

The Social Organization of Learning Initiation Rituals and Public Schools

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The question under investigation is why does a modern well-equipped school with well-trained staff fail to "educate" its pupils? The school in question is in a rural (and hence tribal) area of Liberia. It is compared with a newer, less well-equipped school in a village more recently opened to the outside world. This comparison reveals little difference in the apparent outcomes of the two schools despite the gross differences in input.

An explanation for the failure of these and other similar schools in rural, formerly tribal enclaves is sought in an unlikely location—the initiation ritual. The study provides a broad review of initiation rituals throughout the world, utilizing the concepts of van Gennep and Goodenough to create a theoretical framework. The various constituent elements of the initiation ritual are examined from the standpoint of their contributions to the nature and direction of the changes they induce in initiates.

This review of the initiation ritual provides a template on which the characteristics of the rural public school are sketched. It is concluded that the school doesn't educate because it is organized to indoctrinate and to initiate pupils into a new society.

*L'organisation sociale des études:
les rites d'initiation et les écoles publiques*

Cette enquête traite la question "pourquoi une école moderne, bien équipée, avec un personnel bien formé, ne parvient-elle pas à éduquer ses élèves?" L'école étudiée ici se trouve dans une région rural (et, donc, tribale) du Libéria. On la compare avec une école moins nouvelle, moins bien équipée dans un village plus récemment ouvert au monde extérieur. Cette comparaison ne révèle que peu de différence entre les "produits" apparents des deux écoles malgré les grandes différences matérielles.

On cherche une explication à l'échec de ces écoles et à celui d'autres écoles pareilles situées dans les enclaves rurales, qui étaient tribales, dans un endroit surprenant—le rite d'initiation. Cette étude fournit une large revue des rites d'initiation partout dans le monde, en employant les concepts de van Gennep et de Goodenough, afin de créer un cadre théorique. On examine les divers éléments constitutifs de l'optique de leurs contributions à la nature et de la direction des changements qu'ils suscitent dans les initiés.

Cette revue des rites d'initiation fournit une sorte de modèle d'après lequel on a tracé les caractéristiques de l'école publique rural. On arrive à la conclusion que l'école n'éduque pas parce qu'elle est organisée pour indoctriner et initier les élèves à une nouvelle société.

Dans sa conclusion l'auteur tâche, avec l'aide de Bateson, de développer une théorie qui prédira la présence ou l'absence dans une société des institutions qui s'occupent des changements d'identité.

El interrogante en estudio se plantea en la siguiente forma: ¿porqué será que un colegio moderno, con personal capaz, no logra "educar" su alumnado? La escuela citada se halla en una zona rural (y por ende tribal) de Liberia. Se contrasta a otra mas moderna y menos dotada de una aldea recién-abierta al mundo externo. La comparación saca a relieve diferencias menores en los resultados aparentes de ambas, a pesar de los notorios desniveles.

Se pretende hallar una explicación de tales fracasos tanto en éstas como en otras escuelas rurales, hasta hace poco focos de asentamientos tribales, valiéndose de un aspecto insólito: la ceremonia de iniciación, el estudio ofrece una amplia indagación de las ceremonias de iniciación en todo el mundo valiéndose de los conceptos de van Gennep y Goodenough para sentar las estructura teórica. Se escudriñan los diferentes elementos constitutivos de los ritos de iniciación teniendo en cuenta las contribuciones que hacen éstas en la naturaleza y dirección de los cambios inducidos en iniciados.

Esta investigación de los ritos inaugurales ofrece un patrón que permite bosquejar las escuelas públicas rurales. Se menciona la etnografía de una de tales escuelas en Sinyee, Liberia, en la que aparece la estraordinara coincidencia entre ésta y la ceremonia de iniciación. Se concluye que la escuela no educa porque su organización se ha creado con miras a adoctrinar e incorporar los alumnos e iniciados a la nueva sociedad.

En la sección final, con la ayuda de Bateson, el autor trata de crear una teoría que permita predecir la presencia o ausencia de instituciones cuyas funciones reposen en transformar identidades en cualquier sociedad.

DEVELOPMENT EDUCATORS are becoming aware of a paradoxical problem in education in the developing nations. Simply stated, as the demand for trained manpower continues to grow, at least on paper, countries invest increasing amounts of scarce capital in schools, attracting greater numbers of students who cannot or will not profit sufficiently from this experience to fill manpower needs. Balogh, referring especially to Africa, cites one reason for this problem: "education, far from providing the economy with better and more trained manpower at every stage and level was increasingly considered incompatible with menial jobs, i.e., any kind of job involving manual labor and more especially agricultural labor" (1966:163). As a solution, he would change the emphasis and curriculum in African schools to vocational education. In a rebuttal to Balogh, Philip Foster states, "Rather than attempt to load them with vocational subjects the provision of a sound general education with a bias towards general science and English, essential at all levels, can provide the basis upon

which later effective specialist training can be given" (1966:174).

