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Educating an African Leadership: Achimota and the Teaching of African Culture in the Gold Coast

Cati Coe

Founded by the British colonial government in the Gold Coast in the 1920s, Achimota was an elite school that signaled the colonial government's commitment to the provision of education and the concomitant belief in the role of education in managing the future of the nation. This study explores the contradictions of the school, in which "African culture" was used to substitute for anglicized activities, lessons, and entertainments within the school's dominant Western frame, "African culture" had to be transformed and reified. The school's practices were the result of interaction between the differing expectations of colonial officials, "traditional experts" brought in to teach customs and arts, local intelligentsia, expatriate and African teachers, and the students themselves. Achimota therefore provides a lens on the nuances and tensions within the colonial enterprise in Africa.

Introduction

Achimota aims at the provision of the best education that can be provided for a bi-cultural people in Africa in very close contact with Europe; a people that undoubtedly has been retarded but equally undoubtedly has not been shown to be inferior, . . . an education that would incorporate, and encourage pride in, all that is good and beautiful and useful in the ancient traditions and inherited skill of the people. (*Achimota Review* 1937:7)

Scholars of imperialism have argued that as a project, colonialism was riven with tensions and contradictions, because missionaries, merchants, settlers, and colonial officials had different narratives and visions of their civiliz-

ing missions (Stoler and Cooper 1997; Thomas 1994). Achimota, the first government secondary school in the Gold Coast (now Ghana), is a prime example of these tensions and contradictions.¹ Founded in the late 1920s by expatriate romantics of African culture and history, Achimota sought to wed the best of Africa and the West to educate African leaders who, for the greater development of their nation, would at once be in touch with “the people” and serve as brokers of Western ideas.

This paper contributes to the study of the nuances of colonialism in Africa. A hegemonic project, colonialism was “a socially transformative endeavour” and “a willed creation of historically situated actors,” yet its ramifications and effects did not match the “worldview that imagined metropolitan societies, rival powers, and colonized peoples and places in certain terms” (Thomas 1994:105, 106). Colonialism articulated with local power structures in Africa and was transformed as it played out in different cultural contexts in the interaction between competing interests.

By exploring the bicultural education of the elite Achimota School, I show how a colonial project succumbed to its contradictions. Achimota was a serious experiment made by idealistic people to bring together “the best” of African and European culture through progressive modes of education associated with Pestalozzi and Montessori (*Report on Achimota College 1931 1932*). Yet it was undermined by the contradictions inherent in its founding philosophy. Drumming and dancing were the strongest part of its teaching of “African culture,” and yet these performing arts were relegated to an extracurricular, albeit compulsory, activity. Most of the senior teachers in the school were European, with little personal or scholarly knowledge of Gold Coast culture; outside experts had to be brought in to teach “African culture.” And lastly, there was more of a focus on students’ appreciation of “African culture” than on actual competence or knowledge, both in the founding philosophy and the curriculum: the students were expected to respect the traditions of a reified “ancient” past, but not necessarily participate fully in that realm as competent adults. Ultimately, to incorporate “African culture” into an anglicized elite school, the founders and teachers of Achimota had to define “culture” quite narrowly.

As a model colony in the British Empire (Austin 1964), the Gold Coast influenced, and was influenced by, the experience of other British colonies, especially other small, prosperous ones, like Ceylon and Uganda.² Therefore, this study speaks more broadly about the contradictions of British imperialism, and of imperialist objectifications of culture, both romantic and racist, that were embedded in colonial projects.

Schools in Ghana: Christianity and the Colonial Government

In Africa, formal schooling was historically established by missionaries, and through missionary schools Africans assumed new identities as Christians and modern people (Berman 1975). Among the Tswana of southern

Africa, the word for missionary was the same as that for teacher, and the same word referred to prospective converts and students (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Early African schoolchildren entered the socializing realms of boarding schools and Christian communities. Schooling—especially literacy and fluency in the colonial language—became the route to new roles within the changed economic landscape, as the newly educated took on positions as clerks and teachers, becoming brokers of “civilization” in its forms of the colonial government, export-trading firms, and the missionary enterprises of school and church. Although not intended by the missionaries or colonial authorities, who wished to create Christian peasants and disciplined workers (Berman 1975; Comaroff 1997), Africans reinterpreted schools and Christianity to mean nonmanual employment, “modernity,” and “progress.” In the Gold Coast, the provision of education became a bone of contention with the colonial government for the urban intelligentsia, who in the first decade of the twentieth century set up their own secondary schools (Kimble 1963). People in the Gold Coast have long sought certain kinds of schooling, often the most prestigious and academic, because formal education was associated with upward mobility and work in the colonial service or commercial sector (Foster 1965).

By the beginning of World War I, implementation of the Educational Ordinances of 1882 and 1887 had brought schools under greater government supervision. The process was accelerated by the expulsion of the Basel and Bremen missionaries in 1917. However, even at this point, mission schools were still providing most formal education in the Gold Coast. My interviews with retired mission schoolteachers make clear the difference between church and government schools: mission teachers were under the control of the church, and going to school was the primary way children became Christian (Ampene 1999; Asiama 1998; Okae-Anti 1998; Reynolds 1998, 1999).

