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**Mission in history and history through a mission:
Inventing better worlds for humankind**

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Casimir Lecture

**Mission in history and history through a mission:
Inventing better worlds for humankind**

by

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About the Casimir Foundation:

The Casimir Foundation (Casimir Stichting) was founded in 1999. It is named after Rommert Casimir (1877-1957), erstwhile professor of pedagogy at the University of Leiden and societal reformer. The Casimir Foundation aims to further the study of the theory and history of education through various means. In 2002 the Casimir Foundation appointed dr. René van der Veer of Leiden University to lecture in the field of the history of education. The board of directors of the Casimir Foundation presently consists of prof. dr. M. H. van IJzendoorn, prof. dr. A. W. van Haaften, prof. dr. B. Spiecker, and dr. C.G.T. Vernooy.

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We should remember not what they gave us but what they took away from us. Educating children is, in principle, fine and worthwhile. But there is a question to be asked: what are they being educated for? They were being educated for subservience; they were being educated to turn their backs on their own past and their own peoples.

(A radio commentator in Tanzania summarizing the role of missionary education, cited via Bassey, 1999, p. 40)

We all know it: education *helps* people. Or so we are supposed to know—as adults, educators, and citizens of the “free world.” The story is simple: through education the young generation gets the best possible start in their lives and the older generation may live along with the changing times. Education is necessary for good living in our modern society where literacy in many fields—such as understanding the choices given to us on various bureaucratic forms, saving one’s texts in a computer file, or for clicking on the internet, reading the labels of products’ fat and cholesterol content in supermarkets, and believing experts’ opinions about economy—begin to make a difference in the way we live. Or, in a more old-fashioned way, reading books or clay tablets, reciting poetry or knowing about philosophy were all benefactors of education. Education is cherished both by the donors—the educators of the adult generation—and by the recipients from younger generations who appreciate the head start in life received through opening new alleys for thinking and acting. Education is a kind of benevolent utopia—an attempt to change the World to be a better state.

However, there exists an alternative to this nice story about education. It can be claimed that formal education is an *act of violence* against currently existing socio-cultural states of affairs (e.g., review by Harber, 2002). Formal education was introduced in human history as a means to distance the learners from their immediate knowledge bases, and to make them accept and cherish the corpus of knowledge and values that transcended their local community. As such, formal education differs cardinally from its informal counterpart—the latter brings the young of the given society in line with the existing socio-cultural system.

Such a less-than-appealing description of education is of course not to be popular with educators as it undermines their socially set role definitions. Surely, it would be not very pleasant for a dedicated teacher to be labeled as an “exterminator of children’s native skills”, or—in general—to be considered in the general category of committing “crimes against humanity.” Of course, I am not trying to claim that such a re-categorization is even remotely feasible—yet in the sense of social positioning in discourses about society, it follows from the application of the social representation of

violence. Of course, a transformation of the latter is the evocation of another—again positively valued—social representation: that of a *revolutionary*. Educators are revolutionaries who have to tear down the previous knowledge systems in order to build a new and progressive one that makes it possible for all learners to become prosperous, employed, reproductively successful, and live happily ever after!

In this re-representing trick, I have turned the education as violence notion into another one—education as *necessary benevolent violence* in the service of a better future of humankind through increased knowledge, global understanding of the human condition, and economic prosperity. In some sense, the whole system of education of the European cultural history can be likened to a prolonged initiation ceremony (in terms of education being a ritual similar to the African “bush school” that coincides with adolescents’ initiation). The symbolic—and at times physical—removal of the developing person from the local community context, together with the gradual re-integration of the initiated (educated) person into the context look very similar.

