

A Study of the Church Education System in British Africa and Early African Women Intellectuals

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Abstract

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a crucial period for the formation of the education system in British African colonies and an important stage for the emergence of African women intellectuals. The church, as the main intermediary of colonial education, played a complex dual role in this process. It was both a tool for the colonizers to maintain their rule and an unexpected catalyst for the awakening of African intellectuals. African women who grew up through church education not only acquired literacy and social organization skills but also gradually participated in major historical processes such as Pan-Africanism, national independence movements, and the African literary revival. This paper traces the development of the church education system in British Africa, analyzes the goals and practices of church-based women's education, and explores, through case studies, how early African women used education to achieve self-reconstruction and social participation, becoming an indispensable force in 20th-century African intellectual and political change.

Keywords

British Africa, Colonial Education, Women Intellectuals

1. Introduction

As early as the mid-16th century, Portuguese missionaries attempted to establish formal schools in Africa, but due to a lack of historical records, little is documented about missionary activities during this period. In some parts of Central and East Africa, missionary activities even predated European colonial rule, and the missionary activities of British, French, and American missionaries in Africa in the 19th century laid the foundation for Western education in Africa. The church schools they established not only became precursors to the colonial education system but also, to a certain extent, reshaped the knowledge structure and social classes of African society.

Existing research often analyzes the African colonial education system from a macro perspective or focuses on the lives of individual outstanding female intellectuals, lacking a systematic exploration of the interaction between African church education and women's groups. Deborah Gaitskell's research is the most representative. This scholar primarily studies the history of Christianity in South Africa and women's missionary activities. Her research not only focuses on the activities of missionaries but also emphasizes how Africans, especially African women, received, adapted to, transformed, and even resisted these foreign religious and cultural forms, stressing the subjectivity of Africans. She avoids simplifying the relationship between female missionaries and African women into a simple "oppressor" and "oppressed" dynamic, instead delving into the inherent power inequalities and cultural misunderstandings within this relationship. She also focuses on the emotional connections, cooperation, and shared gender dilemmas.

Domestic research largely focuses on the development and evolution of independent churches and Christianity in Africa, with insufficient exploration of the interaction between African

women and religious education. Li Anshan points out that under colonial rule, the Christian church brought education and healthcare to Africa. Education was a crucial area of cooperation between missionaries and colonial governments; churches established schools throughout Africa, cultivating numerous progressive intellectuals who received church education. Guo Jia further argues that while church schools cultivated a large number of talents, they also created a new social stratum—the "elite class"—thus propelling African society towards a modern model of state governance.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to systematically examine the shaping role of the British African church education system on early African female intellectuals through historical documents and case studies. Despite the limitations of the educational content, the acquisition of literacy skills opened the doors to Western thought and scientific knowledge for women. This group of female intellectuals used the literacy and organizational skills acquired through church education to reshape their self-identity, participate in social change through organizational practice, and thus leave a profound mark on the modernization process in Africa.

2. The Development and Policy Background of the Church Education System

The period from the 1880s to the 1950s is widely recognized as the golden age of the spread of Christianity in Africa. During this stage, the British colonial government gradually realized the importance of education as a means of social control, but still relied on missionary organizations as the main body for implementing education. In 1923, the British Colonial Office established the "British Tropical African Dependencies," which was later renamed the "Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies." In 1925, the committee published the *Memorandum on Education Policy in British Tropical Africa*, which included priorities for British colonial education policy. These included: government control over education administration, but cooperation with private voluntary organizations (missionaries); education should be adapted to local needs and conditions; and greater attention should be paid to girls' education.

The missionary conference held in Lezutte in 1926 further clarified the division of labor between the government and the church: education was recognized as a legitimate government function, and it was pointed out that since indigenous education had no value without religion, it should be largely entrusted to missionaries, who would organize educational activities under the guidance and subsidies of the government. The main area of missionary activity should be primary and secondary education, while higher technical education would be the responsibility of the government through administrative bodies represented by missionaries. However, this did not mean that missionaries could not establish institutions of higher learning; under conditions stipulated by the government, they could intervene in higher education, and missionary organizations still maintained a dominant position in educational content.