Achimota symbolized the greater involvement of the British colonial government in the provision of education in the Gold Coast. Schooling became part of the governmental dream of control and organization: schools became crucial instruments for directing the future of the country and changing people’s behavior and ideas (Foucault 1979; Thomas 1994). However, during the 1920s and 1930s, the colonial government was not interested in mass education, which became a project under the first Nkrumah government after 1951, under “self rule” but prior to independence (in 1957); rather, colonial governments in the Gold Coast limited access to education and focused on the education of the elite (Ball 1983). In part, this stance was due to nationalist pressure from local elites for universities and secondary schools. Achimota was to be a “model of all education” and “a centre in which a standard will be set” for all Gold Coast schools (*Annual General Report 1925–1926*:46). Thus, the concern for high-quality education in the Gold Coast was concentrated on Achimota, which drew a disproportionate share of the resources of the Education Department; education for the country’s leaders was differentiated from that for the rest.

With Achimota, the government showed its interest in guiding the future of the Gold Coast through education. From this time onward, the state increasingly began to support and direct education in the Gold Coast, rather than relying on mission schools, which had the different project of evangelism.

Colonial Romanticism, Indirect Rule, and African Culture

Afei na nnipa anya adwene foforo, . . . se Aborofo ene Abibifo
amanne no wobeka abom, aye baako.

Then people had a new thought, . . . that European and
African customs be brought together to become one.

—Rev. Okae-Anti, taped interview, 27 November 1998 [my
translation]

Beginning in the 1920s, there was a shift in attitude on the part of colonial government policy, which increasingly argued that the progress of the Gold Coast had to be built on African beliefs and ways of life. Studies of British colonial policy in Africa have shown that British colonial administrators in the twentieth century romanticized African pastoral life as equal, communal, and idyllic (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Phillips 1989; see also R. Williams 1973). Concerned about creating a landowning, exploitative class as in India, British colonial administrators' "preferred ideal was that of a peasant community, happily producing commodities for sale abroad" (Phillips 1989:5).

As colonialism and Indirect Rule were being consolidated in the 1920s, the colonial government in the Gold Coast decided to protect communal landownership and relied on Indirect Rule through the institution of chieftaincy, in which they hoped chiefs would be agents of modernization and providers of stability. The new constitution of 1924 gave greater representation on the Legislative Council to traditional rulers while excluding the educated elite entirely from the new local government system, which became the exclusive preserve of the chiefs. Adu Boahen writes about the period:

The immediate consequences of this change were, first, the enhancement of the position of the traditional rulers in the colonial political set-up in the country, and, secondly and consequently, the direct conflict between the educated elite, who saw themselves as better qualified to play that role, and the traditional rulers, who insisted that they were the natural rulers of the country. (1996:242–243)

Colonial officials criticized educated people in the Gold Coast as deracinated caricatures of civilization and education. With the strong colonial scorn of “native intellectuals” and the promotion of chiefs and the tradition they represented as the basis and the leadership of the nation, tensions between chiefs and intellectuals increased.

This interest in African institutions also resulted in government support for ethnographic study. In 1921, the colonial government set up an anthropological department, under the direction of R. S. Rattray, who decided to concentrate on personal ethnographic work of Asante traditions and customs. He explained his philosophy of progress for Africa in the preface to his book *Ashanti*:

I have told [the Asante] that their ideal should be, not to become pseudo-European, but to aim at progress for their race based upon what is best in their own institutions, religion, their manners and customs. I have told them that they will become better and finer men and women by remaining true Ashanti [Asante] and retaining a certain pride in their past, and that their greatest hope lies in the future, if they will follow and build upon lines with which the national *sunsum* or soul has been familiar since first they were a people. [1923:12]

Rattray was busy convincing his colleagues of the importance of respecting African customs, and colonial administrators in the 1920s were indeed thinking about the role of African traditions to attain greater progress. For one thing, colonial administrators’ position in the Gold Coast was related to the status of their assigned district within the hierarchy of “tribes,” so colonial administrators became partisans for their districts, and attempted to raise the position of “their people” through description and analysis of their customs (Kuklick 1979). This philosophy was also reflected in the colonial government’s educational policy. In part, this approach was an attempt to respond to African nationalist pressure by showing that colonialism could be reformed from within (Agbodeka 1977).

After World War I, influenced by a wave of idealism and humanitarianism sweeping Europe, Britain took renewed interest in schools and social welfare in its African colonies (Scanlon 1966). Sir Gordon Guggisberg, Governor of the Gold Coast (1919–1927), sensitive to an African urban intelligentsia that was advocating a West African university and secondary schools, and whose budget was flush with funds from cocoa exports, pushed through many educational reforms. His educational policy, written in 1919, stated:

Our aim is not to denationalise [the people of the Gold Coast], but to graft skillfully on to their national characteristics the best attributes of modern civilisation. For without preserv-

ing his national characteristics and his sympathy and touch with the great illiterate masses of his own people, no man can ever become a leader in progress, whatever other sort of leader he may become. (Quoted in McWilliam and Kwamena-Poh 1973:54)

For Rattray and Guggisberg, progress could best be based on “national” institutions, customs, and characteristics: its “soul,” as Rattray put it. For the Basel missionaries, as with an earlier generation of romantic-nationalists in Europe, language had expressed this national spirit, whereas British colonial administrators in the 1920s focused on customs and institutions as exemplary of the nation’s spirit and past. Progress was seen as a process of “grafting” (Rattray also uses this word in his preface) “civilization” onto those national characteristics: with a bit of administrative science, the plant would incorporate a piece of another, both remaining itself and producing something different. How the interaction of different peoples and cultures within each colony would permit this grafting—a far trickier question—was left vague in these statements, but the biological metaphor suggested that the project was achievable. And here was a difference between the missionaries and the colonial authorities: the colonial government believed it could change or direct “society” as a coherent system through administrative interventions, regulations, and planning. One primary route for doing so was through education.

