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Ethnocentrism vs. World Unity:
Impacts on Socialization and
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EDUCATION AND ETHNOCENTRISM

by

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by JAN KNAPPERT

It was during my studies of the role of the many languages in Belgium, Indonesia and Surinam during the late forties, that I first became aware of the function of a language in the creation of a nation, and the extent to which ethnocentrism is a condition for nation building. The creators of the Belgian state of 1831 were well aware of the need to educate their citizens in the conviction that the whole nation must learn to speak French exclusively, and that in the schools a strong anti-Netherlands sentiment must be nourished, otherwise the state might not survive. In Indonesia, the Malay language was renamed Bahasa (Language) Indonesia, and made compulsory in all schools. Here the conviction was again that: a) a new state required a new language as the vehicle for the expression of a new culture; b) the new language must be the sole and obligatory language for all citizens in the country, who might otherwise be tempted to foster secessionist thoughts. This was in 1948-9, when several new states were created, each with its own national language, viz. India (Hindi), Israel (Hebrew), Pakistan (Urdu), the Philippines (Tagalog). Since those heady days of post war independence, the languages concerned have had varying success, most of all Hebrew.

However, the days of independence were only beginning, but the number of new official languages did not keep up with the number of new nations. Partly because a number of states took the same national language (Morocco , Tunisia 1954; the Sudan 1956; Syria 1946, Egypt 1953, South Yemen 1967) . Arabic is now one of the six official languages of the United Nations, so it has prestige.

A large number of states that gained independence in the sixties retained the 'colonial' language as the lingua franca for the nation, because there was no prominent language that could be raised to the status of national language. Some countries have

even gone back to the metropolitan language when it was realised that it was more useful as a tool for education, and more efficient as a language for technology, both practically, in teaching skills, and at the scientific level for secondary teaching.

There is no doubt that the most efficient way to isolate a nation is to teach the people a language that no one else knows. This is the purpose of ethnocentrism: to isolate the citizens from those of other countries so that they are not tempted to drift away and emigrate to better paid jobs or to welfare states.

The purpose of such ethnocentrism is invariably to augment the power of the government over its subjects. Every commanding officer needs a common language with his soldiers or sailors so they can understand and obey his commands. So, ethnocentrism has two purposes, one external: isolation, and one internal: command.

The big problem for the modern nations of the ex-colonial world is that they cannot remove the colonial language without partly disrupting the fine network of communications in a modern state. At the other end of the scale, there are governments which are, like most governments, composed of an elite of educated men, who are fluent in the ex-colonial language, and who have their own in-group language to communicate among themselves on finer points. They will retain the official position of the metropolitan language because it suits their purpose: the fewer people are educated enough to know it, the fewer will try and rise to become rival politicians.

I think of ethnocentrism rather as tribalism than as race-centredness, as Dr Ishumi describes it. Tribalism (the word flourished in Kenya in the sixties) is pushing the interests of one's own ethnic group and to that end, pushing one's own members into positions of power. This attitude threatened to disrupt Kenya as a unified state, and it has by no means died. There are several vicious civil wars going on in Africa which are still tribal wars.

Sumner's definition, as quoted by Ishumi, refers to an entirely different cultural context, hence the different definition-premises. It refers not to politics , economics, linguistics or anthropology, but to a social parallel of Freud's egocentrism, the isolationism of the ego, a pathological inability of an individual to recognize his fellow human beings. This condition may be the inception of a growing schizophrenia, which gradually alienates the patient.

William Graham Sumner (d.1910) was an American who lived in the days when immigration was at its height. He knew that all the new Americans had to become one nation and to that end they must not be ethnocentric, they must forget their folkways (this was the title of his book), the roots of their differing customs. Today ethnism has come back into fashion so that the American nation is more divided than ever before, and so, weaker, crumblier. In every country there must be a balance between the freedom of the citizens and their responsibility to form one strong nation.

