

WESTERN EDUCATION AND AFRICAN
CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE GREAT
LAKES REGION OF AFRICA: A CASE
OF FAILED GLOBALIZATION

by Elavie Ndura

INTRODUCTION

I quickly learned how to avoid being the victim of the painful and rather traumatic weekly routine. I was ten years old and in my first week of the first trimester of sixth grade in a small school adjacent to the Catholic Church in the evergreen Burundian countryside in the heart of Africa. An older classmate who was probably repeating sixth grade for the third time had struck a seemingly friendly conversation with me in Kirundi, our native language, and my naive trust in his good intentions had caused me to fall in the trap. I had barely spoken my last word when another classmate, his conspirator, I later discovered, approached me with a cunning smile of satisfaction and handed me a closed box of matches. I opened it and wrote my name on the piece of paper that had been folded more than five times to fit the inconspicuous emptied box. The first Saturday came and I found myself in line with my other unfortunate classmates. Sixth grade was a crowded classroom of fifty or so, and I could count those who remained seated on one hand. Mr. Gerard, our sixth grade teacher and fellow Burundian, stood in front of the classroom, his back against the scratched black board, with a smooth good size eucalyptus stick, in anticipation. He called out the names from the fateful list, one at a time, and began to administer the punishment to each one of us, proportionate to our respective linguistic sins. I received one lash on my left calf.

Learning and speaking French, therefore, became more than a tool for academic success in the former Belgian colony. It became a necessary strategy to avoid painful and humiliating lashes on the young legs hardened by the daily twelve or so kilometers of bare-footed walk from the modest villages to the gates of civilization and back. The French language became a symbol of safety, power, and social advancement.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the identity crisis that has resulted from the Western-bound educational system prevalent in the Great Lakes region of Africa, particularly in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Rwanda. Four main points will guide the discussion. First, I will argue that Western-bound education is an overt tool of assimilation. Second, I will relate Western assimilation to the pervasive African identity crisis. Third, I will discuss the destructive divide between the educated elite and the illiterate masses. Fourth, I will propose strategies for reclaiming the African spirit of empowerment. The paper will conclude with some general reflections and recommendations.

WESTERN-BOUND EDUCATION: AN OVERT TOOL OF ASSIMILATION

Webster's dictionary defines *assimilation* in broad terms as "the merging of cultural traits from previously distinct cultural groups, not involving biological amalgamation."¹ Within a migration context, assimilation is defined as "encouraging immigrants to learn the national language and to take on the social and cultural practices of the receiving community."² Both in this context and in the context of dominant and dominated cultures such as produced by the intersection between Western colonizers and Africans or between White Europeans and the Native American, assimilation can be a voluntary process.³ But it can also be and often is the forced "acquisition of the dominator's language, forms of comportment, dress and demeanor, as well as aspirations."⁴

Throughout history, schools have been used to assimilate dominated groups into the cultural landscape of the dominators, often leading to cultural loss and disempowerment. Mr. Gerard's strictly enforced rule banning the use of Kirundi, our mother tongue, anywhere on the school premises was only one of the many strategies of forced assimilation of Burundian educated populations into the French and European cultures. The entire educational system, from the boarding schools to the curriculum, was set up to bring shame to native cultures and aspiration for and honor to European or Western cultures.

Memories of the boarding schools that were designed to immerse the African child into the Western world begin with the long list of required supplies that arrived with the notification of admission into seventh grade for the lucky few who passed the discriminating national exam. Only two students from my sixth grade class received such notification. I was to report to Ecole Moyenne Pedagogique de Kanyinya,

Kirundo, in the far north of Burundi, at the northern border with Rwanda. The required list was quite extensive and included such items as toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, two pairs of linen, shoes, slippers, and even pajamas, in addition to the expected school uniforms and supplies. My family had never owned bed sheets since the mats and old wrappers had always provided us with the needed comfort. And I wondered why I needed special clothing that I could only wear at night while in bed. I also wondered why I needed my own plate and my own set of silverware.

But the wondering did not last long. My boarding school supervising nuns and managers did not delay the transformation process that was meant to help the new recruits shed their village lifestyles and usher them into the civilized world of the West. They taught me how to manipulate and synchronize the knife in my right hand and the fork in my left hand. I had to make my bed every morning, making sure the top sheet was folded over the blanket exactly as instructed to avoid public humiliation by the dormitory supervisor. None of the Catholic prayers I had spent my elementary school years memorizing in Kirundi could be used in the boarding school. The God of the new world understood French prayers only.