Furthermore, the charismatic movement arose in African churches and within mainstream churches from the late 19th to the early 20th century, leading to Africans taking over and establishing new churches. During this period, the role of women in missionary activities on the African continent shifted compared to earlier times. Because African churches placed particular emphasis on women fulfilling their mission and calling, these women used these opportunities to become church founders, pastors, and church leaders. Unlike the passive recipients of education in traditional missionary work, an increasing number of African women stepped onto the religious and social stage in new roles. Women-founded churches transformed the face of Christianity in Africa during this period by expanding women's religious space.

John Anderson points out that, "In Africa, as in Europe, the idea of women receiving formal education was initially met with much skepticism, and it was the tireless efforts of capable and

determined female missionaries that led to the establishment of girls' schools." Data shows that in 1935, Kenya had nearly 30,000 primary school girls, while King Bhudo College in Uganda conducted an experiment in co-education, although only 22 out of 300 students were girls. Against this backdrop, church schools, especially girls' schools, became the earliest window for African women to access Western education. They not only taught basic literacy and arithmetic but also introduced vocational skills training in areas such as home economics and nursing, providing African women with limited but valuable channels for social advancement.

However, despite the British colonial government's advocacy of an education policy "adapted to local conditions," the actual coverage and quality of church education varied significantly by region, with enrollment levels exhibiting a clear geographical distribution: educational expansion in northern sub-Saharan Africa lagged far behind that in central and southern Africa. One of the main reasons for this disparity was the uneven distribution of Christian missionary forces. Furthermore, because church education often prioritized the children of local elites, early African women receiving church education mostly came from families with a certain social standing.

3. The Goals and Daily Practices of Church-Based Women's Education

Church-based women's education in British Africa underwent a complex evolution. In the 19th century, the main purpose of missionaries' missionary work with African women was to cultivate family roles consistent with Christian doctrine, namely, "devout wives and mothers." Unlike the training of indigenous men, missionary activities for African women, particularly the education of girls and the social welfare initiatives, were closely linked to the concept of "family." Household chores and childcare were core concerns for Anglican and Methodist women. African women often received church education "for family life," aimed at preparing them to spread the gospel as wives and mothers.

In 1908-1909, when Anglican deacon Julia founded the St. Agnes' Industrial School for Native Girls in Johannesburg, she discovered that Christian parents desperately desired such a boarding school because day school teachers were predominantly male, and their daughters "had almost no opportunity to learn the knowledge necessary for future domestic service or to improve their families." Missionaries hoped that girls who married at 20, as was customary, would "serve Christ" among their people "as wives and mothers." This educational philosophy was clearly colonial and gender-limited, confining African women to the private sphere of the home and reinforcing traditional gender roles. However, despite the limitations of its educational goals, church education still provided women with basic cultural capital and social networks.

As colonial rule deepened and local social structures changed, the goals and practices of women's education also underwent some adjustments and expansions. Missionary institutions gradually discovered that simply training qualified housewives could not fully meet the colonies' demand for female human resources. In addition to training housewives, many missionary hospitals trained male and female medical personnel, and mission stations offered midwifery courses at many sites. For example, the Jeans Girls' School provided education to prepare girls for marriage and motherhood, while the London Missionary Society's schools trained girls to become nurses. Furthermore, missions also oversaw the training of female teachers, typically through academic teaching. In Uganda, teacher training was more advanced than in other parts of East Africa: in 1936, 316 male and 197 female teachers received training in one public school and thirteen missionary schools. Clearly, beyond becoming a successful housewife, training in teacher education and nursing skills enabled a small number of African women to become teachers, nurses, or midwives—a first step towards economic independence and social respect.

It is particularly noteworthy that the British government prioritized women's education, and the pioneering work of missionaries in this field is widely known. In the reports of the Nuffield Foundation and the Colonial Office, the discussion of women's education in the section on the Central and East African Studies Group is more extensive than on any other topic. This policy inclination, to some extent, promoted the increase of resources for women's education and the establishment of management institutions. In Tanganyika, the first public girls' school was founded in 1929, followed by 14 more church-run girls' schools receiving government assistance. The government also appointed a female official specifically to oversee the education of women and girls.

