

Transcending the majority rights and minority protection dichotomy through multicultural reflective citizenship in the African Great Lakes region

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In this paper, the author examines how colonial racist policies and western-bound post-colonial educational practices have contributed to the recurring ethnic conflicts in the Great Lakes region of Africa. After defining democracy and reflective citizenship within the African context, she discusses how teachers' roles should be redefined and pedagogy revamped within a multicultural perspective in order to prepare students to become reflective citizens who are empowered to reframe interethnic relations in the region beyond the pervasive majority rights and minority protection discourse.

Introduction

In his assessment of the Hutu-Tutsi saga in Burundi, Rens (1991) paints a graphic picture of a people and a nation whose history and destiny have been forever marked by colonial racism and cyclical ethnic conflicts. Relating what he calls the Tutsi's nightmarish fear of extinction and the Hutu's never-fading anger at their unjust subordination and oppression, he concludes, 'Burundi has paid a price for racism. And the final tally is not yet complete' (p. 117).

The Great Lakes region of Africa has been devastated by recurrent ethnic strife and political turmoil for decades. As the world was beginning to turn the page from the 1972 genocide of the Hutus by the Tutsi government in Burundi, the Rwandan genocide of 1994 brought the Hutu-Tutsi troubled coexistence to the forefront of

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international discourse. Scholars who have examined the Hutu-Tutsi discord have suggested that peaceful coexistence between the majority Hutu and the minority Tutsi in both Burundi and Rwanda is at best an illusion because of their ethnicized conception of democracy, which the Hutus define in terms of the rights of the majority, and the Tutsis in terms of minority protection (Chretien, 2003; Havermans, 1999; Reyntjens, 2000). The recurrent ethnic conflicts have resulted in incalculable losses of human lives as well as masses of refugees and displaced people throughout the region (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2002).

Majority rights and minority protection have thus become two irreconcilable sides of a historic dichotomy. Mwakikagile (2001) has even gone as far as suggesting that Burundi and Rwanda should split their respective territories into Tutsi land and Hutu land, as the only viable solution to the persisting ethnic strife. Little work has been done so far to transcend this seemingly natural opposition. This paper examines ways to use education to help reconstruct society in the Great Lakes region of Africa, which has been polarized by the majority rights and minority protection dichotomy. As an African scholar and multicultural educator born and raised in the Great Lakes region of Africa, I maintain, as other scholars and observers have argued, that the only viable way to achieve sustainable peace in the region is to empower the people themselves to deal with their reality of division and war critically and creatively. In this paper, I shall outline transformative multicultural education practices that can help students become reflective citizens who possess the attitudes and skills necessary to deal critically with the majority rights and minority protection dichotomy and to contribute positively to the transformation of their society.

The paper's framework and direction are inspired by a firm belief that any societal transformation is contingent upon the empowerment of individuals and communities to define, validate, and labor to achieve inclusive and reflective citizenship. To this effect, I discuss three main points. After a brief reflection on the troubled nature of the Great Lakes region of Africa, I define democracy and reflective citizenship within the post-colonial African context. Then, I explore strategies for achieving reflective citizenship through multicultural education, which is the driving focus of this paper. I close with some general conclusions.

The troubled Great Lakes region of Africa

Located in eastern Africa, the Great Lakes region includes the countries of Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, surrounding Lake Kivu, Lake Tanganyika, and Lake Victoria. Of particular significance is the different colonial legacy that splits the region into the English-speaking former British colonies of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, and the French-speaking former Belgian colonies of Burundi and Rwanda. Even though it would be fair to say that all the countries within the Great Lakes region of Africa share a history of ethnic and tribal turmoil resulting in great part from the divide in order to conquer policies that underlay colonial rule, it is somewhat obvious that Burundi and Rwanda have the most difficult time reclaiming their lost

national unity and the true meaning of independence. This is one of the reasons why these two nations provide the focus and context for the discussion in this paper. Another important reason is that Burundi and Rwanda share significant demographic and linguistic similarities. They also share the history of ethnic conflict and violence that has opposed the 84% majority Hutu and the 15% minority Tutsi populations in recurrent cyclical bloody clashes and isolated the remaining 1% Twa populations into invisibility. The two nations speak Kirundi and Kinyarwanda, respectively, which are clearly dialects of a common Bantu mother tongue. Yet another reason, small but significant nonetheless, is the fact that as a Burundi native, I approach this paper with the kind of relevant life experiences that can only enrich the discussion.