The academic curriculum I had to master in order to claim my spot among the African educated elite was undoubtedly assimilationist both in content and delivery. It bore no reflection of my familiar world or heritage. It taught me more of the history and values of the West than of my own African ancestors. The curriculum was fraught with such biases as omission and stereotype that distorted and weakened the frame of reference that shaped African students' perception of self and worldview. A true story will better illustrate this point.

It was in a tenth grade French class in a boarding school in Burundi, Africa. The reading comprehension lesson of the day was based on a story entitled "Les Pieds de Mecca" published in the imported French series *La Garde et Michard*. As the story went, Mecca was a very fortunate West African man. He had a job that drew envy from his fellow villagers. He worked for a White man who was very generous. Indeed, the White boss was so nice to Mecca that he gave him a special gift: a pair of used shoes. Mecca was very excited. This was his very first pair of shoes. The shoes had a little problem, though. They were too tight to fit Mecca's untamed feet. But, he was still determined to wear them. So, he drilled holes in the corners of the shoes such that his pinky toes would stick out as he walked. He was very proud. He marched through

the village showing off his new acquisition to friends and neighbors and praising the White man for his infinite goodness.

After we completed the read aloud exercise that required our best efforts to sound as French as our innocent African voices allowed, we worked on the rather simplistic comprehension questions at the bottom of the selection such as, who was Mecca? Where was he born? What did he do for a living? The unsuspecting teacher concluded that we had achieved the lessons' objectives since we could all correctly answer the questions printed in the textbook.

But the true question is: What did we really learn from this lesson that was imported from our colonial master? What lessons did we, as Black African youth, draw from this lesson and many more similar lessons in postcolonial Africa that impacted our attitudes and behaviors for life? We learned that the White man was the supreme symbol of civilization. We learned to accept the superiority of the White man and his products and the inferiority of Blacks and their products. We learned that our worth was determined by our closeness to the White man's ideals and way of life. We learned to be ashamed of our ancestors, our customs, our history, and ourselves.

WESTERN ASSIMILATION AND THE AFRICAN IDENTITY CRISIS

Through exposure to and immersion into Western-bound education, many Africans have become unquestioning victims of cultural racism. Helms defines cultural racism as the "societal beliefs and customs that promote the assumption that the products of White culture (e.g., language, traditions, appearance) are superior to those of non-White cultures."⁵

Many of these Africans become colonized not just academically, but psychologically and socially as well. They experience the kind of cultural confusion that Spring discusses in relation to individuals from dominated groups like Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans in the United States who, because of assimilation into White European culture, have lost a sense of their cultural identity and as a result become alienated from their own cultural groups.⁶ Uncritical assimilated African intellectuals experience a severe identity crisis. As victims of the self-fulfilling prophecy that is propagated through Western-bound educational philosophies and practices, they associate whatever is good and desirable with the West and denigrate the products, values,

and traditions of their African motherland and culture. They become psychological captives who buy into the stereotypes of Africans as inferior and unsophisticated and of Westerners as superior and civilized.⁷

I can personally relate to the negative impact of Western assimilation on African identity. I was 35 years old when I was able to gather enough courage and pride to invite a White European person over for dinner at my house even though I had been a frequent dinner guest at the homes of some of my White European colleagues. I spent the whole previous day cleaning my two-bedroom apartment, making sure the floor and walls were spotless, and no speck of dust could be seen on the furniture. When the special day arrived, I spent countless hours preparing for the special occasion. The dining table and kitchen counter were adorned with at least eight different dishes. I had fixed every main dish I knew how to prepare, from plantains to macaroni and beef, to bouchee a la reine, to simple green salad, and rice chicken pilau. As I welcomed the three White European guests and gave them a detailed orientation to the various multicultural dishes, I felt compelled to offer to prepare sandwiches for them in the event that they did not like any of the dishes on hand. I am proud to say that through deeper critical reflection and more aggressive questioning of my attitude and actions, I have progressively reclaimed and affirmed my African cultural identity and independence. My decisions are no longer dictated by the pressure to please my now frequent White dinner guests, but inspired by my choice to be a respectable African host.