Historical social reality: transformation of education in our time

Education is changing as a social institution these days. For centuries, these needs have segregated school knowledge from everyday knowledge. At our time, the rapid technological connectedness of students at school and at home—through the same internet portals—moves the system of formal education to another state of closeness with “community knowledge.” Only the “community” now is different—it is the World in its web-ified way:

The traditional functions of schools—providing information, knowledge, and skills—are being challenged by other actors. Schools have lost their position as the dominant source of information. Media and information technology that young people encounter in their everyday activities have a different agenda than do schools, and they also communicate experiences in a radically different manner. Their immanent pedagogy is not grounded on the same set of assumptions as is traditional education. Thus, although young people at some level are better informed and more knowledgeable about the world than any previous generation has been, there is a growing misfit between everyday experiences and the approaches to understanding the world that are offered by formal schooling. (Säljö, 2004, pp. 177-178)

Where old distinctions—like that of formal and informal education—vanish, new ones are about to be created. What we see today is a new version of corporational colonial education where the drastically widened freedom of access to information by individuals on a worldwide basis is fully controlled by the limits of access to what is made available (and in what kinds of pre-packaged forms) by the institutions which

control the networks. The school is gradually losing its provider role to institutions like Google, Yahoo, AOL, and their like. Yet the principle of bounded indeterminacy (Valsiner, 1997) applies here as well: the new freedom for worldwide access to information is guided by the constraining that is done by the owners along the access routes. After all our fascination with globalization of knowledge ends, we are left with the “three Ps” (Patents, Passwords, and Payments) in contrast to the traditional education’s “3 Rs” (Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic).

What is happening is a historical differentiation, integration, and de-differentiation process within the structure of socially promoted knowledge. Such processes operate concurrently in any society; the way in which knowledge gets constructed in different disciplines varies synchronically (Knorr-Cetina, 1999). It also varies diachronically within the same area (e.g., the cultural-historical perspective within psychology of Russia / USSR; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). It includes missionary phenomena within the discipline’s international relations (Bhatia, 2002).

Most importantly, the relationships between the heterogeneous complex of “scientific knowledge” and the (equally heterogeneous) complex of “everyday knowledge” become re-organized in history. It is the latter process of a return to a new—institutionalized, yet informal—knowledge proliferation that our contemporary societies face. The distinction between informal and formal education and their functions is being replaced by another form of a distinction: immediate versus mediated knowing.

The basis for education: making distinctions that lead to a mission

How can two diametrically opposite viewpoints on education—help and violence—coincide? The puzzle is solved if we consider education as a process of directed change of an existing state of affairs. By necessity, change entails a rupture with what was and the construction of something else that has not yet been. Education creates new ways of knowing by overcoming old ones. Hence the tension between what already is and what is desired to be brought into existence is always there.

Most social sciences are ill equipped for looking at such change. The goal of educational intervention is transformation of the present state into some desirable future one. This is directly in contrast to some of the sciences—such as cultural or social anthropology—that have attempted to study societies’ cultural patterns in their relatively stable states (Kuklick, 1991). Likewise, the non-developmental side of psychology has been looking at phenomena as those are, rather than as these are about to become. The intervention by education is not merely that of registering change, but by bringing it about by some action. Thus education works by superimposing socially value-laden efforts towards change onto some established distinction.

Making distinctions.

It may be worth the while to elaborate the making of distinctions and their implications in a step-by-step fashion (see also Jahoda, 2001; Valsiner, 2000). The making of an I (WE) <> IT/YOU (THEY) distinction is the basis for any psychological function

(the subject-object contrast). Here it is applied to the relationship between groups of human beings—children as distinguished from adults, social castes or classes as distinguished from one another, separate gender and age sets, kin and non-kin group separation. So, in terms of ontological contrast

We are X and they are Z

is a distinction of no value basis. Such neutral distinctions can be made when there is limited information about “the other”, and when such information is neither threatening nor of interest to the distinction maker. When Marco Polo returned to Europe from his oriental journeys he narrated the story of the Indian *devadasi* temple dancers in fascinatingly non-self-interested terms, stating that in India

they have certain abbeys in which are gods and goddesses to whom many young girls are consecrated; their fathers and mothers presenting them to that idol for which they entertain the greatest devotion. And when the nuns [monks, tr.] of a convent desire to make a feast to their god, they send for all those consecrated damsels and make them sing and dance before the idol with great festivity. (from year 1298, cited via Mitter, 1992, p. 3)

