



THE STRUGGLE FOR AFRICAN EDUCATION IN COLONIAL KENYA; JOHN OWALO'S NOMIYA LUO MISSION OBOCH, FIRST AFRICAN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL 1913 TO 2018.

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Abstract

Christian missionaries were seen by Africans as agents of European colonization who distorted African culture, liberation, conceived the actual misery of Africans due to colonialism and was part and parcel of European colonization. In Britain and other parts of Europe the need to spread European faith formed a very important justification for imperial expansionism. Native Africans viewed and associated missionaries with colonial evils imposed on them, namely forced Labour, land alienation, destocking policy, tax payment, kipande system (Pass) and other social evils, particularly when the missionaries got involved with administrative issues, hence the assertion that "Africans lost their land as they closed their eyes participating in official prayers offered by missionaries". Missionaries were seen to have gotten mixed up and forgot their evangelical mission in Africa, which led Africans to view them with a lot of contempt. It's from such experiences that Africans established the independent church and school movements, Nomiya Luo Mission having been established by John Owalo Being the first independent church and school movement in Africa and the region.

Key Words: Education, values, Colonization, Politics, Religion, Development, Growth.

Introduction

The struggle for education in colonial Kenya was political in nature as advanced by both the colonial government, missionaries and other disgruntled groups like Africans. The above discussion has linked colonial oppression and initial religious reactions to the formation of independent churches, but failed to bring out a similar relationship with education or independent schools. This study therefore seeks to unravel the problem of how socio-politically established NLM independent established schools contributed to the growth and development of education in Kenya 1911-1960 as a result it will unravel the mystery of how politics generally influence and determined the establishment of educational institutions and even curriculum content. This research will unravel the magnanimous role of politics in education that will be a breakthrough reference also in the context of the modern world.

Oboch Primary 1913 to 1967

The original base of Nomiya Luo Mission (NLM) education which is considered the taproot of Nomiya Luo Mission schools stems from two adjacent villages of Oboch and Maranginya village in Asembo. At Marang'inya village famously known as Orengo John Owalo established a sub elementary school in 1914 and an elementary school at Oboch in 1912. The students came among the adherents of the NLC and especially in Nyanza. This was when John Owalo wrote a letter to the district commissioner Nyanza to start the schools and permission was granted. However these schools were short lived before they were re-established. A major boost came in 1930 Yona Oyungu and Meshack Onyango wrote a letter to the district commissioner Nyanza requesting for the opening of NLM schools at Oboch, Sagam, Rapogi, and Holo. They were granted permission and the schools. These schools employed its teachers from a pool of its adherents and especially interdicted or retired teachers from the missionary schools. Most of those teachers' certificates had been confiscated after they married second wives an act against Christian's values. The church and the community contributed funds to pay teachers. Students paid what they could afford there was no standard fee for students.

The general plan of establishing Oboch primary school was based on a visionary hybrid model school that borrows the best of practices from the Christian missionary education, Islamic education and African indigenous education basically arising from the experiences of Owalo with these groups. In an oral interview one of the participants pointed out that:-



‘Five small boys enrolled on the first day namely Ochieng, Odundo, Apul and Odiwori. The kind of education that was offered to them was elementary in nature but different from that offered at the missionary schools because it aimed at producing an African child of both intellectual and physical excellence. Gradually the difference between Oboch school boys and the villager became noticeable. They were taught how to read and write they developed dholuo hymn books, they were taught type writing skills, they were exposed to scientific agricultural skills, home science and office practice etiquettes’.

The case of Oboch Primary School that later evolved to St John’s Oboch high school is unique and will justify the assertions by Szkudlarek (2013) that political decisions, in spite of the aura of power that shines through the spectacles follow the logic of capital. Like education politics gives up its autonomy and hence at a point politics and education serves the same interest therefore the two entities are one and the same. The case was picked because it was the first NLM School to be established by its founder Mwalimu John Owalo. The school presents a scenario of an educational institution that has for over a century suffered as a result of negative political perception.

The case of Oboch has demonstrated that politics has a strong bearing in the growth and development of any educational institution. Having been the first school to be established by the NLM in 1913; today it stands to be the poorest and ill equipped school among all the NLM, other independent established schools, Christian missionary and government established schools, raising pertinent questions that have been answered by this study such as; why many governmental and non governmental institutions proclaim wonderful educational visions of the future for their societies but fail to put in place adequate strategies to counter the ever arising political challenges? To what extent can politics influence policy development in education? To what extent does politics have a bearing to in the development of both physical and human capital in educational institutions?