THE EDUCATED ELITE AND THE ILLITERATE MASSES: A DESTRUCTIVE DIVIDE

In the foreword to Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull asserts that "education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."⁸ In the context of the Great Lakes region of Africa, education should be the means by which people reclaim their African identity and affirm their independence from colonial ideologies and practices. In countries like Burundi where over half of the population, ages 15 and over, can neither read nor write, this transformative calling falls upon the few members of the educated elite

who devise and implement national policies and programs that are supposed to lead the people to individual and collective progress and empowerment.⁹ Unfortunately, most members of the educated elite have missed this vision.

Instead of educating Africans to become champions of democracy and liberation, Western-bound curricula have continually produced graduates who are alienated and disenfranchised from their own people. My Burundian memories are punctuated with stories of denial, shame, and unfounded arrogance. Scores of Burundian youth refused to help their parents and siblings plow the family farm the moment they set foot in the schools. Many of them introduced their parents as their servants when they showed up weary, exhausted, and dusty to visit their beloved children at the boarding schools. Some of the educated folks claimed that they could no longer eat traditional foods. Others were convinced that they could no longer converse well in Kirundi. Yet, many others settled in towns and cities never to spend a single night in their native villages again once they tasted the comfort of Western lifestyle. Thus, a host of educated Burundians and other Africans have become strangers in their own land and foreigners to their own cause.

The social, cultural, economic, and political consequences of this divide that Western-bound education has created between the African educated elite and their illiterate people are devastating. One of the most striking social consequences of this estrangement is the lack of communication between the educated elite and the masses and the absence of validation of the voices and contributions of the majority of the people who did not partake of Western education. It is a sad reality that the educated live in one world, and the uneducated in another. It is not even unusual to find special seats reserved for educated guests at family and community events while the non-Westernized guests congregate in less comfortable and less visible corners. Sometimes Westernized guests are treated to Primus, Amstel, and Coca-Cola beverages while the others are served local banana or sorghum beer, again a symbol of differentiated social status.

At the cultural level, Western-bound education has resulted in the loss of African traditions and customs among the educated elite. The folk tales and legends that used to keep family members of all ages entertained around the evening slow-burning fire have disappeared. The native language has been weakened as Western-bound education pushes for the memorization of and appreciation for various forms of Western literature, art, and entertainment at the expense of African cultural forms

of expression. This has contributed to the persisting illiteracy as even African scholars who have contributed to literature have done so in French and other Western languages, thus making European language instruction and learning a prerequisite for basic literacy development, especially in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

The divide between the educated elite and illiterate masses also has economic consequences. The most obvious is the educated elite's attachment to, hunger for, and pursuit of Western products and goods—as well as the rush for the accumulation of material wealth, Western style. Such Western-bound tendencies negatively impact the value and marketability of local African goods and products, which in turn negatively impacts local economies.

The destructive political consequences of the divide are all too obvious at the local, regional, and continental levels throughout Africa. I dare say that, within the context of Burundi and other nations in the Great Lakes region, one of the major causes of the historic and current political turmoil is the educated elite's blurred vision of self-determination and empowerment as well as, and especially, their lack of vision for their people's welfare and liberation. Participation in politics and government is unfortunately perceived as a sure and selfish means to rise farther above the masses and to accumulate material wealth for self-indulgence. There has been no political leader whose motive was to advance the cause of the people and their collective welfare in Burundi, except Melchior Ndadaye, the only Burundian president who was democratically elected by the people and for the people in June 1993. The nation and the world will never recover from his assassination, after being in office for only four months, by those whose greed rendered them blind and insensitive to the collective needs of the Burundian people.

RECLAIMING THE AFRICAN SPIRIT OF EMPOWERMENT

Western-bound education has at best produced graduates who hold a truncated and distorted vision of themselves and of their place in their respective African communities. It has produced an isolated African educated elite that lacks a global perspective.