The discussion of the troubled nature of the African Great Lakes region focuses on the ways in which both Burundi and Rwanda have become victims of colonial racism, and how the educational system in both countries has fostered and perpetuated divisive colonial dispositions and behaviors. Many scholars have highlighted the dividing impact of colonial policies and practices on the African people and communities. As Ress (1991) argues, Burundi has been a victim of colonial racism. Similarly, ethnic relations were negatively impacted by colonialism in neighboring Rwanda. As Semujanga (2003) explains, Rwandan history has been marked by Belgian colonial practices that fostered discrimination, segregation, and exclusion based on ethnic origin. Commenting on the complex concept of minority/majority as one of the consequences of colonial rule in Burundi, Reyntjens (2000) explains:

It is not always the numerical majority that oppresses the minority. Politically speaking, the Tutsi are dominant, despite constituting a demographic minority. All three groups thus have the characteristics of a minority in one sense or another the Twa are a political and a demographic minority; the Tutsi are a demographic minority and a political majority; the Hutu are a demographic majority and a political minority, (p. 6)

The colonial experiences of the African people have profoundly affected the post-independence performance of African governments throughout the continent in general and within the Great Lakes region in particular. As Throup (1995) asserts, 'the colonial era determined the initial structure of post-independence political institutions, the focus of economic production, and even the strengths and limitations of nationalist and sub-nationalist movements. Colonialism created both divided and comparatively uncontested political societies'(p. 238).

On an even broader scale, colonial racism and discrimination have contributed to the current culture of ethnic discord and violence in the region. Recurrent ethnic conflicts have, in turn, created a society polarized along Hutu and Tutsi lines, produced pervasive mistrust and fear, destroyed the social fiber, and damaged the national and regional economies (Ndura, 2003). In addition, many people in the region have lost their African identities and developed confused and antagonistic individual and collective identities, with destructive and disempowering consequences across ethnic groups (Ndura, 2006). Overall, the Africans of the Great Lakes region have failed to liberate themselves and their nations from the effects of

colonial racism, and even the educational system has perpetuated colonial attitudes and practices.

In another publication (Ndura, 2006), I draw on personal experiences and collective memories to argue that western-bound education has served as an overt tool of assimilation into western ideologies and life styles. The result of this assimilation is a cultural identity crisis among the educated elite and a destructive divide between the schooled and the unschooled populations of the Great Lakes region of Africa. I conclude that the educational systems of the region have therefore failed to achieve the ultimate goal of education, which is to enable individuals to become 'empowered, learned, highly skilled democratic citizens who have the confidence and the savvy to improve their own lives and to make their communities more vibrant places in which to live, work and play' (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 8).

Post-independence colonial education is almost an oxymoron, which unfortunately reflects the reality of the educational systems of the Great Lakes region of Africa. Instead of being a tool of liberation and empowerment, education has often been used to foster and perpetuate colonial ideologies and divisive policies. This post-independence subjugation results from the extensive and uncritical use of curricula and materials that mirror western ideas and lifestyles and bear little resemblance to, or even contradict, African philosophies and values. Throughout their schooling, African students are taught that western languages and cultures are superior and that their success is determined by how closely they emulate western ideals and ways of life. In fact, Burundians often use the 'umuzungu' metaphor to refer to a fellow Burundian who has achieved a comfortable lifestyle. For example, when they say, 'Yohani ni umuzungu' [John is a white man], they usually imply that he has attained a superior social status through the level of western education achieved and the resulting material wealth accumulated. To this extent, education has reinforced white supremacy and cultural racism in post-independence Africa.

Post-independence educational policies and practices have also perpetuated the divide in order to conquer colonial ideology that shaped the pervasive ethnic conflicts in the African Great Lakes region. Within the context of Burundi, for instance, the educational system has served as 'the breeding ground for inequality and discord' (Ndura, 2004), because it has promoted Tutsi hegemony in all national sectors, including the army, the civil service, and the judiciary (Reyntjens, 2000), and reinforced the concept of Tutsi superiority over the Hutu and Twa populations (Chretien, 1985). As victims of colonial racism and unquestioning products of an educational system that fosters colonial ideologies, the educated elite have often failed to develop a united and constructive vision that is necessary to truly liberate themselves and their fellow citizens from the colonial mindset.

In the discussion that follows, I define democracy and reflective citizenship in an effort to contribute to a discourse that transcends the majority rights and minority protection ethnicized polemic.

