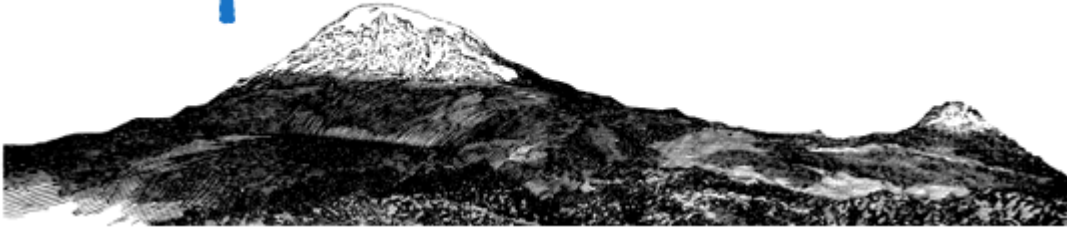




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Conquest of the Mind



by: Jason A. McGarvey (*Research/Penn State*, Vol. 18, no. 2 (May 1997))

When I first met Semali, he was sitting behind his office computer wearing a white baseball cap and reading e-mail. An assistant professor of education at Penn State, Semali has two master's degrees from Stanford in communications and education, and a Ph.D. in social sciences and comparative education from UCLA – an education few would consider oppressive. But as I got to know him, I began to understand better both Semali's frustration and the roots of his harsh remark: *Education is slavery of the mind*.

"I was born on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro in a village called Chaggaland," he began, warmly smiling as he removed his hat and sat it on the table.

"My people, the Chagga, are an indigenous tribe of Tanzania. While I was growing up in what was then called



Tanganyika, we had already been under colonization for nearly a century – first by the Germans, and then the British after the first World War. The colonial school I attended didn't teach me to be a member of Chagga society. Although I had a certain knowledge system as a member of the village, I read, wrote, and spoke things at school that didn't fit into village life.

"I always wore two different hats," said Semali, then glanced over at his cap on the table. "One at school and one at home." He grinned, "I developed this double-consciousness so well that I didn't realize it."

According to Semali, his village began to fall apart as the colonizers gradually replaced Chagga traditions with colonial education. As their traditional culture disappeared, so did the knowledge that had enabled the Chagga to be self-reliant. They became dependent on the British and other European countries to provide them with such everyday needs as food, clothing, and shelter.

In 1988 Semali returned to his village from the United States. The inability of his people to provide for themselves made him both angry and sad. Semali no longer recognized the once self-sufficient culture of his ancestors, and his anger and sadness caused him to vow never to return again. But he does. Not because things have improved in Chaggaland, but because they haven't. And Semali has made it

his life's work to do something about it.

The history of Chagga education begins like that of most indigenous African communities: with the saying, *One white ant does not build an anthill*. (Or, *It takes a village to raise a child*, for all the Hillary Clinton fans). What exactly do these adages mean to the Chagga people?

"Traditionally, village elders were responsible for passing the social values and customs of our community on to the children," tells Semali. "However, children were not taught using the same methods that the colonial schools later used. Rather than reading books and taking exams, the children in the village 'learned by doing,' what is called *mtato*, or 'imitative play.'

"The philosophy of this type of learning is known as *apvunda*," he continues. "Through *apvunda* children are not merely taught abstract pieces of knowledge to be memorized for exams, but instead are taught knowledge that was necessary in everyday Chagga life. This knowledge extends into three practical areas: social duties, social values, and spiritual beliefs."

Semali recollects an example of *apvunda* from his childhood.

"When members of our village died," he recalls, "it was important that their spirits be joined to the spirits of their ancestors. It was the duty of the entire village not only to make sure that the deceased would make this journey safely, but also to make sure that each village member came to terms with the loss."

To fulfill these duties, Semali's village would engage in a three to four-day-long period of mourning called *matanga*, which served a dual purpose: The first purpose being *lsanza na kishari*, or to properly send the person into the afterlife; and the second being *lrambika* – to teach the younger generation the duties, values, and beliefs of the community.

