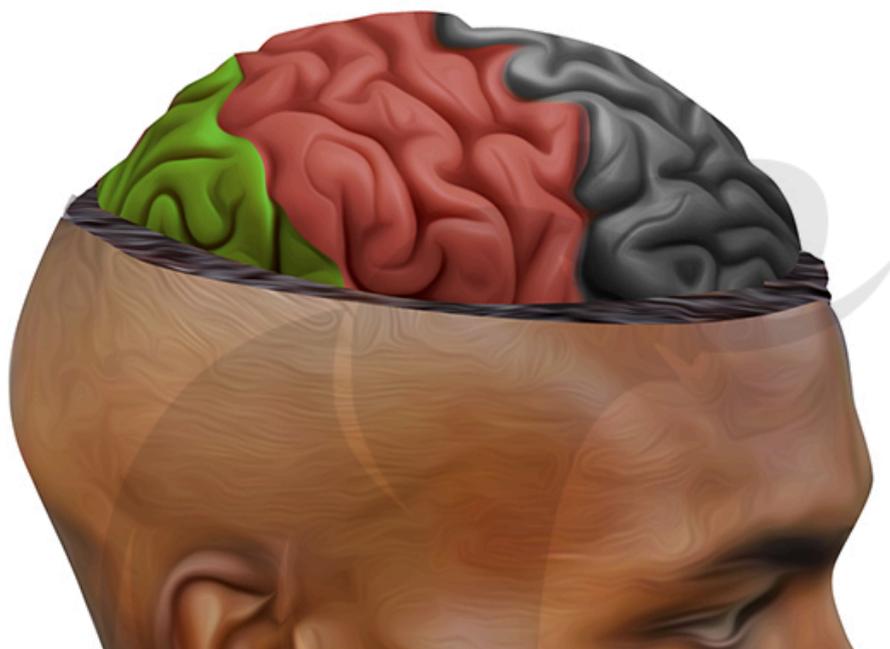




Project Kenya: A Plantation Devoid of Canons

By Darius Okolla



2019

The peril of our national education system is that it shapes students to believe in the regime's preferred version of the country's history to the exclusion of other alternative narratives. Students learn to order their lives within the faulty and often false frames of reality provided by the ruling regime with the intent of entrenching loyalty, deference, and sometimes subservience to the state.

A typical Kenyan schooled in the officially sanctioned social studies texts will refer to Kenya as a nation-state when in reality it is a plantation established circa 1885. This Kenyan will speak of independence gained in 1963 while remaining oblivious to the negotiated transfer of the colonial plantation from the white aristocracy—with the colonial logic remaining intact—into the hands of the black aristocracy.

The same citizen is then left wondering why this country does not behave as a country ought to, as it is ill-equipped to decipher the colonial pulse of this plantation whose logic and DNA are still extractive, corrupt, violent and tribal.

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From 387 BC when Plato set up the academy—deriving the name from Academus the Attic, a hero in

Greek mythology—academia has come to represent the true crucible for sharpening the minds of men throughout civilisations. Academus was famed for his redemptive power, first on Helen, the underage bride of King Theseus, and then on the minds of men for hundreds of years thereafter.

But long before the Platonic academy was built, medieval centres of learning existed in pre-modern societies, sprawling from the sandy Sahelian castles of the University of Timbuktu, to Taxila in ancient India, Shang Xiang in China, the ancient University of Alexandria, which flourished 2,300 years ago, and the school of Sabeans in medieval Persia.

From these bootstrap conceptions of centres of knowledge arose the great academies of the world that were primarily anchored in the progressive growth of disciplines and the respective complex institutions that were exclusively dedicated to their study and to knowledge production.

It is from this strain that the Renaissance academies of 15th century Italy arose, built around neoplatonist education. Then came the 16th century literary-aesthetic academies, mainly patronised by the children of the elite, including such famous academies as Notti Vaticane, Intrepidi and Vignaiuoli.

Out of this progression of disciplines and academies arose the academies of the arts, academies of sciences, literary-philosophical academies, academies of history, linguistic academies and, eventually, academic societies.

Logic, theology, sociology of our education

Interestingly, this rise of knowledge also coincided with the expansion of capital into the global South through the conquistadors and the colonial enterprise.

By the late 1800s, when barely 60 per cent of the world's states had been formed, capital (corporatocracy) began to supplant nation-states (democracy) as the most dominant form of organisation in society. This mainly began in 1896 when the industrial titans in the West realised that they would have to preserve their capitalistic interests by funding political stooges. That marked the shift of the centre of societal life from the home to the state, and finally to industry and the office.

This shift uniquely entrenched the problem all too familiar with our education system, which is that we now educate for the market instead of educating for society. The problem implicit in educating for the market is that it prioritises skills over non-monetisable knowledge in ways that fundamentally alter the value of education in the eyes of society and inadvertently exposes it to the ravages of market dynamics. Many of you out there are in careers that did not exist when you started school and most of your children will be in careers that have not been invented yet. Some students will find that the industry they are now training for will have been wiped out by the time they graduate. That is just one of the many follies of training for the market.