Influenced by the Phelps-Stokes Educational Commission, which visited the Gold Coast in 1920, and its survey of African education (T. Williams 1964; Wraith 1967),³ Guggisberg set up an educational committee, whose report in 1922 recommended that the vernacular should be the medium of instruction in the primary schools, that the teaching profession receive further training, and that a government secondary school be founded. He saw chieftaincy as a breakwater, defending native institutions from the waves of Western civilization: the new secondary school of Achimota would be a school for chiefs’ sons, who would later assume the reigns of government. Thus, Achimota was the product of the new romantic thinking about the importance of “national traditions” for the future progress of the people of the Gold Coast.

Achimota was founded in a polarized environment, where “intellectuals” were opposed to “chiefs,” and “civilization” to “tradition.” Achimota was meant to bridge and combine these oppositions. Through it, the colonial government hoped to create a different kind of educated elite in the Gold Coast, one that would be able to replace traditional chiefs and the intellectuals, but keep each leader in “touch with the great illiterate masses of his own people.”

Achimota in Theory: Civilization and Brokerage

The three founders of Achimota are generally considered to be Sir Gordon Guggisberg; its first principal, the Rev. A. G. Fraser; and the famous Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey, from the Gold Coast, who had served on the Phelps-Stokes Commission. In 1924, the coeducational boarding school of Achimota was established to give teacher training, technical training, and general secondary education. Although, like mission schools, it inculcated Christian values, it was nondenominational. Its first six staff were hired before there were buildings, and they spent a year to eighteen months studying the local languages, building up local public interest, and teaching in Gold Coast schools (Ward 1965). Achimota officially opened in 1927. The guiding principles of the school were summarized as follows:

Achimota hopes to produce a type of student who is "Western" in his intellectual attitudes towards life, with a respect for science and capacity for systematic thought, but who remains African in sympathy and desirous of preserving and developing what is deserving of respect in tribal life, custom, rule and law. (*Achimota College Report 1932:14*)

The founders were concerned that educated people were separating themselves from "the tribal organization which nevertheless remained the basis of their social and political life" (*Achimota Review 1937:6*). If Indirect Rule were to work, they reasoned, the educated must be incorporated into the rest of society, but clearly incorporated in a hierarchical way and as leaders separate from, but respectful of, "the people," viewed as uneducated peasants untouched by Westernization and abiding by "traditional" customs. Achimota was initially begun as a school for children in line to become chiefs themselves, although chiefs' sons did not necessarily inherit their fathers' positions, especially among the matrilineal peoples of southern Ghana. In fact, the composition of students at Achimota was much broader than this—a fact that teachers and administrators recognized. It became increasingly clear that because an Achimota education was privileged so highly, those educated at Achimota would in fact replace the chiefs and run the local councils.

Fraser emphasized that schools were not the only agent of denationalization present in the colony; he defined denationalization as "irreverence for and ignorance of one's own nation and culture and of the things chiefly now affecting it" (1925:75). Although he felt that the school could not undo the work of denationalization,

to set reverence for the things that are passing, to show the students the true and good in them, and much more to get them to look for and find them, there is a great part of the way to success in the training of true leaders. Without that

respect for their traditions the young are largely cut off from sympathy with the older folk. (1925:73)

These statements indicate a vagueness about the extent to which African social institutions and culture should be incorporated into the curriculum: only those that are “true and good,” “good and beautiful and useful,” and “deserving of respect” should be appreciated and engender national pride and “sympathy,” an often-used word. Thus, the founders and teachers at Achimota sought to redefine “civilization,” not simply to mean Europe, but to refer to the process of systematically modifying, adapting, and selecting the past. This understanding of civilization or modernity is close to Giddens’s sense of modernity as characterized by reflexivity or critical distance on all received ideas and lived experience (1991), in this case both “Western” and “traditional.” However, the notion of “the best” or “the good and beautiful” is slippery: it can indicate what is most efficacious, most borne out by empirical facts, or most moral. Karin Barber writes, “What is characteristic of West African modernity is not Popperian evaluation of evidence but an embracing of the principle of moral discrimination between what is to be rejected and what recuperated, in a proliferating welter of stark alternatives” (2000:457). Because the notion of selection of “the best” is so slippery, in which it can mean both what is most helpful to progress, most scientifically true, and what is most moral, it continues to be a common way of thinking about both modernity and culture in Ghana (Cole 2001). It was by no means the founders of Achimota who first mentioned this idea: African pastors and teachers in the Basel Mission, as well as Fante intellectuals like Kobina Sekyi, had also worked on recovering selected portions of “tradition.” However, this idea was often repeated and recirculated at Achimota functions, and in Achimota speeches and reports.

At the same time as the notion of civilization as selection was circulating, other notions of civilization continued to hold sway, for Achimota students and teachers. Embedded in the notion that civilization meant a process of selection and modification from the past was the sense that there was an African civilization (or one on the Gold Coast) and a European civilization, akin to two separate “races” or “cultures,” which had developed along vastly different lines, thus ignoring a long history of colonial encounters between West Africa and Europe. As Fraser said in a speech at the first meeting of the Achimota Council, on 8 April 1930, “The civilization of a race is the sum total of its achievement wrought out in its effort to adapt itself to its environment” (*Report on Achimota College 1930* 1931:39). Thus, *civilization* was used to denote both the process of systematic selection and the actual heritage one was selecting from—a much more static, bounded, and reified notion of race. In yet a third meaning, “civilization” continued to be associated with Europe, technological progress, and a certain presentation of self, encoded in the use of the English language, dress, and orientation, a presentation that Africans could attain (whereas in the second definition, such success was more uncertain). All of these meanings

of the term *civilization* were in play simultaneously, sometimes used by the same person at different moments, and occasionally blurred together.

