

Social Sciences

Colonial Echoes in Kenyan Education: A First Person Account

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In this paper, I critique the educational system in Kenya through personal narratives from a visit I took there in 2004. By examining the history, curriculum, and language difficulties of this system, I paint a complicated portrait of a system that is overburdened and underfinanced. Deliberately avoiding any normative conclusions, my purpose is to expose the postcolonial currents that run through the educational system, continually stunting its success and compromising the autonomy of its subjects. Education must become a site for transitions to independence, not only for the young minds in the classroom, but also for a nation still plagued by postcolonial ghosts.

I arrived at New Hope Children's Centre in the Uplands district outside of Nairobi, Kenya on March 13, 2004. The two-story orphanage is located off the Nairobi-Nakuru Highway, right on the Great Rift Valley. It houses 65 girls, most of who are between the ages of 12 and 16. I was there to live and volunteer in the home and teach at the local school. Most of the girls were orphaned by the AIDS epidemic; many of them had suffered some combination of sexual and physical abuse, malnourishment, and homelessness. There are 1.7 million such children in Kenya, approximately 40% of who lost their parents to AIDS (Unicef). New Hope offers sanctuary to a lucky few of these kids and, in many ways, rehabilitation. The home was founded in January 2000 by a woman named Anne Chege, who explains her dedication to the girls as "answering God's call." She brings up the kids in the Christian faith and gives them practical training for the real world.

She also sends them all to school. Some of them even make it to secondary school, and "Mama" Chege prays she may even have the resources to send a couple of the girls to university.

The notes started to come in the second week of my visit. Throughout my day, between chores, games, or prayers, a little hand would slip a little piece of paper into mine. They were each decorated with unique flair and signed with a unique name. But they all read the same:

molly,
first of all recieve a lot of greetings like a sand in the ocean. next is to thank you because of the love that you love us with. may God bless you. and in the last day, you shall be called. sons of God. and you will see the kingdom of God. bye bye.
from your lovely friend
Elizabeth Wangui

More than half of the girls referred to "the sand in the ocean." Many quoted the Bible or just jotted down "John 3:14." All sent greetings to my family and called on

me to praise God.

SMY students in my English composition class at the local school were no different. In their writing, every student was "as happy as a peasant marrying a king's daughter," or vowed to remember some event until "the worms ate [their] corpse." Besides these identical idioms, most of their writing was incoherent, filled with muddled spelling and grammatical errors. This did not deter me; in all of my earnest ignorance, I only wanted my students to discover some joy in writing. I asked them to dream of something wild and exciting and then put it to words, in a story. I told them not to fret over the rules they had been taught, but just to have fun. Eight of my 37 students turned something in. Only three of those were stories; the other five had just copied what I had written on the board. I was excited about the stories that I had, especially one involving a girl who escaped rape by telling her tormenters that she was HIV/AIDS positive.

When I boasted of this student's story in the teacher's lounge, the other teachers laughed and explained that the class had read that same story in a different class earlier in the week. They did not feel I should penalize the student; on the contrary, she was given good marks for her good penmanship and grammar.

I believed my students were missing something—some main point. But how could I understand what it was? Their world means slums, unemployment, developing—stagnantly, desperately. Their country's history reveals insidious colonial takeover, strife and struggle, and a hard-earned, twisted version of independence. Their lives outside of the classroom mean everything to how my students will learn to think and what their education will represent. We must come to understand their present and their past and begin to ask ourselves: what will be their future?

I have sought to question and understand what I experienced in Kenya, exploring its history and economy, and examining the educational system in terms of its curriculum and language practices. These explorations have revealed incestuous connections between the legacy of colonialism and the psyche of a people, being perpetuated—despite its better intent—by the educational system. It is a dense and sensitive topic, and while I have tried to tease out some questions and nuances, I cannot boast of any definitive conclusions.

This is by no means my story. My insight cannot offer any candid portraits of the culture and the institution I wish to examine. My words can only show the collision of multiple voices and stories. Hopefully this polyphony can shed some light on the relationship between Africa and the West, focusing on the base of socialization and the vehicle that will lead us into the future: the education of our children.