4. From Literate to Intellectual

In South Africa, the church-run educational and health programs cultivated generations of intellectuals. Almost all leaders of nationalist movements were educated in the church, some even coming from pastoral families. The most direct contribution of church education was providing literacy to African women. Although the content of education was often strictly controlled, literacy itself became a window allowing women to access Western thought, scientific knowledge, literary works, and even political discourse. Literacy not only enhanced women's self-expression but also laid the foundation for their further learning and critical thinking. Furthermore, because church schools typically emphasized discipline, communal living, and organizational management, this training enabled women to actively participate in social organizations and political movements later in life. Many women served as volunteers, teachers, or charity workers in churches, accumulating rich organizational experience. These skills were further utilized in anti-colonial movements, women's federations, literary societies, and other organizations.

4.1. Charlotte Maxeke

Charlotte Maxeke, hailed as the "Mother of the Black Women's Movement in South Africa," was the first Black woman in South Africa to earn a university degree. She studied at Wilberforce University in the United States, a long-established Black university run by the African Methodist Church (AME Church). Her educational background was deeply rooted in the church system; she received not only academic training but also honed her organizational and leadership skills. After returning home, Charlotte actively participated in social reform and women's rights movements. In 1918, she founded the Bantu Women's League, which later evolved into the ANC Women's League. Through speeches, writing, and organizing protests, she opposed the Pass Laws' restrictions on Black women and promoted educational equity and gender equality. She wrote, "Education is the key to the liberation of our nation, and women must be at the heart of this process." Her life exemplifies how church education provides African women with an international perspective and organizational tools, enabling them to combine local struggles with the global Black liberation movement.

4.2. Muthoni Likimani

Muthoni Likimani was a Kenyan writer, broadcaster, and social activist. She grew up in a Kikuyu Christian family, received her early education in a church school in Nairobi, and later became one of Kenya's first female broadcasters. Her representative works, **Women of Kenya: Fifteen Years of Independence** (1979) and **What Does a Woman Want?** (1984), profoundly reflect the dual awakening process of Kenyan women in the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Likimani's works are not only of literary value but also important social documents. Through personal narratives and ethnographic writing, she records the roles played by women in the Mau Mau Uprising, the independence movement, and nation-building. She also focuses on how church education enables women to find a balance between tradition and modernity—neither

completely rejecting local culture nor failing to critically accept modern knowledge and new ideas.

Besides Maksiq and Likimani, many other African women embarked on paths of knowledge and social activism through church education. South African writer and politician Dorothy Nyembe, who received a church education in her early years, later became a core member of the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League and actively participated in the anti-apartheid struggle. Flora Nwapa, Nigeria's first female novelist, was deeply influenced by both Christian education and Igbo tradition. Her female characters possess both the resilience of traditional mothers and the self-awareness of modern women, becoming an important marker of the awakening of female consciousness in African literature. These cases demonstrate that despite the colonial and gender limitations inherent in church education, it still provided African women with pathways to self-realization in different regions and to varying degrees.

These cases reveal that while church education exhibits clear colonial and gender limitations in its ideology and practice, it still inadvertently provided African women with a path to knowledge and power. These women not only broke through their silence using literacy skills but also redefined their roles in the family, society, and nation through organizational skills, international networks, and critical thinking. Their stories collectively constitute a history of "from literate to intellectual," revealing that education can still play a liberating role despite structural constraints. This historical process still holds profound implications for contemporary Africa: especially in areas such as the allocation of educational resources, the advancement of gender equality, and the reshaping of cultural autonomy, the experiences and strategies of early female intellectuals are still worth learning from and continuing. The emergence of female intellectuals marks the transformation of African women from passive recipients of education to active participants in history. Influenced by Pan-Africanism, they combined local experience with a global perspective, promoting the modernization of African literature, politics, and society.

5. Conclusion

From its inception, the British African church education system was fundamentally aimed at serving colonial rule and spreading Christianity. However, it also objectively became an important channel for a group of women to break through the limitations of traditional gender roles. These women acquired literacy and organizational skills through church education, enabling them to participate in historical processes such as anti-colonial movements, literary creation, and social reform. The rise of early African female intellectuals not only marked the transformation of African women from passive recipients of education to active participants in history, but also provided important historical references for contemporary African education and development policies. Especially in areas such as the allocation of educational resources, the promotion of gender equality, and the reshaping of cultural autonomy, the experiences and strategies of early women still have profound implications. Understanding this history not only helps in understanding the origins of African female intellectuals but also provides profound historical references for contemporary African education and development policies.

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