

Case Report

The Question of Africa's Underdevelopment and Coexistence

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Abstract

Africa's chronic underdevelopment and struggles for peaceful coexistence fuel endless, competing explanations. Scholars and commentators blame grinding poverty, escalating climate change, religious divisions, dysfunctional politics, rampant corruption, or outright leadership failures, especially in religious narratives. The blaming game has been intense; some Muslims see Christianity as a colonial tool that facilitated domination and exploitation. Conversely, certain Christians point to Muslim groups allegedly collaborating with colonial powers, often via jihadist elements, to sustain illegal mining. Adherents of African Traditional Religions (ATR), alongside secular critics, condemn both Islam and Christianity as methods of control and modern colonialism, which undermined indigenous knowledge systems and extended imperial rule. Amid these debates, many analysts insist that the core issue remains systemic corruption and political mismanagement, sustained by foreign countries to continue exploiting the continent. This article does not seek to disprove any of these explanations. Instead, it calls for closer empirical examination of the nature and outcomes of our education, its true nature, and tangible outcomes across the continent. The central point of this article is that Africa's problem may lie not in the absence of education, but in a misunderstanding of what education truly means. Too often, emphasis falls on certificates, being employed, classroom settings, and many schooling years, while relevancy in productivity and problem-solving erodes. Students may spend years in school yet graduate lacking basic understanding of what education means, critical thinking, or practical skills suited to local needs and global opportunities. This gap traces back to colonial education systems built for control and assimilation rather than empowerment, a legacy visible today in rote memorization, irrelevant curricula, and alienation from cultural knowledge. A productive education centered on skill and empowerment could slash poverty, lift millions, and fuel economic growth, yet Africa grapples with dismal learning outcomes: Limitless certificates, limited outcomes. Highly educated, highly unproductive. Big profiles, yet unproductive.

Keywords

Education, Problem-solving, Colonialism, Importation, Poverty, Communalism, Politics, Exploitation

1. Introduction

As already stated in the abstract, far too often, the focus remains on certificates to get a job instead of job creation, quantity enrollment numbers instead of quality, years spent in classrooms, and building constructive grammar in colonial

language, while productivity, problem-solving, self-discovery, and skills are lacking. [15] Children may attend school for years yet emerge without self-discovery, critical thinking, problem-solving, or skills aligned to the realities around them

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or creating future opportunities. This disconnect echoes longstanding critiques that colonial-era education systems were designed more for control and assimilation than genuine empowerment [16], a legacy that lingers in mismatched curricula, rote learning, and disconnection from indigenous knowledge.

Recent analyses highlight how better education quality could dramatically lift millions out of poverty by 2043 [14] and boost economic output, yet Africa continues to score poorly on learning outcomes, with alarmingly high rates of children unable to read with comprehension even after several years of schooling.

2. Roots of Western Education in Africa

Western form of education arrived in Africa in two forms. First, the missionaries and second, the colonials. Missionaries introduced education in Africa in many regions before formal colonial rule. Christian missionaries such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS), Wesleyan Missionary Society, and Basel Mission established schools [6] as early as 1400AD in Lagos and some coastal areas, which aimed at empowering Africans with skills. These schools operated largely outside direct state control because, at the time, many African territories had not yet been formally colonized. Missionary education often had unintended consequences. Missionary education provided Africans with literacy, critical thinking skills, and exposure to Western ideas of equality and rights. [4] In some cases, this empowerment enabled Africans socially and politically, producing early elites who later challenged European domination. As a result, colonial authorities frequently distrusted missionaries, viewing their schools as breeding grounds for dissent and “over-education” [4]. In several colonies, missionaries faced restrictions, curriculum controls, or takeover of their schools by the colonial state [17].

