

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE ADVENT OF WESTERN EDUCATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Religious organizations played a major role in the advent of western education in Nigeria. It was particularly championed by the European Christian missionaries who entered the country through the southern protectorate around 1842. The primary goal of the missionaries was to convert Africans to the Christian faith, though, basic literacy (in reading, writing, and counting) was introduced alongside the Bible in order to train individuals who would aid them in missionary activities. Before then, traditional education existed among the natives, and Islamic faith had already wrapped the northern region. Therefore, at the introduction of western education, while the southern protectorate was favourably disposed to it, the north resisted and saw it as a threat to the already established Islamic faith. The initial resistance laid the foundation for the educational imbalance between the north and the south. The attempt to bridge the gap eventually resulted to “skewed” national policies that have continued to deny access to equal educational opportunities among Nigerians. This article examines the religious factor that facilitated the establishment of western education and at the same time, underpinned the resistance to western education, the problem created, and the remedy struggle. It also articulates the challenge of unequal access to educational opportunities in Nigeria. The paper recommends possible remedies for equality of educational opportunities which include but not limited to equitable funding, community involvement, government legislation, and public advocacy among others.

Keywords: Education, Equality, Educational Opportunities

Introduction

The history of Western education in Nigeria (as it is in many other African countries) cannot be contemplated exhaustively without reference to the role religious organizations played in introducing and establishing western literacy. This role informed the opinion of Ezewu (1985)

who describes the Western religion (Christianity) and Western education as twin. From antiquity and even in the modern era, education has been the most integral part of civilisation in any society. It has existed since the creation of man and has evolved in line with the developmental aspirations of mankind. This indicates that prior to the advent of the Western style of education in Nigeria, an indigenous form of education or literacy was already in existence.

The indigenous system of education was not seen as the ability to read and write, rather, young ones were taught the practical skills needed to function successfully in traditional society. Usually, children within two or three years of age belonged to an age group; together, they learned the customs of their communities and were assigned specific duties around the village, such as sweeping lanes or clearing bushes. As they grew older, the boys were introduced to farming and more specialised work, such as wood carving or drumming. Girls would learn farming and domestic chores. Boys would often enter into apprenticeship-type relationships with master craftsmen. Even in the twenty-first century, this kind of education is common. In the north, education was copiously religious in nature with Islamic religion as the object of faith. In each Islamic community, a mallam drilled children as young as five years old in the teachings of the Qur'an and the Arabic alphabet. Historically, Arabian merchants had introduced Islamic religion in the north as early as 11th and 12th centuries, and according to Fafunwa (1978), Islam lasted more than three centuries in the north before Christian missionaries set their foot on the geographical space that is regarded today as Nigeria.

The aim of the missionaries who brought Western education to Nigeria through the southern protectorate was almost similar to the Muslim Arabs who brought Islamic education into the Northern protectorate centuries before. The only initial difference one might notice was the desire for economic activities by the Arabs. Christian missionaries on the other hand avowed to liberate the dark minds of the Africans from barbarism and idolatry (Aloy, 2001). The economic and political factors came much later. It is clear that from the cradle, the North and South had substantial disharmonious experiences with the question of Western education; while the South embraced the western form of literacy which was introduced by Christian missionaries, the North embraced, prioritized, and placed more premium on Qur'anic education above any other form of literacy. These initial differences in educational experiences of the north and south remained unresolved throughout the colonial era and eventually became a subject of national contention which has resulted in skewed policies that do not grant equal educational and employment opportunities to all Nigerians.

Concept of Equality

Equality is a fundamental concept that plays a pivotal role in various aspects of human society, encompassing both social and political dimensions. Ekechukwu (2018) stated that equality embodies the principle that all individuals should be treated with fairness, impartiality, and justice, regardless of their characteristics, such as race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, or any other distinguishing factor. Equality is often considered as a cornerstone of human rights, democratic governance, and social justice; and is enshrined in numerous national and international legal frameworks. Equality is not just a philosophical concept; it is also enshrined in numerous national constitutions and international agreements. For instance, the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948, explicitly asserts the principle of equality before the law and equal protection of the law in Article 7 and Article 21, respectively. Equal educational opportunities imply that every individual should have the ability to enroll in and attend educational institutions, from preschool to higher education, without any undue barriers. This includes physical access to schools, access to resources, materials and teachers. Ensuring equal educational opportunities is often seen as a fundamental principle for promoting social justice and creating a level playing field for all individuals (Nwogu, 2015). It can be a challenging goal to achieve, as it requires addressing systemic inequalities and providing necessary resources to underserved communities. Various legal frameworks and policies are in place in many countries to promote equal educational opportunities, but disparities still exist and efforts are ongoing to improve access and quality of education for all.