Although there was occasionally a sense among Achimota's staff that the African past was dying and slipping away, especially on the part of teachers W. E. F. Ward and H. V. Meyerowitz, that feeling did not seem to be a dominant anxiety at Achimota. In the speech quoted above, Fraser said, "I am not terrified lest the good things of Africa shall be lost" (1931:39). The teaching of African customs to African students was not considered a mode of heritage revival, but rather a method of preparing African leaders who would be able to sift through the welter of alternatives offered and pick "the best." This focus reflected the colonial government's ambivalence about the Gold Coast intelligentsia, who were agitating for reform; in Achimota, they hoped to create a new elite that was not "denationalized" but could serve as appropriate brokers between "civilization" and "the masses." This ideal seems similar to that employed in teacher-training institutions in colonial Algeria, even though that was a French colony: students given excellent marks in evaluations were those considered neither too far nor too close to French culture, but "in-between." Their character was evaluated not as a compound of good qualities and defects, but as revealing a kind of relationship to France, that of a broker (Colonna 1997). Alumni of Achimota, the founders hoped, would pay more respect to institutions of chieftaincy and other traditions than the urban intellectuals who criticized colonial officials, yet they would be in a better position than the chiefs to graft Western ideas and institutions onto traditional systems.

Achimota attracted young teachers from different parts of the British Empire (England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, and Canada), teachers interested in promoting and studying African culture (*Report on Achimota College 1930 1931*). W. E. F. Ward, perhaps the most prominent teacher at Achimota, was interested in African music and history. He felt that his aims were "to teach young Africa to understand and appreciate its past" and "to foster a true pride of race" (Jenkins 1994:177). H. V. Meyerowitz came from South Africa in 1936 to promote and study the arts and crafts of the Gold Coast; he fiercely believed that the Gold Coast had something unique to teach the rest of the world (1937). The Government Training College in Accra was incorporated into Achimota in 1928, bringing its staff, the Rev. R. Fisher, an Anglican missionary; Mr. C. S. Dey, in charge of art; and Mr. J. H. Asare, in charge of woodwork. At the Government Training College, Fisher had encouraged the cultivation of African arts and crafts, dress, traditions, and customs, and had introduced "tribal drumming" (*Achimota Review 1937:36*; Agbodeka 1977:55; *Report for Achimota College, 1924-26 1927*).⁴ The importance of hobbies was also transferred from the habitual culture of the Government Training College to Achimota (*Report on Achimota College 1928-29 1929*).

The founders and the teachers at Achimota were idealists, hoping to accomplish the project of grafting two different "civilizations" together and creating an elite that embodied the best of both. However, there was vague-

ness about the way this was to be accomplished and the methods of evaluating what was worthy of preservation, a problem that became more salient once the school opened and these philosophies were put into practice

African Culture in Curriculum and Pedagogy

As Nicholas Thomas (1994) has pointed out about British colonialism in Fiji, the colonial government there defined customary practice quite narrowly—as leadership by chiefs, residence in villages, and communal work, arguing that it was preserving practices defined as “traditional,” even though many of its interventions (in the name of health, for instance) severely disrupted practices that had been equally traditional. In the Gold Coast, we see a similar narrowing and redefinition of “tradition” at Achimota, in which what was traditional had to be incorporated into the curriculum. Achimota’s dominant frame as an elite secondary boarding school, meant that tradition had to be defined narrowly to fit into the curriculum, which aimed also to teach “the best” of Western civilization, including anglicization and Christianity.

In the life of Achimota, two modes of dealing with “African tradition” can be seen. One was to bring it into a sequential, planned curriculum, which ended in examinations: knowledge about Africa thus became a genre of school knowledge, to be transmitted in schools according to scholastic techniques and technologies. The other was to insert “African tradition” into organized extracurricular activities as entertainment and “hobbies.” Ward considered that education at Achimota kept in touch with African life by teaching five subjects: history, southern languages (Ewe, Fante, Gã, Twi), agriculture, art, and music (*Achimota Review* 1937:20). Achimota teachers worked hard to bring the first three into the curriculum and make them examinable; the latter two became hobbies and entertainment, although occasionally the forms were subjected to both modes of translation into a school context.

In the teacher-training course, students studied two local languages—their mother tongue and a second language—because the educational policy in the Gold Coast at that time required the vernacular to be the sole medium of instruction in the first six years of primary schooling. The most important work of Achimota in the area of vernacular language was producing textbooks and convincing the Cambridge Exams council in the 1930s that four languages from the south (Ewe, Fante, Gã, Twi) should be recognized as subjects for the School Leaving Certificate examination (Agbodeka 1977). By 1940, these languages were also recognized for matriculation at London University. After 1930, students at the teacher-training college had to write a thesis in the fourth year, either in the vernacular or in English. “Among the subjects treated were native folk-stories, music and games, local history and customs, as well as methods of teaching the various school subjects. The enthusiasm of the students and the high standard of most of their theses prove the value of this innovation” (*Report on Achimota College 1930*

1931:13). Thus, we see how vernacular forms of knowledge became scholastic bodies of knowledge, which could be examined, researched, tested, and written about in school essays and theses, a process which simultaneously schematized and indicated the importance of vernacular knowledge

Similarly, in the history curriculum, taught by Ward, the first two years of history included Gold Coast history and modern European history, while the last two years concentrated on the growth of Britain and its empire (*Achimota Review* 1937:28). Ward felt that students should start with local history before moving on to world history (Zachernuk 1998:489), and worried about whether the teaching of Babylon and Egypt was pertinent enough for students, although he felt they led into the teaching about African empires, like Asante and Benin (*Report on Achimota College* 1931 1932). Yet Ward also noted, "A great part of the education given at Achimota must consist of the transmitting of European culture—art, music, drama, literature—to African students," and all that he hoped for was keeping alive African students' "interest" in their "traditional culture" (*Achimota Review* 1937:16,19). In many ways, because Achimota wanted to set a high standard as well as attract students, the Cambridge examinations exerted a profound influence on the curriculum, even as the staff sought to change students to accept the lessons they felt were appropriate to the needs of the country, such as African languages and history.