"During *matanga*," says Semali, "a cow would be slaughtered for a village feast in honor of the deceased person. The entire village took part in the feast. As we ate, everyone exchanged stories about all the good things that this person had done. We would talk about how he or she was generous and kind, and how these virtues were going to make it easier for them to join their ancestors. After the feast was over, we would all gather to perform the sacred rituals for burying the dead.

"*Matanga* was an example of *apvunda*," Semali explains, "because the other children and I learned things that were important to the three areas of village life. First, we were taught how to perform the social duties and rituals associated with sending off the dead, like the preparation of the feast. Second, we were taught the social values of our community: that kindness and generosity insured a safer journey into the afterlife. And third, we were taught our spiritual beliefs: the knowledge of our gods, the afterlife, and our spiritual connections with our ancestors.

"But perhaps most importantly we were instilled with a sense of unity and trust in our village.

"The entire village was a part of the whole process of learning. We felt united with

the rest of the members, and we were taught that it was our duty to look out for the welfare of our people. And this is why I do what I can for them today."

Although the village was a place for children to learn, another educator besides the village had been emerging in most African countries since the late 19th century – the colonial school.

"Chagga subjugation," states Semali, "is a result of the long process of colonial schools deconstructing Chagga traditions and replacing them with colonial systems of living."

How did this process occur?

African colonization became widespread after 1919, when the European victors of WWI divided the "dark continent" among themselves. Colonization existed to exploit Africa's abundant natural resources in order to feed European and North American consumerism. As a result, the Chagga became citizens of the British colony Tanganyika, as well as prospective laborers in Tanganyika's newly established colonial market economy.

Says Semali, "In order for the colonizers to exploit the Chagga for labor they first needed to establish themselves as the authority. Because authority traditionally rested in the hands of the Chagga elders, the colonizers needed to begin dismantling Chagga cultural traditions. The main tool for doing this was the colonial school.

"The colonial school was set up to instill the values and practices of the colonizers on the indigenous people so that the indigenous people would open up their land and their minds to market economies," he continues. "In order to establish control over these economies, the colonizers had to first establish control over the socialization of the people. As a result, the colonial schools began socializing the children in ways that conflicted with their traditions."

An example of this conflict, according to Semali, concerned the traditions of village trust and unity learned during ceremonies like *matanga*.

"As soon as we entered the fifth grade," remembers Semali, "we were no longer allowed to speak our native language, Kichagga. We had to speak English. The way that teachers enforced this rule was through a wooden block. This small block, which had the word 'English' carved on it, would secretly be given to one of our schoolmates who was told to report to the teacher if he or she overheard anyone speaking Kichagga. If anyone was caught speaking Kichagga, the teacher could punish them.

"The student with the block was a spy, a witch-hunter," Semali continues. "The trust of the community was betrayed. We were taught by the village to trust each other as children, but now we learned that we could not trust each other; we never knew who might have the block. The community was supposed to bond together, but the colonial school was dividing us. As the saying goes, 'Divide and Conquer.' We were taught that the only ones we should trust were the colonizers – the colonial teachers and the colonial government."

Semali adds that the students were taught to despise their own language. They were taught that everything in Chagga culture was inferior to the colonial culture. As a result, the village elders' credibility as leaders was challenged.

"Chagga society was, and to a degree still is, highly stratified and hierarchical," he explains. "Historically, the elder chiefs, or *Wamangi*, controlled the local resources. This authority derived from the belief that the *Wamangi* had abilities to control rain and communicate with our gods.

"Students were taught in school that these beliefs were primitive and superstitious. As a result, they began to lose faith and respect for the elders as authority figures, and began to see the colonizers as the authority.

"The problem with this is that the colonizers gained control of the village's resources, as well as over the religious and social behaviors of the people. While this control was established, the colonizers slowly created a cash crop system which colonial landlords would control."

Coffee became the chief crop grown in Chaggaland.

"The villagers were forced to work for large plantation owners growing coffee. If someone refused to work in the plantation, they were punished. And even those who did work were whipped by overseers if they didn't work as fast as the colonizers wanted them to. Therefore, by subjugating the culture of the people, the colonizers could also force them into labor, making them mental slaves.