As a guest, I accept the hot tea that is offered me although I am nearly sweating. It's sunny and cool out in the bustling city streets, but in the apartment where I am taking tea, I can hardly breathe. The apartment is really a room, or maybe a closet built to store a person. The bed doubles as a closet, the only table doubles

as a kitchen, and besides the small, ratty couch that I am sitting on, there is no more furniture. Our legs awkwardly mingle, hanging off the couch onto the single patch of floor space.

"I am lucky to have this place. It is quite expensive to live in the city, especially with no job." My host is an unemployed, unmarried, middle-aged woman. She is personable, welcoming, and bright. But she constantly laments her status and prospects, concerned for her financial future. She showers me with questions about the United States, but eagerly cuts off my answers.

"I wish that is how it could be in Kenya! It must be so nice there. Many single men! And with jobs! Our country is such a mess, so many without jobs and poor. The government takes all of the money. It is so corrupt. Sometimes I wish the white people, you know, that Britain would come back and rule for us!"

The Context: History and the Economy

Some Kenyan history textbooks gloss the country's colonial history positively. They characterize the British as a savior of some sort, "out to eradicate the slave trade and spread a 'civilizing mission' designed to make [Africans] all full human beings, on earth and in heaven" (Independent Kenya 3). In this light, British colonization appears as a benevolent, Christianizing force, implemented with the Africans' best interest in mind.

However conciliatory this view is, it is flagrantly incorrect. Kenya was snatched up in the Scramble for Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century as a means of protecting Britain's naval 'sphere of influence' (Ochieng' 12). "Direct territorial take-over was a way of forestalling competition and controlling areas of strategic economic value" (Independent Kenya 3). British settlers came in by the masses, snatching the best agricultural land. They began laying the groundwork for dependence, installing a colonial government to replace the former, less formal systems of the peaceful, indigenous Kenyans. Christian missionaries provided a mechanism for replacing indigenous value

systems (Ntarangwi 221).

Here begins the legacy of the colonial education of Africa: the first school in Kenya was created by a church missionary society. Its purpose after evangelism was to develop labor and staff for the new colonial administration (Ntarangwi 213). The colonial government's mandate for development amounted to defining native customs, health, and food as bad while establishing itself as the authority of change in education and Kenya (Ntarangwi 220).

The colonial powers needed to start capitalizing on their investment. They began injecting their own ideas of capitalist ideas of production, exchange, industrialization, and agriculture into Kenyan culture. It was in this "waxen pot of colonial urbanization [that] ethnic particularism and African nationalism developed simultaneously" (Ochieng' 66). However, the new modes of economics introduced by the British clashed with the traditional, indigenous methods, and by the 1920s, production as dictated by the settlers began to fail (Ochieng' 104).

Tension began mounting as the effects of the Great Depression began to reverberate around the world in the 1930s. Conflict and consciousness were rising, as Africans suffered the friction and failure of colonial misrule (Ochieng' 140). The British settlers reacted by attempting to exacerbate differences between ethnic groups. Despite these efforts, the resistance, especially of the powerful union movements, was powerfully multi-ethnic and tended to organize around class lines (Independent Kenya 9). Tensions peaked in the early 1950s when anti-colonial militants broke out into violence against colonial powers and loyalists. A state of Emergency was declared, and the "Mau Mau Rebellion" was eventually quelled. In the ensuing retaliation undertaken by the British, 11,503 Africans were killed, though some experts estimate the numbers actually spanned far beyond these official statistics into a massacre comparable to genocide (Bergner). But the unrest could not be stifled; the stage was set for independence. The British settlers began identifying indigenous loyalists, whom they exempted from taxes

and fees, creating a sympathetic middle class with earning power (Independent Kenya 11).

As these deep social changes were taking place, the economy that would be inherited by the winners of independence was being shaped and concretized. After World War II, the United States began to emerge as an international superpower, spreading its influence throughout the world. Nairobi was dramatically transformed by the resulting radical jerk towards capitalism. It became, in the hands of foreign capital, a “regional financial, marketing and manufacturing center for East Africa” (Independent Kenya 7). The influx of international capital transformed the economy of Kenya, giving settlers and foreign investors “monopoly control of marketing, prices, and inputs” (Independent Kenya 7). By the 1950s, 4,000 white settlers held over seven million acres of the best land in the country. Meanwhile, the average, indigenous Kenyan was earning an annual income of three pounds, despite the fact that the price of the staple crop, maize, had increased by 800%. The people were performing all the labor, and were not only robbed of the proceeds, but also starved out of their own economy (Independent Kenya 4, 6).

