## *Education Marginalization in Sub-Saharan Africa: Policies, Politics, and Marginality*

OBED MFUM-MENSAH
Lexington Books, 2018, 240 pages.

Obed Mfum-Mensah brings a wealth of knowledge, experience, and insight to his book, *Education Marginalization in Sub-Saharan Africa: Policies, Politics, and Marginality.* The book is organized in two parts: theory on marginality and education; and education policy and practice regarding marginality. He provides a synopsis of human capital (education for production) and human rights (education for all) theoretical and philosophical arguments. His work falls squarely within a human rights framework as he defines the need for an education structure that advocates equity and provides the structures and policy to ensure equity in education to everyone in the wider society. The chapters are designed to defend and promote the argument of education for all to fulfill what has been touted as a global education mandate. This noble mandate resonates in most teacher education programs today as the accepted or expected goal for national education programs. Mfum-Mensah positions this mandate against the historical and contemporary realities of national education systems across sub-Saharan Africa that simultaneously seek to educate all students as they also supply trained labor for the nation-state. These two theories, human capital and human rights, represent a global struggle within education. His specific mission in this work is to demonstrate the need to better identify how to engage marginal groups across sub-Saharan Africa in national education. His work contributes to the development and restructuring of sub-Saharan African education systems to ensure full participation of presently marginal groups.

Chapters 1 to 3 describe the historical and contemporary (colonial and postcolonial) common structures of national education programs found across sub-Saharan Africa. In this work, Mfum-Mensah provides a generalized account of colonial and postcolonial education structures. He posits that colonial policy and later postcolonial policy purposefully favored some African groups, i.e., those who serve the colonial or later postcolonial political and economic agenda, to the disadvantage of other African groups. He identifies the benefited groups as male, able-bodied, urban, and primarily Christian as the educated elite, who historically benefited from colonial education and later, postcolonial education policy and practice. The colony and later the nation-state maintained an education system that was top-down in nature with a

curriculum designed to benefit those in power. He does make the distinction between colonial and postcolonial periods, to note that one's ethnic identity fluctuates as favored or marginalized based over time and political context.

From this simplified, but generally accurate historical context, Mfum-Mensah effectively draws from a range of sub-Saharan African countries to identify marginalized groups and documents the disparities in their education access and participation. These groups include disproportionately female students; Muslim students (especially Muslim students residing in Christian or Christian-dominated localities); students with disabilities; rural students; nomadic students; and refugee students. He also includes marginalized ethnonational groups, who are most often, but not always, the minority in the nation-state population. Notably they are always the ethnic or racial group not in political or economic power. He demonstrates through intersectional analysis (which includes students who belong to more than one marginalized group) the extraordinary impact marginalization can have on a student to effectively block them from access and participation in schools that do not consider their structural or curricular needs to support their success.

Within Mfum-Mensah's work is consistent emphasis on the role of religious identity that in most areas historically marginalized access for Muslim students. Historically, some of this, at least in the Anglophone regions, was explained by British indirect rule, which left Islamic education systems intact in return for non-interference with the British colonial economic mission. Mfum-Mensah describes this as neglect of their education. It is agreed that Muslim students rarely participated in colonial education outside of the urban center. Still, based on his argument where he cites the imposition of European culture as a major disadvantage of colonial and later postcolonial education, Islamic groups may have fared better across sub-Saharan Africa when it comes to cultural retention. As Islam is a historically adopted religion across sub-Saharan Africa, arriving centuries prior to European Christian mission education, it can be argued that African ethnonationals were better able to maintain their cultural and indigenous education systems. This distinction would not hold true in Francophone regions, where access to both economic and political positions was solely dependent on participation in French education, complete with Catholic catechism. Of course, a lack of participation in the nation-state education system within the postcolonial system—regardless of what former European colonial administration or religious affiliation—placed non-Western educated Africans at the economic and political margins.

Overall, the Mfum-Mensah's book is an excellent summary of the struggle of marginalized groups to gain economic and political stability within nation-states that maintain postcolonial education systems. Of special interest to this review is the situation of Muslim students who reside in *Zongo,*[1] which is a minority community residential area, within Christian majority or dominant communities. In my research that involved interviewing students in middle schools in Ghana and Nigeria, which included students from Zongo communities, I concur with Mfum-Mensah's findings that these students in particular have to struggle against religious bias that is often imposed upon them via educational curriculum and school practice. Most secondary schools still mandate some form of "moral education" courses that are largely based on local religious practice, either Christian or Muslim, and daily prayer remains a mainstay of school culture. For Muslim students from Zongo communities, this means that they are often exposed to religious bias in the curriculum and in interpersonal interactions in the schools. Secondly, a language factor is also a frequent barrier for many Zongo residents, as many are not fluent in the local language of their teachers, and more importantly, often are less likely to be fluent in the colonial language of education for the historical reasons mentioned above.[2] Mfum-Mensah provides commentary on the need to directly address the curriculum and community to better provide for these students in the local schools.

Mfum-Mensah does an excellent job of providing a rich description of the struggles and needs of marginalized groups within this work. He develops policy and practices under a "Transgressive-Progressive Policy Framework" model to provide "decolonizing strategies to education policy decision making to focus on marginalized children" (p. 179). He recommends an active historical critique of national education and review of the nation-state constitutions to reset education policy and curriculum. These are notable recommendations, as most sub-Saharan African nation-states set forth equity in education and development of Afrocentric curriculum as center-pieces of the initial templates for African education systems in their constitutions. My hat is off to Mfum-Mensah, as a colleague and fellow advocate of African-centered inclusive education. His work is a significant contribution toward development of syncretic education[3] that attempts to contribute to a workable Africanized education model that is at once a multi-ethnonational and demographically inclusive education system. This book adds depth of description of student needs within marginalized groups that is respectful of their cultural and historical context. Mfum-Mensah is commended for ensuring they are equitably represented as equal partners in

his work. The devil is in the details, as each nation-state needs to engage at all levels in an inclusive manner with consistent collaboration across groups, in order to produce a major restructuring of sub-Saharan African education.

## Notes

1. Zongo settlements are areas in West African towns populated mostly by migrants, especially from northern Nigeria. Zongo communities are often, though not always, Hausa speaking and Muslim. The term derives from the Hausa word *zango*, which means "a camping place for trading caravans.". The zongos were historically founded as ports of trade in the long-distance trading networks that connected West Africa.

2. See full discussions of this fieldwork in Abidogun (2003; 2007; 2012).

3. See work on syncretic education and intersectionality in Abidogun (2021), Abidogun and Recker (2021)), and Abidogun (2018).

Jamaine Abidogun, "Introduction," in *Handbook of African Education and Indigenous Knowledge*, Jamaine Abidogun & Toyin Falola, editors, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021; and Jamaine Abidogun & Sterling Recker, editors, *Africa and the Diaspora: Intersectionality and Interconnections*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021; and Jamaine Abidogun, *African Science Education: Gendering Indigenous Knowledge in Nigeria*, Routledge, 2018.

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DOI: 10.2979/jems.4.1.11