The depiction of the *devadasi* made them similar to European mediaeval nuns (See Figure 1). Of course, in Marco Polo’s time whatever happened in the Indian subcontinent was of no more than exotic story value— the *devadasi* could be pictured as some kinds of nuns dancing piously in front of a black idol. The message about them was for European cultural consumption—it was of importance to use the exotic image of “them” to fortify the moral messages used among “us”. The *devadasi* custom was not linked with Europe—hence appropriated as neutral and filled in with local socio-moral meanings.



FIGURE 1. Depiction of “Hindu Temple Dancers” in mediaeval Europe (Mitter, 1992, p.4)

However, when the British colonizers reached India by the 19th century the importance of the same cultural phenomena of temple dancers changed. Now it was an issue of controlling a vast multi-ethnic society and its resources. The battlefield for that was everyday morality—and that meant the fight against the “native promiscuity” that the temple dancers were supposed to represent in the eyes of the colonizers. The *devadasi* now were in a crucial cultural locus precisely because their sensuality was used in the service of the existing social order (Valsiner, 1996)—and that existing order was the target for change by the European power. Hence the British began to stigmatize temple dancers as prostitutes (see Kersenboom, 1998; Singh, 1997) with the usual communication of prejudicial labels such as “lower”, “lewd” and “uncivilized” projected onto the practice.

Adding moral values

As the *devadasi* example shows, it was under the conditions of the European vested interest that values became added to the depiction of “the other”: what *they* do, or think, loses neutrality when *we* have vested interest in them.

Adding such value basis can lead to two opposite elaborations:



Both of these value additions lead to the evocation of action possibilities. So, one can refrain from action (e.g., so what if we are worse or better than they?) or eradicate the difference in either direction (we become like they, or they like we). Equally likely is the strategy of accentuating the detected difference—we are better (or worse) than they—and *we should make sure that we stay so*. For the latter goal, no education is needed—simple social segregation and maintenance of social caste / strata boundaries suffices.

Educational goals in a society are built within the existing stratification system and help to maintain it in principle. The social hierarchy in a society—be it based on power, knowledge, or age—sets the stage for education becoming a mission. The mission “moves” from the “higher” to the “lower” strata in the social hierarchy—so the “higher” classes attempt to educate the “lower” classes rather than the other way around¹. It is only when the focus becomes de-centered to “the other” (they) that we arrive at the doorstep of educational missions. If “they”—children—do not grow up on their own and “we”—adults—have to “help them”, we have the beginning of a mission.

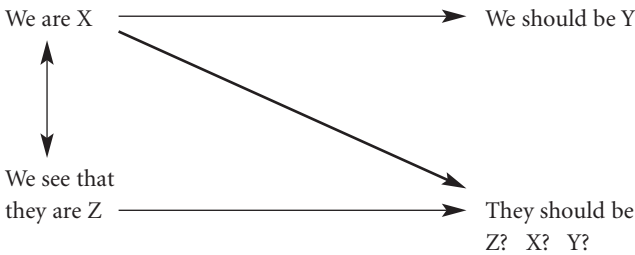
1 If the latter happens, it is usually a part of a fundamental revolutionary rupture within a society—like the Chinese “cultural revolution” calling for the inexperienced young to “re-educate” their parents’ generation (see Chan, 1985). It is a social strategy by a dominant power group to turn to the lower classes to act upon the middle strata—so in effect it is the same as the simple top-down social control effort.