With economic losses of the WWII and US pressure bearing down (whether the US applied this pressure for ethical or financial purposes is debatable), Britain finally began the process of decolonization in Kenya, ultimately granting the people independence in 1963 (Ochieng` 196). All parties seemed to call for a continuity of lifestyles—at least all parties involved by the settlers arranging the transition. In his speech at Independence, the new president, Jomo Kenyatta, promised there would be no loss of land or security for the British settlers. The Kenyan people had to buy their own land back at inflated prices, affordable only with loans from Britain and the World Bank (Independent Kenya 12). Kenya embarked on its first year as a free nation already in obligation to the West. In effect, Britain managed to relieve itself of its nominal authority and all obligations of law and order, without

disturbing its economic interests or the self-interested systems it had embedded into Kenyan culture long ago, accomplishing “exploitation without responsibility” (Ochieng` 197).

Consistent with this smooth political and economic transition, the educational structure following independence was hardly touched. There were minor shifts in structure, but none in content. The teachers, trainers, movers, and shakers were now Kenyan, but the system remained British. All ensuing tweaks and reforms would be working from the foundation of Kenya’s colonial heritage.

“Good morning, guys.”

“Good morning, Teacher Molly!”

“Thank you! Please, sit down! Today, guys, we’re going to study nutrition!” I’m doing my best here, grinning ear-to-ear, as I turn to the board and write down ‘nutrition’ in large block letters. That morning, I was handed the textbook for Class 4 Science and was told to prepare a lesson on nutrition. I protested—“I know nothing about the subject!” They laughed—“But it’s in the textbook! Just tell them what it says.” And here I find myself, smiling and copying the four food groups from the book onto the board.

“To have healthy bodies and to grow, you need 2-3 servings of protein a day!”

Some of my middle-class students have meat once a week. The girls from New Hope each get a few pieces on holidays.

“To keep your bones strong, you need plenty of calcium! That means lots of milk!”

To even have water to drink, my girls must haul 5-gallon jugs for a mile. The little milk produced by the home’s cow goes to the youngest and weakest.

“To grow strong muscles and keep your nervous system healthy, you need magnesium! Magnesium is found in green vegetables, legumes, fish, and whole bran!”

I’m reading to forty blank faces. Faces that need healthy bodies, strong bones and muscles. And all I can offer them are these words; these awful, empty words.

Curriculum

Since independence, Kenya has struggled to define a philosophy of education and apply it meaningfully in an articulate and feasible curriculum. Working within

the brittle skeleton of the former colonial structure, critics and reformers have big ideas but face considerable challenges. For example, while the curriculum must be a means of conveying culture and a strong national identity, it must also accommodate high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity (Woolman 27). The curriculum must also be financially feasible, coping with the reality of too many student and too few resources. It must also incorporate the role of education in the critical issue of development. The evolution of curriculum in Kenya reflects a nation grappling with these issues and facing challenges with the best intentions.

At independence, the goals and expectations of curriculum development were fundamental: to produce manpower for economic development and to Africanize the civil service (Woolman 33). From 1965-1975, the Primary Curriculum Revision sought to infuse materials with Kenyan history and geography, starting by using locally produced teaching materials. This “Revision” outlined student-oriented teaching methods designed to develop cooperation, creativity, and innovation (Woolman 36). There was a sustained call for continued change and evaluation of the educational system. Intellectuals called for a sort of African literacy, an education “rooted in Africa’s own cultural heritage and values [that has] relevance to African societies” (Busia as quoted by Woolman 31). This idea raised questions on how to integrate scientific and technological innovations of the West (Woolman 31).

There was a Beecher Committee, a Binns Report, an Ominde Commission, the Gachathi Committee, and a Mackay Report: intensive investigations and recommendations, considerations and changes (Omulando). But to what avail? How was the Kenyan curriculum really affected by these deliberations? The textbooks have changed: they have black faces and beautiful African names. There have even been significant structural changes. The 8-4-4 system was adopted in 1985, breaking Kenyan schooling into 8 years of primary school, 4 of secondary, and 4 of university. This system was adopted to address

the lack of correlation between graduation and employment, providing vocational training so that each stage or cycle is self-containing for students who do not continue to the next (Omulando 265).