The small, rural, public elementary school, which is becoming increasingly common in developing countries, must bear a large part of the burden for providing this "sound, general education." It is the contention of this essay, however, that, as presently constituted, these schools cannot provide basic education which is compatible with the later learning of modern technical specialties, and will not become so even with curriculum changes, or improved teacher training. The reason for this failure lies in the fact that schools, especially in developing countries, serve other functions, totally unrelated and incompatible with technical training and that these other functions largely determine the form of education. According to Everett Reimer, "schools in all nations, of all kinds, and at all levels, combine four distinct social functions: custodial care, social role selection, indoctrination, and education as usually defined in terms of the development of skills and knowledge It is conflict among these functions that makes schools inefficient." He later states,

After performing their child care, social screening, and value teaching functions, schools also teach cognitive skills and both transmit and, at graduate levels, create knowledge. The first three functions are performed necessarily, because of the way schools are organized. Skill- and knowledge-teaching, though they are declared the principal purposes of schools, occur only insofar as resources remain after the built-in functions are performed (1971:7).

My own research in Liberia confirms Reimer's claims. Since the early sixties, the Liberian government, with backing from the United States, has rapidly expanded its educational services in rural areas. This expansion has centered on building or assisting villagers in the construction of elementary schools and in training and placing high-school graduates as teachers in these schools. Until 1970, the U.S. Peace Corps also supplied many volunteers to serve as teachers in Liberian rural schools.

The stated reasons for this expansion of primary education are numerous. They include: meeting individual manpower needs, acceptance of improved sanitation and health-care measures, improving agricultural output, etc. A powerful, but unstated, goal is to Liberianize the majority of the population which owes greater allegiance to tribal than to national ties. While this last goal appears to be slowly materializing, the former goals are not being met. Accomplishing the first set of goals requires education while the latter requires indoctrination. To see why these goals are in conflict and why the indoctrination takes precedence necessitates an examination of a rural public school and another unlikely institution, the bush school.

Rich School, Poor School, Bush School

In 1969, I spent some time observing in a rural elementary school in the village of Sinyeé, Liberia.¹ This school was, in many respects, a model school. It was accessible from a main motor road, and adjacent to a liberal arts college, an agricultural research station, and a modern hospital. The well-constructed school building had been erected in 1966 with American AID funds. There were four teachers for the six grades including the principal. Two of these teachers had some education beyond high school. Sinyeé pupils had modern textbooks. Some were designed particularly for African schools and others were written exclusively for Liberia.

More recently, I visited a school in a remote area of Liberia, in the town of Gbarngasuakwelle.² The contrast between this school and the school in Sinyeé could not have been greater, at least on the surface. The only apparent similarity was that both served children of the Kpelle tribe.³ Gbarngasuakwelle was, until nine months ago, inaccessible by road and it has, as yet, no school building proper. School is held in the church. This building is constructed of the traditional wattle and daub, with a dirt floor and roughly square openings in the walls to let in a little light. Bamboo benches are the only seating. There are no desks or tables to write on. There is one teacher for the 90-odd pupils in five grades. The first-graders have no books at all and the second through fourth graders (there is one sixth grader, and one seventh grader) use vintage texts from Britain and the United States (instruction is entirely in English). Nevertheless, the teacher, a very energetic young man, insistently told me that while "the pupils aren't learning much now, they'll do fine just as soon as they get enough books, copybooks, desks, and a new school building." This remark came during a 15-minute interlude in the classroom when he found it impossible to teach because a six-year-old girl was screaming her head off. Her outburst, in turn, was triggered when she was "switched" on the hands by the teacher for "talking." It was this incident which served to link the two schools, the new, struggling, poorly equipped one, and the smooth-functioning, well-equipped one, because the whipping of children for talking was common to both. Other commonalities soon became apparent, and I was led to treat the teacher's hopeful remarks about the future skeptically, because I could find no evidence that pupils in Sinyeé were learning any more, any faster, or any more eagerly than their counterparts in Gbarngasuakwelle.

Measured in terms of the mastery of the three "R's," the "advanced" school and the "backward" school seem to be nearly equally inadequate. This assessment is based on my own observations and is supported by Gay and Cole's work with Kpelle school children, which included

a study of the Sinyeé school. To quote from *The New Mathematics and an Old Culture*:

In summary, Kpelle students who encounter mathematics in Western-oriented schools misuse the English language, learn by rote memory and guessing, do not use logical patterns, and have no use for what they learn. School mathematics has largely failed, and the child produced by the system needs radical help to overcome this failure, no matter what the grade level (Gay and Cole 1967:35).

