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

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Pull Quote: Students took on a stance towards “tradition” borrowed from their teachers, generated amongst themselves, and appropriate to their new status as educated elite: they were able to appreciate and evaluate “tradition” from a critical distance, but not necessarily participate in it as a lived form, as competent adults.

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

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Founded by the British colonial government in the Gold Coast in the 1920s, Achimota was an elite school which signaled the commitment of the colonial government to the provision of education and the concomitant belief in education’s role 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 dominant western frame of Achimota, “African culture” had to be transformed and reified. The practices of the school 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 through with tensions and contradictions, because missionaries, merchants, settlers, and colonial officials had
different narratives and visions of their civilizing missions (Stoler and Cooper 1997; Thomas 1994). Achimota, the first government secondary school in the Gold Coast (now Ghana), is a prime example of the contradictions of colonialism. Achimota was founded in the late 1920s by expatriate romantics of African culture and history, who sought to wed the best of both Africa and the West in order to create an African leadership who would both be in touch with “the people” and broker Western ideas for the greater development of their nation.

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 ‘bi-cultural education’ of the elite school of Achimota, 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 both African culture and European civilization through progressive modes of education associated with Pestalozzi, Arnold, and Montessori (Report on Achimota College 1931 1932). Yet its project 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. The senior teachers in the school were mainly European, with little personal or scholarly knowledge of the culture of the Gold Coast; 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, in order 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. Therefore, this study speaks more broadly about the contradictions of
British imperialism, and of imperialist objectifications of culture, both romantic and racialist, 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 schools Africans assumed new identities as Christian and modern (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 both prospective converts and students (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Early African schoolchildren entered the total 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 either 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 non-manual 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 set up their own secondary schools in the first decade of the twentieth century (Kimble 1963). People in the Gold Coast have long sought certain kinds of schooling, often the most prestigious and academic, because it was associated with upward mobility and work in the colonial service or commercial sector (Foster 1965).

By the beginning of World War I, schools had come under greater government supervision since the Educational Ordinances of 1882 and 1887, a process accelerated by the expulsion of the Basel and Bremen missionaries in 1917. However, even at this point, mission schools were still providing the vast majority of education in the Gold Coast. My interviews with retired mission school teachers 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 Africa limited access to education and focused on the education of the elite (Ball 1983). In part, this 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 quality education in the Gold Coast was concentrated on Achimota, which drew a disproportionate share of the Education Department’s resources; 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. . . sɛ Abɔrɔfo ɛne Abibifo amanne no wɔbeka abom, ayr 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 in which it was increasingly felt 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 land-owning, 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 land ownership and relied on Indirect Rule through the institution of chieftaincy, in which they hoped chiefs would both be agents of modernization and provide 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 (1996) 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. [242-3]
Colonial officials criticized educated people in the Gold Coast as cut off from their cultural roots and caricatures of civilization and education. With the strong colonial scorn of “native intellectuals” and the promotion of chiefs and the tradition they represented as both 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* (1923):

> 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. [12]

Although Rattray was busy convincing his colonial colleagues of the importance of respecting African customs, colonial administrators in the 1920s were indeed thinking about the role of African traditions to attain greater progress. For one thing, the position of colonial administrators in the Gold Coast was related to the status of their assigned district within the hierarchy of “tribes,” so colonial administrators were partisan to their districts, attempting 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 also an attempt to respond to African nationalist pressure by showing that colonialism could be reformed from within without overthrowing it (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 colonies in Africa (Scanlon 1966). Sir Gordon Guggisberg, the governor of the Gold Coast (1919-1927), sensitive to an African urban intelligentsia which was pressuring for a West African university and secondary schools, and whose budget was flush with funds from cocoa exports, pushed through many educational reforms. Guggisberg’s 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 preserving 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]

Progress, for both Rattray and Guggisberg, could best be based on “national” institutions, customs, and characteristics: its “soul,” as Rattray put it. For the earlier 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) “civilisation” onto those national characteristics: the plant would incorporate a piece of another, both remaining itself and producing something different, with a bit of administrative science. How this grafting process would be accomplished in a colonial state, in the contact between different peoples and cultures, was far more tricky and left vague in these statements, but the biological metaphor helped provide the impetus for the project as something that could be achieved. 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 American Phelps-Stokes Educational Commission, which visited the Gold Coast in 1920, and its survey of African education (T. Williams 1964; Wraith 1967), 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. Guggisberg saw chieftaincy as the breakwaters defending native institutions from Western civilization: the new secondary school of Achimota would be a school for chiefs’ sons, who would later assume the reigns of government. Achimota was the product of the new romantic thinking on the part of some colonial officials, including the new governor, 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 that would be able to replace both traditional chiefs and the intellectuals, but was 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 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 co-educational boarding school of Achimota was established to give teacher training, technical training, and general secondary education. Although Christian, unlike mission schools it was non-denominational. The 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 for Achimota, 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 para. 28]

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, then the educated must be incorporated into the rest of society, but clearly incorporated in a hierarchical way as leaders separate from but respectful of “the people,” who were viewed as uneducated peasants untouched by Westernization and abiding by “traditional” customs. It was initially begun as a school for those children in line to become chiefs themselves, although chiefs’ sons did not necessarily inherit their fathers’ positions, especially among the mainly 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.