Dr Ishumi quotes the reports about Africa written by travellers in "darkest" Africa. It was Henry Stanley who coined the term, perhaps to hide the many things he had done there which cannot bear the light of day. However, all that is history now. I cannot read those boastful bush rangers' books without smiling . Prejudices are childish , but every generation has its own. Even today, African peoples are divided into Islamic, Christian and animist. It is true that some belief systems can be called animistic but not all African religions belong to that type. Dr Ishumi quotes Murdock on the diffusion of cultures in Africa, but Murdock is a theoretician, totally ignorant of the real Africa. Seligmann's theory of the Hamites has also long since been abandoned, so Dr Ishumi can lay those ghosts to rest. Nor need it worry us where the African cattle come from: there is no necessary connection between the origin of cattle and of people. John Speke was another of those explorers who jumped to quick

conclusions, and Richard Burton did not hide his contempt for him. The days when those explorers' works influenced our school syllabus have long since passed. Unfortunately, our modern historians of Africa do not show greater caution in describing peoples' movements. John Sutton is also well known for his sweeping statements. For instance the peoples of northeastern Africa are not only pastoralists, they also have some of the oldest agriculture in the world, notably in Ethiopia. Sutton ought to know that Hamitic means 'speaking a certain type of language.' We know nothing about the movement of a so-called Hamitic race. It is even more erroneous to call these people Caucasoid, firstly, because that word, like Hamitic, refers to a Biblical classification which was not based on scientific observation, secondly because 'Caucasoid' does not mean anything that could include 'African'. Sutton knows nothing about the linguistic classification 'Hamitic', so he should not have brought it in. Linguists do not imply historical movements of peoples when they speak of the relationship of languages, only comparative classification. Nor can it be maintained that pastoralists have no talent for political organisation. The nomadic Arabs proved the contrary. We know even less about the Hamitic civilization, so Dr Ishumi may quietly forget the Hamites except as speakers of languages of a certain type which, as claimed by some, is related to Semitic.

On the subject of influence versus multiple invention, I have always insisted that the only African people I know a little, the Swahili, although they have clearly been influenced by Arabs and Indians, have invented many aspects of their culture themselves, especially poetry, hymnsinging, matmaking and other skills. It has been claimed that the Benin people of Nigeria invented the art of casting bronze.

So, there is no need to 'right the distorted picture of Africa' (p. 13) in the writings of the colonialists of recent history. Their opinions have died with them. Ibn Battuta has a different axe to grind. By describing the virtue, honesty and justice of the rulers in Africa, he is criticizing by implication the despots of the Central Islamic lands who have become godless in his conviction. He called Africa's non-Muslims Caffirs.

With regard to Al-Mas'ūdi's renderings of words in the Zanzi language of what is now called the Swahili Coast, it is unfortunate that Dr Ishumi did not look up my decipherment of these words in Knappert, Swahili Islamic Poetry , 1971, I, p. 7. The word w-k-l-m can be read as wakulima 'farmers', i.e. landlords rather than supreme lords. The sequence m-k-l--y-j-l-w can be read Mukulu ijulu 'the Great One Above' in old Swahili. These words prove that Swahili was spoken on what is now the Kenya Coast more than a thousand years ago.

Nor should we worry any more over the description of the Majimaji war as 'rebellion'. All rebellions against the established authority are described as heroic wars of liberation by those who undertake them. If it had not been for Yorktown, the American revolution might still be called a vain rebellion. Fashions dominate history writing, and history is always written by the victors. So, abject rebels can become heroes overnight.

It was the colonial powers who introduced formal education, i.e. school education , in most of Africa. Dr Ishumi seems to deplore this, if I read him correctly. Would he prefer Africa to have developed the traditional education ? Admittedly, western education was not adjusted to African needs. Is anything being done to change that ? (p.22). How would the author like to see an educational system in Africa constructed so as to be both fair to other peoples and yet favorable to nation-building ?

India is more than a country or even a continent; it is a world. The 745 million Indians speak between them 745 languages belonging to at least five distinct language families; fourteen of these languages are official, including English; this means that they are used in the administration of the 22 states into which India is divided. Add to this the fact that all the main religions of the world are represented in India, while the term Hinduism encompasses an immense variety of religions, from pure philosophy to primitive magic. All the main Christian churches and all the Islamic sects are represented. Instead of regarding India as a hotbed of violence, I am personally amazed that this tinderbox of potential disagreement does not generate more war and civil disturbance than it does. Indians are naturally kind, restrained, peaceful and tolerant in their relations with their fellow citizens. India's four thousand year old tradition of harbouring peoples of all races, religions and languages has taught its citizens pacific behaviour towards others.