But both schools do accomplish some behavioral change in their charges—namely, they change their pupils' identities. The nature and extent of this change is discussed below, but to understand this, as well as their failure to "educate" requires a study of the social organization of learning in the school. It is necessary to move away from an examination of the content of textbooks to a broader perspective where one studies the symbolic meaning of textbooks per se. In terms of their structural features these two schools are remarkably similar to each other and, interestingly enough, to a local Kpelle institution, the "bush school." Very little is known about the bush school even though it is found in many West African tribal societies. What is certain is that it incorporates an initiation ritual whereby boys and girls are transformed into male and female adults and, simultaneously, they become members and learn the rites of the *Poro*, a powerful secret society. To make the point that schools for Kpelle children change their identities and to show how this is done will be greatly facilitated by comparing the more typical Sinyeé school to the Kpelle and other initiation rituals.⁴ It will be shown that both types of institution, the rural public school in a tribal area, and the initiation ritual, despite gross differences in outward appearances, in fact do organize learning along very similar lines and achieve similar outcomes.

The idea that formal schooling and the initiation ritual may have something in common is not new, but has been suggested, for example, by Ong in "Latin Language Study as a Renaissance Puberty Rite" (1959). Fisher in "White Rites versus Indian Rights" (1969) asserts that the Canadian government school serves as a rite of passage for Indian children. In the following essay, I will apply this comparison to the system of elementary schooling in Liberia. One reason for re-examining this theme is that in two recent articles (Cohen 1971; Scribner and Cole 1973) the authors have correctly delineated the differences between public schooling or formal education and learning outside the public school or informal education without dealing satisfactorily with the initiation ritual. Both articles point out that socialization taking place in the home and in the peer group is organized quite differently from that

which takes place in schools, and hence leads to different outcomes regardless of the content of the "curriculum." What they don't show is exactly what children are learning in schools and how the structure of the educational system shapes this learning. Both pass lightly over the initiation ritual in their discussions of out-of-school learning and this is unfortunate because an examination of the initiation ritual and its outcome can throw a great deal of light on these questions.

The Initiation Ritual

An initiation ritual is an example of what van Gennep has called a rite of passage. There are many such rites which an individual may encounter in the course of his life, but I am limiting my investigation to those that affect children and adolescents. These have often been labeled "puberty rites," but they do not always coincide with physiological puberty—so van Gennep has coined the term "social puberty" (1960:65) to counter this insinuation. Thus, an initiation ritual in this essay will include any system of rites done regularly, in a set, precise manner wherein a child or adolescent is made a member of a sect or society and/or invested with a particular status.

Goodenough has dealt at great length with the identity-changing function of rites of passage, pointing out that a changed identity is often associated with graduation, marriage, inauguration, funerals, as well as initiation rituals (1963:Ch. 9). There are three parts to a changed identity. First, the individual must perceive himself as being different; he leaves one peer group and joins another. Second, he must be perceived by others as having changed status; he is accepted by the group which formerly did not accept him. Finally, related changes occur in the individual's behavior. He may dress and talk differently. His relationship with the opposite sex may change, and so on. In the discussion which follows, it will be necessary to gloss over the wide variation in initiation rituals cross-culturally in order to isolate those structural features that appear to be most common and to contribute most to learning a new identity.

The first thing that is remarkable about initiation rituals is that they almost always take place in a special setting. In the West African bush school, "a permanent place is selected in the forest . . . and is never used for other purposes, . . . all the structures are burned at the close (Watkins 1963:430). Among the Hopi, initiation is associated with the Kiva, an underground chamber (Simmons 1942). Religious instruction which in most societies occurs only at adolescence and may constitute a rite of passage takes place in temples which are set apart in space, architecturally, and by whomever may enter under what circumstances.

The fact that initiation rituals occur in special places

is only one indication of the fact that they are systematically organized. Initiates learn from a few teachers (as contrasted with the many people from whom the child may learn prior to initiation) who are clearly designated as such. These teachers may have other duties to perform for a society, but in the presence of initiates their role is to teach. Inordinate stress is placed on the subrole of "tester" or evaluator. Teachers explain their severe treatment of initiates by saying this is necessary to test them. Teachers not only possess knowledge, they possess special powers as well, including political, religious, and mystical power. This power may be symbolized by special clothing, titles, masks, etc., or it may be conveyed nonsymbolically through gestures or posture among other things. Teachers generally are strangers to the initiates. "In Tiwi they are a selected group of his [the initiate's] senior male cross-cousins . . . They are 'from the other side of the tribe,' men with whom the boy has had little to do and whom he may never have seen before (Hart 1963:411). They may be familiar figures whose identity has been hidden by masks. Even when the teachers are the initiate's own kin and are unmasked their behavior is so extraordinary as to render them strangers. Finally, there is often a head initiator who is not only superior to the initiates, but is superior to the other initiators as well. An example is Namu, the head of the Kpelle bush school who is immortal and may be in many places at once.