Democracy and reflective citizenship in post-colonial Africa

In his discussion of the stages of ethnicity, Banks (1992) posits that effective citizens in a democratic pluralistic nation have reflective and clarified ethnic and national identifications. He adds that such individuals 'have a commitment to their ethnic group, an empathy and concern for other ethnic groups, and a strong but reflective commitment and allegiance to the nation state and its idealized values such as human dignity and justice' (p. 96). The concepts of democracy and citizenship cannot be separated as we attempt to understand the Hutu-Tutsi ethnicized discourse and experiences in the Great Lakes region of Africa

What does democracy entail? According to Campbell (2004), 'democracy is about the equal distribution of power.'³ It is based on such values as the belief that each person has equal merit, the right to equal treatment before the law, equality of opportunity, equal respect for all, and the encouragement of free choice (p. 32). Post-colonial Africa, in general, and the Great Lakes region, in particular, therefore need better mechanisms for the development and implementation of democratic values, dispositions, and behaviors in order to reclaim their independence from the colonial master and build an equitable and socially just society.

What is reflective citizenship? To borrow from Scott-Baumann's (2003) definition, citizenship denotes the transformation of the voters of every nation into politically literate and socially conscious individuals who will take critical action to redress injustices. She notes three interrelated and mutually dependent elements of 'active citizenship': social and moral responsibility, community involvement, and political literacy (p. 357). Banks (1997) posits that 'citizens in a democratic, pluralistic society must interact and engage in public discourse with people from diverse racial, ethnic, gender, and social-class groups' (p. 80). He argues that 'to create effective democratic communities within a pluralistic nation-state, it is essential for a superordinate group identity to be developed to which all groups can identify and have loyalty' (ibid.).

However, the nature and level of commitment to this superordinate group identity are defined by the extent to which national policies and practices reflect principles of equity and justice. As Banks (2004) explains, 'individuals can develop a clarified commitment to and identification with their nation-state and the national culture only when they believed that they are a meaningful part of the nation-state and that it acknowledges, reflects, and values their cultural group and them as individuals' (p. 9).

Therefore, the history of exclusion and subjugation that favored the Tutsi and alienated the Hutu throughout the colonial and post-colonial eras complicates the idea of citizenship in Burundi and the Great Lakes region. Such a history has created a troubled landscape where the different ethnic groups continue to tear each other apart, the Hutu in the name of majority rights, and the Tutsi in the name of minority protection, with no consideration for their intimate interdependence upon which rests the survival of their nation and the region.

Hence, reflective citizenship within the context of the post-colonial African Great Lakes region should be conceived as the re-examination, deconstruction, and

unlearning of the ethnicized discourse that pervades the national myths and legends, as well as people's daily lives. Reflective citizenship is about understanding that 'there cannot be a Tutsi, a Hutu, and a Twa solution* to the Burundian or Rwandan crisis, because all Burundian people and all Rwandan people 'are forever bound in a destiny that only they can define' (Ndura, 2004). The following section discusses how reflective citizenship may be achieved through multicultural education.

Achieving reflective citizenship through multicultural education

In an earlier publication, I argue that effective multicultural education in the context of Burundi and the African Great Lakes region should challenge Tutsi hegemony, affirm the nations' diversity, yield equity and social justice for all people, and lay the foundation for sustainable peace within the individual countries, the region, the continent of Africa, and the world. I then outline ten thematic units that would constitute the core of a transformative multicultural education program for Burundian schools and communities. The program that I propose can be adapted to the Rwandan context and to other countries in the region. I also show how multicultural education can be infused in the existing academic curriculum in order to prepare students for reflective, critical, and peace-minded citizenship. I argue that transformative multicultural education implies 'comprehensive reform of the policies, practices, instructional materials and strategies that characterize the educational systems.' I add that 'transformative multicultural education empowers educators and students to become reflective agents of change who advocate for and labor to achieve equity, social justice, and peaceful coexistence in their interethnic communities and in the multicultural global community' (Ndura, 2004). In this section, I apply multicultural education principles to highlight the redefined roles of the teacher and pedagogy in the quest for reflective citizenship.