The colonial government opposition to the establishment of NLM schools started immediately Mwalimu Rev John Owalo established a school at Oboch, which later became the first independent school not only in Kenya but in Africa. However rev G. Owalo notes that:-

The first Oboch primary school was built at its site at which it was witnessed by the then DEO Mr. T E Webb. The school flourished for three and a half years only owing to shortage of money and teachers. The old site of the school together with the trees can be seen, the late Chief Absalom Okobde of Adhola was one of the initial teachers of the school (KNA: DC/KSM/1/10/45/113).

During the initial growth of Oboch primary school it’s on record that Nyanza director of education refused to sanction the construction the school on the grounds that the school had no capacity to offer quality education compared to the missionary schools. He instead suggested that the school be put under a missionary organization in order to receive funds for payment of teacher’s salary and infrastructural development. However, this move was highly discredited by Owalo himself and his followers, they resolved to collect funds on their own and offer free labour for the construction of Oboch pre-elementary school.

Nyanza District Commissioner saw the move as a sort of defiance against Government policy especially in its bid to control local affairs. Africans through the LNCs were struggling to establish schools away from missionary influence. By 1927, North and Central Nyanza LNCs had each raised £10,000 while Kiambu had raised £3000 for the construction of their schools (Omosule, 1974: 222). African population especially in western Kenya was determined to acquire quality education and they had resorted by all means as long as it justifies the end. The NLM determination forced the Government to approve its request to establish more schools. Nonetheless, the Government did all it could to thwart the growth of Oboch pre-elementary school.



According to archival source (KNA: DC/KSM/1/10/45/113), in a spectacle move Nyanza DC ordered the closure of Oboch School and notified the director of education on the decision. They advised Owalo and his adherents to send all the students to the nearby missionary schools. The leadership of NLM were dismayed at such a possibility and they unanimously rejected the proposal for the second time to be enjoined to a missionary organization outside NLM and instead opted to form other schools within and outside Asembo. Their stubborn stance prompted the DC to wonder sceptically whether they really knew 'the difference between a political resistance movement and a school.

As evident in archival source (KNA: DC/KSM/1/10/45/3) in North Nyanza DC argued that it would be almost impossible for NLM school to develop and flourish at Oboch, in 1929, the director of education Mr Scott used the same argument in proposing the closure of other NLM schools that had by now mushroomed in North and Central Nyanza. The Government was also opposed any further development of Oboch pre elementary school on suspicion of promoting radicalization among the youths. To the adherents of NLM it was evident that the colonial government had been opposed to academic education for Africans.

The Government was also not in favour with the curriculum offered at Oboch School. In line with the colonial government educational objectives pupils were to be given at least equal hours of literary and technical education to counter-balance what it termed as the side-effects of a one-sided literary education (KNA: DC/KSM/1/10/45/3). Teachers at Oboch pre-elementary school offered a curriculum that was not approved by the Director Of Education or rather a curriculum that was considered radical and not meant for Africans. In connection to the above, this description can be equated to Wamagata (2008) who points out that, the colonial government criticized the African schools for producing what it called 'quasi illiterate' individuals who lacked any handicraft know-how and who were ashamed of doing manual labour, which they considered below their dignity.

African curriculum at Oboch School included History and traditions of the Luo, numbers, writing skills, agriculture, carpentry skills and religion which included narration of bible stories and NLM doctrines. This curriculum was by any standards what Africans were yearning. With teaching experience in different missionary schools and with the interaction with the Muslims in Mombasa where he attended Islamic Madrasa classes; Owalo basically knew what was best for his people. Probably this kind of curriculum was all-round and could be equated to the one being offered in European schools at the time. The management of Oboch School and other NLM schools insisted that they had from the onset been instructing their pupils in practical skills that stressed manual knowledge that enabled its graduates to excel both physically, mentally and emotionally or spiritually.

However the above information contradicts archival source (KNA: DC/KSM/1/10/45/3) that states that the curriculum was less in content and quality to that offered in missionary schools. Facts clearly disputed by all the participants interviewed who argued that learning was practical and that the students had their school garden, they made the roads leading to the school, they made their own school uniforms, they maintained the school compound, they cooked for themselves and built their own dormitory and that of their teachers and cleared their own football pitch. They had regular school sports with the village teams and into all this things they threw themselves with a zest and an enthusiasm which were good to see.