The other way that African culture was incorporated into Achimota was through extracurricular activities. One example is that in March 1929, some students went on treks to "villages." These treks were miniresearch excursions. In the first week, the students did nature work, and in the second, "villages near were visited by different groups and the history of the village was obtained by talking to the chiefs and elders" (*Report on Achimota College 1928–1929* 1929:11). The next year, the trek during the interterm fortnight was spent doing social service, fixing gutters, and cleaning roads. So that what had begun as learning history from elders quickly turned into doing communal labor, an activity not associated with "intellectuals," although schoolchildren certainly labored on school grounds.

Woodcarving was taught by African craftsmen (*Report on the Teacher-Training Classes of Achimota College* 1931:13). Students carved, of their own choice, state swords, chiefly stools, small animals, soup ladles, and mortars for pounding *fufu* and other foodstuffs. (*Report on Achimota College* 1931 1932). Later, in 1937, the chief woodcarver of the Asantehene taught woodcarving at Achimota and trained others as demonstrators. Students also learned "Ashanti weaving," tailoring, bookbinding, metalwork, and silversmithing (*Report on Achimota College 1928–29* 1929:3). During the 1930s, the master-weaver from the Ashanti weaving center of Bonwere came to Achimota (Agbodeka 1977:84; see also Osei 1998). Meyerowitz described great turnover in woodworking instruction (*Achimota Review* 1937:39).

Likewise, in 1927 and 1928, Enoch Azu, the grandson of a Krobo paramount chief, was hired as a temporary member of the staff and "came every week from Accra to give the Gã children lessons in drumming, but

nobody could be found for the other tribes, and the experiment was given up" (*Achimota Review* 1937:36). The visit of the 1932 inspection was again a stimulus of tribal drumming, and intensive rehearsals were held for that purpose: because of those rehearsals, drumming "became more consciously recognized as an art and less as a mere pastime" (*Achimota Review* 1937:36). Although it seems that African culture primarily occurred in these recreational spaces, as hobbies or drumming and dancing, these activities were "very highly organised," as an inspector noted in 1932, with times on the schedule set aside for them (*Report on Achimota College* 1932 1933:10).

The commitment to teaching African customs was undermined by British members of the staff, who appreciated but were relatively ignorant of indigenous culture, as African intellectuals were quick to point out. After Aggrey's death, in 1927, there was only one African member of staff, and a junior one at that. In December 1929, however, Achimota staff reported happily that they had twelve African teachers, three senior and nine junior, out of a total of fifty teaching staff, forty senior and ten junior; they had had no senior African staff in March of that year (*Report on Achimota College* 1930 1931). A training scheme to Africanize the staff began in the 1930s. However, when Africans returned from their training program in Britain to teach, they were considered the cream of the educated crop and were drawn into other fields, such as the civil service (Agbodeka 1977:55). An inspection committee recognized the problem:

In the entire life of Achimota there is involved a tension between the African culture and ideas of the tribes and homes from which the students come and the strongly European and Christian character of most of the life and work of the College. . . . The College professes to aim at combining what is best in European civilization with what is best in African tribal and social life, and carries out this aim by the encouragement of tribal dances and plays, African art, etc. But most of the staff can know little about native African life and mentality, and they are hardly in a position to judge (beyond certain obvious points) what is good or bad in it, or what is consistent with the European or Christian education which Achimota gives. (Inspection Committee 1938)

Instead of recommending more African staff, the inspectors called for more anthropological research to be done. Teachers at Achimota had already done some research: around 1931, they had collected folklore, proverbs, and other material for language teaching; and W. E. F. Ward had collected royal histories, music, and folklore in the Volta Region in 1925 and in Akyem Abuakwa and southern Asante in 1928 (Agbodeka 1977; *Report on Achimota College* 1928–29 1929; Ward 1991).

To fill in the senior teachers' gaps in knowledge and skill, African specialists were brought in from outside to train students. "Chiefs and other leading Africans" occasionally gave lectures at the College on "tribal his-

tory or customs on African constitutions or customary law, on manners and etiquette, on local traditions or any other topic of national or local interest" (*Achimota College* 1932:36). Bringing in outside experts as junior or part-time staff members pointed to the contradictions of teaching African customs in an elite school. The senior teachers were not experts. Also, the outside experts had learned their craft in contexts other than schools. Asking them to teach schoolchildren in the manner school knowledge was usually taught (planned, sequential, oriented to a child's development) proved outside their sensibility, which was more attuned to apprenticeship practices, in which one learns through participation on the margins and slowly assumes greater responsibility for various tasks. This disjuncture is alluded to by Ephraim Amu, an African member of staff and composer of African music, who might have been the most sensitive of his colleagues to the process of passing on knowledge associated with "African customs." He noted in *Achimota Review* (1937) that Achimota had difficulty finding skilled craftsmen: they could come and do their work, but were unable to "teach." The school method of an adult expert directly instructing students about a topic or in a method broke down when the topic was "African traditions," and I suspect that it broke down more often than the other official reports suggest, since their reports offer few details about the process. The outside experts may have wanted to teach through demonstration rather than direct instruction, as I saw during ethnographic research in ritual events and drumming practices in Akuapem in 1998–1999 and as is more typical in apprentice situations (Coe 2000). Perhaps as a result of the informal method of demonstrating used by the craftspeople, a more sequentially planned system of teaching craftwork was introduced in 1933: "A scheme of simplified exercises has now been introduced and these are based on a series of carefully planned demonstration lessons given by the Instructors" to teach "the use of fundamental tools and operations in their proper sequence" (*Report on Achimota College 1933* 1934:17). Thus, craftwork became a genre of school knowledge, taught, no doubt, by teachers, rather than local craftspeople.