Initiation rituals begin and end at set times. Even though the length of any ceremony may vary from a few days to several years, their length does not depend on the learning process. Initiates do not remain only long enough to learn what they're supposed to, but instead remain until the end of the ceremony. Leaving before the end is either forbidden or followed by public censure and scorn.

The information of the initiation ritual is fixed; neither the initiators, the initiates, nor their parents can control or change it. The interests or abilities of the learner are not taken into account; all initiates are exposed to the same information in the same way. Within any given society and often in several societies in an area, the curricula of initiation are remarkably standardized. In West Africa, for example, the bush school has diffused, relatively unchanged, over a wide area crossing language, geographical, sociopolitical, and economic barriers. Similarly, in Melanesia, one finds patterns which have spread beyond otherwise well-defined boundaries.

The nature of the information contained in the ritual may vary from society to society. It may include religion, art, sex education, etc., but "technological training is absent from the initiation curricula" (Hart 1963:421).⁵ Referring briefly to Puluwat navigation we take up a part of the information associated with

learning to be a navigator—sea life. Sea life is not essential to the task of navigation; it is nontechnical and is, rather, esoteric information. A navigator who does not possess sea life is referred to by Gladwin as being uninitiated (1970:204-06). An essential feature of sea life is that it is not only nontransferable in the sense that it applies only within the context of the Puluwat atoll and its environs, but it has no referents in the real world. Sea life does not refer to anything which can be witnessed. It must, therefore, be learned through rote memorization.

Abelam initiates are told they will be shown the *nggwalndu* (spirits associated with patrilineal clans); what they are actually shown are paintings and painted carvings which “represent” the *nggwalndu*. They are not meant to be likenesses of the *nggwalndu*. The carvings are different from the paintings, but both equally represent *nggwalndu*, and no reason is given for these differences. The number of art objects does not correspond to the number of *nggwalndu* (Forge 1970:281).

Here we have symbols whose relationships to their referents cannot be specified and whose referents cannot be seen or described. The lack of transferability of knowledge gained during the Abelam initiation is further illustrated in Forge’s discussion of their use of color terms. The Abelam have two sets of color terms which are not interchangeable. One set refers to the colors of the vegetable dyes used by women in making string bags. The other set of color terms refers to four different colored paints used in the ritual decoration of bodies and carved objects. Color is also implicit in the classification of some, but not all animal species. For example, male and female hornbills are grouped in two different species because they have different colored feathers. Again, the hornbills and their feathers have great ritual significance (1970:282-86): “the sacra are unveiled to the novices . . . it is the privilege of the initiated to manipulate the sacra according to precise rules” (van Gennep 1960:79).

This unveiling of the sacra is a common feature of initiations and has two implications for learning. First, the to-be-learned information is in a highly restricted location; it is secret, held in the minds of men who divulge it only under very special circumstances, or in artifacts whose meanings or purpose cannot be discerned by inspection. Previously information was available to the learner in a variety of forms all of which were relatively unrestricted. Secondly, the learner cannot initiate the search for further information. He cannot ask questions; this may be explicitly prohibited, but, more importantly, he does not know what questions to ask. He cannot even glimpse the total picture of what he is to learn so he cannot, on his own, fit pieces of it together. The initiation ritual may be organized into sequentially ordered grades through which the initiate

must pass. The Arunta, for example, have three while the Abelam have eight. The initiate cannot skip a grade because he has no way of learning what is in the next higher grade except by going through it. He cannot bypass a grade because each successive grade depends on the learning which took place in the previous one.

We have seen that the learning of esoteric information is accomplished through rote memorization; there are no organizational principles which the child can use in encoding and storing new information. A second learning process characteristic of the initiation ritual is avoidance-learning, learning to avoid certain responses because they will be punished. Both avoidance-learning and rote-memorization may have occurred earlier, but nowhere have they been relied upon to as great a degree. As a matter of record, for learning large bodies of complex information, neither is very efficient, but the initiation ceremony is not meant to be efficient, merely effective. The “shock treatment” can begin before the initiation ceremony itself. The Arunta boy is carried off into initiation by old men; and the women, in mock combat, attempt to prevent the boy from being taken. Later the boy will have his nasal septum pierced, his tooth knocked out, he will be circumcised and his urethra will be split along the length of the penis (Williams 1972:184). The Hopi boy may be beaten severely upon initiation into the Kacina cult (Simmons 1942:83). Kpelle initiates are cicatrized all over the back, chest, and upper arm. Needless to say, not all initiation rituals represent this painful an ordeal, but it is rare indeed for a child to enter initiation freely and happily. Initiation then must be made compulsory.