What the colonial government missed to understand was that the aims of NLM schools were apart from educating their followers to compete with the white man, it was to equip them to become useful to themselves and instil political consciousness to them. Racialism was also a strong factor behind the opposition to such radical curriculum because they considered Africans 'not yet ready to cope with highly abstract forms of thinking' (Tignor, 1976: 205). Europeans as discussed in chapter two believed that the Africans' brain capacity was lower than that of the Europeans and hence argued for the uselessness of trying to attain higher educational qualifications at the same time they argued that Africans were at the lowest level of human evolution and that technical education was best suited for them. In support of the above the Director of Education's annual report of 1926 states:-



‘Generally speaking, the African mind in Kenya has reached the stage of sense perception. The imagination and the emotions are both highly developed but the development of the reasoning faculties must be slow. Just as handwork has been found useful in the training of mentally defective children, so the most useful training which the African can receive in his present condition is continual contact with material processes. The discipline imposed by the exactness required in joinery, carpentry, building, smithing, etc., increases the power of perception and gradually develops the process of thought. Increasing emphasis is, therefore, being placed on education in Kenya in contact with material processes such as agriculture, handicrafts, sanitation, hygiene, house work, the management of money, clothing, etc. and the classroom will become more a place where the ideas and thoughts arising from practical experience can be coordinated and re-applied. By the recalling of practical work in the classroom, the laws of arithmetic, geometry, causation etc., are vividly impressed on the mind. The training of the African mind, therefore, in its present stage of development is more dependent upon the practical than the literary arts. (Annual 25’).

Oboch primary school still stands today although the school structures indicate clearly a school that is struggling to meet its financial end. It has an enrolment of two hundred and fifty students and a staff capacity of ten teachers. It’s expected that a school with such rich history should be in the league of well equipped schools in the country. Initial attempts by Mwalimu John Owalo to establish a secondary school was thwarted by the colonial government for reasons mentioned above. It was not until 1957 that the church followers decided against the will of the colonial government to move Oboch Primary school to the neighbouring compound to pave way for the establishment of St John’s Oboch secondary school as a memorial school in honour of Mwalimu Rev John (KNA: DC/KSM/1/10/45/113).

The school collapsed after about a year and a half due to financial challenges characterised with poor facilities and lack of teachers. Clannism rivalry greatly interfered with the school enrolment therefore Oboch secondary school died prematurely. However the remnants of the first NLM secondary school for some time remained as a landmark for the struggle of the NLM now the NLC to provide quality higher education to its people opposed to the segregative missionary education. The location of the school just next to the graveyard of Mwalimu John Owalo was a symbol of great determination of the NLC. Its remains were a sign of hope that perhaps a school and probably a national school in honour of the legendary John Owalo will be erected.

The colonial government was adamant to register the land under which Oboch School stood, the government instigated interclanism rivalry and politics that stood on the way of the school registration. This information is found valid as it is also noted in a correspondence from one Mr Adonija Owich to the district commissioner central Nyanza and copied to the headmaster of Oboch primary school dated 31st May 1955. He noted that the site where the school stands is where the local Muruka headman insists the school should remain is influenced by his move to please his cousins ‘jo-kochieng’ of the Nomiya Luo Mission, a religious sect. Mr Adonija Owich wanted the construction of the classes to be stopped immediately (KNA: DC/KSM/1/10/45/107). In an interesting and malicious move the District Commissioner Central Nyanza Mr J M Normand stopped the construction of the school and acknowledged the dispute raised by Mr Adonija Owich as genuine (KNA: DC/KSM/1/10/45/113). The politics of the school land did not stop at that point; Andrea Olela Obade and his sons Naftali Olila and Gideon Omolo also claimed ownership of the land (KNA: DC/KSM/1/10/45/113). In confirming the above in an interview with Arch bishop Okech (O.I, Okech, 6/11/17) he noted that they have for many years failed to secure registration of the land due to disputes and financial constraints until 2016 when they approached Jaramogi Oginga Oginga University of Science and Technology for assistance that turned out to be successful.

Rise to St John’s Oboch High School 1967 To 2018

This determination resurrected with a magnitude of its own in 1967 when the school experienced its rebirth. The new St John’s Oboch secondary school was born. Facing the same challenges the school experienced stunted growth for years. For the first time it opened a boarding school wing that never really attracted students, and after



sometime the boarding section closed. The first Oboch High School Principal was Mr Hezron Omege. The school faced opposition from the government from colonial times to post colonial period due to suspicion on its activities. The independent government never really wanted to take up the management of the school up to 2006 when it agreed to send the first Teacher’s Service Commission appointed principal to head the school Mr John Onditi. Currently the school has five TSC teachers namely Mr John Onditi (the principal), Mr Charles Omondi (the deputy principal), Mrs Rebecca Nzioka, Mr Vincent Ojwang and Mr Isaac Agaya. They are assisted with four teachers employed by the board of management whose salary is raised by the parents. Up to now the school has dilapidated facilities, however the national government through an economic stimulus plan with the assistance of the county government of Siaya and the area Member of Parliament through the constituency development fund has put up a modern laboratory facility this information was also displayed in the Principal’s office at St John’s Oboch high school.