The psychological function of making the distinction “we versus they” sets the stage for the projection of one’s own characteristics—positively or negatively valued—into “the other”, and then relating with that “other” accordingly. Hence educating others is actually based on the fulfillment of some role (or need) of the self. In other terms: education is an ego-centered exercise. It is meant for the other, yet it is through that other that it benefits the self. The direction of the “help” to the other is set by the self, the limits of that direction fit the social class (Smollett, 1975), religious (Niezen, 1991), or economic needs of social institutions.

Of course, that centrality of the helper—educator—is not within the realm of discourse about education. Like in many other “helping professions”—doctors, nurses, policemen, military—the “helpers” social roles are depicted in monologically positive terms.

Adding educational goals to the value-distinction.

Our general scheme becomes more complex. The generalized goal orientations or moral imperatives (“should-value”) become added to the we/they distinction:



The we/they distinction creates a complex set of socio-moral decision tasks for whoever is the “we” living in practical local relations with the “they”: “they” are different—should they stay so (Z), become like us now (X), or join us in eradicating that difference by joint development (Y)? It is here that education gets its beginning—as a mission, or a social utopia. Of course, the status of some goal orientation as a “social utopia” can be ascertained only *after* it has failed. Before that all new ideas look promising.

Education as a mission

Historically viewed, it is clear that education is a missionary enterprise. It turns around the minds towards better futures—defined by the mission goals (Dutch: *zending* or *missie*). Educational efforts take place from the perspective of a social power that introduces new sets of activities as well as often new symbolic locations, such as churches, schools, mosques, and medreses, together with an elaborate system of canalization (Valsiner, 1997, 2000) of these activities. The combination of action-regulation and feeling-suggestive tactics is expected to lead to the conversion of the persons who are made into targets of education.

The missionary spirit of educational efforts would exist in any society—it is a universal cultural invention at the height of a society’s self-directed intervention. It entails the dialogical separation of “what we are now” and “what we should be”, and a series of strategies for moving towards the latter. In the case of colonial education this contrast becomes expanded by the “we/they” distinction that entails the tension of viewing of “the other”. Of course such contrast is reciprocal—Europeans felt the need of “civilizing” the “African cannibals” in ways similar to people from African tribes who were equally worried about European activities and conduct (Jahoda, 1999, p. 109).

The mission of introducing formal schooling has been explicit in its effort to produce a rupture in the existing ways of living—a break that would keep the learners within the field of educational efforts without letting those be jeopardized by the background conditions of home and community. The value of education as bringing about a cultural rupture was idealized in educational discourse. It was made to seem that the world can proceed towards ultimate prosperity as education is introduced—at least as far as Figure 2 implies. That was the hope in the United States for educating its native population at the turn of the 20th century.



FIGURE 2. The implied role of education for the development of American Indians (Report, 1904)

Missions after conquests: fitting the natives into a role

The world has always been filled with conquests. After the conquistadors come the others who want to make life good for the conquered: to save the souls of the natives, to make them healthy, and—of course—to make sure they accepted the governing ideologies, religious or secular. The 19th century was the era of colonization of the rest of the world by European powers. The role of the missionaries in Africa became especially enhanced by the end of the 19th century when all colonizing countries were expected to demonstrate their roles in the conquered territories, as demanded by the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference.

The major means of any conquest is economic, rather than military. It is not so long ago that the colonized territories in Africa or Asia were administered by companies—such as the Dutch East India Company (1602-1798) or the British United

Africa Company (founded in 1879). It is only through territorialization of the administered areas and their resources that the nations-based colonial system emerged. In parallel, religious missionary societies (e.g., the Church Mission Society; a branch of the Anglican Church) were involved (Beidelman, 1982).