Punishment may be verbal as well as physical; Samburu initiates are harangued for hours on end (Spencer 1970:138). Threats of further punishment or the wrath of the supernatural, “hell’s fire and damnation,” are common. The things one learns to avoid if one is to escape punishment may not be verbalized. The initiate is left to infer what aspects of his behavior are unsuitable. He may be made to feel shame as well as fear, and be told in general terms “not to act like a baby” or “not to act like a woman.” The Samburu are specifically cautioned not to eat meat seen by a married woman, not to have sex with married women, not to “hang around” the compound and not to be disrespectful to the elders (Spencer 1970:132-38). In the lower Congo, initiates must avoid speaking their natural language and instead may only use a special language; they must change their normal diet and eat special foods (van Gennep 1960:81). Kpelle initiates acquire personal animal totems which they must not kill or eat. The initiate learns verbalized taboos and the tabooed behavior may well have been already deeply ingrained. He also learns information such as values, attitudes, and beliefs which may not be verbalized.

Unlike earlier forms of education which may very well be solitary or include only an apprentice and a master, initiation is a group affair. The special group status of the initiates is underscored by having them wear special costuming, painted decoration, masks, or no clothing at all. But it is a segregated group; the initiate is cut off from members of the opposite sex, older and younger peers and siblings, the same sex parent, and sometimes both parents. While the initiate is not cut off entirely from familiar people, he is cut off from those who have been most supportive in the past. He is in a marginal position vis-a-vis his society. No longer part of his parent's family, not yet having a family of his own, he cannot even contribute to the livelihood of his society. This fact is exploited by the initiators, and the child may be referred to as having died. He is scorned because he knows nothing; none of his previously learned knowledge or skills are of any use here.

At the close of the initiation ceremony, the initiate is welcomed back into the land of the living. Among the Kpelle, he is reborn, with a new name. He is now eligible for marriage and expected to start a family. The initiates are given presents and feasted at celebrations lasting several days. There are special dances and songs for the occasion. The initiate is for all time set apart from the uninitiated by the knowledge he has acquired, as well as by identifying marks such as scars. This feasting represents the last phase of what has been a very costly undertaking for the community. While data are lacking, there seems to be no activity in traditional society which soaks up more of the group's resources than initiation.

As to the function of initiation, there is a high level of agreement in the literature on this point. It is to effect an identity change in the initiates. Howitt describes the function of initiation among the Kurnai:

The intention of all that is done at this ceremony is to make a momentous change in the boy's life. The past is to be cut off from him by a gulf which he can never re-pass. His connection with his mother as her child is broken off, and he becomes henceforth attached to the men. All the sports and games of his boyhood are to be abandoned with the severance of the old domestic ties between himself and his mother and sisters. He is now to be a man, instructed in and sensible of the duties which devolve upon him as a member of the community (1904:532).

Van Gennep refers to "rites of separation" and "rites of incorporation" (1960:62). Taking the child from his family to a special place where he is surrounded by strangers and strange symbols, shaming him and threatening him all serve to separate the initiate from his former self. Under intense pressure the initiate breaks down and enters a highly suggestible state where new values are easily accepted.

Anxiety accompanies an increased suggestibility and this may induce a change of attitude . . . the Samburu have a number of . . . devices which serve to increase this anxiety largely by over-awing those most directly concerned; . . . [these] include physical debilitation (circumcision), haranguing, blessing and insisting on the meticulous performance of ceremonies which perplex by their profusion of detail and dismay through the mystical beliefs surrounding them . . . this makes them (the initiates) intensely aware of certain important social values such as honour and respect, for the possibility of shame and ridicule hangs over them (Spencer 1970:155).

The unveiling of sacra, the cicatrization, the learning of otherwise useless information, the new names all serve to incorporate the initiates into adult society; they gain status and privileges and are viewed differently by everyone in society including members of their families. The initiates in turn look at their social world from a different perspective: they no longer "play" nor associate playfully with peers or younger siblings; their relationships to peers of the opposite sex have changed, and so on. They have acquired no new skills of a technological order, but they now apply formerly learned skills to their own house, their own land, their own tools.

We may ask why initiates put up with all this pain, shame, and ridicule and why they don't refuse to participate as initiators in future rituals? The answer lies in the fact that initiation rituals are a very effective means of changing one's identity. As Talyesva, who was so badly beaten during initiation that he acquired permanent scars, says, "I thought of the flogging and the initiation as an important turning point in my life, and I felt ready at last to listen to my elders and to live right" (Simmons 1942:87). When one has undergone such an ordeal, one's pride will not accept the notion that it was all in vain; rather it is much easier to accept the rationale as given and insist the experience is "good for everybody."