In terms of performance the school in the Kenya National Certificate of Secondary Examination has been averagely over the years with the worst performance in 2017 (see the table below).

Table 4.2: St John’s Oboch Secondary School Performance

No	Year	Entry	Mean Score
1	KCSE 2010	21 Students	5.09
2	KCSE 2011	25 Students	4.33
3	KCSE 2012	26 Students	4.60
4	KCSE 2013	19 Students	5.00
5	KCSE 2014	19 Students	4.48
6	KCSE 2015	23 Students	4.04
7	KCSE 2016	24 Students	2.7

The pathetic state of Oboch School is pure evidence and a living testimony that education can be used as a political weapon to weaken political opponents. One hundred and five years after the establishment of the school and Fifty-five years down the line since Kenya got its independence classrooms at Oboch School primary and secondary schools can be compared to the structures of ancient Gedi ruins.

It should be understood that even after the United Nations general assembly adopted the convention on the rights of the child on 20th November 1989, which stated that every child shall have the right to education and that primary education shall be made compulsory and free for all, it was not and still is not the case for the children of Oboch village. Negative political perception that the colonial as well as the successive independent governments have had over the people of Oboch has made them to be denied this basic fundamental right to education contravening article 28 of the UN Convention of the rights of the child, Jomtein declaration of 1990, section 7(1) of the children’s act 2001 in Kenya and the NARC manifesto of 2001/2002.

Historically Oboch School started as a sub elementary school. This category enrolled students at preliminary level. As discussed earlier it was unaided and was purely ran and managed by the NLM. With time the school transformed into an elementary school, at this level Oboch School offered a five year elementary course based on an established curriculum. The medium of communication was vernacular. English was taught as a second language in the last two classes of this level. It later metamorphosis into a primary school with boarding and day students, as a primary school it offered a three year course in class six, seven and eight.

Socio-Economic and political change associated with NLM established schools to the Local community

Former students of Oboch School have over the years engaged themselves in various activities for example preaching in the NLM and its affiliate churches and teaching in the local NLM village schools around. Some took informal roles as leaders of associations and organization. Out of the products of NLM schools, thousands provide services both at local and international level in different occupations and capacities since its inception such as



providing various services professionals. Others became teachers, education offices and researchers in various institutions of higher learning. The schools have produced politicians and government technocrats.

In conclusion, NLM schools have had an adverse impact on the local community and generally the people of Nyanza and the rest of the country and Africa as a whole. The impacts of NLM schools range from social, economic and political as seen in chapter five of this study. NLM as a movement with its schools has greatly contributed to social change and transformation in the culture and traditions of the native Luo community since colonial times. NLM schools in itself have produced products that have consequently transformed the society in various spheres of life and professions. The school employed local African teachers who spent their income in developing the society economically. As previously discussed the aspect of land was a communal responsibility and ownership.

It's evident from the study that the council of elders among the Luo "buch piny" which was headed by a chief elder "Ruoth" was the custodian of land. However with the advent of missionary activities at Ng'ya African's abandoned their ancestral land to the aliens. The missionaries who arrived in Luo territory took over control of African land and established churches, schools, mission hospitals and residential homes; this clearly shows how Africans lost their land, to the whites, of which the activities which took place on the same land had adverse effects on the local community. This is what John Owalo and his NLM movement were purely against and hence decided to form a political outfit using education as a tool to fight against all forms of colonial oppression.

Due to missionary influence Africans gave up some cultural practices like removal of teeth, polygamy and traditional way of worship and initiation rituals i.e. the practice of the removal of the six lower teeth was seen by the missionaries as Barbaric and of no positive value to the lines of the natives. Education at the initial NLM churches and schools as introduced by its founder Mwalimu John Owalo was determined to fight such cultural injustices to the end. NLM movement transformed itself into a socio-political and economic movement; representing a sign of political as well as religious change in to the community under study.