The colonial system collapsed in the 1960s—to be replaced by a myriad of independent nations—many of which inherited the administrative boundaries of former colonies. The discourse of a colonial kind became replaced by a new one—since the end of World War II the “Third World” has become viewed as endlessly in need for economic help from the richer nations—often their previous colonial powers. A new (yet old) way of reflecting upon the “native states” emerged:

the representation of the Third World as a child in need of adult guidance was not an uncommon metaphor and lent itself perfectly to the development discourse. The infantilization of the Third World was integral to the development as a “secular theory of salvation”.
(Escobar, 1995, p. 30)

Such infantilization also plays the role of making a new distinction (we/they) and results in the glory of “helping” the “developing countries”. What we may see in our present days is a new return to the era where companies were running the social systems and using resources of former colonies and impoverished independent countries. Thus, the power structures of oil companies, as well as NGOs (Hearn, 2002) return to leadership roles in Africa—in competition with Islamic missionary organizations (Lamber, 1990, Niezen, 1991).

Educating Africa

African colonization opened the door to European and North American religious groupings to attempt to evangelize it. In 1898, all education was in the hands of missionaries and even by 1942 around 97% of students in Africa were enrolled in missionary schools (Bassey, 1999, p. 28). The missionaries came both from colonizing countries (England, France, Belgium, Germany, and Spain) as well as from countries of no colonial presence in Africa but with much religious zeal (Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, USA, etc.).

Like the relationships between countries in Europe were tenuous, so were the relations between different missionary organizations in Africa in competition with one another (Bassey, 1999; Beidelman, 1982). The different colonial systems promoted different ways of governance: from strict top-down (French, German) that led the education towards enforced assimilation of the students to the colonizers’ ways of being (Blakemore, 1970), to British “indirect governance” through local tribal leaders. Yet in that policy the British projected onto the rest of the World their particular social class structure:

Colonial officials believed that true Indirect Rule was appropriate only for those peoples who had reached a relatively high stage of evolution. Officials employed the comparative method to determine the state of development that various peoples had attained. From evolutionist indices to developmental stages—religious beliefs, rites of passage, political institutions, and so on—administrators were able to classify whole cultures in the evolutionist taxonomy even when their knowledge of these cultures was very limited, since they assumed that cultures judged in the same stage were virtually identical. Only if societies were considered to be in an advanced stage of evolution would they be ruled in truly indirect fashion. (Kuklick, 1991, p. 218)

Thus, the “indirect rule” led to the separation of the ruling tribal elites from the laypersons—using the “truly developed” as their emissaries in relation with the “not developed”. Yet even the tribal leaders were expected—in around 1912—to become “good Africans” (rather than “imperfect Europeans”), since

Africans should not be taught dangerous ideas, which might inspire them to demand self-government before they were capable of exercising it. Perhaps, for example, they should not learn English history, since if they were to do so, they would learn of Cromwell’s revolutionary methods... and might imagine that their own societies were ready for the constitutional changes that had been effected in Britain. (Kuklick, 1991, p. 206)

However, what was supposed to prove the success of the mission of “civilizing the natives” was something different than capability to think (and make revolutions). The criteria for becoming a “civilized native” in Portuguese colonies included the internalization of the feeling of superiority over peasants, and that civilized persons wear shoes and eat with appropriate cutlery at home (as verified by surprise home visits by an official; Basse, 1999, p. 36). The explicit goal of such education was to create a vehicle for social mobility among the natives, in the symbolic terms set by the colonizers.

A glimpse into the missionary efforts to educate different peoples in different European colonies (as well as in uncolonized parts of Africa such as Abyssinia and Liberia—Drewal, 1970; Killingrey, 2003) is an experiment in revealing the depth of the European and North American colonial minds. This experiment becomes particularly revealing when the different tactics replace one another. Thus, when the German colonization of Tanganyika ended as a result of German’s loss of all its colonies in World War I, the British took over. German administration had eradicated the local governance system and the British came with their focus on the “indirect rule” through the local tribal leaders.