Redefining the role of the teacher

Armed with knowledge acquired from the colonial master, dusty pieces of chalk that they do not hesitate to throw at their students, and a stick that they often use to assure their unchallenged supremacy, many teachers have perpetuated the culture of oppression and division in the classrooms of the African Great Lakes region. Since education must play a center role in the process of transforming and reconstructing the society that has been ravaged by unending ethnic conflicts, teachers must assume center stage in the national and regional pursuit of reflective citizenship. As Giroux (1988) asserts, 'teachers should become transformative intellectuals if they are to educate students to be active critical citizens' (p. 127). As transformative intellectuals, teachers

need to develop a discourse that unite the language of critique with the language of possibility ... they must speak out against economic, political and social injustices both within and outside of schools ... they must work to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to become citizens who have the knowledge and courage to

struggle in order to make despair unconvincing and hope practical. (Giroux, 1988, p. 128)

Within the context of the post-colonial African Great Lakes region, teachers must claim the roles of ethnic border-crossers, critical pedagogues, and social activists in order to contribute to the quest for reflective citizenship. In their role of ethnic border-crossers, teachers must be reflective practitioners who understand the impact of their ethnic identities on their classroom practices and interactions. They must be aware of and sensitive to the needs of all their students to feel secure and validated, regardless of their ethnic group membership. Most of all, they must be sensitive to the ways in which the recurrent ethnic conflicts have affected the lives of the students and their families. In addition, teachers must engage all their students in activities that foster intra-ethnic and interethnic exploration as well as interethnic dialogue, thus enabling them to develop critical social consciousness and empowering them to become active participants in the transformation of their society. It is important to stress that, in their role of ethnic border-crossers, teachers should not play ethnic favorites. They must rise beyond the majority rights and minority protection discourse in order to solicit and welcome multiple perspectives, and prepare students to become active and reflective citizens in their multi-ethnic nation. Teachers must have a clarified vision of and commitment to their redefined roles as empowered agents of societal transformation.

As critical pedagogues, teachers

must do more than simply further legitimate shared assumptions, agreed upon properties, or established conventions ... [They] must make classrooms into critical spaces that truly endanger the obviousness of culture ... as a collection of unalterable truths and unchangeable social relations ... [They] must excavate the 'subjugated knowledges' of those who have been marginalized and disaffected, whose histories of suffering and hope have rarely been made public. (McLaren, 1998, p. 234)

Since, as McLaren (1998) argues, there is no neutral, non-partisan sphere into which teachers can retreat to engage students' experiences, it behooves them to understand that through their work, they support one of only two choices: they either foster societal transformation and reconstruction, or perpetuate the destructive division of ethnic discord. In order to serve as agents of societal transformation and reconstruction, teachers 'must function as more than agents of social critique. They must attempt to fashion a language of hope that points to new forms of social and material relations attentive to the principles of freedom and justice' (McLaren, 1998, p. 234). What does all this mean within the troubled context of the African Great Lakes region? It means that through their instructional materials and strategies, their attitudes towards and interactions with students, teachers must lift the taboo image that hangs over ethnicity and hinders open and honest interethnic dialogue. They must create and sustain safe spaces where students' narratives of fear and suffering can be discussed and validated. Practical examples of how pedagogy can be revamped will be discussed later on in this paper.

Teachers must also become social activists. They must realize that 'schools [are] economic, cultural and social sites that are inextricably tied to the issues of power and control' (Giroux, 1988, p. 126). This realization should inspire and energize them to question the status quo and labor to achieve educational equity and social justice. As social activists, teachers in the African Great Lakes region must be at the forefront of the pursuit of true independence. They must challenge colonial principles and policies. They must interrogate Tutsi hegemony and openly discuss its devastating impact on Hutu-Tutsi relations in both Burundi and Rwanda. They must break the silence that has masked Hutu oppression and suffering in Burundi for decades. They must advocate the cause of all victims of the 1972 genocide of the Hutu by the Tutsi, and the hundreds of thousands of Hutu who became victims of the successive, autocratic and repressive Tutsi governments. They must be the voices of the widows and orphans whom the cyclical interethnic conflicts have annihilated and condemned to die in torturous despair.

As social activists, teachers from all ethnic groups must understand that there is no way around interethnic interdependence, and that their efforts to engage students in unifying, collaborative endeavors will only be as strong as their conviction. They must become 'transformative intellectuals' who 'contextualize in political and normative terms the concrete social functions that [they] perform' (Giroux, 1988, p. 126). In order to prepare students who are active, critical, and reflective citizens, teachers must transform the way they teach, as suggested in the following portion of the paper.

Revamping pedagogy

According to *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (2001), pedagogy is defined as (1) the function or work of a teacher and (2) the art or science of teaching. In order to move the ethnic discourse beyond majority rights and minority protection, and achieve reflective citizenship in the African Great Lakes region, teachers must change their instructional methods and empower students to become active contributors to the discourse of peaceful interethnic coexistence. They must implement equity and emancipatory pedagogy.