A student's chance at moving from one stage to the next depends entirely on his performance on a national examination, the Kenya Certificate of Primary Examinations (KCPE) or the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examinations (KCSE). The tradition of exam-oriented education is a clear relic of the colonial system and British educational philosophy. With the introduction of the 8-4-4 system, many pushed for a reduction of these inherited systems. However, these proposals failed, and students are persistently overloaded by exam material, setting them up for failure (Woolman 36). In fact, the importance of the exams has only increased, as they are the sole indicators of whether a student will proceed to the next cycle—51% are eliminated in the first exam, and about 20% in the second. Every pronouncement in the curriculum must be considered under the light that the exam takes precedent to everything; therefore, facts and drills come first, and more important material at the end of the curriculum is neglected for the “front-loaded” examinations.

The current curriculum resonates with high ideas of values and holistic development. It encompasses life skills, national development and identity, universal ideas with equal opportunity, cultural heritage, social justice, human dignity, and multiculturalism—a strong laundry list of solid, foundational principles (Woolman 33). It seeks to help students “internalize the values that underlie the country's constitution and laws” (Omulando 305). The subjects are integrative and comprehensive, with aims to teach critical thinking, excite curiosity and improve communication (Omulando 303).

This new curriculum looks great on paper. All problems seem to be addressed by these abstract conceptions of educational philosophy. We are given an answer to multiculturalism and an answer to development. But what about resources? How does the Kenyan gov-

ernment plan to actually implement this nobly stated curriculum? What do these subjects and principles really mean to the students whom they are supposed to benefit? What is the reality for the young minds in my class on nutrition that need to be nourished with answers and promises for a future? The curriculum will be meaningless and empty to them if there is no implementation.

I asked Lucy to sit with me after class in the grass outside to review some things for English class. My tenure as a guest teacher at St. Joe's overlapped for one day with a woman earning her PhD. in Education in Canada. She told me about Lucy. Lucy, she explained, was dyslexic, confusing the b's and d's, p's and q's. At sixteen years old, Lucy was illiterate. A challenge.

Lucy and I sat in the sunshine. I held a workbook prepared by the Canadian teacher just for Lucy, filled with dotted outlines of letters and fill-in-the-blank _ogs and pe_cils.

“Lucy,” I spoke slowly. “Can you tell me what this says?”

She did not look at the notebook. She continued to look at me, smiling timidly. I pointed.

“Th-th-the...” I began sounding out. She looked from the notebook to me, with confused urgency flashing in her eyes. The smile stayed, stuck yet quivering.

“The tah-tah-tah-rah-rah-rah-eeeeeee... the tree,” Lucy was silently listening to me, the smile wavering with each awkward noise I made.

“Lucy, do you understand?” A hesitation. And a nod.

“Can you sound it out for me?” Pause. Nod.

Silence.

My insistence grew stronger as her smile grew weaker. As we both desperately tried to communicate, I suddenly realized that was precisely the problem: communication. Lucy didn't speak English. I was trying to teach, in English, a dyslexic child, who did not speak English, how to read, well, English.

I sent Lucy to lunch. I sat alone in my classroom and cried for the rest of the period.

Language

English is the official language of Ke-

nya; Kiswahili, on the other hand is the national language. This subtle distinction means that government and education are in English, while everything else tends to be in Swahili. And, in actuality, most of government is in Swahili also (Kenya.com).

But for Kenyans who live outside of urban centers, neither of these two languages is their first language. They are raised with their “mother tongue,” or MT, the language associated with their ethnic group. For example, in the Uplands, where I was staying, the mother tongue was Kikuyu. There are over 42 such language groups in Kenya (Woolman 38). And when children skip nursery and preschool (as often happens in rural areas), they lose their most critical years of language development.

English became the language of instruction in 1965, one of the few significant changes to the colonial administration, which taught in MT (Muthwii 3). To the newly independent nation, English was seen as the language for “empowerment and advancement,” the route to autonomy, development, and success (Woolman 38). This approach has been slightly modified since the 1970s, during which MT or Kiswahili (the former used only in monolingual schools) was implemented as the language of instruction for the first three years of primary school (Muthwii 4). This change both acknowledged English as the ultimate objective for students and accounted for the students' need to relate their education to their home environment.