The location and exclusive exposure to formal schooling environments was a key tactical feature in introducing missionary education in Africa. Thus, the Phelps-Stokes Fund summary survey of educational efforts in East Africa in 1925 elaborated these tactics:

The relative value of boarding and day schools... is to be determined largely by the community environment, the objective to be attained, and the available school facilities. Experience and observation in every part of the world prove the necessity for both types of schools. *Boarding schools are necessary to cultivate sound habits of life in communities that lack the home conditions and influences essential to the formation of such habits.* The brief contacts of the day school are in many instances insufficient for forming character when the influences of the home and the community are potent in the wrong direction. It is almost equally futile to send young men or young women with sound habits formed in the more or less artificial environment of the boarding school to cope single-handed with the traditions and customs of their home community. Experience in Africa and elsewhere has revealed tragic examples of such thoughtless use of those who have profited by long years of training away from their homes. The cruel and futile results of such action are far more certain in case of young women than that of young men. (Jones, 1925, p. 350, added emphasis)

It is the interesting role of educating women that acquires its centrality in this general policy recommendation. Women's education has been at issue. Women in any society—as the key to its reproductive success—have been under special regulatory control. They also have been the carriers of formal education efforts back to their families, and pious gatekeepers of the moral texture of a society. Not surprisingly, it is the issues surrounding female (and not male) circumcision in Africa that have been controversial in Western and African westernized discourses (James & Robertson, 2002). The usual focus in those discourses has been on the health risks of the operations—while the social function of these procedures has escaped the limelight.

The circumcision rituals were a concrete competitor to Western type schooling in African societies—they lead to girls dropping out of school (as the procedures may be combined with long seclusion periods of alternative education) and vanishing into the traditional marriage systems after the initiation ritual makes girls socially marriageable. Without doubt the circumcision procedures are invasive—but the issue here is that of the psychological, internalized value system that these procedures test and that is an obstacle for the missionaries' conversion goals. Furthermore, at times the enforced changes in the initiation practices brought with them the opposite of the expected results (see Steegstra, 2002, pp. 221-223): the “moral laxity” of the young girls—

meaning sexuality that led to childbearing out of marriage—was enhanced by the diminishment of traditional initiation rituals.

Formal schooling—the cognitive basis for social control

The formal education mission can succeed in its goal to change at least some areas of psychological functions. All comparative-cultural evidence about the reasoning processes of formally educated pupils all over the World indicates that a certain conversion of the pupils to accept the suggested basic assumptions of the recognized institutional authority figures works very effectively (Luria, 1974; Tulviste, 1991). Thus, as pupils have been through a few years of formal schooling they stop questioning the reality of the major premise of the following type of syllogism.

All X are Y: “all metals are heavy”
 “all bears in the Far North are yellow”
 “all children in Lake Wobogon are above average”
 “all Estonians are troublemakers”

They have no difficulty attaching the general assertions of the major premise to an individual specimen. So they can easily reach the socially appropriate answer about a specific metal (that it too must be heavy), a Wobogon child (that she must be above average), and even an Estonian. Formal schooling thus promotes the acceptance of a deductive reasoning scheme.

There is remarkable cognitive economy in reasoning deductively for persons who cannot know by inductive experience many a thing in this world. Formal schooling indeed opens the horizons of the learners. Yet it does something else in parallel with that—it brings the reasoning and feeling processes of the knowers under the social guidance of the educators. Hence education is a root for social power—and the latter is never neutral, altruistic, or unconditionally benevolent.

Here is a key to our understanding of educational discourse: the social power that insists upon the specific value addition to some distinction at the same time insists upon the invisibility of its own power role in enforcing that valuation. If one says “X is good” what is actually meant is “I *insist* that ‘X is good’ but *you should look at X*, not at my act of insisting.” This is an example of setting up a semiotic demand setting (SDS—see Valsiner, 2002) that “rules in” certain forms of talk while “ruling out” others.

It is only rarely that the social power role of education becomes visible and the introduction of formal schooling through religious missionary efforts by Europeans in many parts of the World provides us with access to the phenomena of social transformation of “the other”—the natives.