In the absence of expert adult teachers who taught through direct instruction rather than demonstration, especially in the case of drumming and dancing, students knowledgeable through their family backgrounds taught their peers, resulting in an adolescents' view of "culture," absent of more secretive or ritual elements. Amu noted about drumming that the students were "not specially instructed in the art by any expert, but the intelligent ones among them pick up as much as they can from their people and thereby become the leaders and instructors of their fellow students. This is why there are many deficiencies in their drumming" (1937:37). Amu himself had learned how to drum from his students at the Presbyterian teacher training college in Akropong, where he had taught prior to coming to Achimota (Agyemang 1988).

Babefemi Osofisan (1974) described a similar process of interaction among students at the *École Normale de William Ponty* in Dakar, which was a boarding training college for students, generally aged 18 to 29, from

all over Francophone West Africa (see also Kerr 1995). During the 1930s and 1940s, students at the school were encouraged to record folk plays and sociological data during their school holidays, and they presented imitations of traditional customs at annual school celebrations. Their dramatic performances were generally characterized by cross-cultural elements, since the students were from all over West Africa, and the absence of ritual, which was primarily the domain of adults and specialists and therefore relatively unknown to these young adults. Achimota similarly brought together students from all over southern Ghana, and therefore, the cultural traditions produced within its domain were probably characterized by cross-cultural borrowing, and a simplification of both ideational and performative elements of “tradition.”

Despite Ward’s statement about the various ways that “African culture” was incorporated into the curriculum, what was most highly indexed as “African culture” within the publications of Achimota and the memories of its students were the performing and visual arts. At Achimota, as at other elite schools in West Africa, African performance arts were used for entertainment during extracurricular activities. Dramatic performances were among the features inherited from the Government Training College in Accra; plays were performed on Saturday nights by the various houses, including the girls’ house, with fierce competition between them. At first, bearing a resemblance to concert parties (Cole 2001), the plays were in the vernacular, with simple plots and no written parts; the principal character was often a buffoon (*Achimota Review* 1937:66–68; Agbodeka 1977). Sometimes, the students sang one or two African songs at the beginning of the performance. However, after the staff had performed a play in English, the students decided never to do plays in the vernacular again (*Achimota Review* 1937:37).

Founders’ Day at Achimota was also a time when African cultural traditions were displayed (Amisshah 1977:8). Professor Mawere-Opoku, who attended Achimota (1931–1934) and later taught there as an artist, recounted that on Founders’ Day, each tribal group—of Ewe, Fante, Gã, Twi—presented a dance new to their area. He said that two Saturdays a month at Achimota, they had tribal drumming and African nights: “Tribal drumming was taking lessons in drumming and dancing” (1997). On “African night,” the students were divided into the four principal tribal groups. “Arrangements were made for Gãs to come to talk and discuss things, to chat as one would in a village community, with experts from the Gã area. Or they would tell stories in their language. “All the four principal languages or peoples [of southern Ghana] were taken care of. They couldn’t do more than that, because there weren’t enough people. With that, people who had come from mission schools, who didn’t know anything, who had been prevented from doing so [by the church], were forced by the circumstances to learn to dance.” Mawere-Opoku remembered that each house was required to put on a play and variety entertainment, but the performances he recalled were of *The Pickwick Papers* (a dramatization of the book by

Charles Dickens) and *The Mikado* and *The Pirates of Penzance* (operettas by Sir W. S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Seymour Sullivan), speaking to the shift from vernacular comic plays to English drama by the early 1930s.

Joanna Laryea, a retired schoolteacher and development worker in her sixties, first remembered the daily and weekly schedule from her student days in Achimota (1947–1954): all time was structured. More than forty years later, she could recite the schedule for every day of the week. By that time, counting the houses, she thought there were about 900 students, with twice as many boys as girls. When I asked her about “African culture,” she said that they had entertainment on Saturday nights: maybe a movie, or students were gathered in tribal groupings and taught drumming and dancing. As a Fante from Cape Coast, she had joined the Fante group, learning the latest dances and hymns in Fante, taught by the Fante teachers, but occasionally they brought in outsiders who knew how to dance and sing. However, she quickly passed on to the differences between Anglican services and the Methodist services she attended at Achimota, which she considered “rowdy.” As for Founders’ Day, the night before was strongest in her memory, when the boys would come around singing late at night, around 11 p.m. (they were used to going to sleep at 8:30 at night). The first year she was there, she found their singing “very moving.” She and the other girls crept to the windows to listen, and when the house prefect had asked if they were in bed, they scampered back. Early the next morning, the girls were supposed to go singing. One Founders’ Day, they did not want to sing the hymns in Fante because they thought they were being laughed at by the head teachers. She explained that the missionaries had first thought that everything indigenous was pagan, but when the teachers persuaded them they were not laughing, the girls did indeed sing (Laryea 1997). Whereas the teaching of “indigenous customs” at Achimota seemed to embarrass her, Mawere-Opoku’s impression was that “as Achimotans, we felt proud that we were Africans” (1997).

