Education and the Development of Nationhood in Kenya

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Abstract
After the attainment of political independence, it became necessary for different ethnic groups in Kenya to see themselves as members of a large family – the nation – within which their various ethnic groups would harmoniously co-exist and work together for the good of all. They were expected then, as now, to conceive of themselves as one group of people forming one nation, not as different ethnic groups constantly hostile to one another. Education was seen as the best means to achieve this goal. So immediately after independence, the government of Kenya assigned educational institutions the role of instilling feelings of nationhood and promoting national unity. Since then there is no single government document on education that does not emphasize this role.

This paper attempts to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the philosophy behind using education as a means to instil nationhood and promote national unity. In order to do this the paper first examines the meaning of the terms ‘nation’ and ‘nationhood’. Then, the paper analyzes the
recommendations of the Ominde Commission Report of 1964 regarding the role of education in instilling feelings of nationhood. This is because the Ominde Report is the one that lay the foundation upon which all the subsequent educational reports and other similar documents in Kenya are now built.

The analysis reveals inherent difficulties in trying to use educational institutions as a vehicle for inculcating nationhood and promoting national unity. This is mainly because nationhood is an attitude of mind and the nature of attitudes is such that their formation and maintenance is influenced by factors largely found outside the school system. By way of conclusion the paper suggests that schools are mere reflections of the society that maintains them, and that nationhood can be achieved only if every section of the Kenyan community is involved in its promotion, with the adult world and the political establishment leading the way as role models to be emulated by the learners in schools.

1.0 Introduction: What is a Nation?
Despite the existence of vast literature on the definition of the term "nation", Emerson has given caution that:

no one has succeeded in devising a definition which is watertight in the sense that ... it enumerates the constituent elements of the nations we know in such a fashion as to distinguish them satisfactorily from other types of communities in which men have intensely lived their lives through the ages.¹

And the late J.M. Kariuki has given a warning (or is it advice?), thus:

It takes more than a National Anthem, however stirring, a National Coat of Arms, however distinctive, a National flag, however appropriate, a National flower, however beautiful to make a nation.²

That notwithstanding, scholars have defined nation in terms of state, some in terms of language and culture, some in terms of common heritage, some in terms of common aims, and others in terms of territory, and yet others in terms of the will and the consciousness of nationality. For reasons which will be clear later, this paper confines itself to the last definition.

Writers who have attempted to explain 'nation' using such psychological terms as 'consciousness' and 'will' include Professor Fairchild, who has given an example of the scattered members of the Jewish community as a nation because of their "desire to share a common life."³ He considers Switzerland as a well-knit political unit by several nationalities.

However, Frederick Hertz cautions against the danger of using such words as 'consciousness' and 'will', and warns that in the history of national development this 'will' is usually at first only that of a minority. In the course of time, it succeeds in gaining more or less the assent of the majority. But if a people has not yet reached this stage, or if an old loyalty has been destroyed by historic events, then he says there cannot be spontaneous national will but merely a welter of conflicting aspirations. Hertz advises that it would be:

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more fruitful ... to define a nation as a people possessing national consciousness ... National consciousness consists in the combined striving for unity, liberty, individuality and prestige [of a people] ... The decisive criterion is whether the idea of a duty to sacrifice particular interests to the nation has become predominant in the people.4

This decisive criterion - a duty to sacrifice particular interests to the nation - can be used objectively to test national consciousness among individuals who claim that they form a nation. This criterion is particularly useful in a heterogeneous population such as that found in Kenya, where different ethnic communities are expected to strive for unit, liberty, and a feeling that they are one people, a nation called Kenya, each of whose citizens should possess a sufficiently predominant "idea of a duty to sacrifice particular interests to the nation".

Consciousness is spontaneous as it is incorporated inside the individual’s personality and is part of the individual and is observable only through the individual’s behaviour. National consciousness is, as Hayes has rightly put it,

A condition of mind in which loyalty to the ideal or to the fact that one’s [nation]...is superior to all other loyalties and of which pride in one’s nationality and belief in its intrinsic excellence and its ‘mission’ are integral parts.5

When carefully examined, all these definitions seem to express, although in varying degrees, a person’s psychological state of mind: ‘a consciousness’, ‘a condition

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of mind', 'an ideological commitment' 'a desire', 'people who conceive of themselves', etc. When this state of mind pervades the entire group of people, or when it reaches the critical mass, it becomes what Leonard W. Doob defines as:

The set of more or less uniform demands (1) which people in a society share (2) which arise from their patriotism, (3) for which justifications exist and can be readily expressed, (4) which incline them to make personal sacrifices on behalf of their government's aims, and (5) which may or may not lead to appropriate actions.  