Initiates probably do not avoid the ceremony because important social and economic rewards are dependent on being initiated. As long as the leaders of a society control the dispensation of these rewards, one must "do as they say." The fear that their children will be denied access to important offices is the main reason given by educated Kpelle for sending their children to bush school.

When new rewards, uncontrolled by the village leaders, are made available, the initiation ceremony will be curtailed. In fact this is what has happened for the Kpelle. It is now possible for an adolescent to travel to the Firestone Rubber Plantation and earn enough money to build a house, buy a bride, food, and other of life's

essentials. Consequently, the length of the bush school has shrunk from four years to four weeks or less.

Traditional symbols and institutions are slowly being supplanted by foreign substitutes. While the bush school and the public school may not be in direct competition, an increase in the enrollment of Kpelle children in public schools has corresponded with a decline in bush school attendance. I would like to turn now from the organization of learning in the initiation ritual to a review of similar processes in the public school.

The Rural Public School in Sinyeé, Liberia

The discussion of public schools will be limited to those that have recently been introduced in societies which formerly lacked them. Typically, these societies have a pastoral or agricultural base and hence are nonurbanized. My observations of rural public schools were neither sufficiently systematic nor detailed to offer a "school ethnography." They were, however, adequate enough to allow a comparison with the initiation ritual, and I will concentrate on the Sinyeé school because it is probably typical of such schools around the world.

In the village of Sinyeé, Liberia, the school is a most imposing building. Set off from the houses by at least 1,500 feet, with no other buildings near it, it is the largest structure in the village. It is also the only building made of concrete blocks, the only one that is L-shaped, the only one with a corrugated composition roof (other buildings have thatched or galvanized iron roofs and are usually round), the only one with large windows, and the only one with a gravel path leading to it. The school building serves no function save education; no one enters it except teachers and pupils (and an occasional anthropologist).

There is a single teacher in each classroom, and they are addressed as "Teacher X," "Teacher Y," by the pupils. Pupils and teachers are assigned to a particular classroom for at least one year, and there is little if any interchange while school is in session between classrooms. Teachers do not perform other duties for the community and are the only adults in the village who do not participate in rice farming. Teachers see an important part of their role as the testing of students. When asked how well he felt his pupils were progressing, one teacher showed me his grade book. When I asked my houseboy why he was studying his math book (something I had never seen him do before), he replied "because I have a math test on Friday."

The teacher is a commanding presence in the room. He usually stands while the pupils sit; he has a larger desk; he does most of the talking; he gives orders; he punishes those who talk out of turn. His status and power are further emphasized by his fine clothing and

the fact that he can speak "good" English, as opposed to Liberian English, a dialect with grammatically different features from standard English, which is what most people speak when they're not speaking Kpelle. Of the four teachers in the schools, none had been born in Sinyeé, only one was Kpelle; two lived there, but only during the week, and only one had been teaching there longer than a year. Teachers, then, like initiators, are powerful strangers. Mrs. S., the principal, was especially awe-inspiring; she was severely critical of teachers who did not keep their class "in order" and frequently looked in on other classes. If she saw a child talking, she would interrupt the class to give him a tongue-lashing or a switching.

The findings of Wolcott in a Kwakiutl village are similar to my own. Kwakiutl adults expect teachers to be "smart" in reading and writing, i.e., they expect the teacher to know well something they don't know. Teachers are supposed to run the school the "right way," i.e., opening school every day, starting on time, and keeping the pupils busy. They do not expect the teacher to behave like an Indian; in fact they expect him to be contemptuous and critical of them and village life in general. The teacher is expected to be a disciplinarian; specifically, he should provide the child with a sense of discipline which the villagers feel is necessary but are unwilling or unable to impose themselves. The teacher is expected to be honest and dependable and he is to teach children these and other moral and religious qualities (Wolcott 1967:81-84).

The residents of Gbarngasuwakwelle are in the process of building a school and, despite the burden in goods and labor on their meager economy, they seem eager for their children to "learn book." The basis for this eagerness is very interesting. The elders of the town have been rather consistently exploited by educated outsiders for the past several years, especially since the construction of the road. These outsiders include government officials, soldiers, and traders who force the villagers to work on their farms, often without pay, force them to work on government projects, "tax" them at every occasion, and cheat them in trade. They want to educate their children so that they won't be similarly exploited. This is directly parallel to reasons given by these same elders for sending their children to bush school, i.e., so that the ritual leaders and *Poro* officials can't ridicule them and discriminate against them. Obtaining an education is thus seen as becoming a member of a society which protects and confers status as the *Poro* does. As a corollary, the elders did not think it necessary to send all their children, especially girls, to school, nor did they see any value in themselves attending adult-education classes. As long as one or two sons in a family were educated, it would be incumbent on them to protect the noneducated family members from the

avaricious outsiders. Finally, the elders saw no value in education beyond that necessary for learning to read, write, and do sums because it is in their ability to execute these skills that outsiders take advantage of the nonliterate villager.

