

# MODERNISATION THEORY, PRISMATIC SOCIETY AND EDUCATIONAL DECENTRALISATION IN UGANDA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper revisits modernisation theory in relation to the nature of education in Africa. It examines how schools actually operate in 'prismatic' societies in general before focusing on a study of educational decentralisation in Uganda. The study used interviews, observation, documentation and filed notes to explore the ways in which a policy of educational decentralisation actually played out. From the study eight themes emerged illustrating how educational policy established at national and international levels can be interpreted and distorted by local cultural values and behaviours.

Keywords: modernisation, Uganda, decentralisation, culture

## INTRODUCTION

And the history of developing societies in the last 30 years suggests that it would be foolhardy to ignore some of the insights of that large body of theoretical and empirical scholarship on modernisation (Leftwich 1996: 21).

Modernisation theories of development were at the height of their influence in the 1960s and 1970s. Modernisation theory see all societies as moving from less complex, undifferentiated and agrarian social systems to modern, industrial societies. Wealth and economic growth are linked to the degree of development along this continuum. If societies are poor or 'underdeveloped', it is because they have not evolved the social, cultural, economic and political structures for industrialisation and economic take-off. An institution seen as central to the process of modernisation or becoming modern was the school.

A key critique of modernisation theory was its Eurocentricism – its assumption that all societies needed to develop in the same historical manner and direction as

Western Europe and North America. However, while this remains a serious criticism of modernisation theory in general, the introduction of formal schooling through European colonialism in Africa was nevertheless the introduction of an essentially western and modern form of organisation into less modern societies. The postcolonial period has witnessed an enormous expansion of this organisational form of learning. This article explores whether this organisational form of education actually operates in the modern way in which it is supposed to by drawing on both ideas of a 'prismatic' society and form of organisation and empirical data on educational decentralisation in Uganda.

## Modernisation, education and prismatic society

According to modernisation theory, a modern society is one that has such features as an ethic of science and rationality, industrialisation, urbanisation, bureaucratisation, differentiation and specialisation of social structures, the principles of individualism and political stability (Leftwich 1996: 6–11). Peet and Hartwick (2009:122) put it that

in the economic sphere, modernisation meant specialisation of economic activities and occupational roles and the growth of markets; in terms of socio-spatial organisation, modernisation meant urbanisation, mobility, flexibility and the spread of education; in the political sphere, modernisation meant the spread of democracy and the weakening of traditional elites; in the cultural sphere, modernisation meant growing differentiation between the various cultural and value systems (for example, a separation between religion and philosophy), secularisation, and the emergence of a new intelligentsia. These developments were closely related to the expansion of modern communications media and the consumption of the culture created by centrally placed elites, manifested as changes in attitudes, especially the emergence of an outlook that stressed individual self-advancement ....

Of particular concern for present purposes are the characteristics of individual modernity – how is a 'modern' person different from a 'traditional' one and how does that change take place? The work of Inkeles and Smith (1974) focused on individual modernity, what a modern individual might look like and which socialisation agencies most contribute to individual modernity. They set out the key differences as follows,

### **Traditional**

Not receptive to new ideas  
Rooted in tradition  
Interested only in immediate things  
Denial of different opinions  
  
Uninterested in new information  
Oriented towards the past

### **Modern**

Open to new experiences  
Change oriented  
Interested in the outside world  
Acknowledgement of different opinions  
Eager to seek out new information  
Punctual; oriented towards the present

Concerned with the short term	Values planning
Distrustful of people beyond the family	Calculability; trusts people to meet obligations
Suspicious of technology	Values technical skills
Places high value on religion and the sacred	Places high value on education and science
Traditional patron-client relationships	Respects the dignity of others
Particularistic	Universalistic
Fatalistic	Optimistic

(Source: Peet and Hartwick 2009: 126)

A book on the sociology of education in Africa (Blakemore and Cooksey 1981) adds further differences: that a modern person is more individualistic as opposed to putting the family and group before the individual; is rational (seeks scientific explanation) rather than believing in magical and religious explanations; has a need for personal achievement as opposed to emphasising habit or custom; is punctual and relies on the clock as opposed to being not regulated by precise units of time; favours urban living and working in large organisations as opposed to rural living and distrusting large organisations; sees occupation as the main determinant of status and life's purpose as opposed to traditional or religious positions being more important.