Now, in the science of social psychology, such psychological states of mind in a person are known as attitudes or antecedent predispositions, central tendencies, feelings, traits, or response tendencies. Social psychologists have found that such antecedent predispositions or attitudes always induce a person to perceive his social world in a certain characteristic way and this often leads him to respond (act) to this social world according to how he perceives it. So, nationhood can be seen as an attitude of mind.

1.1 How to Identify a Person’s Nationhood

Leonard Doob has found out that the strength of a person’s nationhood is measurable and can be determined along a continuum. At one end of the continuum, the person is taken to express strong nationhood or national consciousness when he feels that his welfare is intimately connected with the nation’s power and culture; hence he subjugates many of his own important needs to the demands

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7 Ibid. p. 5.
of his state. He is often affected by these patriotic feelings; he is conscious of his nationality; he seeks and finds evidence for his nation's distinctiveness and aspirations; he plans his life in a way which in his opinion best promotes the common weal. Of all his group loyalties, he is convinced that the allegiance to his country is the most compelling. The state is supreme and should be so.⁸

At the other end of the continuum, says Doob, the person expresses little or no nationhood when he feels that his welfare is much more intimately and importantly connected with other groups [or things] than the nation; the powers and culture of that nation may be of some concern to him but only as a matter of curiosity or as a target for hostility; when he obeys the state, he does so unwillingly or begrudgingly. He is rarely conscious of his nationality; he does not boast about his country or find evidence for its distinctiveness, and in fact may be quite ignorant of that alleged attribute; he considers himself primarily a member of the other groups to which he belongs, he may even stress the cosmopolitan aspects of his beliefs and behaviour; and he plans his life in terms of non-national ideals. Allegiance to his country, in brief, has an exceedingly low priority. The state exists to serve people; it may be unavoidably important, but so are other institutions.⁹

⁹ Ibid. p. 13.
It is clear that the two individuals cited above have opposite attitudes concerning their nation and it is these attitudes which determine their different responses to the demands of the nation. The first person clearly expresses patriotic behaviour in his every day life. This is a person which the education recommended by the Ominde Commission was expected to produce.

2.0 The Ominde Commission

The commission was appointed on 19th December 1963 and started work on 15th February 1964. Headed by the eminent scholar, the late Professor Ominde, and assisted by two foreign consultants, Arthur Lewis and V. L. Griffiths, the commissioners were all Kenyan citizens, most of them experienced educationists.\(^10\)

The Commission's Report, now described as the "most illuminating, comprehensive and down-to-earth guiding educational planning document in the history of Kenya's education"\(^11\) and one that "marked a watershed in Kenya's educational history by setting a new tone appropriate to an independent African nation",\(^12\) outlined nine (9) goals of education in independent Kenya. For the purpose of this paper, only the first goal is relevant. It states: "Education is a function of the Kenya nation; it must foster a sense of nationhood and promote national unity".\(^13\)

The new Government had already prohibited segregation in schools. The Report outlined how this problem would be solved through the role of the teachers themselves.

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\(^{12}\) Sheffield, *op. cit.*, p.87.

\(^{13}\) Ominde Commission Report, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
In our primary school, this is hardly possible; but in these schools we need a much more developed national consciousness among the teachers, in order that the whole teaching in the school may encourage children from an early age to think of themselves as Kenyans.\textsuperscript{14}

The Commission welcomed the introduction of English medium teaching in schools and urged colleges to seize upon this opportunity and recruit teachers from various parts of the country for greater inter-tribal mixing. The Report stressed the role of the teachers as the real motive force behind the development of national consciousness among children because, as the Report said, we need teachers whose horizon is national, rather than tribal, and who are therefore capable of communicating their own lively interest in the nation to the children under their charge...the immediate task is that of creating a nation and of stimulating those loyalties and affections that are the stuff of nationhood.\textsuperscript{15}

The Commission also recommended that the schools should promote and reinforce the nation's "own historic instincts and moral values,"\textsuperscript{16} enshrined in the African spirit of cooperation. Competition should be removed from the education system because it was typical of western system. "...in our schools, we find the idea of competition pressed to an astonishing degree...We must make a determined effort to blunt the edge of competition".\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p. 29.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
As for the language policy, the Report recommended the use of English language as a medium of instruction in the primary schools but said that Kiswahili should be made a compulsory subject because it would not only ... provide an additional, and specifically African, vehicle for national co-ordination and unification, but also to encourage communication on an international basis, not only within East Africa, but also with the eastern parts of the Congo and parts of Central Africa.18