In the words of Banks (1997), 'teachers who successfully implement equity pedagogy draw upon a sophisticated knowledge base. They can enlist a broad range of pedagogical skills and have a keen understanding of their own cultural experiences, values, and attitudes toward people who are culturally, racially, and ethnically different from themselves' (p. 85). Within the context of the African Great Lakes region, equity pedagogy must be framed by the teachers' understanding of how their own educational experiences have been shaped by the colonial legacy. Such understanding will guide teachers' instructional decisions, from the selection and development of materials, to teaching strategies and classroom management.

The revamped pedagogy will be inclusive of the voices and experiences that represent diverse ethnic perspectives, with the ultimate purpose of validating diverse narratives and achieving interethnic understanding. Through the practice of equity

pedagogy, teachers will design and engage students in learning experiences that are both meaningful and culturally relevant. They will create and maintain classroom environments in which students' voices are recognized as significant and vital contributions to the discourse of teaching and learning.

Teachers must also implement emancipatory pedagogy in order to educate reflective citizens capable of functioning beyond the majority rights and minority protection discourse. To this effect, they must use 'forms of pedagogy that treat students as critical agents; make knowledge problematic; utilize critical and affirming dialogue; and make the case for struggling for a qualitatively better world for all people' (Giroux, 1988, p. 127).

Emancipatory pedagogy implies giving students an active and critical voice in their learning experiences. Instead of teaching students to memorize and assimilate western knowledge provided through unexamined and unchallenged western-bound instructional materials, teachers will engage students in activities that require and empower them to challenge western assumptions of truth. Such activities will enable students to reflect upon and expose underlying colonial teachings that have hindered the quest for cultural, political, intellectual, and economic independence in the region.

Emancipatory pedagogy will also empower students from all ethnic groups to turn a critical eye onto their own history and how it has been shaped by the failure of the national and regional leadership to develop an inclusive vision that seeks the welfare of all the people regardless of ethnicity or education. Students will thus formulate and raise questions that will help them deconstruct Tutsi hegemony, understand Hutu oppression and its national and regional consequences, and begin to construct an interethnic vision of peaceful coexistence.

Equity and emancipatory pedagogy will therefore liberate both teachers and students. Teachers will no longer have to pretend to be the know-it-all masters. Instead, they will assume the more empowering roles of critical participants, guides, and mediators. Similarly, students will no longer have to pretend to be empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. Instead, they will be reflective, active participants who are empowered to interrogate and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions of truth, and construct complex knowledge from diverse perspectives.

Conclusion

The people of the African Great Lakes region have undoubtedly been deeply scarred by their nations' history of colonial racism and ethnic conflicts. The Tutsi's fear of extinction and Hutu's anger at their oppressive subordination have created a divisive discourse of Hutu majority rights and Tutsi minority protection. Very little space has been allowed for the development of a national discourse of interethnic unity and peaceful coexistence.

In this paper, I have argued that the divisive discourse that has caused so much bloodshed in Burundi and Rwanda has its roots in colonial racist policies and has been perpetuated by post-independence colonial education. Within the context of

the African Great Lakes region, I have defined democracy and reflective citizenship in order to reflect local realities. I have argued for the need for better mechanisms that would facilitate the development and implementation of democratic dispositions, values, and behaviors in order to affirm the rights of all ethnic groups to coexist in peace and prosper. I have posited that reflective citizenship refers to the re-examination, deconstruction, and unlearning of the ethnicized discourse, and understanding the unavoidable interdependence that binds Hutu and Tutsi together in their shared destiny.

I have stressed the central role that education must play in the quest for reflective citizenship and societal transformation. To this effect, I have indicated that teachers must assume new roles as ethnic border-crossers, critical pedagogues, and social activists. I have also argued that teachers must implement equity and emancipatory pedagogy in order to prepare students who are active contributors to the discourse of peaceful interethnic coexistence.

In order for interethnic trust and unity to be restored in the African Great Lakes region, both the Hutu and the Tutsi must come to the honest realization that the divisive majority rights and minority protection discourse will never yield long-lasting victory for any one ethnic group. While it is true that the Hutu people of Burundi have had to bear the brunt of Tutsi domination, repressive policies, and genocidal practices, some Tutsi people of Rwanda might have similar stories after the 1994 genocide.

We can therefore draw hope in concluding that the educated elite and policy-makers of the African Great Lakes region will, someday soon, summon their innate African wisdom, and join hands across ethnic lines in order to deconstruct the destructive discourse of division and repression, and together develop a unified discourse of peaceful coexistence. Revamping educational policies and practices to empower students and teachers to become reflective citizens will be the cornerstone of societal reconstruction within the individual countries and the region.

Notes on Contributor

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