The key organisational form that embodies the emphasis in rationalism in modernisation (Peet and Hartwick 2009) is bureaucracy. For Inkeles, for example, the modern state and society are 'suffused with bureaucratic rationality' (1969a: 1122). Indeed, the organisational model most commonly used to describe the school is a bureaucracy or rule by officials. Max Weber, a key exponent of rationalism in sociological thought, argues that bureaucracies had the following characteristics:

1. Staff members are personally free, observing only the impersonal duties of office
2. There is a clear hierarchy of offices
3. The functions of the offices are clearly specified
4. Officials are appointed on the basis of a contract
5. They are selected on the basis of a professional qualification, ideally substantiated by a diploma gained through examination
6. They receive a money salary and usually pension rights. The salary is graded according to position in the hierarchy. The official can always leave the post and under certain circumstances it may also be terminated.
7. The official's post is his or her sole occupation
8. There is a career structure and promotion is possible either by seniority or merit and according to the judgement of superiors

9. The official may appropriate neither the post nor the resources that go with it
10. The official is subject to a unified control and disciplinary system  
(Albrow 1970: 44–45).

In his empirical work, Inkeles found education to have the strongest relationship of all variables to the possession of modern (i.e. bureaucratic) attitudes, values and behaviour. This is partly because the pupil at school learns new skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic so that he or she will be able to ‘read directions and instructions and to follow events in the newspaper’, but also because of the bureaucratic nature of the hidden curriculum:

School starts and stops at fixed times each day. Within the school day there generally is a regular sequence for ordering activities: singing, reading, writing, drawing, all have their scheduled and usually invariant times. Teachers generally work according to this plan .... Thus, principles directly embedded in the daily routine of the school teach the value of planning ahead and the importance of maintaining a regular schedule (Inkeles and Smith 1974: 141).

Two other writers on the role of education in modernisation and industrialisation argued in a similar vein with a more critical perspective. Marten Shipman puts it that:

Punctuality, quiet orderly work in groups, response to orders, bells and timetables, respect for authority, even tolerance of monotony, boredom, punishment, lack of reward and regular attendance at place of work are the habits to be learned at school (1971: 54–55).

Whereas Toffler argues:

Mass education was the ingenious machine constructed by industrialism to produce the kind of adults it needed ... the solution was an educational system that, in its very structure, simulated this new world ... the regimentation, lack of individualisation, the rigid systems of seating, grouping, grading and marking, the authoritarian style of the teacher – are precisely those that made mass public education so effective as an instrument of adaptation for its time and place (1970: 354–345).

This modern, largely bureaucratic, organisational model of schooling was introduced to most developing countries, including those of Africa, through and during colonialism (Altbach and Kelly 1978; London 2002; Molteno 2000). As Booth (1997: 433) puts it: ‘In post-colonial Africa, the school is the ultimate example of a transported alien institution designed to create change.’ Indeed, Kendall (2009) argues that this now near-hegemonic, bureaucratic model of formal, Western-style and state-provided schooling defines and constitutes ‘education’ for development in the twenty-first century – as sanctioned at the global Education for All conferences at Jomtien in Thailand in 1990 and Dakar in Senegal in and as inscribed in the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals. The

essential features of this taken-for-granted model of modern education are that children learn primarily from adults about high stakes academic subjects, on a fixed schedule, in an indoor setting that includes particular features (desks, chairs, chalkboards, written teaching and learning materials). Moreover, there is an imagined linear development model from informal, family-provided education concerning daily tasks and survival skills to ‘modern’ schooling systems:

The international development model of education posits that mass, state-sponsored schooling is: (1) central to the creation of a “modern” nation-state; (2) central to the development of “modern” workers and families ; and, thus (3) central to a state’s “modern” economic growth and international acceptance. The general conceptualisation of education and development has received critical attention since its inception, but has yet to be significantly challenged (Kendall 2009: 422).

Fuller (1991) argues further in some detail in relation to Malawi that the push to expand schooling as a visible and tangible symbol of bureaucratic modernity in the post-colonial period has helped to legitimate the relatively new and often fragile state, despite the regular failure of schools to actually deliver learning outcomes such as literacy and numeracy. Indeed, this failure to achieve learning outcomes in Africa (see, for example, Verspoor 2008) starts to suggest a major problem with modernisation theory in relation to education. This concerns the reality of school organisation in developing countries in general, and Africa in particular. In practice, social organisations such as schools tend to reflect the actual values and behaviours of their surrounding society rather than perfectly match an ideal type, imported Weberian bureaucracy. So it would be surprising if schools in developing countries were to act autonomously as modernising change agents independently of their society, that is, if the society is marked by non-modern structures and behaviours then why should schools be any different?