Concept of Educational Opportunities

Educational opportunities refer to various ways and means through which individuals can acquire knowledge, skills and expertise to further their personal and professional development (Ekechukwu, 2018). These opportunities can vary widely in terms of format, level and focus, and play a crucial role in enhancing one's education and career prospects. Furthermore, the concept of educational opportunities refers to the idea that all individuals should have equal access to quality education, regardless of their background, socioeconomic status, race, gender, and other personal characteristics. It embodies the belief that education is a fundamental human right and that it should be available to everyone on an equitable basis. According to Nwogu (2015), educational opportunities encompass several key principles such as equity, inclusivity, equality, accessibility, life-learning etc. Educational opportunities are critical for personal growth, career advancement, and societal development. The availability and accessibility of these opportunities can vary depending on factors such as location, financial resources, and individual circumstances. Nonetheless, they are essential for individuals to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to achieve their goals and contribute to their communities. Efforts to promote educational opportunities are central to addressing educational inequalities and ensuring that all individuals can reach their full potential. Governments, institutions, and individuals can play a role in advancing this concept through policy, funding, and advocacy for inclusive and equitable education systems.

Education

Education is one of the essential elements in the socialisation process that trains the mind, unwrapped human capabilities, and empowers man with both intellectual and social skills to attain his existential aspirations. Education could be formal or informal, organised in basic or sophisticated modes, whichever form it comes, it is regarded as a key index for measuring development in every society. Dewey (1916) construes education as the process of remaking experience, giving it a more socialised value through increased individual experience, by giving the individual better control over his own powers. Every society has one form of education or the other but when western education is mentioned as applied in this context, it refers to a non-indigenous type of education that emanates from the western culture of reading, writing, and

arithmetic (3Rs of education). This is a European form of education that came in through the shores of most African countries and Nigeria inclusive. It is an educative system that entered Nigeria through the southern protectorate of the country between 1842-1914 by the European Christian missionaries with the aim of establishing Christianity. These missionary activities saw the establishment of mission schools where western literacy was taught and the eventual gains of western education became an incentive to the natives. According to Bowen (1972), the function of western education was to enable people to perform useful roles in their community or environment.

The Penetration of Western Education in Southern Nigeria

The earliest set of Europeans that came to Nigeria were the Portuguese merchants who first came to Benin in the early part of the 15th century. Aside from their commercial interest, they started teaching the children of the Oba of Benin including children from other royal families. However, no substantial western education was established until the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Remarkable efforts towards introducing western education in Nigeria started in 1842 (Taiwo, 1980). The missionary organisation that first introduced western education in Nigeria was the Wesleyan Methodist Society, which opened the Christian mission station at Badagry, near Lagos. The activities of this society were facilitated by an ex-slave of the Yoruba extraction, named Ferguson who had earlier returned to the area. It was he who succeeded in persuading the Yoruba chiefs to bring the missionaries from Sierra Leone into Badagry. This effort saw the coming of Thomas Birch Freeman and Mr. and Mrs. De Graft in September 1842 under the auspices of the Wesley Methodist Society to establish the first-ever Christian mission station in the area.