3.0 Critical Observations

3.1 Assigning Noble Goals to Wrong Institution

In suggesting that the schools of Kenya should be used as an instrument of fostering nationhood, the Ominde Commission did not foresee the difficulties inherent in such a programme. Teachers could not succeed in inculcating nationhood in the minds of children the majority of whose home backgrounds are tribal. Learning results from reinforced practice. When acquiring feelings of nationhood the classroom teacher is only an insignificant reinforcing agent, unless the entire social environment is involved. Furthermore, to suggest that a two-year teaching course would be able to impart national consciousness in the teachers from predominantly tribal home background was to assume too much optimism.

The Commission overlooked the fact that nationhood, as has clearly been shown above, is an attitude of mind, and the nature of all attitudes is such that they are difficult to eradicate once they have been formed. In fact, schools would find it extremely difficult and sometimes impossible to teach

changes in attitudes because of the number of factors involved outside the school environment. At this point one is inclined to agree with Philip Foster when he observes:

Generally, both historic and more recent research evidence would suggest that it is extremely difficult to mobilize educational system in such a manner as to effect significant attitudinal change. The Soviet Union, for example, seems to have been singularly unsuccessful in creating the 'New Soviet Man' even under optimal circumstances where most major agencies of socialisation have been manipulated in such a manner as to produce maximal reinforcement.¹⁹

As for the recommendation on equality of educational opportunity, this has never been implemented as there are the rural poorly equipped and under staffed, and the urban better equipped and over staffed schools. As though the Government is unaware of this difference, these students all sit the same national examinations. Naturally, those candidates from better schools do better than those from poor schools. In effect, it is those from rich homes who are more likely to perform better and, therefore, have better employment opportunities.

Furthermore, the spirit of competition, and not co-operation, is inevitable. While cooperation is a desirable attribute for schools to impart, the competitive element in the system cannot be avoided in a country where a good individual examination certificate of formal education is used as the one single criterion to select people suitable for the employment sector, and where it is impossible to absorb all the teeming population of the school leavers. A fair and suitable criterion of selection for, and placement in, jobs should require that candidates compete for them.

¹⁹ The Ominde Commission Report, op. cit., p. 60.
In recommending a foreign language (English) as a medium of instruction in favour of Kiswahili which was acknowledged as a vehicle for national unification, the Report was rather shocking. Since one of the elements of a nation’s identity is language, it was only too natural, therefore, that the Report should have recommended Kiswahili not only as a compulsory subject, but also as an inevitable medium of instruction. But since this was not done, the foreign language continued to enjoy its supremacy and even now this supremacy still persists, as can be evidenced right here where the author is using English language in this work!

The Commission’s emphasis that Kenyan schools respect the cultural traditions of Kenya inevitably encourages the creation of tribal societies, some of whose activities only helps to reinforce the perpetuation of the very tribal attitudes the school is supposed to eradicate.

Perhaps, the best way to get out of this problem and create nationhood out of Kenya’s diverse cultures is to encourage people to engage in economic activities that attract inter-ethnic interaction. In his Development of National Consciousness in Kenya, Monyenye has found that people tend to create friendship and cooperate when they find themselves in situations that make them need each other.  

What is really needed is a deliberately conscious move to create a ‘need’ for the coming together of people of various ethnic communities for a common purpose. Once the ‘need’ has been created people’s motivation to satisfy that need would be aroused. All that should be done is to ensure that the ‘need’ created is the type which people from all the ethnic groups would willingly want to join hands in an

effort to satisfy. If the economic arrangement could be made in such a way as to make it impossible for Kenyans to benefit unless they all join hands in sharing the benefits, then they would obviously have to accept the need for coming together.\textsuperscript{21}

Ethnic loyalty at the expense of the wider national loyalty exists because those who practice it continue to believe that their economic and socio-political security and well-being is provided for by the tribe, the clan or the family from which they come.

They have never been convinced that the state can provide them with this security and well-being. Lewis has clearly brought out this point:

For, as long as the overall security and well-being of the individual are not provided for by the state, independently of his tribal affiliation, he will be encouraged to rely upon traditional tribal principles of co-operation.\textsuperscript{22}

Until the state comes forward and replaces the tribe the clan or the family in providing the individual with these needs, it is unlikely that loyalty to the tribe will be replaced by loyalty to the wider nation. Tribalism and nepotism find their sanctuary here partly because notoriously incompetent and mediocre leaders, who feel insecure in their positions, strive to build a leadership cocoon made up of members from their ethnic groups to ensure the maintenance of security for their leadership.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.} p. 520.