In its most critical and empowering sense, education for a global perspective and vision "helps individuals better comprehend their own condition in the community and world and make more accurate and effective judgments about other people and about common issues. It emphasizes the study of nations, cultures, and civilizations, including

our own pluralistic society, and focuses on understanding how these are interconnected, how they change, and what each individual's roles and responsibilities are in such a world. An education with a global perspective provides the individual with a realistic, balanced perspective on world issues, and an awareness of how enlightened self-interest includes concerns about people elsewhere in the world."¹⁰

Western-bound education in Burundi as well as elsewhere in the Great Lakes region of Africa has not only failed to produce individuals who possess a global perspective but it has also robbed them of their cultural identity and disempowered them. In this part of the paper, I intend to discuss two complementary approaches to reclaiming the African spirit of empowerment, which is a prerequisite for restoring the culture of unity and peace in Burundi and the Great Lakes region of Africa. The two approaches are (a) achieving cultural identity clarification and (b) questioning Western motives.

Achieving cultural identity clarification enables individuals to make peace with themselves and others. Banks posits that an individual who has achieved ethnic or cultural identity clarification "is able to clarify personal attitudes and ethnic identity, to reduce intrapsychic conflict, and to develop positive attitudes towards his or her ethnic group."¹¹ The individual learns self-acceptance, thus developing the characteristics needed to accept and respond more positively to outside ethnic groups ... the individual is able to accept and understand both the positive and negative attributes of his or her ethnic group. The individual's pride in his or her ethnic group is not based on the hate or fear of outside groups."¹²

Western-bound education produces graduates who are not only mentally colonized but also lack the skills and attitudes necessary for self-actualization and acceptance. It could be argued that the lack of a clarified ethnic identity is one of the primary causes of the continuing conflicts between the Tutsis and Hutus in Burundi and Rwanda, and to a great extent in the Democratic Republic of Congo as well. Since, as Banks argues, "self-acceptance is a requisite to accepting and responding positively to other people."¹³

Therefore, one way of reclaiming the African spirit of empowerment is the development and implementation of programs that enable individuals to research, discover, and appreciate their own cultural background. Such programs could be in the form of discussion groups organized and run by local communities. They could also be a component of the various literacy development projects run by the different

churches. Most importantly, such programs should be a major part of the academic curriculum at all levels of instruction. The curriculum needs to be transformed in order to engage students and teachers in a process of knowledge construction that reflects and validates the differing perspectives that characterize multi-ethnic and culturally diverse nations.

Such programs would not only shape and enhance individuals' self-actualization, but also develop their awareness of and appreciation for people from different ethnic groups and their experiences. As they acquire empathic ability, individuals would also learn to respect and value the humanity that unites their diverse ethnic groups and understand that such unity is a major prerequisite for local, national, and regional lasting peace as well as individual prosperity. Most of all, these programs would enhance participants' awareness of and appreciation for the increasing and unavoidable inter-ethnic interdependence that is engrained in the very fabric of African history, traditions, and customs.

Another way of reclaiming the African spirit of empowerment, which complements the first approach, is questioning Western motives. Many Africans, including those from the Great Lakes region, have absorbed the stereotypes that venerate Western colonial ideals and denigrate African philosophies and ways of life. These stereotypes have been developed and propagated through mostly Christian churches' sermons and practices as well as educational materials and instructional methods that combined to weaken African cultural identity and subject the Africans to uncritical submission.

One glaring consequence of this unquestioning attitude is the unending ethnic conflicts between the Hutus and the Tutsis in Burundi and the Great Lakes region of Africa. It is quite ironic, for instance, that the Burundian Tutsi dictators would stand proudly in front of the people and the world every year on independence day to denounce the "divide in order to conquer" rule that the Western colonizers practiced in order to create and sustain destructive ethnic divisions in the country, yet engage in oppressive and genocidal acts against the Hutus.

Developing a critical and questioning attitude is, therefore, key to reclaiming the African spirit of empowerment and self-direction. Why is Western literature elevated to the center stage of the educational experience while African languages and literatures remain under-explored? Why is Western financial assistance used to hire Western expatriates instead of preparing local educators for local schools? Why are most school textbooks imported from Western nations? Why do Western governments provide financial and military assistance to warring African

ethnic factions? Why do Western nations grant asylum to persecuted Africans and yet make it almost impossible for those in exile to reunite with their families? Why do Western institutions deny so many African academic credentials when they were educated under Western philosophies and standards? Reclaiming the African spirit of empowerment will become a possibility only when the Africans begin to raise such questions and lift the veil of blindness that has obstructed their true independence from the colonial masters' stronghold.

