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Education and Communities at the “Margins”: The Contradictions of Western Education for Islamic Communities in Sub-Saharan Africa

Abstract

This paper employs postcolonial framework to discuss the contradictions of promoting western education in Islamic communities in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Prior to colonization, Islamic education was an important socializing process that instilled strong Islamic identity in Islamic communities in SSA. European encounters in SSA and the introduction of western education shifted the socializing process and reconfigured SSA societies and dislocated Islamic communities in the region. I argue that Islamic communities’ marginalization educationally since the colonial era is partly the result of their resistance to western colonization and all its forms. In the first part of the paper I discuss postcolonial discourse and education. The second part discusses education and religion nexus in sub-Saharan Africa. It uses recent Pew Research for example as evidence to delineate the Muslim-Christian gaps in education by age categories and gender. The third part outlines ways western education became a tool for reconfiguring Islamic communities and the rationales behind Islamic communities’ resistance to this form of education. The concluding section discusses contemporary efforts to promote education in Islamic communities in SSA within the rubric of Education for All (EFA).

Keywords: education marginalization, Education for All, religion and education, colonialism, Islamic education

Introduction

Many traditional Africans encountered Islam and were morphed into strong Islamic communities before western colonization. For many of these communities, Islamic education became a major socializing process for promoting strong Islamic identity. Colonization and the introduction of Christian and colonial education shifted the socializing processes and reconfigured SSA societies culturally, socially, economically and politically. This paper discusses the contradictions of promoting western education in Islamic communities in colonial and postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). I acknowledge that Islamic communities in SSA are not a homogeneous group and how western education affected Islamic communities should be placed within the contexts of the colonial territories. I argue that Islamic communities’ marginalization educationally since the colonial era is partly the result of their resistance to western colonization and all its forms. In the first part of the paper I discuss postcolonial discourse and education. The second part discusses education and religion nexus in sub-Saharan Africa. It uses recent Pew Research for example as evidence to delineate the Muslim-Christian gaps in education by age categories and gender. The third part outlines ways western education became a tool for reconfiguring Islamic communities and the rationales behind Islamic

communities’ resistance to this form of education. The concluding section discusses the contemporary efforts to promote education in Islamic communities in SSA within the rubric of Education for All (EFA).

Postcolonial discourse

The literature outlines the relationship between colonial and postcolonial education policy reforms (see Bray, 1993; London, 2003). Jurgen Osterhammel views colonialism as a relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of invaders, and a system of governance by which colonizers define and implement the fundamental decision affecting the lives of those colonized in pursuit of the colonizers’ interests in a distant metropole (Osterhammel, 1997). The literature highlights three stages of colonialism: *classical colonialism* is the subjugation of an indigenous society by a foreign power; *internal colonialism* is the domination of a nation (defined geographically, linguistically, and culturally) within the national borders of another nation-state by another group or groups; and *neocolonialism* is the domination of the industrialized nations over the Third World in different forms (Bray, 1993). Colonialism is also an ideological perspective and a state of mind in colonizer and colonized alike which began when colonizers arrived on the scene and continues when they go home (London, 2003). Colonialism relates to postcoloniality in how the former shapes the latter. Postcoloniality is a new designation for critical discourse that thematizes issues emerging from colonial relationships and their aftermath, covering a long historical span. It is a concern to renarrativize the story of the colonial encounter in a way that gives prominence to issues that have to date been put on the periphery of the education debate as it concerns colonial societies (London, 2003). London suggests the need to examine and understand the complex ways in which colonial powers brought the colonized under their imperial system because the impact lingers on after nations attaining independence (London, 2003). Discussions on postcolonial education achievements in Islamic communities in formerly colonized nations in SSA must be placed in contexts of educational policies and educational objectives that prevailed in a particular nation in the colonial era.

Religion–education nexus in sub-Saharan Africa

Educational attainment for Islamic communities in sub-Saharan Africa is crucial for the global EFA initiatives. In 2010 an estimated 248 million Muslims lived in SSA and are projected to reach 670 million by the mid-century. Majority of young Muslim adults in the region lack basic education (Pew Research Center, 2016). The literature draws a link between religious affiliation and educational attainment in SSA and also outlines the complex ways religion is a source of the sometimes tensions between Muslim and non-Muslims and the contestation and shifting identities, educational marginalization and economic disempowerment of Islamic communities (Chande, 2008; Stambach, 2010; Izama, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2016). In sub-Saharan Africa, Muslims have fewer years of schooling and are less likely to be literate than Christians. Similarly, Muslim children are less likely to be in school than Christian children (Dunbar, 2000; Izama, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2016). A 2016 Pew study finds large differences in education between Muslims and