A competent and just leadership, which mark a democratic nation, should have no reason to fear bringing into the leadership fold members from other ethnic or racial communities.

In theory, the virtues of competence, integrity and justice are rated among the highest qualities sought after in the choice of leaders anywhere, and it would be gratifying if, in practice, these virtues could be made the criteria determining the choice of those aspiring to serve the public. Since the leadership cadre will be seen to practice them in their leadership roles as well as in their everyday lives. Only then would educational institutions venture to develop them in the learner with a measure of success. As conditions stand now, educational institutions are inculcating attitudes and values that are at variance with the observable conduct of those expected to serve as role models for the learner to emulate. Monyenye has found out that the younger generations no longer have faith in those from whom the virtues of competence, integrity and justice should be emulated:

They are acutely awareness that the conduct of the teacher in the school, or the lecturer and professor in the university, has not been exemplary. The moral character of the clergy is suspect. The public conduct of the politician or the civil servant is untrustworthy. Impartiality and integrity of the judges, or the honesty and dedication of the police are now questionable. Yet, all these are the people expected to be the role models and from whom the younger generations are expected to acquire the accumulated wisdom, knowledge and the cherished cultural values of the society.²³

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²³ Solomon Monyenye, op. cit., p.525.
If those who go through the school system are expected to develop feelings of nationhood – national consciousness – then those from whom they learn these feelings, whether formally or informally, must be seen to possess them and openly eliciting them in their everyday lives. It is not enough to tell the young generation of students the virtues of saintliness when the conduct of those saying so is conspicuously rotten.

3.2 The Influence of ‘Reference Groups’

Pupils’ attitudes are always determined by key reference groups outside the school. The scope of these reference groups is now being widened further and further by technological advancement and is now beyond the control of both the parents and the school. The immense influence of the electronic and print media, especially the runaway Information Technology (IT), now knows no bounds. The IT has not only forced its way into the living rooms of respectable homes to bring embarrassing TV programmes, but, what is worse, it has also now entered the pupils’ bedrooms through personal computers (PCs). In fact, the TV and the PC have now unavoidably reduced the world into such a small global village that the reference groups they bring, whose conduct the pupil unquestioningly cherishes and tenaciously ape, have now proved far much more effective in shaping the perceptions of young people than any other groups.

4.0 Conclusion and Way Forward

As the analysis in the preceding sections has shown, the Commission laid down policies that it thought would enable the Government to establish firm foundations for inculcating feelings of nationhood and promoting national unity. It has been shown how difficult it is to use educational institutions to inculcate nationhood unless the entire social environment is fully behind him and intensely involved.
Now, the difficulties highlighted above invite disturbing questions that seem to demand alternative approaches to the problem of nationhood. For example, if political leadership is truly keen in seeking to initiate desirable development of nationhood in Kenya, is the school really the most appropriate instrument? Could it not be wiser, instead, to devote resources to the education of the adult who would serve as role models for the youth to emulate, and to the provision of support services towards that end?

Since it has been shown that forces outside the school system are more influential in moulding the minds of the youth than the school, political leadership should now direct resources towards that end. It might be wiser to direct financial and human resources to target those influential forces outside the school system. Special attention should be focused on the reference groups, as they seem to hold the key in influencing the youth regarding the development of a sense of nationhood in Kenya. These reference groups include, among others, the political and religious leaders, professionals and business tycoons, artistes in the entertainment industry, sportsmen and women, and men and women in the media industry.

If political leadership can succeed in creating a sense of nationhood among these categories of people, or bring pressure to bear on them to provide the kind of public morality perceived to promote nationhood, the youth who now hold them highly as their role models would inevitably grow up to follow their example.

To say that pressure should be brought to bear on these reference groups is to recognize the fact that the conduct and public morality of some of these groups is often wanting and unworthy emulating. Yet, some of their misconceived success that has now misled the youth to see them as role models may have been ill gotten.
The Government can enforce this by strictly applying the existing legal machinery already at its disposal. While using the legal mechanism to reinforce the development of appropriate public morality in the reference groups, the government could at the same time wish to design appropriate policies that encourage these reference groups to engage in economic activities that attract inter-ethnic interaction, such as entering into joint business ventures which would slowly give way to wider feelings of nationhood. Since Kenyans are often willing to have trade and business relationship with any member from any ethnic or racial group, hopefully this would provide the best opportunity to exploit the relationship for a wider and deeper understanding among various peoples in the country.

References


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