CONCLUSION

I have written this paper to address the theme of globalization and peace studies through African eyes. The paper's focus on education is driven by a firm belief that the dominant groups have always used education as a major tool for assimilating and even subjugating dominated populations. I also believe that it is through education that individuals can reaffirm their cultural identity as well as their rights and responsibilities as citizens of nations and a world that celebrates and values ethnic and cultural diversity.

The goal of education should be 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."¹⁴ Through examples from personal experiences and collective memories, I have argued that Western-bound education has failed to achieve this goal. As an overt tool of assimilation, it has produced a cultural identity crisis among the educated elite of Burundi and the Great Lakes region of Africa as well as created a destructive divide between the schooled and the unschooled populations. I propose that the African spirit of empowerment can only be reclaimed through the establishment of transformative educational community and school programs aimed at engaging participants in a sustained process of cultural identity clarification as well as empowering them to question Western motives.

The call for transformative and empowering education for a global African educated elite would be weak and incomplete at best if it failed to address the responsibilities of the West in the process. Western political and educational institutions have historically been active participants in and contributors to the troubled destiny of Africa and the Africans, especially in Burundi and the Great Lakes region. They must claim their place in the transformation process in a number of ways. Western political

and educational institutions should acknowledge the part that they played in the dismantling of traditional African cultures and institutions. They should also restructure their own educational systems and institute programs aimed at transforming the negative stereotypical images of the Africans created by racist colonial philosophies and practices. In addition, they need to acknowledge their hand in the current ethnic turmoil that has spread across the African continent, particularly in the Hutu-Tutsi discord in Burundi and the Great Lakes region of Africa. Western political and educational institutions must be prepared and willing to contribute financial and other resources necessary for the design and implementation of programs focused on peaceful conflict resolution and peace education, as this is a prerequisite for social reconstruction in Burundi, the Great Lakes region, and other adversely affected areas in Africa.¹⁵

In conclusion, Bakwesegha's words resound with wisdom, power, and urgency as he stresses our individual and collective responsibilities toward the creation and sustenance of a culture of empowerment and peace in Africa. He states, "... one hundred years from now it will not matter how fat our bank accounts are today, what type of house we are living in today, the type of vehicles we are now driving, the beauty of the suits we are wearing today, or the number of parties we attend every weekend. But we will be judged by that tribunal before which we will all have to stand one day as adults for our acts of omission or commission in bringing up our children."¹⁶

Formal schooling is by design the largest and most powerful institution used to educate our children and to socialize them into their individual and collective roles as citizens of their nations and the world. Within the context of the Great Lakes region of Africa, Western-bound education has been ethnocentric at best. As such, it has caused a destructive cultural identity crisis among the educated elite and destabilized local mores and institutions.

NOTES

1. *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1992), 90.

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3. Joel Spring, *The Intersection of Cultures: Multicultural Education and the Global Economy* (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2004).

4. Ramon A. Gutierrez, "Historical and Social Science Research on Mexican Americans," in J. A. Banks & C. A. McGee (eds.), *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 203-22.

5. Cited in Rebecca Powell, "Overcoming Cultural Racism: The Promise of Multicultural Education," *Multicultural Perspectives* 2, 3 (2000), 8-14, 8.

6. Spring, *The Intersection of Cultures: Multicultural Education and the Global Economy*.

7. J. A. Banks, "The Stages of Ethnicities," in P. A. Richard-Amato & M. A. Snow (eds.), *The Multicultural Classroom: Readings for Content-Area Teachers* (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1992), 93-100.

8. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York, NY: Herder, 1970), 16.

9. Rene Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnocide as Discourse and Practice* (New York, NY: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1994).

10. Kenneth Cushner, Averil McClelland, & Philip Safford, *Human Diversity in Education: An Integrated Approach*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2003), 154.

11. Banks, "The Stages of Ethnicities."

12. Ibid., 95.

13. Ibid., 96.

14. Joe L. Kincheloe, *Critical pedagogy* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2004), 8.

15. Chris Bakwesegha, "Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa: Lessons and Opportunities," in E. E. Uwazie (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 9-18. Elavie Ndura, "Peaceful Conflict Resolution: A Prerequisite for Social Reconstruction in Burundi, Africa," in E. E. Uwazie (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 151-60.

16. Bakwesegha, "Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa: Lessons and Opportunities," 18.