But this is just policy; the question of language turns out to be a prime example of curriculum choices with sound intent but no means of practical implementation. In relatively affluent areas and urban centers—where English is often spoken at home or on television—the policy translates well, and the transition from MT or Kiswahili to English is smooth. But in most schools, the reality amounts to a faulty system of “code-switching,” in which teachers first instruct in English and then translate (Muthwii 16). Often in this system, when students do not understand,

they become silent, imitating the rest of the class' response: nodding, smiling, appeasing the teacher. Code-switching is a problematic band-aid for the language difficulties: students cannot respond, to the teacher or on tests, in the same code in which they were presented the material. Students who mix languages in class are often ridiculed by their teachers and heckled by their classmates, creating classrooms full of timid students who dread expressing themselves (Muthwii 45).

Many teachers from rural areas feel their students would have a better chance for success if they were taught and tested in MT or in Kiswahili. Currently, most students think in MT or Kiswahili, and then must translate their thoughts into English (Muthwii 28). In essence, they are tested twice in every exam they take: once on the subject matter and again on English. But there does not seem to be another possibility. Educational resources and textbooks are written in English; technical math and science vocabulary is often not translatable into MT; MT and Kiswahili can also compete with each other, leaving students juggling two or three languages at a time (Muthwii 19).

Besides, the students are by no means asking for a switch in language policy. Even while admitting they understand MT and Kiswahili much better, most students prefer English. Already at the primary level, they understand English as the language of success, the language that will lead them to a "bright future" (Muthwii 21). English provides access to a larger body of knowledge, to employment, and higher education. It opens pathways of communication across the country, the continent, and the globe (Muthwii 33). To the West. Some acknowledge that understanding words and meaning is more difficult in this language. Some even worry about English alienating ethnic heritage. But this worry is mitigated by the belief that it is in the homes and communities that should propagate culture. Ignoring the American programming on television and rap music on the radio waves that students are exposed to in their homes and communities, this justification of English

in the classroom is still problematic. In the previous discussion on curriculum, education was identified as precisely the opposite: it was a bastion of cultural ideals, Africanized images, and strong national identity. Are these thoughts somehow complementary, existing on different planes somehow? Or is the discord deeper than it seems?

As the situation currently stands, the examinations are English-oriented, and the curriculum is examination-oriented, so there is no clear alternative for classes being hindered by language problems. Some teachers resort to "code-switching"; others ridicule or even punish students for the casual use of MT. For the students who cannot grasp the language of instruction, the "spontaneous interactive response during learning activities" is obstructed (Muthwii 55). Students memorize facts that they do not comprehend and cannot apply to their lives or world. It is a difficult reality to address, and one that is not likely to change soon: even the most profoundly effective new policy from the government would—like most past policies—not be adhered to or fully be understood by teachers (Muthwii 55). Such policy changes require expensive tools of implementation: teacher training, resources, and an active process of analysis and evaluation. In the meantime, teachers keep pushing, while the students continue to nod and smile, and everybody waits to go to lunch.

This memory burns. Trust its accuracy: I can still smell it, see it, hear it...

I'm in the teacher's lounge. My shoes are muddy on the wet concrete floor, the rain is loud through broken window panes, the room smells of gloriously aged and mildewed textbooks—textbooks, only too few. I am, as usual, the only white person in the room. Usually, all the other teachers buzz around me, gossiping in Kikuyu, ignoring the eager, sycophantic young American preparing lessons in her corner.

But today, one of the teachers has become fascinated with me. He wants my opinion. He's wearing a second or third hand suit, too big for him, but freshly cleaned and pressed. I remember him getting off the bus that morning, walking leisurely with

his umbrella as the kids hurried to shelter from the rain.

He's asking me about America. His questions are all loaded; he wants me to tell him that it's better there, that I would only come to Africa out of pity. I protest, taking his words out of my mouths, walking on egg shells, begging him to understand. But my words fall on deaf ears.

And then he says it. He says it without sarcasm, without contempt. He takes for granted that I believe it, and he even believes it himself.

"You think that here in Africa, we are just like monkeys, swinging from the trees."