According to Fafunwa (1978), the effort of the Wesleyan Methodist Society was consolidated further by three missionaries of the Church Mission Society who arrived in Badagry from where they later moved to Abeokuta. On the team were Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, (later Bishop), Mr. Henry Townsend, and Mr. G.A. Collman. Samuel Ajayi Crowther settled at Igbehin and established two schools – one for boys and the other for girls, while Townsend settled in Ake, another part of the town, where he built a mission house, a church, and a school. This was the beginning of real rivalry among the Christian Missions in Nigeria. The Methodists, who started the first evangelical work in Nigeria, did not take this news kindly and so decided to send a lay missionary to Abeokuta to commence work there. As the Catholic Mission Society was consolidating its activities around Abeokuta and Badagry and “extending its evangelical programmes to other parts of the country, Samuel Ajayi Crowther opened the first school in Onitsha in December 1858 for girls between the ages of 6 and 10 (Fafunwa, 1978). Down Calabar and Bonny, Church Mission Society missionaries started the work of introducing western education among the people. The chiefs of the area were however, not interested in the evangelical activities of the missionaries, but would rather want their children to be taught how to gauge palm oil and other merchant businesses as trading was the main interest of the people of the area. The missionaries had no option but to accept the people’s wishes. The Presbyterian Mission also made its presence known in 1846 and established a mission house. Another Baptist Convention established itself at Ijaye Abeokuta in 1853. The society of the African Mission similarly arrived in Lagos and established its mission in 1868. Unfortunately, as noted by

Fafunwa (1978), each denomination emphasized its own importance and spared no pains at proving that one denomination was better than the other. As these denominations moved further into the hinterland, they established schools for the training of the catechists and teachers.

Penetration of Western Education in Northern Nigeria

The northern protectorate was the seat of Islamic education as earlier mentioned. The values of Islamism were already deeply rooted in the minds of the inhabitants who were predominantly Muslims. This peculiarity, together with geographical terrain determined the pace of development of western education in the region. Gbadamosi (1967) reported that the northern Emirs were less enthusiastic about accepting and adopting a system that they considered an “enemy” of their faith. Based on the resistance of the Emirs, Lord Lugard, the Governor of the Northern region persisted in warning the Christian Missionaries against the consequences that would result from spreading Christianity in the area. His warnings to the Christian missionaries according to Gbadamosi (1967) are contained in the following words “I see no reason religion be it of one sort or another should be forced upon the natives – I see much in it to exasperate the Muhammadan master who considers himself robbed of his property, that we may further a religious propaganda hostile to its creed.” This skepticism notwithstanding, the missionaries were able to get to the middle belt region of the north. By the year 1913, only four schools had been established but exclusively for the training of the sons of traditional rulers who would take over administrative functions from their fathers. One school was also established for the training of mallams. The aims of schooling were restricted to imparting academic knowledge to produce a literate ruling class and few educated people to assist the colonial administration.

Religious pledges affected the course of Western education in the Northern Protectorate since Western education was provided at the time only by Christian missionaries. The problem of the missionaries became by implication the problem of introducing Western education since there was religious suspicion among the northern leaders. Ozigi and Ocho (1981) asserted that Lugard had some admiration for those missionaries who sacrificed much in the cause of their work and this personal admiration as well as his belief in the value of the missionary forces as a handmaid to the establishment of British rule made him allow few missionary enterprises in the region. The Toronto Industrial Mission was allowed by both the Government and the local Emirs to operate in Pategi, the present Niger State. It was under similar circumstances that the same mission and the C.M.S. were allowed to move into Bida in 1902. In Muri, there was Cambridge University Mission by 1904, and in the same year, Mennonite Brethren were at Ilorin. In 1904 also, Lugard was willing to allow Dr Miller of the C.M.S. to open a station the following year at the memorable place, Kano. These missionary establishments at Pategi, Nupe, Ilorin, etc., were made with the consent of the local Emirs and with the permission of the Government (Gbadamosi, 1967). They were primarily missionaries, but they were expected to commence the provision of education shortly after. In summary, northern Nigeria initially resisted western education due to the fear of their children being converted to Christianity coupled with the support of the colonial administration who did not want administrative disruption in the region.

The Challenges of Equality to Education Opportunities in Nigeria

Western education was opposed by the northern protectorate; it was perceived as a threat to Islamism which was the dominant religious affiliation of the northern population. Adesina (1988) alluded that the colonial authorities also did not do much to salvage the situation; Lugard in particular, did not want to coerce the people into accepting western education for fear of uprising. Therefore, he cautioned the missionaries (who could have extended western education to the northern population) to restrict their activities to “pagan” areas. By 1960, after Nigeria's independence, it became glaring to northern Nigeria that their initial resistance to western education was a minus and it had placed them at a great disadvantage. The administrative structure bequeathed to Nigeria by the British administrators needed men who had literacy in western education (rather than Quaranic literacy) to handle various administrative offices in the new country, Nigeria. While the North was in want of personnel (educated people) to feature in administrative positions, the South had a considerable number of personnel who were well-educated in Western literacy to take up the available jobs. It became obvious that there was a huge gap between the North and the South in terms of Western education and employment opportunities.