By contrast, colonial (state) education was introduced after formal colonization, particularly following the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. [19] Unlike missionary education, colonial education was secular, bureaucratic, and designed explicitly to serve the needs of colonial administration [7]. Its purpose was to train a limited African workforce for roles such as clerks, interpreters, artisans, and low-level administrators. [7] Colonial education systems were heavily regulated, standardized, and racialized. Colonial governments issued education ordinances, controlled curricula, enforced the use of European languages, and restricted African access to higher education. The system deliberately avoided producing independent thinkers, focusing instead on discipline, obedience, and technical skills necessary for maintaining colonial rule [8]. While missionary education preceded colonial rule and challenged it directly, colonial state education was a calculated instrument of governance, designed to reinforce imperial control rather than African development.

3. From Classrooms to Dependency: Why Education Isn’t Building Africa

A key question, therefore, guides this discussion: if Africa has education, why does it remain overwhelmingly dependent on imports? Why can’t the same Western education that transformed Europe, China, America, Russia, Israel, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, and other countries develop Africa for almost 100 years? African universities train pharmacists and medical scientists, yet the continent imports about 90% of its vaccines and essential medicines worth around \$14b or more yearly. Agricultural science is widely taught, yet African countries rely heavily on imported fertilizers, improved seeds, pesticides, and food products, spending roughly \$719b annually on agro-supplies importation. [9] Civil and mechanical engineering are core university disciplines, yet most African states depend on foreign firms for road construction, heavy machinery, vehicles, and industrial equipment. About 84% of African road construction is handled by foreign companies. [18] Similarly, electronics and technical education exist in theory, but nearly all electronic devices, large and small, are imported. Even basic consumer goods such as clothing, shoes, toothpaste, cutlery, stationery, and household items are rarely manufactured locally, with spending roughly \$130-170 billion on imports yearly. [17]

This contradiction suggests a structural problem: education has been equated with certification rather than production. Schooling has become focused on classroom instruction, examinations, and proficiency in colonial languages, rather than on the capacity to create, innovate, and solve local problems [13]. Until education is measured by its contribution to productivity and self-reliance, Africa will continue to debate symptoms rather than causes.

A useful illustration appears in the biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 4–8). “*Behold, they are one people... and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them*” ... *let us go down and confuse their language*” (ESV). This emphasis on collective purpose resonates strongly with traditional African worldviews. Across African cultures, communal philosophy is expressed through proverbs such as “*one hand cannot roof a house*” (Margi, Northern Nigeria) and “*one broom cannot sweep a compound*” (Hausa). “*If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.*” “*A single tree does not make a forest.*” (East African proverb). Similar sayings exist throughout the continent, portraying the communal living nature. Yet today, these facts only survive as cultural memory rather than as practical. Just as God confused them with language, our colonials confused us with education.

Historically, African societies achieved complex political systems, technological innovations, and economic networks long before colonial contact. However, colonial education systems disrupted these trajectories. They gave us a schooling system designed to train a labor force suited to imperial economic needs. [2, 4]. This system produced a small educated

elite detached from productive labor and local realities. [1] This system of education thus became a mechanism of division and dependency rather than unity and transformation.

Religion is often blamed for many of Africa's problems, but this view requires a more balanced assessment. First, evidence shows that Islam has coexisted with rapid economic development in countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both of which have experienced significant economic growth over the past decades. [10] At the same time, Christianity has historically been deeply embedded in the development of Europe and North America, shaping their social, political, and educational institutions. [11] Second, there are places in the world, such as Israel, where Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and secular communities live side by side, demonstrating that religious diversity and coexistence are possible within one society. [20] This shows that religion itself is not the root problem; Africans must therefore reform our religious tolerance and strengthen traditions of mutual respect among ourselves. And religious leaders must claim their responsibility of promoting peace and unity.

Imagine Muslims helping Christians build a church, and Christians helping Muslims build a mosque. Such cooperation would demonstrate the true strength of African solidarity. Unity would resolve much of the distrust often blamed on religion and would significantly reduce social tensions. Third, across Africa, faith-based organizations are among the largest providers of social services, particularly in education and healthcare. Studies show that religious institutions play a major role in delivering schooling and medical services in many African countries. [12] In Africa, religious institutions remain the largest providers of social services, such as education 45%, healthcare 40-50%, [3] NGOs 85%. All these combined estimate around 50-200 million employments. In a continent facing severe unemployment and weak public systems, the economic and social contributions of religious organizations cannot be ignored.