The school day begins promptly at 7:30 a.m. and ends at 2:00 p.m. School attendance is compulsory in Liberia, although, in fact, all children do not attend. Pupils are expected to be on time and to come every day. If a child arrives late, he is sent home. I never saw a child excused from class because he was ahead in the lesson, nor were children permitted to do "independent study" during class. Whatever the lesson happened to be, all had to follow it. The curriculum of the schools was standardized, meaning it was set by the Ministry of Education (and developed in large part in the United States) and could not be modified by the teacher, the pupils, or their parents. There was no "individualized instruction"; those children who seemed to be following what was going on sat at the front and were often called on, those who couldn't keep up sat at the back and were ignored. I didn't hear of anyone skipping a grade, but many were held back.

A great deal of the curriculum falls into the category of esoteric information, such as the pledge of allegiance to the flag, studying the lives of "Liberian" heroes, etc. The teacher asks, "Who was X?" X is a Liberian hero, possibly one of the freed slaves settled in Liberia by President Monroe. X's most notable accomplishment may have been to fire a cannon into a crowd of "unruly natives" (i.e., Kpelle). Hands go up, a pupil is called on; he gives a halting, one-sentence answer. "Wrong, sit down!" The next pupil gives a similar answer. "How many times do I have to tell you not to leave out the subject of a sentence? Sit down!" Sometimes the right answer never comes; sometimes the teacher supplies it. This knowledge is not essential to the fulfillment of any skill nor does it contribute to the pupil's sense of his own place in history; it does not support his identity with his own past, but, rather, denigrates it.

While some of the reading books were newly introduced and included "Liberian" folk tales, many of the readers were written for American children and included words like fire engine, dalmatian, garage, etc. The pupils could not associate these new words with any previously learned information. They could not see, nor could the teacher adequately describe the referents of these words. A direct parallel between the Abalam initiate's learning that painted pictures and painted sculptures are different, but nevertheless both represent *nggwalndu*, which are undefined, is the case of the number two. The child must learn "2," "two" and, perhaps later, "II." Now all three twos look different, but no reason is given for this difference. One doesn't do anything with a two except copy it in a notebook; it has no instrumental value. The

child may be shown a picture of two melons followed by the number "2," but if, in another context, he calls a melon "two," he will be told to sit down. He sees a second picture of four oranges followed by the number "4." Later he is told that adding two twos yields four. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest, given the Kpelle child's previous exposure to magic, that a sign (+) which can turn melons into oranges must be very powerful. If he then writes these signs on his notebook and on the palm of his hand, which I have seen pupils do, he may be trying to make this magic work for him.

The language of instruction is English, and this is used by children exclusively in the school. Outside of the school they may use Liberian English but, more commonly, they speak in Kpelle. This means that the color of writing paper will be designated as "white" while the color of the (white) medicine which is put on people's faces will be designated by the Kpelle term, *kwille*. The lack of continuity between the language of the school and the language of the community is repeated in other areas. Knowledge in the school comes from textbooks and teachers. There are no books in Kpelle homes to learn from, no library, no "Sesame Street." Parents, almost all of whom are illiterate, cannot teach their children what they are expected to learn in school. The school, like the initiation ritual, exercises complete control over the access to knowledge. I had to offer to help my houseboys with their "homework." They didn't seek my help even though they were struggling and had previously solicited my assistance in other nonschool matters. It simply didn't occur to them that school problems could be solved using nonschool resources.

What is missing from the classroom is also significant. The child does not use his knowledge to make or to grow anything. None of the modern tools such as tractors, stethoscopes, slide rules, and wrenches, which he is later expected to be able to use, are found in the classroom. There are no games, no grandparents telling stories, and no activities to observe.

There must be, therefore, a heavy reliance on rote-memorization in the schools. A second type of learning which I witnessed can be called one-trial learning. Each learning trial is discrete, rather than each successive trial leading closer to a correct solution. The situation I am referring to occurred repeatedly in the classroom. A pupil would begin reading from a reading text. At the first mistake, he or she would be told to sit down. The teacher did not always correct the mistake, nor was the pupil given an opportunity to try the word or sentence again; he either had it right the first time or not at all. I can't say whether one-trial learning is found in the initiation ritual as well, but it is quite probable. The teacher, in fact, did not seem to care whether the pupils read correctly or not. As a conjecture I would suggest that by following this procedure he was able to

call on each student in class in short order and thereby forestall their attention from wandering.