First principal 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)

To repeat a quotation given above, the report on Achimota said that it hoped to provide “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). These statements, part of the ideology of Achimota about picking the best from both worlds, indicate vagueness about the extent to which African social institutions and culture should be incorporated into the Achimota 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,” to mean not simply Europe, but to refer to the process of systematically modifying, adaptation, and selection of the past. This understanding of civilization or modernity is close to Giddens’ 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 indicates what is most efficacious, most born 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” (2000:457n18). 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). Furthermore, 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 recuperating selected portions of “tradition.” However, this idea was often repeated and recirculated at Achimota functions, speeches, and reports.

At the same time as this notion of civilization as selection was circulating, it is important to note that other notions of civilization continued to hold sway, for both 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” that 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 8th 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 refer both to the process of systematic selection and to the actual heritage one was selecting from, which was 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, that could be attained by Africans (whereas in the second definition, this 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 from teachers W. E. F. Ward and H. V. Meyerowitz, this does not seem to be a dominant anxiety at Achimota. Fraser said in the same speech quoted above, “I am not terrified lest the good things of Africa shall be lost” (39). The teaching of African customs to 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 “denationalised” but could serve as appropriate brokers between “civilization” and “the masses.” This educational ideal seems similar to that employed in teacher-training institutions in colonial Algeria, even though that was a French rather than British colony: students given excellent marks in evaluations were those who were 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). Students 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) who were 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 (Meyerowitz 1937). The Government Training College in Accra was incorporated into Achimota in 1928, bringing its staff, 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, introducing “tribal drumming” (*Achimota Review* 1937:36; Agbodeka 1977:55; *Report for Achimota College, 1924-26* 1927; *Report on Achimota College 1928-29* 1929). The importance of hobbies was also transferred from the habitual culture of Government Training College to Achimota (*Report on Achimota College 1930 1931*).

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 vagueness 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 those practices defined as “traditional,” even though many of its interventions (in the name of health, for instance) severely disrupted practices that were 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 school’s project of educating a future African leadership to evaluate Western and African ideas and practices scientifically and systematically, an ultimately transformative project. Achimota’s dominant frame as an elite secondary boarding school, with primarily British teachers, meant that tradition had to be defined narrowly in order to fit into the structure and schedule of the school which aimed to also teach “the best” of Western civilization, which included 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 that ended in examinations: knowledge about Africa thus became a genre of school knowledge, to be transmitted in schools according to its techniques and technologies. The other was to insert “African tradition” into organized extracurricular activities as entertainment and “hobbies.” Ward considered that there were five ways that education at Achimota kept in touch with African life: through history, the teaching of four local languages (all from the south: Gâ, Twi, Fante, and Ewe), 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 are subjected to both modes of translation into a school context simultaneously.

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 (Fante, Twi, Ewe, and Gã) should be recognized as subjects for the School Leaving Certificate examination (Agbodeka 1977), and 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 the way that vernacular forms of knowledge became school genres of knowledge, that could be examined, researched, tested, and written about in school essays and theses.

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). He felt that students should start with local history before moving on to world history (Zachernuk 1998:489), and worried about whether the teaching of Egypt and Babylon was salient 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 Achimota staff sought to change them 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” that were mini-research 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 inter-term 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 (*Report on Achimota College 1931 1932*). Later, in 1937, the chief wood-carver of the Asantehene taught wood-carving 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 staff and “came every week from Accra to give the Gâ children lessons in drumming, but nobody could be found for the other tribes, and the experiment was given up” (Achimota Review 1937:36). However, the visit of the 1932 inspection team provided the occasion for the stimulus of tribal drumming again because of intensive rehearsals for that purpose: because of those rehearsals, “it 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, it is important to note that these recreational activities were generally “very highly organised,” as an Inspector noted in 1932, with times on the schedule set aside for these activities (Report on Achimota College 1932 1933:10).

The commitment to teaching African customs was undermined by the predominantly British staff, who were appreciative of but 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, Achimota staff were pleased to report that they had twelve African teachers, three senior and nine junior, out of a total of fifty members of staff, forty senior and ten junior, because 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 positions such as the civil service (Agbodeka 1977:55). An Inspection Committee (1938) 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.

