

# Education in East Africa

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by Iain R. Smith

Education is a subject which should engage our keenest interest, our most careful provision, our deepest thoughts. Yet one of the most depressing aspects of education in Britain at the present time is that it is not doing so.

Professor Castle writes about education in East Africa.<sup>1</sup> As he is concerned with education in its widest sense – clearly formulated in ancient Greece as that which makes a man – his enquiry is not only into existing educational institutions but also into the whole nature of the societies in which African children are growing up in East Africa today.

He is uniquely well-qualified for his task. After spending most of his life in education in Britain – as teacher, headmaster, and Professor – he went in 1961 to Makerere in Uganda, as Visting Professor of Education. From 1961–65 he was in East Africa travelling widely, visiting all types of schools and colleges. In 1963 he was chairman of the Uganda Education Commission, whose Report is likely to form the basis for educational planning in Uganda for the foreseeable future. Here is no fly-by-night ‘expert’, but a man whose knowledge about educational institutions in East Africa is probably unparalleled at the present time. To these highly professional qualifications one must add that extra quality of an author who has a deep personal sympathy and concern for his subject.

The result, in this book, is a picture of education as it is in East Africa today, clearly presented, acutely observed.

Such a wide and general subject is fraught with obvious complications. Here is a vast area which includes three states with widely differing environments and societies within each of them. Some areas are rich, some are poor. Some have a self-contained pastoral economy, some have a thriving market economy sustained by prosperous agriculturalists. Some areas have a high degree of literacy and many schools, others do not. In a book which sets out deliberately to talk in general terms, and to avoid the case-study approach towards particular groups, where does one find useful categories, valid common denominators?

The contrast between urban and rural environments presents an obvious case, and Professor Castle treats both contexts with considerable detail. In Africa there has been a widespread migration to

<sup>1</sup>*Growing up in East Africa* by E. B. Castle. O.U.P., 1966, 272 pp. 30s.

the towns during recent decades, and the rate of migration in many areas has steadily increased. Given 'the revolution of rising expectations' among the young, life in the towns seems full of possibilities. In contrast, life in the rural areas so often implies a future of farming amidst conditions which inhibit the application of modern farming methods, and an income which seldom exceeds 500 shillings (£25) per year. As Professor Castle rightly remarks:

'Only Europeans debilitated by the sophistications of modern life can get sentimental over the farmer's "good life".'

Yet more than 90% of the population of all three countries live on the land, and one is told, with almost wearisome reiteration, by economists, that in the development of agriculture lies the principle means of raising the levels of health, education and prosperity throughout the area. By agriculture one must surely mean modern methods of agriculture. Farming as a way of life must be seen to offer a prospect of livelihood at least as good as that offered by other forms of employment. Until this is the case, young people, quite understandably, will continue to regard a formal education as a means of escape from the drudgery associated with outmoded, unproductive, and unprofitable systems of subsistence agriculture.

The situation in the towns is vividly described by Professor Castle. He is not particularly concerned with the life of the elite; with those whose expectations have to a large extent been met amidst the impressive surroundings of a Makerere Hill or a Kenyatta Avenue. His concern is with the masses, with the still largely floating populations of the African townships. This is surely a fair division to make. Nowhere is the size of the gulf which separates the professional elite from the unskilled worker more starkly revealed than in the distribution of incomes. In Uganda 4% of the population use 40% of the national income.

In the poorer areas of Kampala or Nairobi, where most of the urban population live, the strain on housing and basic social services is acute. The infant mortality is appallingly high. In East Africa generally, one out of every five children die in their first year, and one more during early childhood. The frequent instability of family life, the insecurity of wage-earning employment ('the dominant feature of wage-labour in East Africa is its temporary character') all contribute to a situation which Professor Castle summarises in the following terms:

'for the present we have to accept the fact that a very high proportion of Africans in towns live in conditions strongly adverse to the healthy physical and moral welfare of children.'

Coming from a European, this may sound dangerously Europe-centred in its implications of what the 'healthy physical and moral welfare of children' might be. But few people would, I think, gainsay the facts on which Professor Castle's judgement is based.

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The second part of the book is concerned with the experiences an African child undergoes in the process of growing up. Here one is particularly aware of the dangers of generalising about a process which it is almost impossible to generalise about in the context of East Africa at the present time. But, since the systems of primary and secondary schools are at least national, and therefore conform more or less to a general pattern, it is on the experiences which are undergone in these schools that Professor Castle rightly concentrates.

He gives some sobering figures concerning the problem of sheer numbers in relation to schools, places and teachers. We have got used to living with the idea of a 'population explosion' in relation to Africa. If we penetrate beneath the surface of this well-worn phrase we find that in relation to East Africa it means that, at the present time, *half* the non-European population is under 15 years of age, and that half of these children are under 5. This is roughly twice the proportion that one finds in a developed country such as Britain. One consequence of this rising young population has been a parallel explosion in the demand for schools and for education generally. The response, in terms of the rapid expansion of educational institutions at all levels, is one of the most notable achievements of most African countries since independence. Even so, Professor Castle's conclusion is only in agreement with that of most other commentators: 'it is difficult to see how school provision can catch up with population growth'.