It was therefore inevitable that India should be conceived at its inception as a secular state, for as soon as there is a majority religion, there are minority religions and 'sects'. ← Professor Shukla rightly emphasizes this secular aspect, for many of us tend to think of India as Hindu in contrast to the Islamic state of Pakistan as it was conceived by one man in 1947. Yet one is justified in thinking that Hinduism, in spite of its division into distinct groups, commands a majority of Indians. In our days of fundamentalist revival this causes inescapable political problems. Here perhaps more clarity is needed for those of us who are not familiar with the Indian scene. Is there not a connection between secularism, internationalism and the wish

to send one's children to English-medium schools on the one hand, and Hinduism, nationalism and the drive to teach Hindi at all levels on the other ? Was it not Jawaharlal Nehru himself who led the nation in internationalism, since he never addressed it except in English ? Is it not this internationalism which is ultimately linked to what Dr Shukla calls universalism, the realisation that all human beings share their basic feelings, fears, foibles and fortes ? On the other hand, is it not the nationalism which leads inescapably to ethnocentrism, the exaggeration of the in-group's superiority ? It is true that the Indian intelligentsia are outward looking. They send their children to English-medium schools because they want them to become engineers and scientists in the West. They look over the borders to a better future for their children. They may perhaps be imputed with lack of loyalty but can we blame them ? India fails to offer the opportunities that young bright people need and deserve. Dr Shukla deplures by implication the capitalist system 'still' prevailing in India, but its effects have been the only wealth generated in India. On the other hand a capitalist like Mr Tata who provides jobs for thousands, is constantly threatened by nationalisation. It is usually the socialists who are the ultra-nationalists, in spite of their lip-service to internationalism. They need ethno-centrism so they can ban the much maligned 'internationals' in order to get complete control over the national means of production. The Indian government is already flexing its muscles to become the most militant power in the Indian Ocean. That is the inescapable consequence of ethnocentrism.

All this has nothing to do with the colonial period. That is already too far behind us to have any real influence. In the forty years since it ended so many changes have taken place on the international scene that the strategic map of the world is unrecognizable. Colonialism is now used only to keep an old hatred alive that was

not always there, certainly in India where many people benefitted from the presence of an effective peacekeeper in that vast land.

It is not useful to blame everything that goes wrong on the colonial governments of forty years ago. It betrays a lack of will to search one's own heart and find out what is wrong today. I found the same cultivation of hatred in Poland and the Soviet Union. All the evils of today were blamed on the devastation caused by the Germans before 1945. In Western Europe where no such hatred is cultivated, progress has been visibly better.

Here again there is a contradiction in the innermost wishes of some Third-world nations. On the one hand they want to stress their total independence, on the other they want to enjoy the large benefits of belonging either to the Western world or to the Soviet world. Some nations even draw benefits from both sides. They are welcome to them, but it does bring out an inner contradiction: a truly independent nation would surely prefer to rely on its own resources of brains and work-power to raise itself up.

The question remains, as Dr Shukla put it at the very beginning of his paper: what do we want to give people instead of ethnicism? We all know that extreme nationalism and religious fanaticism will lead to war. So, if we want peace we shall have to give all people something of value to live for, to strive for, to unite for. It is not nationalism that is to blame, that is already past its peak. It is now a servant of much bigger political movements, a tool in a much bigger game. Islam stresses Arab nationalism in the Middle East; Marxism stresses Russian nationalism, Rumanian nationalism, Vietnamese nationalism and so on. It is ironically only in the much maligned internationalistic western cultures that ethnic minorities have any chance at all. The Estonians, Latvians, Szekely's and numerous other ethnic minorities of the Marxist world have no chance of getting any measure of independence, whereas the Welsh, the Friesians, the Lapps, the Catalonians and others now have their

own language in their schools and receive generous benefits.

India is a very difficult country to rule. The creation of the 14 Indian language-states has made it more difficult, since these states tend to drift apart, do their own business in a language which nobody understands and even interfere in international affairs as Tamilnadu did in Sri Lanka. The alternative is the one-party rule, as in the Soviet Union, to create a strong government. The ideal of a federal state as in Switzerland can be achieved only when the people are as highly educated as the Swiss are, and as highly disciplined, thrifty and hard working.

The extreme form of ethnocentrism is still found in many parts of Africa where ethnic groups (the word tribes is now out of date) live who have no time for the central government and resist the arrival of the tax collector. Any such group with a strong leader can make itself independent, receive arms by air from any outside agent eager to fish in troubled waters, and start a war against its neighbours, as we have seen in Uganda, Nigeria, the Congo, the Sudan etc. In the end there is no more communication, no transport, no security, no medical services, no food supplies. In brief, there is no more state so the villagers are back to the hazards of life as it was a hundred years ago: they have to supply their own fresh water from wells, or dig them, they have to police the area and deal with robbers as best they can, for there is no more law in such countries. The gun has become law.