Christians in sub-Saharan Africa in general and not only that but the educational disparities between Muslims and Christians in SSA have grown in recent generations. The Pew study shows that Muslims are more than twice as likely as Christians in SSA to have no formal schooling. For instance, the data shows that 65% of Muslims and 30% of Christians have no formal education in SSA. The study reveals further that in 18 of the 27 sub-Saharan African countries with substantial Muslim and Christian populations, Muslims are more likely by at least 10 percent points than Christians to lack formal education. The Muslim-Christian education gap in SSA is also persistent among genders and generations (Dunbar, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2016). Nigeria presents an interesting example of the situation where adults between the ages 25-34 who participated in the study in 2010, 42% of Muslim men and 63% of Muslim women has no formal schooling compared to 8% of Christian men and 19% of Christian women (Pew Research Center, 2016). In terms of generational trends and education in SSA, the Pew study shows that 79% of Muslims compared to 52% of Non-Muslims between the ages of 55-74 lacked basic education. In the same way slightly above 61% of Muslims and about 30% of Non-Muslims between the ages of 35-54 lacked basic education. Furthermore, 57% of Muslims and 24% of Non-Muslims ages 25-34 lacked basic education. Religious factors are linked to the expansion as well as the decline of education and particularly, the economic impoverishment of Muslim communities (Stambach, 2010).

Islam, Christianity and colonization in sub-Saharan Africa

African societies had organized religious and political systems for centuries before the arrival of Islam and Christianity. Both Islam and Christianity reconfigured African societies and their established religions. Islam predated Christianity in West and East Africa. The goals of Islamic education since the pre-colonial era include proselytization and promotion of Islamic ideology and identity. These goals helped create Islamic imprints in SSA and the development of literacy through Qur'anic schools, Medersas, and Islamic scholarship. Islamic education helped solidify a unified African-Islamic identity, promoted learning, and offered interactive spaces for Muslims to cultivate values and piety (Danbur, 2000; Babou, 2003, 2010; Jammeh, 2012).

Islamic educational influences in Senegal, The Gambia, Mali and Nigeria predated Europeans. Scholars have discussed the ways Islamic education unified Islamic communities and helped build strong Islamic identity in communities in SSA (Dunbar, 2000; Levtzion & Pouwels, 2000; Reichmuth, 2000; Jammeh, 2012). The first European travelers in West Africa in the 15th century noted the existence of expansive Qur'anic schools in the region (Babou, 2003; Jammeh, 2012). In The Gambia, the traditional Islamic schooling known as "Majlis" was grounded in many parts of the Muslim population. Education historian Burama Jammeh notes that around 1751 about fifteen predominantly Moslem communities called Morikunda were spread across parts of Gambia. These places are still recognized as centers of traditional Islamic educational establishments (Jammeh, 2012). Similarly, Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels discuss ways Islamic education itself carved an exclusive Islamic enclave and communities in West Africa. They note for instance that scholars in Timbuktu lived as autonomous community known as Diaba, "the

scholars’ town” under leadership of the *qadi* or the Muslim Judge. They also point out that in the 16th and 17th century Bornu, the capital of Borno in modern day Nigeria was an important center for Islamic learning. Borno scholars officiated as teachers and Imams in Hausaland, Yorubaland, and Borgu. They noted that by the end of 18th century Islam was deeply rooted in the everyday life of the ordinary man in Borno (Levtzion & Pouwels, 2000).

Islam, colonialism and western education in sub-Saharan Africa

Islamic education was a major tool that helped Islamic communities in SSA to consolidate power (Dunbar, 2000; Reichmuth, 2000; Iddrisu, 2002). The balance of power shifted to non-Islamic groups during and after the colonization of SSA territories. The tool that spurred the power shift was western forms of education (Chande, 2008). The introduction of western education in SSA reconfigured the economic and power dynamics in colonized societies in SSA in tremendous ways. The proselytizing and “civilizing” agenda of western/Christian education sometimes created tensions and suspicion in Islamic communities. Islamic communities subtly and sometimes fiercely resisted western education. Western/Christian education succeeded mostly in non-Muslim communities. In predominantly Islamic populated areas of colonial territories in The Gambia, Senegal, northern Nigeria, the coastal parts of Kenya, parts of Sierra Leone, and northern Ghana, Christian missionary education was introduced in the context of a predominant Islamic society (Chande, 2008; Jammeh, 2012; Skinner, 2013). Burama Jammeh points out that in the British colony of The Gambia, the Muslim elders in the city area organized themselves into an association and established a school called Mohammedan school in order to offer Islamic and Arabic curricula to Muslim children. They did this to undermine the western form of education provided by the Christian missions (Jammeh, 2012).

The Christian missionaries encountered strong resistance and opposition to Western/Christian education in Muslim communities for several reasons. First, for most Islamic communities, Islam had been for centuries the basis of a universal identity (Babou, 2003; Bell, 2015). Muslim communities came to view western education as alien cultural process that belonged to the infidels. Islamic communities also viewed western education as a subtle and benign strategy to Christianize Muslim children and shift the Islamic communities’ socio-political arrangements and identities and part of the larger order comprising western education and colonial administration (Bell, 2015). Islamic communities cited western education’s promotion of certain religified norms as evidence that enrolling their children in western education would be tantamount to conversion to Christianity or learning the ways of the colonizers and therefore were hesitant to enroll their children (Chande, 2008; Izama, 2014). To address this skepticism the British colonial administration in West Africa for instance allowed the establishment of English/Arabic schools in some colonies like Ghana to provide Muslim families with an alternative to sending their children to Christian schools (Skinner, 2013).

