Education for Self-Effacement - A Student’s View

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Abstract: Considering the ultimate limitations of instructing Kenya’s children in ‘civilised’ acts like eating a banana with a knife and fork at the expense of an education true to the nation’s history, Wangui Kimari wonders whether the current educational system simply upholds students’ self-effacement. When my sister was in primary school (the school where we all were had a supposedly pious nature that was the talk of town), like all of the students within this institution she had to take a mandatory ‘ethics’ class. The title of this class appeared to us ambivalent, big and intimidating, but from what we could garner, ‘ethics’ were simply tacit rules that we needed to embody in order to live (or pretend to live) in religious harmony with each other.

One morning on our way to school in our car, the aforementioned sibling, age 13, obviously thinking of what she had learnt the previous day, informed us with uninhibited joy that during the ethics class – taught by the idolised Italian priest – the teacher focused on instructing the adolescent students how to eat a banana with a knife and fork. Obviously certain that it was a most salient lesson for these young African minds, this priest devoted over forty-five minutes to demonstrating one of the requisites of modern ‘civilised’ life. My sister’s happiness was due to the fact that she was among those who managed, although with admitted difficulty, to embrace the ‘challenges of modernity’ and perform the required feat.

I was only seven when I heard my sister relate this, and as one of the car’s occupants, I remember (even though at this age I was probably on my way to being quite a successful colonial project) being rather unsure of how to receive this news. Nonetheless, it appeared to be the most normal occurrence to the rest of the occupants, for I do not recall anyone responding with any ounce of indignation. This was in 1993, supposedly thirty years after independence.

It makes me wonder – now of course when my agitation is more articulate, and when (duly) I have much less of my childhood tolerance and when I can more clearly see the interdependent nature of life and thus have a more fervent need to deconstruct what was I was made – what exactly have we been learning and are we learning in schools in Kenya if such an ethics class was such a norm, that even adults were not be able to discern the unequivocal insinuations of such a lesson?

Later on and more than 15 years later, I am graciously offered a book entitled Kenya: A Prison Notebook by one of my close friends, A. Shujaa. Despite years of education in this country and sufficient participation in public forums, I had never heard of the author, Maina wa Kinyatti. In reading further I am to discover the depths of my ignorance about the history of Kenya, for the experiences documented in this book – the catalyst of which, among many, was a yet imperceptible
independence – were not unique to the author. I then ask myself, how many people were subject to such morbid life as Nyayoism – a word new to me – was being so severely implemented? How many people died in Kenya or were forced to leave their homeland in the early 1980s and 1990s? How many more hungry stomachs were created as we incessantly fortified a system where people have to compete for food? How many?

The answers to these questions and the experiences that generated them, I am positive, have not found their way onto the national curriculum.

So my query is, what is the purpose of school here in Kenya, if my attendance, and the attendance of my sisters, brothers, and colleagues, really just encourages and exacerbates a process of self-effacement? In their unwavering support of this type of education, are our parents and grandparents really just encouraging us to view them as persons without dignity because what we learn does not allow us to give them appropriate reverence? We are living the consequences of this education for self-effacement. It was a few years later after my sister’s ethics class that my cousin from my mother’s rural home picked out a stray potato leaf in a bundle of Managu leaves.

Before this, I had internalised the normalised prejudice (stated or not) that I was more intelligent than this cousin as I was city-born and likely to go further than she ever would, regarding her as a mere a country girl whose future would always be limited. However, on this day I can remember thinking how much more vital her knowledge was when compared to that of the textbook I had crammed and thus could wield like a weapon. In awe of her, I marveled. It was perhaps at this time that I slowly began to see that, even if I could (albeit awkwardly) succeed in eating a banana with a fork and knife, the effortless natural knowledge that my cousin conveyed was more worthwhile than my extensive knowledge of the ‘sciences’. For in preservation of such wisdom, she knew a lot better than I did who she was, even if this was and would be an amalgamation of various influences. And in her knowledge of herself she would (a lot more easily than I) and as Fanon advised the youth, ‘out of tentative obscurity discover [her] mission, fulfill it or betray it.’

It is through many follies and sometimes fancies, often in foreign lands that I have learnt the histories of many that I should have learnt whilst in my country. Luckily, slowly by slowly, I begin to perceive the true patterns of the past. Accordingly, I then become concerned about the educational priorities of this country and ask what exactly are we really learning to do?

I know many more are to pass through this enforced system, and thus if so, if this is the structure of education we have chosen, there is a great need to reconsider what is being taught in the halls of our educational institutions. Or perhaps we would much rather continue dissecting fruit (rather awkwardly if I must say) than learn about ourselves?

If so, we can only await the further consequences of an education system that upholds our own self-effacement.
Maina during a book launch carried on YouTube.