Avoidance-learning which is found in initiation rituals is also used in the school, if not in such an extreme form. Children are punished in a variety of ways, including paddling, and they are threatened with suspension and expulsion. They must avoid a wide variety of otherwise normal behaviors such as talking to their classmates, talking in Kpelle, looking out the window, turning around in or getting out of their seats, etc. They aren't permitted to laugh, or cry, or play games, or speak without raising their hands. The teacher looks on the pupils with scorn, may ridicule them for their stupidity, and accuses them of "acting like first-graders!"

Pupils, like initiates, are cut off from their families, either literally in the case of a few Kpelle who go to a mission boarding school or figuratively in the sense that their school experiences lead them, inevitably, away from the family. They are segregated in grades where they cease to associate with older and younger siblings. Kpelle girls are rarely sent to school; thus there is sex segregation as well. Pupils must wear uniforms and if they show up for school without the uniform they are sent home. Many pupils reside with distant relatives in Sinyeé because their homes are too far away for them to be able to walk to school. Those who walk leave home at dawn and return after the day's work at home is over. They are not expected to maintain work and kin obligations while they are in school.

In Liberia, only two percent of those starting in grade one graduate from high school, but a large number of those who have dropped out along the way seek wage employment outside of the village. The behavior of Kpelle boys who had dropped out after the fourth grade parallels that of Sisala boys in a similar situation. In a series of essays, Sisala students equated formal education with success. This success was stated primarily in terms of prestigious positions in the urbanized sector of Ghana and costly material goods. A second theme in the essays was the student's desire to escape inferior status, and a third theme was the desire to serve as a teacher. The young literate, whether or not he is a graduate will go into great debt to buy the expensive clothing, drink, cigarettes, etc., which are in keeping with his newly acquired self-image. The failure to sustain this life style may lead to anomie and alcoholism (Grindal 1972:86-90, 99). Village elders know and fear this outcome for their educated children. They also, justifiably, fear that once educated, their children will scorn them and their customs.

Like the initiation ceremony, the school confers status, indoctrinates with esoteric and useless information, and changes the pupil's view of himself, his family, and his society. School attendance means the acquisition of a new name and, in Liberia, these invariably are

English versions of biblical names. The pupil is anxious and willing to pursue rewards of which he was formerly unaware. Liberia is fast becoming a meritocracy, and access to these rewards depends on having been schooled. Far from rejecting the confusion, humiliation, pain, and boredom of the school experience, the school-leaver wants to become a teacher and will encourage younger siblings to follow in his path.

Conclusion

The *Poro* secret society and bush school have served the Kpelle well for at least 200 years as a force for social control and in providing protection for the individual. It has been a vital force where the lack of political integration coupled with traditions of intervillage warfare and slavery could have led to perpetual chaos. In its system of higher grades it has provided consistent goals for those seeking increased power and status. The public school, on the other hand, already shows signs of offering diminishing returns. Because of the emphasis on identity change, the learning of skills compatible with the demands of a growing and more complex economy must occur only incidentally if at all. On the other hand, the fully schooled Kpelle possesses a role identity which is ideally suited for only one occupation, that of government bureaucrat. The few civil-service jobs that are available to nondescendants of the American slave settlers are becoming scarcer and the academic qualifications required for employment are becoming steeper.

The typical Kpelle villager is insular and withdrawn in his relations with the world. He resents the intrusion of someone from another quarter of his small village; imagine his feelings toward representatives from the Liberian government! At some time the identity of "Liberian citizen" must be accepted by the Kpelle man if the government is to rule at the consent of the governed. Schools serve this function admirably in contemporary Liberia. Yet there are other functions which the schools are designed to serve. The country needs trained manpower to assist in agricultural and industrial development. Improvements in public health, sanitation, and living standards depend on an educated population. Here the schools are failing, so a compromise is needed. Somehow schools must be made to educate as well as indoctrinate, but what part of schooling accomplishes these respective tasks? I feel strongly that the model of the initiation ritual can show us which practices are clearly indoctrinating in their effects. Therefore, whenever we find school practices that resemble the rites in initiation, these should act as red flags stopping us and forcing us to reconsider the rationale that created them.

NOTES

1. The observations of the Sinyeé school were conducted during 1968-69.
2. The author conducted fieldwork in the town of Gbarngasuakwelle from July-October 1973.
3. A brief ethnography of the Kpelle can be found in James L. Gibbs, Jr., ed., *Peoples of Africa* (1965). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pp. 197-241.
4. My own attempts to elucidate the nature of the bush school were continually discouraged. Since the aggregate of *reliable* information was insufficient to support my thesis, I found it necessary to draw on accounts of initiation rituals in other societies. Where reliable information on the bush school was available, it was incorporated into the text.
5. Contrary to what Watkins asserts, I found no evidence that the Kpelle children learn any crafts or farming skills while they are in bush school.

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