Ugly Truths and Inherited Lies

When Kenyans maintained the old, British structure of education, they attempted to Africanize it. But there was something inherently un-African about this structure. Traditional African education was organic, informal, and based in the community. Transitions between age groups were natural and inclusive, not based on any system of elimination. Learning was based on active discovery, not textbooks, no matter how Africanized (Woolman 31). The colonial structure was a complete "subordination of Africans" that introduced Eurocentric morality models that were individualistic and contradictory to the traditional, communal values (Uchendu as quoted by Woolman 29). This imported culture of egocentric materialism caused "the decline of collective responsibility" and "contribut[ed] directly to unemployment" (Rwomire as quoted by Woolman 30).

The stated value of traditional, African culture within the curriculum is also questionable. Mwenda Ntarangwi recalls being taught about the Mississippi and Rhine rivers before the Athi and Tana rivers of his nation (216). He remembers singing "London Bridge" without having seen anything like it or understanding remotely why. He argues that alienating students from their heritage causes self-loathing (Ntarangwi 216). Alternatively, superficial "Africanization" of materials manifests as "indigenous knowledge... as a relic to be documented and saved," rather than "a process that reaffirms different

ways of living and interpreting the world, that ultimately leads to more appropriate models of change” (Moita as quoted by Ntarangwi 219). Indigenous culture is undermined, and education deteriorates into students memorizing meaningless facts to be parroted in a meaningless language.

This reality echoes the ideas of Paulo Freire in his treatise on education, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this system, he illustrates, education is boiled down to the “banking concept” in which the teacher is the depositor of knowledge, and the students are the depositories (Freire). There is no comprehension or digestion of the material, only memorization. This system leaves the students with a view that knowledge and the world is somehow static, that there is no interaction or critical discourse with the reality they learn. The authoritative teacher role, in which the teacher holds all knowledge, projects ignorance onto the pupils, stifles inquiry, and undermines academic self-esteem (which Freire notes is “characteristic of oppression”) (Freire). By making learning passive and unquestioning, the banking concept produces passive and unquestioning students who adapt this approach to their society. The reality of oppression is disguised to the students who learn numbness, subjugation, and apathy, preparing them for their places in the world (Freire).

During colonial rule, the citizens became aware of the outright injustice of their situation and were able to actively resist. But in modern Kenya, the cultural and economic dependency has been insidiously ingrained into the next generation, creating citizens who don’t judge or challenge their government and society (Independent Kenya 2). The rich and complex process of education, “through which values, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs, and all parts of a people’s unique cultural orientation are transmitted from generation to the next” has been reduced to schooling, a cheapened “process of perpetuating and mandating a society’s existing power relations and its institution” (Ntarangwi 222). It is a system that prepares and divides the future leaders and future beggars,

herding everyone to their proper place without explanation (Independent Kenya 70). In fact, ex-President Moi was first a schoolmaster and went on to treat “his country like his classroom,” where activity falls “along rigidly authoritarian lines, designed to kill initiative and independent thought” (Independent Kenya 70). This is a “classroom” of the oppressed from which Kenyan citizens cannot emerge or escape.

Ironically, this oppression of thought often translates to thought on development. The popular belief—in both Kenya and the West—is that development is the natural answer for “underdeveloped” nations such as Kenya. But this belief and these terms may really be at the root of the problem. It reflects a certain spectrum that ranges from “primitive,” “underdeveloped,” “third world” (i.e., Africa) to “modern,” “developed,” “first world” (i.e., the West) (Ntarangwi 220). Built into this spectrum are the assumptions that Africa is somehow inferior, and that Africa must evolve along the same path towards the same success as the West. These assumptions are at the base of the Kenyan educational system; this spectrum implicates education as a sign of modernity and key to development. Kenya can never incorporate traditional material and systems in a meaningful way as long as the dominating belief is that prosperity means Westernized development means Westernized education (Ntarangwi 215). What results is a “system of education that is in itself a form of governmentality[...] where individuals absorb dominant ideologies that construct imaginary pictures of prosperity that are shaped by foreign lifestyles” (Ntarangwi 216).

