

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COMMUNITY IN AFRICAN EDUCATION

by O. S. D. MOOKI

AFRICAN education in the past was the sole responsibility of the missionary, and anybody knows how much the African owes to the churches for this education.

The primary school, the secondary and high school, the grade school, and the training college. These were initiated by missionaries. They were run and maintained by the churches for many years, with the state giving very little, if any, assistance. In fact it can be said the state was more of a spectator, and only later, as a result of pressure, did it come in to "aid" these very important institutions in the life of the African people. There is therefore no African who does not owe a debt of gratitude to the missionaries for their services in the field of education.

But even after the state had started to show interest in, and to aid, African education, the responsibility of running the schools, primary, secondary and training, still devolved upon the churches, and the missionaries continued to erect the buildings, appoint the teachers, and apply for their subsidization. The missionaries were the link between the Education Department and the community. They decided policy, and it was on their recommendation that any teachers were dismissed.

We all know that pioneers in all fields of activity are bound to make mistakes, big and small. Sometimes small mistakes are exaggerated, and sometimes big mistakes are overlooked. The missionary, too, made mistakes in his fervour in this field of endeavour.

Firstly, there was competition between missionaries of various churches, which was not always salutary. It led to proselytism which sometimes went to great extremes, as, for instance, children of a different denomination were debarred from attendance at a school, or if allowed, were openly ostracised. Teachers, too, did not get employment if they did not belong to the denomination running the school; if they were employed it was either on a temporary basis or they were there on mere sufferance. Naturally they could not give of their best.

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Then, although provision was made for school committees, it was not always that missionaries saw to it that these were, in fact, elected. I doubt whether the regulations made it incumbent for school committees to be appointed. The parents, therefore, had no say in the education of their children, except perhaps, indirectly, through their church elders or African ministers, who had some influence on the missionary.

It can, therefore, be said that the community had practically no say in the education of their children; the community were lookers-on, spectators.

This state of affairs brought about dissatisfaction among the community, especially when it came to the dismissal of teachers, or, in their ordinary duties and functions. There was an outcry, "Away with the missionaries" was a slogan that gained impetus very quickly, and it was advocated that the missionary should attend to "things of the spirit" and leave education alone!

The present system came into being, where the community was given a much greater say than was even expected, by those who advocated a change. It came about as a result of recommendations of the Government Commission of Inquiry, which had been under the chairmanship of Dr. W. W. N. Eiselen, then a Chief Inspector of Native Education, in the Transvaal.

According to this system it became imperative that schools should be under school committees and school boards, and that these should be entirely African, not even coloureds being allowed to serve on them.

Much was said for and against the new system. It was said, for instance, in certain places, that the African was not yet ready for such responsibility, and that to make the system workable, members of other races who had experience in the field should be allowed to serve on school boards and school committees, even if it was merely in an advisory capacity.

Those who said this felt, for the Africans own good, that it was a mistake that new and wide powers should be thrust on a people who were so inexperienced in this field, and who, therefore, might "abuse" such great opportunities. These people did not realise that a people must start somewhere, and even learn by their mistakes. To them a mistake by one single African is a mistake by the African races as a whole: "What did you

expect of natives, anyway?" they say. But a mistake by a member of another race is simply ascribed to the particular individual, and not to his race: "Mr. X has let us down, so try Mr. Y."

Africans themselves criticised the system from other aspects; for instance, the election of members on to the school committees and school boards was not fairly balanced, because the majority of the membership was appointed by the authorities and only one-third were elected. The feeling here, therefore, was that the majority rule would not always be in the interests of the community as such, and it was advocated that the whole membership should be by election by the communities themselves.

It can be seen, therefore, that the community wants to be more and more recognised in the education of their children, unlike before, where it was only passive, and where members of other races did all the work for them. The school committees and school boards are welcomed, and it is suggested that membership to these boards should be entirely by election, and the community demands that those who serve on these bodies should have some knowledge of the work which they undertake to do.

Of course, it is a debatable question, the question of the total election system. Many feel that it has failed in the advisory boards, where not always the best people are elected or have the greatest popularity. But it is, of course, true that members of school committees and school boards should know

something of the work for which they seek election.

The Government has also been criticised for its tendency to shift all responsibility to school boards, without at the same time making the necessary funds available for such projects as the erection of school buildings; this is especially difficult in the urban areas, where the cost of living is so high, and where it is not practicable to levy the parents, or even make it compulsory for them to contribute to school funds.

It is pointed out that the parents are already heavily taxed, not only by the Central Government, but the local authorities have a special levy from tenants for education, but that this is utilized only for the erection of lower primary school buildings. Why can't this levy be applied to the higher primary and also secondary school building projects? Or is there special provision for this where the community is more stable, and where the need is more for higher primary and secondary schools than for lower primary schools?

But the community appreciates the education of their children more if they see proof of its good in their midst. Thus, more and more Africans should be absorbed in the professions, in the semi-skilled and skilled jobs which are available. There is nothing more disheartening than to see members of other races doing jobs which can and should be done by the Africans themselves. Let us learn by our mistakes, and thus follow in the path of all other civilized nations.



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