Their differences in experience may have been due to gender and family, which would be illuminated by greater research among Achimota alumni: Mawere-Opoku, a member of the Asante royal family, was a professor of African dance at the University of Ghana, whereas Joanna Laryea was from Cape Coast, from an intelligentsia family. I include her story to show that the cultural performances may not have been the most significant aspect of Achimota for many students. If they were upwardly mobile, African nights and hymns in the vernacular were no doubt problematic and something to avoid. Furthermore, the difference in experience may be due to the progressive Westernization of Achimota, as Mawere-Opoku attended during the early 1930s and Laryea about two decades later.

Students and teachers who passed through Achimota seemed to be primarily from upwardly mobile families: in 1931, despite a worldwide depression and a decline in the price of cocoa, a surprising 40 percent of students were paying the school fees; the rest were on whole or partial scholarship. Although Achimota was intended for chiefs’ sons, this segment comprised

the smallest proportion of students: in 1931, of 500 students, 122 were from the merchant or shopkeeper class; 102 had agricultural connections (probably, for the most part, cocoa farming); eighty-two were from teachers' families; fifty-seven had families in the clerical professions, "including subordinate government servants"; and thirty-two were the sons or wards of paramount or other chiefs. Speaking to the fame and prestige of Achimota, eight students came from outside the Gold Coast (*Report on Achimota College 1931 1932*:12). In March 1933, out of a total of 388 students, ranging from the middle school to the university, seventy-eight were young women, or about 20 percent (*Report on Achimota College 1933 1934*).⁵

Although Achimota made a conscious attempt to help students appreciate African culture, the dominant frame of the school was Christian and British, both in the curriculum (the history of the British Empire) and in extracurricular activities (English drama). "African culture" was made to fit within these frames, as a substitute for existing categories from English school life, such as more anglicized entertainment or British history. Professor J. H. K. Nketia, who had not attended Achimota but was Mawere-Opoku's contemporary, said that Achimotans "appreciated traditional culture from an intellectual point of view"; they learned "to tolerate traditional culture": they could appreciate it, but they would not do it (1999). This insight is supported by archival documents and descriptions of Achimota: within a dominant Anglicized frame, "culture" was relegated to extracurricular events and defined as language, history, and the performing and visual arts. Appreciation and respect of traditional life were more important than competent performance and participation within it, and, due to the lack of experts willing to teach through direct instruction, students often ended up learning from one another, contributing to a more superficial and less ritualistic depiction of culture, creating "culture" from an adolescent's perspective. Students adopted their teachers' stance toward "tradition": as an educated elite, they appreciated and evaluated it from a critical distance, but did not fully participate in it as a lived form. The production of "African culture" at Achimota was the result of the interaction between expatriate teachers, romantic about a pastoral and communal "Africa"; African students and teachers aiming for upward mobility and civil-service positions; and African craftsmen and drummers, whose ways of imparting their skills did not resemble the instruction regularly given in a school.

Achimota and the Contradictions of Colonialism

Achimota aroused passionate feelings and criticism within the Gold Coast. Many educated Africans felt that it was unnecessary and a disservice to Africans to have one kind of education for Africans and another for Europeans, and suspected that the reason for teaching local arts, language, and customs was to keep Africans in inferior positions. Thus, they pushed for an academic education and a focus on the English language. In 1935, prominent

political nationalists attacked the way Ward taught African history, in an attempt to reveal that the school was an imperial institution (Jenkins 1994). They also criticized the lack of senior African staff at the school, and they wanted it to provide university education (Ward 1965). African Christians disliked that converts were forced to participate in what they saw as pagan practices, such as the drumming and dancing on “African nights.” They were suspicious of the school’s nondenominationalism. Teachers at Achimota felt they had to defend the proposition that their school was providing a Christian education. Others in the colonial service felt that Achimota was a center of subversive political propaganda, fostering criticism of the British Empire. Furthermore, Achimota was often at odds with the colonial Education Department (Jenkins 1994; Ward 1965). Another criticism involved expense: Achimota sometimes used up a quarter of the educational budget for the entire country, thus limiting the provision of basic education (McWilliam and Kwamena-Poh 1973:62). Achimota was therefore pulled in many different directions by various parties, and was at the center of many political debates—about Christianity, education, and colonialism.

McWilliam and Kwamena-Poh (1973) argued that because it was not identified with a particular mission society, Achimota became a national possession as other schools could not; it brought together elite students from all over the Gold Coast Colony and Asante, the southern portions of what is today Ghana. For extracurricular activities and language instruction, students were divided into the four major ethnic groupings and languages of the south, but the lingua franca of the school was a pidgin that mixed Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, and Fante, and borrowed some words from Gã (Mawere-Opoku 1999; see also *Aims and Methods of Language Teaching in the Gold Coast* 1930). Isolated from their families and communities, on a campus in what was then countryside, just north of the capital, Accra, the students had intense relationships with one another, friendships that lasted into old age, and flirtations that turned into marriages (Laryea 1997). An elite is maintained by their close interaction, including the connections and shared culture created by boarding school (Cohen 1981). Achimota successfully created a southern elite, disproportionately represented in the next generation of politicians and policymakers, and generated a new elite culture characterized by cross-cultural borrowing, respect for a reified, nonreligious “African culture,” but awkwardness about actually participating in it.