"The coffee was not being grown for the village, but instead for the landowner's profit," Semali continues. "As a result of this, the people were growing things they didn't eat, and eating things they didn't grow. All because the colonizers had taught them to despise their culture, which had previously enabled them to be self-reliant.

"So it was not necessarily their becoming laborers that made the Chagga people slaves, but rather their increasing dependence on the market economy which was completely controlled by the colonial government." Because of this mental dependency, even after Tanganyika gained its independence in 1961 and became Tanzania, the Chagga were still unable or unwilling to provide for themselves. Mentally, they were still colonized. Had the colonial school permanently damaged the traditional culture? Semali's belief that people are resilient allows him to remain optimistic.

In the late 1960s, Semali was sent by a missionary organization to study journalism at the Kitwe School of Journalism in Zambia. After working in Tanzania as a journalist, Semali worked for the Tanzanian government in its media and education programs; by the late-1970s he was the director of communications. Throughout this period, Semali increasingly saw the tensions between the colonial legacy and Tanzania's indigenous cultures.

Tanzania's independence movement was led by its new president, Julius Nyerere. The first thing Nyerere did to change the educational system was to develop programs attempting to reintroduce indigenous African education, which he called "Education for Self-Reliance."

Nyerere tried to make an ethnic blueprint of Tanzania so that education could be more local, and so that schools could operate along with traditions and indigenous cultural systems.

"In other words," says Semali, "parents and elders would be able to influence what was taught in the schools, and how it could be taught to be meaningful for life in the village. Nyerere wanted schools to make indigenous knowledge – local knowledge of the land, the animals, the culture, and the social structure – the focus of education. He felt children should be taught subjects like agriculture using some of the same methods that their traditional cultures used: like by having children 'learn by doing.'"

However, Nyerere's programs were met with resistance from the teachers and others who had become set in the ways of colonial education. Many of them felt that emphasis on traditional education would not help their children become mobile in a modern society. They felt that colonial-style education was the wave of Tanzania's future.

"Also," tells Semali, "many people tried to view the school and the village as two separate institutions for learning. The school was seen as separate from the village. But it is impossible to separate the two without trying to claim that one is better than the other.

"Children were torn between their duties to the village and their duties to the school," he explains. "The schools felt that *their* education was the most important because it was necessary for becoming successful in a 'modern' society. And of course it was, but only in the context of the environment the colonial education had created. It was not useful for traditional life in the village."

The result of the conflict between Nyerere's vision of education and the peoples' vision of the future were programs that taught traditional subjects using colonial methods and knowledge. Two such traditional subjects were *Elimu ya Maarifa ya Nyumbani* (home economics) and *Kilimo* (agriculture).

"The traditional way of teaching these subjects is *apvunda*," says Semali. "Children play-acted the roles of adults and in doing so became familiar with the behaviors and attitudes expected from them as future members of Chagga society.

"But under *Elimu ya Maarifa ya Nyumbani* and *Kilimo*," he adds, "many of the lessons learned at home contradict the ones taught at school.

"For instance, traditional Chagga etiquette teaches that certain portions of a slaughtered animal are appropriate to offer persons of particular rank. Children learn that the breast portion of a slaughtered animal is properly served to the male head of the family, and that the middle ribs and rump are reserved for the second rank of men in the hierarchy.

"In contrast, students of *Elimu ya Maarifa ya Nyumbani* learn that breasts and ribs are some of the choicest meats, and that male elders need not be distinguished from others by the choice of meat given."

The same is true for agriculture.

"In the village," explains Semali, "when children begin tending goats or guarding maize fields, they do so in the context of seasonal changes and social rhythms that correspond to village events and activities. Children also learn not to distinguish between 'theoretical' and 'practical' lessons.

"On the contrary," says Semali, "students of *Kilimo* learn theoretical approaches to agriculture and are limited in the amount of practical experience they receive. Most of the hands-on work they do occurs in an agricultural setting that is different from that of their village. Furthermore, students are taught that many of their elders' farming methods are outdated and primitive, and that Western methods of agricultural science are far more productive."