With this understanding, blaming religion as the central cause of Africa's underdevelopment becomes an oversimplification. It shifts attention away from deeper structural issues and instead focuses on symptoms rather than root causes.

4. Way Forward

By now, this essay has clearly exposed how, why, and who distorted our education system. This essay further exposes a glimpse of how this system of education affects our peaceful coexistence and politicians in Africa, making choices that innocent Africans always regret in some instance, pay with their blood. Hence, we cannot continue to play victims, thereby mourning and Nursing grudges. We need to turn the tables around with a productive education.

As we know, the education inherited from colonial powers was designed not to empower Africans, but to serve the objectives of the colonizers, and it has, and still serves them well. It

is not their responsibility to provide us with the tools to liberate ourselves; that responsibility lies squarely with us. No one will hand us progress on a "golden platter"; we must earn it through wisdom and hard work, discipline and vision, skills and creativity, solving our problems, and consuming our products.

Africa must urgently rethink its approach to education. We need a paradigm shift, one that transforms curricula at all levels, from primary schools to universities. The future of Africa does not lie in producing certificate holders, but in cultivating knowledge, practical skills, and productive capacity. As my uncles often say, "A blacksmith producing hoes for farmers is more valuable to Africa than a PhD graduate waiting for a job." Africans must move from job-seeking to job-creation, from dependency to innovation, and from passive learning to active problem-solving. Education must be evaluated by what it builds, produces, and sustains, rather than by the prestige of a degree or the number of certificates issued. Only by embracing this reorientation, focusing on tangible skills, creativity, and self-reliance, can Africa break free from cycles of dependency and blame and achieve genuine, sustainable development.

Furthermore, African youths need to learn from the people who have hacked the system, such as Aliko Dangote, who built Africa's richest entrepreneur, \$31.2B, not through academic credentials. Nollywood is worth around \$6B through skills, innovation, and networks, rather than formal certification alone [5]. Youssou from Senegal is worth around \$145 million, Rupert from South Africa is worth around \$16 billion, Davido from Nigeria is worth around \$100 million, Black Coffee from South Africa is worth around \$60 million, Dewji from Tanzania is worth around \$2.2 billion, Sarkodie from Ghana is worth around \$13 million, Nassef Sawiris from Egypt is worth around \$9.6 billion, and many more. These examples show that applied knowledge and value creation, not certificates, are the foundations of economic impact. Furthermore, no form of employment can enable an individual to attain a standard of living comparable to that enjoyed by the people mentioned above.

Africa requires a fundamental paradigm shift in its education system. This shift should involve the development of a comprehensive curriculum spanning primary to tertiary education that prioritizes critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and skills-based learning over rote memorization. Such a curriculum would better equip learners to address complex social, economic, and technological challenges. In parallel, religious institutions must also re-examine their pedagogical and pastoral approaches. In some Christian contexts, an overemphasis on spiritual transcendence has, at times, discouraged practical engagement with social responsibility, stewardship, and self-agency, fostering excessive reliance on divine intervention in matters that could be addressed through human initiative and rational problem-solving. Conversely, within certain Islamic contexts, inadequate theological framing and leadership practices have contributed to the rise of religious extremism, promoting rigid dogmatism that undermines social

cohesion and constructive civic participation.

6. Recommendations

Finally, for religion to play a constructive role in Africa's development, religious leaders across traditions must adopt methodologies that balance spiritual formation with ethical responsibility, critical reflection, and active engagement in societal development. And for education to liberate Africans, we need a paradigm shift from certificate and job seeking to job-creation, problem-solving, skill-based education, and producing.

Abbreviations

170b	170 Billion
50M	50 Million
ESV	English Standard Version
CMS	Church Missionary Society

Author Contributions

Joshua Ishaya Mamza: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Resources

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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