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The blowback from educating for the market rather than educating for the society is that the market requires signals, such as a degree or diploma certificate. These signals are domiciled in particular institutions—mainly those mandated by the state to provide education. Therefore, the average citizen learns to centralise classroom education, while alternative knowledge systems are ignored and fizzle out, atrophied by disuse and neglect.

On the other hand, educating for humanity means complementing classrooms with museums and local knowledge and libraries and creating reverence for knowledge for its own sake. It means fusing knowledge with skills, not denigrating knowledge especially when it does not fit into any immediate solutioneering need.

The case for canons

In the absence of rigour and vibrancy in the nationalistic classroom-based education, Kenyan educators have to take upon themselves the difficult duty of developing canons as pointers to the critical extra-classroom texts for the society. A canon simply refers to a body of books, tracts, narratives and other texts judged to be the most critical, insightful, and influential of a particular time period, context or place.

Take the scriptures for example, the most famous of the canons, consisting of 66 books written in three different languages—Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic—by 40 authors from more than 23 different professions over a span of 1600 years, and with a 400-year gap between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

These books were written in five regions—Judea, Babylon, Asia Minor, Greece and Italy—with books on law, systematic thinking, history, culture, philosophy, and theology transcribed mainly from four major families of manuscripts.

These manuscripts were recovered from across three continents: the Alexandrian manuscripts were recovered in Egypt, the Byzantine manuscripts in modern-day Turkey, and the Western and Caesarean manuscripts in Libya. Out of these, the church established its core texts.

The canonisation of authors and books into popular usage is based not only on their quality, but also on their relevance to society's moral, historical, social, and artistic context. The subjective desires of the canonisers, including their moral inclination, gender, geographical location, biases and motives, influence the list incredibly. That is why the question of what goes into a canon and what does not is always a never-ending topic of scrutiny and debate for scholars and readers across all academic disciplines.

Moreover, the creation of canons lends them subject to change and alteration to reflect the changing societal dynamics, as is the case with the increasing diversification of canons away from domination by Western white patriarchs like Homer and Shakespeare.

According to the scholar Paul Lauter, who historicised the American canon, the first American literature classes started in the mid-to-late 1890s, and the term "literary canon" came into use in 1929 at the same time as the first American literature textbooks were rolled out.

In recent decades, canons have diversified to include African canons, African-American canons, Asian canons, Latin American canons and feminist canons, which are complemented by discipline-specific ones such as canons of philosophy, linguistics, economics and a litany of other emerging disciplines.

Reimagining the nation

Curiously, canons are as much a political project as they are intellectual projects, laden with illuminating beliefs as to whose voices make it into the marketplace of ideas and get memorialised into pop culture.

It is in the very nature of certain books and writings to be deemed critical and reflective as well as

beneficial to a nation's soul based on their versatility, prestige, utility, power, and incisiveness and writing quality. Canons, therefore, within their historical-literary sense, equip the citizens with the ability to philosophise their nation-states.

A nation grounded in the culture of constantly evolving canonical creeds is able to articulate its existence, humanise its people and arm them with the tools necessary to see through the skilled lies of the neoliberal project with its insidious desire to quantify every aspect of human existence.

While referring to the state of Nigerian consciousness, the late Nigerian scholar, Prof. Pius Adensami opined:

Few Nigerians [or Kenyans] understand that our chaos, our urban rot and rural decay, our decrepit roads, hospitals, and Universities, our power failures and water shortages, and our fuel scarcity are collective consequences of our wanton embrace of the unthought and unreflected society.

Since we inherited this dilapidated contraption from the British, we have made not a single attempt to philosophise the Nigerian project through sustained critical thought. The price is always very heavy when a people develop a collective hostility to philosophy.

Dubai, London, Paris, and all the other destinations that Nigerians adore and desire are all outward manifestations of something called modernity. Democracy, law and order, urban planning and regulation are all features of modernity. Innovation and science and technology are equally features of modernity.

Adensami made an accurate indictment of the general public's unwillingness to appreciate the philosophy that undergirds disciplines and the resultant mess often prevalent in societies that lack canonical creeds.

According to scriptural history, long before the church convened the Council of Nicaea in 325AD to decide on the 66 books that make the Bible, Moses, the Hebrew patriarch, went to Mt. Sinai to pick up two tablets that were, hopefully, the redemptive canons that would mitigate the chaotic evil brought about by the apple debacle in the Garden of Eden. As is typical of canons, the ten creeds contained in the two Sinaitic canons would expand to 632 laws contained in the Hebrew Torah and the Talmud before being boiled down to two by the Aramaic philosopher Jesus Christ. Interestingly, in the two precepts with which he summarised the entire Hebrew canon, Christ simply calls for one to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and mind and to love their neighbour as themselves. He was in essence asserting that in the sacred-social axis of a society's existence, the social order of human civilisation has to be undergirded by the sacred order in one's relation to their deity.