Consequently, the Federal Government initiated policies targeted at bridging this gap and the result was the introduction of the quota system, educationally advantaged and disadvantaged states, and catchment areas (Onwuka, 1997). The sole goal was to create more opportunities for certain categories of people to be able to reduce the “imbalance” in the attainment of Western education and employment opportunities between north and south. These policies have turned out to represent a systematic denial of equal access to educational opportunities in Nigeria. Pitfalls inherent in these policies violate applicants' equal rights to education as provided for in the 1999 constitution as amended. It is a discriminatory admission process that works to favour some school applicants from particular states more than others. The implementation of these policies has generated criticism and controversies among ethnic nationalities and regions within the country.

These policies according to Onwuka (1997) were supposedly aimed at addressing issues of ethnic or regional representation in the public sector. The implication is that issues of admission, recruitment, promotion, and appointment are based on these principles. The implementation of these policies have divided the country along ethnic, religious, majority-minority, and advantaged-disadvantaged lines. Unfortunately, education has had its fair share of struggles resulting in an educationally imbalanced society. Nigeria is suffering the effect of the initial northern resistance to Western education which was underpinned by religious considerations. As it stands today, the policy is construed as “robbing Peter to give John”, thus enthroning mediocrity (Olabisi, 2019). One of the effects of these absurd policies is continuous suffering in the land in spite of its rich human and capital resources, to the extent that the country is now named the world's poverty capital. While the major reason for formulating the quota policy is to foster even development and unity among the over three hundred ethnic nationalities in the country, the evidence on the ground, however, shows that the system is not only killing the quest for excellence and distinction in some parts of the country, it is making others to wallow in frustration giving them a sense of dejection.

In university admission, for instance, 45 percent of candidates are admitted based on merit, 35 percent based on catchment areas while 20 percent go to educationally less developed states. In other words, only 45 percent of slots in public universities are merit-based in the true sense of the word. Other considerations apart from merit determine those that get the remaining 55 percent slots. Olabisi (2019) observed that the situation is worse in Federal Government secondary schools referred to as unity schools. In these schools, some candidates do not need more than between 4 and 10 marks over 300, to gain admission, while others are required to score as high as 139 to get a slot. The cut-off marks for male pupils from Yobe and Zamfara states in 2022 entrance examination to Federal Government Colleges for example, were a mere 2 and 4 respectively, likewise, a male candidate from Taraba state only needed 3 points out of 300 to gain admission, whereas the minimum score for any pupil from Anambra state was pegged at 139 in the same examination. This is a clear case of unequal access which if not addressed will truncate the nation's quest for inclusive development.

Many countries of the world that adopted quota system and other skewed policies in school enrolment and employment have started reneging on them. In Malawi for instance, the quota system has remained a contentious policy same for India and Pakistan. In these countries, there is a growing public clamour for the populace to go to school and work based on their qualifications and abilities rather than where an individual comes from. This is because they have realised that the quota system is discriminatory in nature. This means that when an inferior candidate is considered above a more qualified person just because government wants to create a balance, striving for excellence becomes meaningless. Getting outstanding leaders is also a challenge when merit is relegated to the background in the government recruitment process.

Possible Remedies for Inequalities of Educational Opportunities

Equalising inequality in educational opportunities is a complex and multifaceted challenge that requires a combination of policies, programmes and societal efforts. Here's an outline of various ways to address this issue:

Early Childhood Education: Universal access to high-quality preschool and early childhood education programs to ensure that all children enter school ready to learn.

Equitable School Funding: Reform the funding structure of schools to reduce disparities between wealthy and underprivileged districts. Eliminate discriminatory practices, such as tracking or biased discipline policies that disproportionately affect minority and low-income students. Ensure that all students have access to the internet and necessary technology for remote learning, especially in the post-pandemic world.

