5 Africans and African-American Educational Models

Just as World War I catapulted Africans into a fervor of political activity bolstered by the African-American myth, so too it ushered in massive changes in African education influenced by the myth. Up through the early part of the twentieth century, education in Africa was largely the province of the missionaries, who used it as a powerful means of attracting converts. By the end of the nineteenth century, Africa had an extensive network of missionary-operated elementary schools, seminaries, technical schools, teacher-training colleges and some secondary schools, which provided western education for hundreds of thousands of Africans.¹

Western education was a commodity that Africans were eager to obtain and ready to convert for. As the basic requirement for employment in the European commercial firms and colonial administrations, it was the key to social and economic mobility.² At the same time, increasing numbers of Africans came to consider western education the *sine qua non* for regenerating the black continent. Reverend Peter Kawa, a superintendent of schools of the Church of England in the Cape Colony, asserted in 1902 that ‘the South African Native must be educated, if he be expected to take his place among the nations of this land’.³ The *Gold Coast Chronicle* had reached the same conclusion a year earlier: progress by blacks, it asserted, would be achieved ‘not by fighting, but by ... educating ourselves’. For modern western education was the tool ‘as would fit us to hold our own in the race of life’.⁴ The *Gold Coast Times* reiterated that point in 1924: western education, it wrote, would enable Africans ‘to take their rightful place in the council of nations’.⁵ In his book *L’Aventure Ambigue Recit*, the Senegalese novelist Cheikh Hamidou Kane has a traditional African woman urge her young relative to attain western education on the grounds that it will enable Africans to regain command of their lives: ‘One hundred years ago, our grandfather ... threw himself upon the newcomers. His heart was without fear and he valued liberty more than life. Our grandfather and his elite were defeated. Why? How? Only the newcomers know. One has to ask them to explain. One has to go and learn from them the art of winning without being right.’⁶

The work of the missions notwithstanding, beginning at the turn of the
century repeated complaints could be heard throughout almost all of Africa about the inadequacy of the educational facilities and the low standard of education for Africans. The schools established by the colonial governments, missionaries, and Africans themselves could not meet the growing demand for western education. There were not enough secondary schools and only a few colleges in all of Africa. Only two institutions of higher education in Africa were recognized internationally: Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone and the School of Pharmacy in Dakar. A description in the Nigerian Pioneer of the educational situation in Nigeria concluded: ‘In all those schools the standard is that of elementary grade except in a few schools at Lagos which are denominated secondary schools but the result of whose work does not show ability to pass an examination of the Matriculation Standard.’ The South African Native Affairs Commission, looking into the low level of education in the Union, concluded decisively that ‘the supply of Native teachers is far from equal to the demand and that many of those whose services are available are of inferior attainments’. Similarly, the British Colonial Office was aware of the poor quality of African education and was looking for a comprehensive educational policy to apply to their colonies. Africans, foreign missionaries, and the colonial regimes were all united in their dissatisfaction with the state of African education.

THE DEBATE OVER CURRICULA: VOCATIONAL VERSUS ACADEMIC

Africans differed, though, as to the type of education they believed was needed. Some favored a vocational curriculum, others an academic one. The advocates of a vocational curriculum attributed the current superiority of whites mainly to their technological skills. In her comprehensive study of the image of Europeans in Africa in written and oral sources, Veronika Gorog-Karady shows that, more than any other quality, Africans were impressed by Europeans’ technical ability, which they linked directly to the European’s formidable superiority. The natural conclusion was that to attain such power for themselves, Africans too must acquire technological and agricultural skills. Thus, as early as 1899, the Lagos Weekly Record hammered home the point that Africa ‘needs colleges, seminaries, schools of technology, mineralogy, civil engineers, electricians, telegraphers and railroads; these are the greatest civilizing agencies in the world’. The correspondent went so far as to assert that: ‘The planting of a school for the industrial training of young Africans in the principal cities and towns where