In a case study of these two programs, Semali and Penn State post-doctoral fellow Amy Stambach suggest that one of the problems some elders identify with *Elimu ya Maarifa ya Nyumbani* and *Kilimo* is that students learn European customs and they forget – or intentionally ignore – Chagga traditions. The students' indifference challenges established traditions and reinforces many elders' views that students are taught practices, beliefs, and values that devalue Chagga tradition.

For instance, women and girls are traditionally in charge of the marketing of agricultural produce. In post-independence schools, however, men and boys are taught to be in charge of these societal functions. This gendered division of labor goes against tradition, and many Chagga elders feel that it disrupts social relations.

Chagga elders also feel that young men and women are eroding traditional adult authority by taking over much of the agricultural production in the community. Their control comes from being labeled as "experts" by the schools, and by being taught to believe that foreign agricultural knowledge is superior to indigenous knowledge. In short, the traditional systems of hierarchy are challenged and replaced with new systems of hierarchy centered around the national government rather than the village.

"It is easy to see how the cycle of deconstructing indigenous culture continues," says Semali. "Although Tanzania is an independent country, its people are still not self-reliant. They depend on a government which is still largely influenced by the colonial legacy for many reasons, such as its dependency on foreign aid. As long as the schools conform to that legacy, the people will never be able to provide for themselves."

Semali feels that one way to balance this shift of power is by integrating traditional cultures into the schools.

Semali suggests, for example, that village elders be invited to serve as teachers, or to train teachers in local customs and traditions. In the case of agriculture, rather than contrast the "scientific" way of farming that students currently learn in school with the "traditional" way of farming that their parents and grandparents know, Semali finds it more productive to allow elders to adapt scientific knowledge for traditional use, thereby making lessons relevant to village life.

"Education is supposed to provide a platform for socializing new generations for a particular society – in this case the Chagga society. It should be designed to make people self-reliant, not dependent. The Chagga people need to be taught things that they can use in their own environment, not the environment that foreigners create for them."

Semali is drawing on these ideas in a workshop for lessons in literacy that involves inviting village members to tell traditional stories to students.

"Stories, fables, and legends are commonly used by indigenous peoples all over the world to communicate and transmit knowledge systems from one generation to the next," explains Semali. "Usually these stories have several layers of meaning, and teach in much the same way as the matanga ceremony, by using apvunda. The listener is challenged to talk about the tale and find his or her own lessons in it. This enables students to relate the stories to their own lives."

Because knowledge about the traditional institutions of customary law, land tenure systems, inheritance rights, and rituals are preserved in local stories and legends, Semali believes that lessons based on these stories can promote cultural identity, as well being as a means for children to learn to read and write.

"Many educators find the definition of literacy to be problematic," adds Semali. "The dominant Western worldview sees literacy in a limited way: The ability to read and write. But literacy means two different things to colonized people – the ability to function in the dominant culture, and the ability to function in their own culture. Oftentimes, this tension leads to the devaluing of one definition. In the case of my village, it was the traditional one."

"The best way to describe what literacy and knowledge mean to me is through my grandparents. Like most villagers in East Africa, they lived an agricultural life and never went to school. I admired them for the many things they knew about: crop rotation, animal husbandry, nutrition, food preparation, and so on. All this they knew without ever reading a book! They were 'illiterate' according to Western ideals of literacy, which equate reading and writing with being a functioning member of society. Yet my grandparents functioned very well in our village, and even held positions of authority in the larger community."

"I have since then realized that it's not the ability to read and write that allows people to function well in a society, but rather their ability to construct knowledge, or ways of knowing, specific to their environment. And it is this ability to construct knowledge for practical life that I feel is necessary for my people ever to become truly independent."

Ladi Semali, Ph.D., is assistant professor of [education](#), 257 Chambers Building, University Park, PA 16802; 814-865-6565; lms11@psu.edu. He also directs the Interinstitutional Consortium for Indigenous Knowledge in 241 Chambers. Amy Stambach is a post-doctoral fellow in Population Studies. Their article, "Cultural Identity in African Context: Indigenous education and curriculum in East Africa," appeared in the Spring 1997 issue of Folklore.