Unfortunately the provision of school places is only part of a much graver problem, abruptly, if rather dramatically stated by the headmasters of some of the lower secondary schools which Professor Castle visited. They observed, of their pupils fortunate enough to be in schools, 'not 10% of these boys will get jobs'. At the present time in Kenya for example, rather less than 10% of the population is engaged in regular wage-earning employment. In 1965 there were over 67,000 children (who left school after completing *primary* education) for whom there was no prospect either of further education or of wage-earning employment. In all three East African countries there is a formidable problem of young, unskilled, urban unemployed. The numbers involved seem likely to increase. The political dangers of the presence – mostly in the capitals – of such large bodies of frustrated, deprived young people are obvious. Perhaps the most encouraging aspect is the awareness by the governments concerned of the problem, and the great efforts that are being made to meet it. Few governments elsewhere in the world devote anything like the same proportion of their national budgets to education that most African governments do.

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If Professor Castle had done no more than examine the facts concerning the numbers of students, teachers and schools; the syllabuses

that are taught, and the examinations which are sat; and set these against the general background of East African societies, he would have performed a valuable task. He would have made available to the lay-man, in Africa and elsewhere, data hitherto buried in Government Reports and known only to the specialist. In the final section of his book, however, he goes much further, into the largely uncharted territory in Africa of educational values. He examines, in a way not possible in Government Reports, the fundamental questions concerning what education is about.

This is undoubtedly the most original and controversial part of the book. It is easy to disagree with much of what Professor Castle says – many will undoubtedly do so, some violently. But this in itself has its uses. For in East Africa, as in many other parts of the world at the present time, the discussion about educational issues is so often conducted in purely utilitarian terms. The talk is about manpower needs; of the necessity of expanding the number of secondary school and university places; of ways of obtaining more and better teachers. But these are the means, the instruments, of education. The danger is that the deeper overall issues of what education is *for* become neglected. In East Africa this is perhaps even more understandable than it is in the West. For there, the need for national unity, stability, and economic growth are a pressing priority. Ever so subtly, education comes to be regarded as a training in technical skills for a world wholly concerned with material development and technological advance.

Professor Castle perceives this trend acutely, and counteracts it with the restatement of a wider view:

‘Education is a preparation for living in the society into which we are born . . . It is as important for Africans as it is for Europeans to avoid the error of thinking that what is African is old and outworn, and what is western is new and useful. To be African today is to inherit the African past and also to accept Africa as it is now.’

Africa ‘as it is now’ is a difficult entity to handle, even to the more limited extent of the East Africa with which this book is concerned. Here are societies where there is a great deal less continuity than there is change; where there are few established patterns of discipline and authority acceptable to the growing body of educated young people; where conflicts between traditional obligations and individual aspirations are often more acute and less reconcilable than in most other societies. Faced with a status and a situation for which there is no customary provision, the East African schoolboy, like his European counterpart, tends to create his own standards, values, and forms of conduct and behaviour.

The parallels between the processes which Professor Castle describes in relation to East Africa, and those apparent in Europe and the United States strike one forcibly. It is a point perhaps not

brought out strongly enough in the book. Many of these problems are world problems, and we are all still looking for solutions to them.

Throughout the book, one is aware of the deeply western, liberal, Christian outlook of the author. His values are those of the individualistic, western tradition of the Christian community, and particularly of the Society of Friends – of which Professor Castle is a member. It is a very fine tradition. But it is distinctly European. For the Quakers a school is a community of responsible individuals who have a religious attitude to life. The difference between a good school and a bad school is that the former ‘develops mental habits that assist pupils to acquire and use knowledge in the right way, while bad schools are content to impart knowledge in the wrong way and remain indifferent about its use’.

In Africa, as in Europe, this is not a very strong tradition. It represents the viewpoint of a small minority. A rather different kind of school is closer to the norm. This is best represented by the traditional British grammar or public schools, with their hierarchical organisation of authority. The advantage of this system is that it imposes order; it may perhaps even make for greater efficiency. But it also tends, to use Bertrand Russell’s phrase, to create ‘good behaviour with bad emotions’. The school becomes less a community in the Quaker sense, and more a hierarchy of castes. In an African school in which only the 5th and 6th forms were allowed to wear blazers, one could walk into the 2nd form and find an expression of this outlook chalked up on the blackboard in a most charming way:

‘I will labour night and day to be a blazer boy.’

Professor Castle wants something different, perhaps something better. As the first of the conditions which he finds encouraging for the growth of the type of school which he favours he asserts:

‘The African’s feeling for tradition and his capacity for reverence, both marks of a fundamentally religious outlook.’

And both, one might add, noticeably declining in Europe.

There is a tendency in Africa today for observers, advisers, educators, and planners to emphasize – perhaps unconsciously – those aspects of African society which they like to feel had their parallels in the Europe of the recent past. The danger is that this very emphasis can be seen as an artificial attempt at prolongation. Particularly in the sphere of education we have all perhaps lost our way. And it may be a considerable time yet before any of us find it again. Something new in education will come out of Africa. As even the most cynical capitalist would say ‘the demand is there’. But when it does come it will not come from outside, and the element of regret in the West for past mistakes is unlikely to exert much influence.