Between these two extremes, the supra-national superstate like the Soviet Union, and the independent ethnic group in Tropical Africa, there must be the golden mean of the federal structure as I hope we are composing it in Europe, of the Swiss model on which ultimately the United States was also based. Such structures are however, extremely vulnerable to subversion from inside and whittling away from outside. Freedom is a fragile flower

In the end, Dr Shukla seems to prefer a human world divided into separate nations with their own styles of dress, rather than the 'western' ideal of the future man as a modern superman. In one respect, the divisions of the past will be with us for a long time : as standards of education are going down, so the number of people knowing foreign languages is reduced. In Holland and Czechoslovakia it was normal for educated people to speak three foreign languages, today few speak one well. The result is a narrower nationalism than ever before . This may please Dr Shukla but I feel that it is leading us away from the ideal of World Peace. I would be ready to sacrifice my national language and culture if the gain would be true understanding between the nations of the earth and a genuine good will among all people.

Dr Wagaw ends his paper on the same subject, that of mutual understanding in a united continent. He mentions Europe, Africa and Latin America. North America, we may presume, no longer needs such concerns since there is already a good understanding between Canada and the U.S. , except that there are still problems with the speakers of French and Spanish. In Europe we now have nine official languages, which has caused some scholars to suggest we should introduce Esperanto as the one second language for everybody. Progress is slow but at least it is democratic. As for Latin America, the Spanish republics at least should have been united long ago. Since there is no unity yet in Western Europe and South America, one can hardly be surprised that in Africa there is no success yet in creating unity at any level.

Dr Wagaw begins his paper by stating that "the role of education in society is to serve the purpose of that society."

That would seem to be an irrefutable truth but what if the purpose of a society is world conquest ? I know of several societies, past and present, whose purpose, stated or hidden, is world conquest. Dr Wagaw does not say so, but the original purpose of all societies was simply to survive. To that end three things were needed: food, peace and defence. Every society has to train a sufficient number of its youngsters to become food producers, including fetchers of water (we would now say: suppliers of unpolluted potable water) and hewers of wood (we would now call them suppliers of fuel, i.e. of energy resources such as oil or gas). The second need of a society is internal peace, which means the laws of Moses must be observed: no killing, no stealing, no adultery, which is always a cause of civil strife. These laws have to be enforced so that civil authority has to be created in the form of a chieftainship or a council of elders, now called presidency and parliament. Thirdly every society has to defend itself against outside invasions if it wants to survive. To that end the nations of the world usually cultivated a class of warriors such as the mediæval knights, the samurai in Japan, the morán among the Maasai of Kenya, the Serbian junak, the Turkish ghazi. Such warrior classes usually outlived their usefulness, when new methods of defence became necessary. Adaptation is needed in every society and in every species for the sake of survival. It is, however, an illusion to believe that primitive societies had no problems. Apart from a high infant mortality rate and a short life span for most, there was the constant fear of attack by raiding enemies, there was jealousy and witchcraft, which caused much discord and alienation.

Formal education , i.e. school teaching, was brought to the colonies by the colonizers. Perhaps they should have left the colonized peoples as they were. As it was, education in most of tropical Africa was in the hands of the missionaries, who were later subsidized by the colonial governments. Naturally, the missionaries taught that paganism is bad and Christianity is good, just as in North Africa and the other Islamic lands all education was based on the Koran. The result is, as we know, that all children are made into imitators, as Dr Wagaw complains.

I agree with him in principle except that there are certain things one has to know such as the countries of the world, the rights of men or perhaps the American constitution and of course the numbers , the major constellations and the families of flowering plants.

I do not know if it is wrong to educate children as Christians, Jews or Muslims; perhaps we should give our children a neutral education, but then they will choose an emotional, harmful ideology.

If the AID agencies are politically motivated, as Dr Wagaw claims, it is not because they want to dominate the countries they aid, but because they feel they have to follow the fashion, which is to do good, to be the good Samaritan. Whether it is worth while, whether the good things arrive in the right hands is another question. Nor do I think the Germans expect the Goethe Institute to have more than a vague influence on a few poets in Africa; nothing political. Like Dr Ishumi, Dr Wagaw is concerned over things that are already passed and were never very important anyway. What matters today is working for world peace, and to that end we should remove all hate and enmity from our hearts and those of young people for whose education we are responsible. They must learn objectivity and equality.