Instead of recommending more African staff, the Inspection Team called for more anthropological research to be done. Teachers at Achimota had already done some research: around 1931, they collected folklore, proverbs, and other material for language teaching; and W. E. F. Ward 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 history 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 para. 99). 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 expert themselves. Also, the outside experts had learned their craft in different contexts than a school. 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: while they could come and do their work, they were not able to “teach” the children. 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 they offer few details about the actual process in their reports. 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 1998-99 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 who were
knowledgeable through their family background taught their peers, resulting in a 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. [37]

He himself had learned how to drum from his students at the Presbyterian teacher training college in Akropong at which 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 18-29, 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 school’s 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 purposes during extra-curricular 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 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 (Amissah 1977:8). Professor Mawere-Opoku, who attended Achimota (1931-34) and
later taught there as an artist, recounted that on Founders’ Day, each ‘tribal group’ of Twi, Fante,
Ewe, and Gâ, 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.” “For the Gâs, arrangements were made for Gâs to come to talk and
discuss things, to chat as one would in a village community, with experts from the Gâ area”
(1998). Or they would tell stories in their language (1998). “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” (1997). Mawere-Opoku remembered that each house was
required to put on a play and variety entertainment, but the specific performances he recalled were “The Pickwick Papers,” “The Mikado,” and “The Pirates of Penzance,” 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 tell me the schedule for every day of the week. By this 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 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 the Anglican services she was used to 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 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 headteachers. 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 was part of the Asante royal family who became 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 very well 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 she fifteen years 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% of students were paying the school fees in whole; the rest were on whole or partial scholarship. Although Achimota was intended for the sons of chiefs, 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); 82 were from families of teachers; 57 had families in the clerical professions “including subordinate government servants”; and 32 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
Therefore, although Achimota made a conscious attempt to help students appreciate African culture, the dominant frame of the school was both Christian and British, both in the curriculum (through the teaching of the history of the British empire) and in extracurricular activities (English drama). “African culture” was made to fit 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 rather than demonstration, 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 took on a stance towards “tradition” borrowed from their teachers, generated amongst themselves, and appropriate to their new status as educated elite: they were able to appreciate and evaluate “tradition” from a critical distance, but not necessarily participate in it as a lived form, as competent adults. Thus, 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 many 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 reasons for teaching local arts, language, and customs were 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 this liberal school was an imperial institution (Jenkins 1994). They were also critical of the lack of senior African staff at the school, and wanted Achimota to provide university education (Ward 1965). African Christians disliked converts being forced to participate in what they saw as pagan practices such as the drumming and dancing on “African nights.” They were also suspicious of the non-denominational character of the school, and teachers at Achimota felt they had to defend their school as 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 was its expense; Achimota sometimes used up a quarter of the educational budget for the entire country, thus limiting the provision of more 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 creole Twi that mixed Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, and Fante, with Gâ words occasionally used (Mawêre-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 city 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 did successfully create 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, non-religious “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
Achimota was an attempt to give an African elite, the future educated 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, Achimota was not very influential in changing school policy in the mission schools, but it did influence the next generation of policy makers, civil servants, and politicians, a substantial number of whom had passed through the school (Nketia 1999). In the end, Achimota succumbed to its contradictions from within and to its 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 very different ideological auspices: in the 1920s and 1930s, colonial officials hoped to recuperate African traditions (as a notion, not necessarily as 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 extra-curricular 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 within the packed schedule of boarding institutions; 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 “civilisation” 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 Mfantsipim, 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 need of the Mission for teachers and evangelical workers (Boahen 1996). By 1903, there were three secondary schools: Mfantsipim, 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, 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 the knowledge about African-American education in the United States (Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes, especially) could be transferred to Africa. Their recommendations read “like a report on Negro education with a different locale” (Berman 1971:135). They 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 (1965) comments that when Fisher and Candler came to the Government Training
College in 1921, 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”
(187). The Government Training College opened in 1909 in Accra and was part of the
government’s movement to improve the quality of education in both 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 co-educational institution.

6. Achimota was not under the control of the Education Department, but rather had its own
governing board. Ward (1965) describes how its founders stressed that the school was not
“government,” for which people in the Gold Coast had a deep-seated suspicion (208). Fraser
stressed that Achimota was a “family” in comparison to a school “under bureaucratic control,”
thus differentiating the school from the government, in his speech to the Achimota Council on 8th
April 1930 (Report on Achimota College 1930 1931:38). But in my interviews with Akuapem
teachers, Achimota was clearly considered “government” as opposed to mission or church.

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