures. However, most participants look to western processes as models for their own development. An analysis of state and international postcolonial hegemonies which influence these teachers is presented, including allocation of resources, curricular agendas, and professional development opportunities.

Keywords: International education; Curriculum; Development; Postcolonial education; Culture; Critical theory

1. Introduction and context

1.1. Educational context

Many mission schools in Anglophone Cameroon, which were established during precolonial and colonial eras, are still functioning as educational institutions. Though faculty and administration in these schools are almost completely Cameroonian, they work within a material and cultural infrastructure—that of a Western, formal school—which originated from a society different from theirs in values and motives. Interactions along these physical and social dynamics have transformed traditional, indigenous educational processes.

Prior to significant Western influence, education of children in the region now called Cameroon was considered a traditional duty of the family, and parents were the children's first teachers (Atayo, 2000). Mothers took responsibility for the education and general rearing of children until the children were about 8 years old. After that, fathers became the primary educators of their sons, while mothers remained their daughters' educators. At this stage, children generally learned by participating in the various activities of their parents. The broader community, or subgroups from the community, became a child's main teacher at adolescence. From elders chosen for their knowledge, skills, experience, and wisdom, children grew aware of the need for discipline in the community and respect for elders, customs, and nature (Atayo, 2000).

This communal education occurred as children became increasingly involved in various aspects of social life, including observing their seniors, listening to and later joining in discussions, hearing narrations, folk tales, legends and proverbs, and

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engaging in riddles and mental arithmetic. The focus of traditional, indigenous education was not on an academic accumulation of factual knowledge; rather, education encompassed moral, intellectual, and physical realms, which were developed as the child engaged in social activities (Atayo, 2000). Pre-colonial education in Cameroon "integrated the individual into his (sic) societal context and enabled him to become responsible and also interdependent with the other members of the society" (Atayo, 2000, p. 12).

Traditional education processes continued until around 1844, when Joseph Merrick, of the British Baptist Missionary Society, arrived in Bimbia, a coastal village, and established Cameroon's first primary school; this Western schooling introduced an entirely new educational context and included knowledge that was distinct from that in indigenous education. In 1845, a second primary school was opened in Douala by Alfred Saker and Horton Johnson (Atayo, 2000; Ihims, 2003). From 1845 to 1876, Alfred Saker continued the process of establishing a system of missionary schools in Cameroon. Saker considered education to be the "best means of helping indigenous people and of establishing a permanent Baptist Mission in Cameroon" (Ihims, 2003, p. 4). As graduates of mission schools began to serve as school and church leaders, demand for access to mission schools among the local population began to increase. By the time Germany annexed Cameroon in 1884, there were three main Baptist primary schools along with eight feeder schools in the Cameroonian territory. One significant practice of these early Baptist missionaries was, since they thought that their religious message would be more effective in the local language, they made efforts to teach in local languages and to translate the Bible into the vernacular (Atayo, 2000; Ihims, 2003). Families faced a choice between knowledge offered through traditional, indigenous education and that offered through Western, formal education; that academic content in Western education was distinct from that in indigenous education is evidenced in part by this Western focus on Christianity in their schools.

During the approximately 30 years of German colonial administration in Cameroon, mission education continued to grow. After German annexation of Cameroon at the Berlin West Africa Conference of 1884–1885 (in a turn of events that would become significant to Cameroon's later history, Britain obtained colonial control over Cameroon's neighbor to the west, Nigeria, at the Berlin Conference), the German Basel Mission took over from the British Baptist Mission schools, and other missionaries (the Presbyterian Mission from America, and the Roman Catholic Pallotine, the Baptist, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus missions from Germany) arrived during German rule. The Basel Mission sought and determined to "continue the good work in education whose foundation had been properly laid by their outgoing colleagues" (Ihims, 2003). By 1914, there were a total of 625 mission schools operating in German Cameroon, with an enrollment of just over 40,000 students; these mission schools continued, for the most part, the practice of using local languages in schools. In contrast, the German colonial authorities had established four governmental primary schools by 1913, with an enrollment of 833 (Ihims, 2003). One of the reasons, according to Ihims (2003), that Germany was slow to become directly involved in education in Cameroon was a concern for fiscal responsibility. Germany did not want to become over-burdened by heavy financial colonial involvements. Atayo (2000) adds that Germany showed little interest in colonial education until the early 1900s because mission schools produced enough graduates to fulfill the needs of the German colonial authorities.

When the League of Nations was created as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, Cameroon was mandated to France and Britain. French Cameroon comprised about four-fifths of the total area of the Cameroonian territory, with British Cameroon being the other one-fifth. Britain further split its Cameroonian territory in two, forming a Northern Cameroons and a Southern Cameroons. Both British Cameroons were administered as part of Britain's other neighboring territory, Nigeria until 1961. In 1961, on the heels of Cameroonian independence, Southern Cameroons ceded from Nigeria and re-united with French Cameroon. This formerly British-administered Southern Cameroons currently forms the two Anglophone provinces of Cameroon (Atayo, 2000; Ihims, 2003). Thus, from about 1916 to 1960, two separate educational systems were administered by the two distinct colonial powers operating in Cameroon.

Britain's and France's colonial styles contrasted highly on many points. The French colonial style of rule was generally highly centralized, with all important governmental decisions being made in France, and with highly standardized educational policies. For instance, school syllabi and schedules