Community Involvement: Engage parents and the community in the educational process to create a supportive environment for learning. There should be a partnerships between schools, local businesses, and community organisations to provide additional resources and opportunities for students.

Government Policies and Legislation: Government should enact and enforce anti-discrimination laws and policies at local, state, and federal levels to prevent discrimination in education.

Public Awareness and Advocacy: Raise awareness about educational inequality and encourage public support for measures to address it through advocacy campaigns and community engagement. Equalizing educational opportunities is an ongoing process that requires the cooperation of government, educational institutions, communities, and individuals. By implementing a combination of these strategies, it is likely to make progress toward a more equitable education system.

Conclusion

Religion played a fundamental role in the establishment of Western education in Nigeria and its entry point was from the south. All attempts to aggressively extend it to the northern region were vehemently resisted by the northern (Muslim) leaders with the support of the colonial authorities. The North later realised the value of Western education and the attempt to catch up with the South informed the policies that are mentioned above. These measures are not in the best interests of Nigeria as a whole. It will benefit everyone if the Federal Government can abolish it. Admission to Federal Government institutions should be based only on merit. Students should be permitted to compete in a fair and reasonable manner. The decision to attend school should be based on a student's knowledge, talents, and ability rather than religion, state of origin, or geographical region. It will be unjust for the Federal Government to continue to push education on individuals who are unlikely to be interested in learning while denying other willing citizens the opportunity, all in the name of balancing the books. State governments should be tasked with closing education gaps in their respective states; only by doing so can the nation progress.

An enduring national unity has been one of the key goals of Nigeria since her independence. The reason is not far-fetched especially given that an enduring national unity is regarded as a *conditio sine qua non* (an essential condition) for sustainable development. National unity is a condition wherein the citizens of a country consisting of diverse ethnic groups, religious beliefs and regions co-exist peacefully as one united country in accordance with given national ideology and federal constitution (Chang, Azizan & Amran, 2013). For the above authors, ensuring national unity in any country often requires collective efforts of both government and the citizens. However, creating a suitable environment in which national unity thrives is an important duty of any responsible government. This very important duty of the government is often discharged in line with extant laws and/or government policies. Expectedly, sections 18(1) and 42(1) of the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria as amended were designed to guarantee all school applicants in Nigeria through equal rights and provision of adequate educational opportunities, a level playing ground as steps in the right direction towards providing an enabling environment for upholding national unity (FRN, 1999). To further ensure that various disuniting forces like; the initial lopsided educational advancement which seems to have placed some regions in Nigeria at vantage positions and as well occasioned uneven socio-economic development are weakened, the quota system principle was reinstituted by federal government of Nigeria. The quota system principle was once operational during the colonial rule in Nigeria but resurfaced in post-colonial Nigeria as an upshot of the constitution drafting committee, inaugurated during the military presidency of Murtala Mohammed in 1975 (Onwuka, 1997). The reintroduction of the quota system principle in post-colonial Nigeria was a response to the forces

of multiethnicity of the new independent state. Nigeria's multiethnic nature as well as the initial uneven educational advancement was regarded as potent centrifugal force due to the endemic problems of acrimonious existence as witnessed among the diverse groups and interests, often resulting to mutual distrust, inter-ethnic conflicts, fear of domination of one ethnic group over another and instability steering towards possible disintegration of the polity.

The above are believed to have made expedient, the need for national integration as it applies to building a

unified nation-state out of the desperate ethnic and geographic elements by ensuring that every part of the country is carried along. It was however not long after the reinstitution of the quota system principle that it found its way into the educational sector. As a principle to be applied to students' admission into federal government owned schools, it is to help address disparities in educational attainments of different areas of the country and inequalities in socio-economic development which create perennial acrimonies promoting disunity in Nigeria. However, it is regrettable to note that with more than forty years gone since the introduction of the quota system of admission in Nigeria's educational sector, the problem of inequality among various regions with regard to educational advancement cum socio-economic development seem to have continued to linger. Thus, aggravating further agitations by some ethnic groups and/or regions in Nigeria especially non-beneficiaries of the quota system of

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