The political and educational role of elders as custodian of culture and knowledge became a struggle between the elders, missionary groups the colonial administration and NLM leadership. The old in the traditional African society educated the youth on various aspects of life; this form of organization was not only threatened by the colonial administration and the missionaries but also the NLM. The young who left for school lost parental values. In most cases they spent all the day in school and when some of NLM schools transformed into boarding schools they spent months at school. Pioneer students established independent schools and churches attached to NLM in and around Luo Nyanza. NLM Village Schools emerged as a result of the Africans who had attained NLM initial education and believed in its course. The growing urge to provide fellow Africans with more educational opportunities and the rising spirit of African nationalism further motivated the need to open more NLM schools in Nyanza. Most NLM schools such as Sagam, Nyamira girls and Rapogi secondary schools over the years since their inceptions has attracted the development of urbanization and high population around their geographical zones. This is evident by the fact that market centers have developed around the area as well as residential homes for the workers around this schools and their environs. This population was influenced by the availability of social facilities around the school established by the NLM.

Through NLM established village schools young native boys and girls who were initially deprived quality education by the colonial government based on political reasons that they did not collaborate with the whites for the first time were provided with a stepping stone to move to higher levels of education. Over the years, NLM schools have liberated the African girl and boy child from the bondage of illiteracy and harmful cultural rites and have produced a class of highly educated elites in the society.

There was a revolution in housing styles, following the new architectural designs introduced in the construction of classes' houses and dormitories at NLM established schools and churches. Since NLM was determined to borrow the best of European practices, construction design was one of them. Many people started putting up iron roofed



and cemented houses in and around NLM schools, it should be noted that most of them were either followers of NLM or products of NLM schools. Traditional religious leaders had their roles reduced as NLM schools produced educated clergies and young leaders who took up leadership responsibilities both in the church and administratively.

The establishment growth and development of NLM schools had adverse economic impact to the local Luo community who are the subjects of the study, in the sense that a class of enlightened Africans who progressed economically a rose in social, economic and political power. Early students drawn into NLM affiliated schools adopted and established the western system of economic production. In school skills of production were acquired through technical and industrial education taught to pioneer students at NLM schools; the subjects included typewriting, Arithmetic, Agriculture and Home Science. Students took up trades taught as their occupations. Some utilized newly acquired skills to set up modern homes with permanent buildings.

One result of the increased establishment of NLM schools across Nyanza was the production of a class of African clerks and officers to assist the government in administration and Europeans in their business. Some of the students were employed as workers in the NLM mission stations and even European mission stations, NLM schools school as well as village or bush schools, at settler homes and government departments. They provided services in various capacities at both local and international level. Agriculture education exposed members of the local community to new crops and methods of farming .some of these skills were learnt through demonstration plots established in school. This led to the establishment of small scale cash crop economies by the Africans in and around NLM schools. Products of NLM schools were given appointments to the public community posts.

Some worked as community service officers, doctors, nurses, as members of the local native councils. Young men and women who left their villages to advance their education at mission stations executed economic production gaps. This group abandoned traditional modes of production such as farming. The establishment of NLM and its schools general triggered a number of land problems including immigrants who flocked the areas where the schools are established also to have a taste of the education offered there.

Political allegiance transferred from traditional elders and rulers to NLM religious leaders. Local traditional chiefs and elders complained of the bad behaviours of the converts, the chiefs and elders of the affected areas demonstrated that the schools and the churches be shut down because of what they termed as negative influence. Africans also became aware of their rights through the kind of education offered at this schools and this led to the rise, growth and development of African nationalism.

Conclusion

It's clear from this paper that NLM struggle to have their own schools was moved by a strong political activism precipitated by colonial injustices and discrimination. African political awakening manifested itself in the formation and the establishment of independent schools and Local Native Council schools in Nyanza. Christian missions and the colonial government had a strong phobia for the rapid expansion of NLM schools in Sagam, Oboth, Ujwanga, Othothe, Nyamira and Kanyobok, Rapogi, Alungo, Holo, Opande, Nyaundi, Gunu and Nyanginja. Basically the missions were afraid that the schools would become 'hot beds for sedition as they surely would be seed plots of the evil elements of paganism'. Not only that, the underlying factor and the core reason was the rise of African nationalism through NLM independent schools. Though NLM schools faced a thorny path in their growth and development, the seeds of determination planted by John Owalo at Oboch has matured thorough the transformation of many of the NLM schools into secondary schools and who knows maybe a University will be born basing on the fact that Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University has accepted to establish a school on Mining at a five acre piece of land donated by NLC in 2015 adjacent to Mwalimu John Owalo's mausoleum.



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