Since colonization many Islamic communities have demonstrated apathy toward western forms of education because colonial era brought considerable social, political, and economic changes for Muslim and non-Muslims alike in SSA. Colonial rule imposed new systems of law which generated resentments in many colonial territories (Babou, 2003; Loimeier, 2013; Bell, 2015). Islamic communities

in French colonies of West Africa for instance used Islam as a cementing force to unite West Africa and inculcate distrust for foreign invaders (Bell, 2015). The negative views of some Christian missions and colonial governments toward Islamic communities in some colonial territories sometimes added to the tensions which reinforced Muslim communities to resist western/Christian education.

The colonial governments sometimes implemented policies of exclusion in heavily Islamic communities for political expediency (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007; Abdurrahman, 2012; Izama, 2014). Both Abdurrahman (2012) and Izama (2014) point out that the colonial government's exclusionary tactics in places like northern Ghana and northern Nigeria were a strategy to pacify Northern emirs whose territories had been forcibly occupied. Governor Lord Lugard prohibited the establishment of Christian mission schools in Northern Nigeria, because he did not want to risk destabilizing a well-functioning system of indirect rule via Muslim chiefs. The British colonial administration in the Gold Coast colony (Ghana) also deliberately restricted expanding education in northern Ghana in order to preserve the region as a labor pool for the colony (Iddrisu, 2002; Mfum-Mensah, 2005). The British colonial administration however established Hausa constabulary schools for Muslim Hausa boys who had fled from Nigeria to Ghana. These errant boys were provided rudimentary education in English language and basic subject and recruited into the colonial police in Gold Coast to serve as guards of British property and to consolidate colonial authority and keep the peace in Gold Coast (Skinner, 2013).

Some colonial governments were also suspicious of Islamic communities and even placed some Islamic African leaders under surveillance (Babou, 2003; Loimeier, 2013). In the French colony of Senegal, the colonial government became apprehensive to Amadu Bamba, the leader of the Islamic sect of Murid and viewed the Murid religious ideology as a threat because Muridiyya education was based on encouraging members to involve in hard work and productive ventures. The teachings of Murid focused on farming and many who became adherent to the Murid ideology and Muridiyya education made strong contribution to the Senegal economy. The French colonial administration saw this as a threat to the colonial government. It exiled Bamba and after his return from exile, was put under house arrest until his death (Babou, 2003). Similarly, German colonial administration viewed Muslim communities in Tanganyika and other territories in East Africa with apprehension to the extent that at the German Colonial Congress in Berlin in 1905, Islam became the central theme of German colonial politics. A few of the German colonizers who did not see Islam as a threat in German colonial territories nonetheless saw Muslims as the "other" that needed to be civilized (Loimeier, 2013).

Prior to colonization many strong Islamic communities existed who were sometimes ruled by the *imam* or *qadi*. Formal colonization introduced colonial laws, taxes and western education which reconfigured the Islamic social arrangements and led to the Muslims' adaptation to the modern colonial state (Loimeier, 2013). Islamic communities resisted colonial rule but many also found multiple paths to accommodate the colonial rule and identified with aspects of the modern state in particular, in the area of education. While, Muslim communities may have

accommodated western education they became wary of enrolling children in schools whose overt mission was religious conversion to Christianity (Loimeier, 2013).

Conclusion: Efforts to promote enrollment of Muslim children in SSA

During colonization Muslim leaders in colonial territories acted outside the state. After independence Islamic communities found themselves at a disadvantage because they did not have the requisite education and skills to participate in the political and economic processes of the society. High positions in government fell to non-Muslims educated in Christian mission schools. Some Islamic communities continue to promote stricter forms of Islam rather than on achieving educational modernization of their youth to prepare them for the competitive job market (Chande, 2008). In the early days of independence, some Muslim parents still associated modern schools with Christianity and colonization and therefore were reluctant to enroll their children in modern schools. In the former French colony of Mali for instance, Muslim parents refused to send their children to school because they still saw western education as a threat to their Muslim beliefs and sensibilities. This situation partly explains the continuous Muslim-Christianity disparity in school enrollment in postcolonial SSA (Chande, 2008; Bell, 2015).

There have been recent initiatives to integrate Islamic forms of schooling in national education system in some SSA communities as part of the campaigns for Education for All. Things are changing now and many Islamic communities in SSA have come to gradually accommodate and embrace western education. We should note that the education and religious-based social stratification in SSA demonstrates that Islamic communities were not passive recipients of western education but interrogated this socialization process (Babou, 2003).

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