Cultural imperialism is rare today, and ineffective. It is still to be found in Belgium where the French language and its literature are imposed in all schools as the only way to get a job. I see no harm in institutions like the British Council which -- though its budget is regularly cut -- invites a few students over to study in Britain, then sends them back home to teach. Nor is the direction of influence a one way street. Nowadays, the Third World has an enormous influence on the art of the Western World. Mexican painting, African sculpture, Indian miniatures, Chinese philosophy, Japanese poetry, Polynesian woodwork, to mention only a few of the many arts, have become welcome additions to the museums, exhibitions and art books of the world. That is a very good thing: it teaches us that all nations produce art, but (fortunately) in different ways and through different media. Thanks to the Rev. Moon's new project, we hope to contribute to a new series of conferences on the arts of the world.

It is true, as Dr Wagaw says that international aid is never enough to provide education for everybody in the Third World. I have calculated that a country of ordinary size like Tanzania or Kenya, with 20 million people each, would require one million teachers, who would have to earn a billion dollars annually. That sort of money is never spent on aid, only on armaments. The languages used in schools are also of some concern to Dr Wagaw. Here perhaps his information is not entirely up to date. An increasing number of nations now receives education in their national languages; in Africa these are: Botswana (Tswana), Burundi (Rundi), Ethiopia (Amharic), Lesotho (Sotho), Madagascar (Malagasy), Malawi (Chewa), Rwanda (Rwanda), Somalia (Somali), Tanzania (Swahili), Togo (Ewe), Swaziland (Swati), Zimbabwe (Shona), not to mention the Arabic speaking countries, and the Transkei (Xhosa).

On p. 7 of his paper Dr Wagaw seems to imply that he wants children to be taught only one language, for "duality in language is bound to create dual loyalty." Does this mean that none of us should learn a second language lest we become traitors ? Many Africans that I have met speak several African languages fluently without ever being in any doubt what they are themselves. Africa's problem is (and this is also true for India, Burma, Pakistan and Indonesia) that each country speaks many languages so that a one-language approach to education is impossible except by means of the ex-colonial language which is precisely what Dr Wagaw does not want. Yet, Nigeria is entirely educated in English. Perhaps Nigeria is so large that there is no danger of it being strongly influenced by Britain. In technology the same dilemma comes back: if a nation wants to be developed it will have to accept western or Japanese technology; if not, there will be poverty.

④ The most westernized nations are also the most prospering nations, such as Singapore; totally isolated nations tend to remain poor, such as Albania. Do not misunderstand me: I am not advertising westernisation as such with all the dangers of pollution and deforestation. I prefer zero-development which would save the forest. But that would lead to more poverty. Multiplying nations must industrialize or be fed by outside aid, such as Egypt. I do not like this situation any more than the Egyptians, but we cannot abolish overpopulation. We can only help the people by teaching them skills and technology. This teaching can only be done by teaching the people western ways of thinking and usually also a western language. It is possible that this will cause some alienation, but is poverty and stagnation a preferable alternative ?

Here is the real problem, where the fear of losing one's ethnic identity confronts the fear of seeing one's children live in poverty forever after. Unfortunately, history teaches us hard lessons in this respect. Nations that did not adapt to changing times were defeated, those which went through a period of rapid mutation, survived, such as Turkey, Japan, South Korea, Tai^w Wan. Thailand is now an up and coming country to watch, but Saudi Arabia will lapse back into its ancient oblivion as soon as the oil in its rock bottom has been pumped away. Reason : it is not developing industry, nor is it educating young scientists in sufficient numbers. More remarkable is Iran, which was on its way to become a modern nation, until its current leader pushed it back to the Middle Ages. With that, poverty came back too. I fully understand the resistance a person and a nation feel against modernization. The flowering countryside where I grew up has been replaced by a network of motorways and parking lots to accomo^mdate the transport for a nation that has doubled its numbers. The alternative would have been poverty or emigration. This happens everywhere: educated Indians come and work in England, English scientists go and work in America, for better pay. They, like thousands of Mexicans, Vietnamese and many others, leave their home, their language and their culture to go and live where they can bring up their children in health and peace. For most people that is understandably the most vital consideration.

The world is changing rapidly and we have to change our actions with it. It is no use deploring what happened in the past, we must prepare for the future. Our children will expect to be fed tomorrow, and to be educated so that they can earn a living with what they have learned. To that end we must teach them practical skills, to cope with life in a world that has little time for theory .