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Jesus simply demonstrated that the canon process therefore goes beyond the politics of memorialisation, the intellectualisation of social reality, and the philosophisation of its existence; it is a spiritual duty of helping a nation decide what defines its popular beliefs on critical human decisions, such as the meaning of life, existence, history, sexuality, community, and identity.

Back to the feisty Adensami:

Nigerians [or Kenyans] see the end product but they have absolute contempt for the road which led the advanced world to the glittering modernity that they desire. They do not know that modernity and its gloss exist today because a long line of thinkers in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe produced philosophies which became the bedrock of what we see and call modernity today.

They do not know that the cars they drive are products of philosophy before being products of science and technology. Because Nigerians are ignorant of these things, they frown on philosophy, intellectual labour, and critical thought. The slightest encounter with philosophy and critical thought in our lives is quickly dismissed as “dogon turenchi”.

Everywhere you look, our national life is a sordid and tragic display of the absence of philosophy in our conceptualisation of Nigerian society. When you declare war on philosophy, knowledge, and critical intellection, the consequence, simply put, is Nigeria as you and I know her today. Nigeria can therefore be defined as the absence of and hostility to philosophy [and canons].

Across the Atlantic Ocean it is said of the United States that it borrowed its philosophical categories from the Greek canons, its political categories from Ancient Roman canons, its theological categories from the law and the prophets of the Hebrew canon, and its social categories from British Victorian values. It is appropriately parenthetical to add that it borrowed its secularising power from the thoroughly desacralised French canons through the 1970s identity politics and Foucault-ian poststructuralist philosophies which, I might add, constitute a large part of the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of American life today.

It is this tapping into the canonical existence of medieval societies through which we get the genius of the impressive Euro-American edifice. The United States, therefore, comes into existence as the apex of the 2000-year-old Greco-Roman-Hebrew canons which that were distilled into the American declaration of independence, stating that:

We hold these truths to be self-evident [logic], that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights [theology] that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness [philosophy]. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed [politics] . . .

Theory in everything

It takes the theorising and philosophising of one's existence for an individual and his resident community to reimagine their society and to reimagine their existence. Let's face it, food and shelter, water, schooling, and healthcare are all theory and the theory-practical divide is a false dichotomy. There is an entire theory as to why Nairobi has more schools than, say, Wajir or Kakamega; there is a whole theory behind the vibrant rural modernity in Meru; it is the theory that determines whether there is water in your neighbourhood or not. The theory could be racism, humanism, urban anthropology, historical accidents, ethnic profiling, social notions of wealth and development, political marginalisation—it is all theory.

There is a theory behind our obsession with concrete and soil. Yes, metal pipes bringing water to your house carry silent theories within them. The theory could be in the quality of materials used, the government idea of sustainable infrastructure, the social class of the neighbourhood or the work ethic of the engineers and the enforcement of quality controls in the system.

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Behind the silent width of the cemented Mbagathi Road or the glaring omission of footpaths on Jogoo Road or even poor markings on Waiyaki Way lie theories. Sometimes the theory is simply entrenched classism and the voicelessness of the poor. Every time you claim that that's just theory, we want practice, that too is a theory; it is a theory that posits that theory is not important.

Darwinism, democracy, racism, pan-Africanism and all other -isms and -acies silently populate all the "practical" designs and outcomes out there. It's no use mocking theories without giving people alternative metaphysical constructs and ideas. And when we deny ideology and paint theory as unnecessary, abstract, esoteric, pie-in-the-sky, we display a nation sorely in need of a canon.

Tragically, we don't like theory so we think TVET and the Competency-based Curriculum will make our kids learn "practical skills", forgetting that that too counts as theory.

These kids might never invent anything new because invention, innovation and improvement of existing systems and infrastructure requires an understanding of their theories of origin and development, but theory is not important, right? At best, they will adopt solutions from abroad without interrogating the anthropological, historical, demographic and social contexts within which those systems and infrastructure, policy or setups were invented and how those contexts influenced the designs and workability of those systems; yet it's all in the theories domiciled in some form of a canon.

Everyone for themselves

There are those that think that canons are the elitist conceptions of egomaniac Kenyan scholars and thinkers laden with a well-concealed contempt for the hoi polloi's capacity to pursue knowledge on their own. The central thesis of their argument rests upon the unnecessarily idealistic and manifestly illusory belief that everyone can and should pursue intellectual labour unencumbered by the patronising canon-building efforts of intellectual elites.

According to this school of thought, the process of building canons is filtered through gatekeeping and a god-like status that scholars purportedly grant themselves to decide what the society should read.

The truth is that, in the face of a nationalistic education that is often the vehicle for the regime's official narrative, and the inability of many to decipher fact from fake news, the presence of a wide range of alternative canons will improve the scope of books and texts that one needs to help them figure out the society.

The humanities, therefore, owe the Kenyan masses a canon. So do the arts, the social sciences, the hard sciences, linguistics and pretty much every professional field and discipline. If this is not done, we might as well watch Project Kenya collapse and with it the hopes, dreams and aspirations of its people.

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