Missionary educators—their liminal roles

For the minds of the missionaries, the notion of “helping the natives” to get on the

“right path” was the leading force for their personal lives spent far away from their native lands. The missionaries were migrants exposed to all the stresses of liminality in their personal lives (Turner & Turner, 1978). They were pilgrims who were to set up moral beacons for further pilgrimages. Thus, the marriage decisions of the missionaries were under close scrutiny of the social institutions (Predelli, 2001).

Educational efforts in any society have a dual—knowledge and morality promoting—function. In the context of the introduction of formal education in Africa by the various kinds of missionaries that duality was particularly visible—knowledge mattered as secondary to the converted morals. Education had to counter “dangerous pleasures”:

Among primitive people, play occupies relatively a much greater part of life than in civilized communities. While some of their amusements are helpful, others are degrading to the body, mind, and character. The improvement of many tribes in Africa is impossible until the degrading influences of their pleasures are corrected or eliminated. Moonlight orgies and other forms of sensuous excesses, well known in many parts of Africa, undermine the physical strength, thwart mental growth, and dull or destroy the moral sense. *The influence of education and religion will be largely nullified so long as the degenerating power of harmful amusements is permitted to continue.* (Jones, 1925, p. 32, added emphasis)

Crusade against pleasures

The “sensuous processes” of “moonlight orgies” were obviously intensely interesting for the missionaries. How did Western formal education eradicate native pleasures? The issue of conversion of the “natives” comes first of all to the central issue of converting women. Women are at the center of all cultural transformation as the bearing of children and home work in feeding the family is in their realm of competence. As mentioned above, part of the efforts to counter the native traditions that fortified the internalization of the native meaning system was to fight against crucial life-cycle rituals (circumcision). Success in that would have removed the young women from their background—but not yet given them a new role.

Women were needed as teachers—yet the concern about them was their drop-out due to marriage. For the missionaries that actually provided an opportunity of social intervention:

The training of girl teachers is needed tremendously. They are needed for infant classes in the elementary or sector schools. They are needed to conduct women’s classes in sewing, knitting, cooking and child welfare at the same centers. The fact that their teaching career is usually cut short by marriage *does not lessen the value of their training.*

The sensibly trained teacher will be the best homemaker and mother.
From South Africa comes recent evidence that the girl teachers are the spearhead of public opinion among village women. (Dougall, 1936, p. 28, added emphasis)

The entrance to the everyday life of the ideas promoted by the missionaries through the exit of female teaching students from the profession is indeed a powerful strategy. It succeeds in case of schooling as a whole—pupils who have been in school look at the world differently. In some sense, all students—the successful ones—“drop out” of school when they succeed in finishing it.

General conclusion

Since any cultural transfer is a bi-directional enterprise (Valsiner, 2000), there is no guarantee of success in the latter. The missionary educators in Africa learned that simple fact in the field. It is and was the same in their countries of origin, only without the extra psychological distance created by the different cultural worlds. All educational efforts as cultural practices are over-determined by meaning (Obeyesekere, 1990), and are redundantly controlled through a multitude of semiotic mediating devices.

Furthermore, that over-determination by meanings is selectively guided by the interested social institutions and accepted by the recipients for whom such acceptance constitutes an opening to a local (native) social setting. On the basis of recognition of the two sides of European education in Africa—both enabling and delimiting—one can come back to the general issue: what can the history of education tell us about present and future ways of becoming educated?

Let us return to some fashionable themes of our time. Would “computer literacy” mean our capability of writing programs for our home computers or merely following the instructions for how to run a pre-set program? If the latter: isn’t that somewhat similar to the Portuguese colonizers expecting the “assimilated natives” to wear shoes and eat with fork and knife? Are the users of PowerPoint more “civilized” than the backward people who use just a regular overhead projector?

These are questions that come from our contemporary discourses and involve high technology presented to us for consumption. A glimpse into the history of missionary education in Africa can tell us about our own projections into “the other”—perhaps to the benefit of setting the whole future of our own education up in less missionary and more reflexive ways.

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