Conclusion

The teacher’s glory is, in an atmosphere of thoughtful and sincere patriotism, to aid the growth of these quick and eager and promising citizens of the Africa yet to be. Africa is come into her Renaissance, and in our teachers’ hands to-day are many of her future leaders, whose names and work will live

long after we, their teachers, are forgotten. (*Report on Achimota College 1931 1932:8*)

Achimota was an attempt to give an African elite—the future leaders of the Gold Coast—an appreciation and respect for a world that students expected to leave behind, the “traditional” society of unlettered peoples. Because it was a government-supported school,⁶ it was not very influential in changing school policy in the mission schools, but it did influence the next generation of policymakers, civil servants, and politicians, a substantial number of whom had passed through the school (Nketia 1999). In the end, Achimota succumbed to contradictions from within and criticisms from without. It became ordinary and like other schools. By the 1950s, as independence approached, it had become academic, and the study of local languages had declined (Agbodeka 1977:37). As Mawere-Opoku remarked, “They have gone western now” (1997).

What was the influence of Achimota’s teaching of African culture? Achimota contributed to the objectification of “African culture,” a process that had begun with the missionaries and a Christian critique of cultural traditions as pagan. However, this critical distance (or reflexivity) occurred under distinctly different ideological auspices: in the 1920s and 1930s, colonial officials hoped to foster African traditions (as a notion, not necessarily a practice) as the basis on which the progress of the nation could be built, so long as Western ideas, institutions, and skills could be grafted onto “tradition,” through administrative science. This “tradition” represented the national spirit, and romantics argued that its preservation was essential for the progress of the nation. Achimota was the product of this administrative skill and of increased governmental control of and support for education; it had the mandate to create a new kind of elite, who would be in sympathy with a reified past seen as “tradition,” and could serve as brokers between the West and Africa.

In many ways, the postcolonial governments of Ghana have inherited the colonial discourse about culture and modernity. “African culture,” reified and split into different segments (music, language, etc.), continues to be subjected to evaluation for its compatibility with progress. The segments most able to be inserted into this frame continue to be the performing arts. After independence, in 1957, the government of Kwame Nkrumah, who had attended Achimota teacher training college in the early 1930s, continued to promote “African culture” as a particular selection of the totality of lived experience, particularly focusing on drama, music, and dance. In the 1990s, these performing arts continued to be displayed on the outskirts and margins of Ghanaian schools, through school cultural competitions and on school anniversaries, pointing to the difficulties of integrating a particular idea of “African culture” into schools so closely tied to a particular notion of “modernity” associated with fluency in English, Christianity, and social mobility.

"African culture" was promoted at Achimota through the focus on arts, especially music and dance, performed during extracurricular and celebrative times within the school schedule. European teachers were more able to present "tradition" for the purposes of appreciation than for competent performance, which relied on students teaching one another and learning from community members. Students from different ethnic groups presented "their" musical and dance traditions to one another, simultaneously reifying ethnic boundaries and stimulating learning across cultural and language groups. Achimota promoted a view of "culture" as entertainment; it also created a more multiethnic culture and language for a future elite. This was one piece of an education for African future leaders that was primarily Christian and anglicized, so that they would be intermediaries between "civilization" and "tradition," choosing the best from both for the good of the nation. Achimota emerged at a particular time in Ghana's history, as colonial officials and people of the Gold Coast grappled with the issue of how and for whom "civilization" and "tradition" could be combined.

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NOTES

1. Achimota was not, however, the first secondary school in the Gold Coast, which was Mfantshipim, founded in 1876 in Cape Coast, under the auspices of the Wesleyan Mission in response to the demand of the educated elite for higher education and the mission's need for teachers and evangelical workers (Boahen 1996). By 1903, there were three secondary schools: Mfantshipim, a private school in Cape Coast run by an ex-Wesleyan African minister, and a school run by an organization of educated people in Accra (*Annual Report for 1903*).
2. The first two principals of Achimota, the Rev. A. G. Fraser and H. M. Grace, had previously been principals at Trinity College in Kandy, Ceylon, and King's College in Budu, Uganda, respectively. Ceylon and Uganda were used for comparison in terms of educational policy, and Mr. Benzies, an Achimota teacher, toured schools in India and Ceylon to explore their use of social service in the late 1920s.
3. The Phelps-Stokes 1920 African Education Commission studied African education, with the idea that knowledge about African-American education in the United States (Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes, especially) could be transferred to Africa. The commission's recommendations read "like a report on Negro education with a different locale" (Berman 1971:135). It

- advocated adaptations of education to meet local conditions; the incorporation of health, environment, home, and recreation into the curriculum; the need to develop a community consciousness; the importance of agricultural and industrial training; the need for better school supervision; the necessity for cooperation between missions and governments for African education; and the need to differentiate between the education offered the masses and those given to the leaders.
4. Ward comments that in 1921, when Fisher and Candler came to the Government Training College, they found that “everything English was regarded as good; everything native as shameful,” and this is why they encouraged “African customs, arts and crafts, dance and dress” (1965:187). The Government Training College opened in 1909 in Accra, and was part of the government’s effort to improve the quality of education in mission and government schools.
 5. Although I wish it were otherwise, I do not have specific information about the socialization of girls at Achimota, an important aspect given that this was a coeducational institution.
 6. Achimota was not under the control of the Education Department, but rather had its own governing board. Ward describes how its founders stressed that the school was not “government,” for which people in the Gold Coast had a deep-seated suspicion (1965:208). Fraser, in his speech to the Achimota Council on 8 April 1930, stressed that Achimota was a “family” in comparison to a school “under bureaucratic control,” thus differentiating the school from the government (*Report on Achimota College 1930* 1931:38). But in my interviews with Akua-pem teachers, Achimota was clearly considered “government,” as opposed to mission or church.

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