Everyday Kenyans are told education is the key to development and that education accounts for 30% of the government’s budgetary expenditures (Ntarangwi 219). The reality is that 40% of Kenyans are unemployed (World Factbook) and that every year, highly-trained college graduates cannot find a job in the very fields that are supposed to be so “key to development.” Despite all the policies, spending and programs, there is a gap. Aid, loans, and well-meaning NGOs have been pouring into

Africa for years, and still, there is a gap.

It is time we face the possibility that the “Western diagnosis” for development does not answer to Africa’s realities (Ntarangwi 222). We have imported our culture, our resources, our technology, and our institutions into the country with the best and worst intentions. But to what avail? The Western model of education and economy is not working. The “shadow of the West” is stunting Kenya’s growth; Kenyan citizens must be allowed to create their own cultural framework and their own terms of development (Ntarangwi 222). In education, this means gearing the curriculum to teach towards economic self-sufficiency of a country. It means teaching citizenship skills that liberate students, engaging them with skills of questioning and critical thinking. It means teaching history as a collective, inclusive pool of human knowledge rather than as a demeaning spectrum of societal evolution (Ntarangwi 223). It must be relevant to students themselves, and it must foster a sense of self-worth and national pride that defies any comparison to the West. Perhaps this alternative could not make it past the embryonic stages of hypothesis, but it is a possibility that calls for a new debate. But there must be a debate, there must be new possibilities. There must be change.

Mgure’s Story (Conclusion)

We are implicated. Kenya—Brazil, Tanzania, Laos, the “undeveloped world”—is thousands of miles away, out of sight, out of mind. But this globalized world is shrinking everyday, and despite the thousands of miles, our culture has flooded their line of sight, and our economy has skewed their frame of mind. The West has set an international standard of education, language, and development that is insidiously colonizing a group of people who were granted independence decades ago. As a result, students are blocked from their own education, disallowed the means of communicating, expressing, and advancing. And worst of all, they hate themselves for it. Kenya’s problems may be thousands of miles away, but

we are implicated.

But IMF economists, the US government, or an Oxford think-tank cannot undertake solving this problem, outlining recommendations and creating committees. Neither can a white American Stanford student. I have presented a first person account: my trip to Africa, my placement in the school, the treatment I received as a teacher and as a traveler all reflect the very problem I seek to present. This paper itself has traces of this mentality. I will not seek to recommend or conclude because it is not my place to do so. We must finally trust Kenya to decide its fate.

Yet history cannot be retracted, and generations of oppression cannot be reversed. We cannot extricate ourselves so easily, nor will the reality of the “global village” ever allow us to do so. While Kenya re-examines its own role, we must understand our own, working towards a mutual approach to mutual understanding, esteem, and benefits. So while I cannot offer answers, sweeping conclusions, or even a

candid portrait of Kenyan culture, I can offer my first person account of the clash of cultures, the multiplicity of voices, and perhaps, a little hope. We can always start with understanding.

For a week, I have been conducting interviews with the girls at New Hope, collecting their stories to recruit potential donors. We talk one-on-one, in my bedroom. The interviews often last an hour; while the girls only speak for fifteen minutes, they spend the majority of the time crying. At first I thought I was doing irreparable damage, but Mama Chege assured me it was quite the opposite. The girls, she explained, have never been asked their story. They have never grieved, they have never explained, they have never been held and rocked and whispered to, “Everything will be just fine.”

Mgure has been in my room for an hour, but she has been speaking the whole time. She needs a translator, from whom I hear in fifteen second delay how Mgure was beaten and starved as a child, how when she ran away she was gang-raped by street boys, how she lived in dire poverty and

only managed to survive selling her body for a few shillings. And how, at the age of thirteen, Mama Chege found her and brought her in.

She continues to speak, despite her tears, despite the translator, despite my sporadic whimpers and sobs. She speaks for an hour, hurriedly, including details of all sorts: the cost of the first meal she had in exile from her own home, the number of street boys who found her all alone, the shoes she wore when she was taken in as a house girl by an abusive employer. I scribble furiously on my pad, never quite exhausting my tears.

When she finishes her story, I tell her everything will be okay and that she is so beautiful and so strong and that I love her so much. I tell her that people in America care and will love her so much too. I ask her what she would say to them. If she could tell America one thing, one thing that I promise I will tell the whole country.

She turns to me and wipes her tears and says to me in clear English, “I just want them to know.”

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