Riggs (1964) describes developing countries as having ‘prismatic societies’. Riggs (1964) uses the analogy of a fused white light passing through a prism and emerging diffracted as a series of different colours. Within the prism there is a point where the diffraction process starts but remains incomplete. Riggs suggests that developing societies contain both elements of traditional, fused type of social organisation and elements of the more structurally differentiated or ‘modern’ societies. He argues that the societies of most developing countries, and the organisations that exist within them, are a synthesis – though not always a harmonious one – of traditional, long-lasting indigenous values and practices and relatively new ones imported during and after colonialism. They are neither fully modern nor fully traditional. As a result, within the form or facade of modern, bureaucratic organisation, much that happens in schools will reflect older priorities and needs emanating from family and village as well as newer ones emanating from the Ministry of Education. For example, a basic tenet of modernity is regular attendance at a place of work and punctuality. However, staff and student absenteeism and lack of punctuality are marked problems in schools in developing countries where harvests, markets and family responsibilities can take priority over schooling.

So, not only can there be cultural conflicts of expectations for schooling between the home and the school (see Booth (1997) on Swaziland), but evidence from a range of developing countries, including many African ones, suggests that schools themselves primarily reproduce the values and behaviours of the existing 'prismatic' society rather than acting as independent and self-contained agents of modernisation (Harber and Davies 1997). The net result is that teachers and schools exhibit what is regarded as unprofessional behaviour in a modern institutional setting. For example, in a more traditional and ethnically homogeneous setting such as a village, favouring one's own ethnic or clan group member for some sort of post of responsibility is normal, but once this is moved into a modern state setting such as a school or education system it becomes nepotism. In a traditional setting, giving priority to harvesting the crops at a certain time of year is fine but in a modern setting such as a school it becomes student or teacher absenteeism. A final example is that in a traditional rural/agricultural setting, very precise time measurement is far less important but move this into a modern setting such as a school and this imprecision become student and teacher lateness.

In a study of Tanzanian schools, for example, Van Der Steen (2011: 162) found the following examples of practices at odds with modern bureaucratic principles:

- A teacher being physically assaulted by an education officer at the municipal office when complaining about a work-related issue
- A teacher reportedly not being paid salary for five months as she refused to pay 'commission' to the accountant in charge
- Teachers ordered to carry out demographic surveys in their neighbourhood on behalf of the municipal office without financial compensation
- The monthly payment of teacher salaries rarely being on time
- A teacher using her influence in the municipal education office not to be transferred to a school she did not want to go to
- Reporting of inaccurate information of progress such as exaggerating the provision of education to disadvantaged children and the number enrolled in schools
- Punitive action against a head teacher who refused to use school funds to provide visiting officials with meals
- Bribery in the allocation of secondary school places to primary school leavers

This is also an issue in South African schools where schools are often criticised for being 'dysfunctional' and teachers unprofessional, and which may well be exhibiting 'prismatic traits'. For example, a research report of 2007 noted that educator attendance varies widely between schools but is known to result in significant loss of learner time. Apart from arriving at school late and leaving early, reasons for educator absence include strikes and stay-aways, examinations and sporting events and municipal

activities. The report also noted that loss of learning time will undoubtedly adversely affect achievement, outcomes and progression (Motala *et al.* 2007: 58–59).

The South African Human Rights Commission report on the right to basic education in 2006 describes a dysfunctional schooling system for the majority and a privileged, functional sector serving a minority. The report followed public hearings in October 2005 on a litany of problems that schools face, including low teacher morale, lack of accountability and non-attendance of children. Teacher absenteeism and lack of enthusiasm also remain as problems (Hunt 2007; Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005). Moreover, various forms of corruption are also not unknown in South African schools (Harber 2001; Fataar 2007).

In their research in schools in three provinces of South Africa, Hammett and Staeheli (2011) note:

On multiple occasions during our work at a township school in Cape Town we witnessed educators either arriving late or leaving early from class or even remaining in the staffroom for the duration of the teaching period (despite being timetabled to teach). ... On a number of occasions at other schools, it appeared that educators were drunk. At many schools, educators used learners to run personal errands – primarily to fetch food or drinks from the school tuck shop or neighbouring street traders (2011: 275).

In a sustained analysis of what he terms ‘dysfunctional’ schools, Bloch (2009) relates in some detail evidence of poor educational outcomes in South Africa to poor internal organisation. Acknowledging serious problems of infrastructure in schools in relation to the supply of electricity, libraries, laboratories, computers, clean water and suitable toilets, he also notes the enormous difficulty of recruiting of competent heads to manage the 27 000 schools in South Africa. As a result, Block states:

Schools are often not well organised, timetabling is poor, institutional process is arbitrary and ineffective. At a teaching level, haphazard planning and time management are often reflected in a poor ability to plan and timetable teaching plans for the curriculum over the year (2009:82–3).

A study of educational decentralisation in Malawi (Davies *et al.* 2003) found that local contextual realities, including the context of poverty, changed the way in which policy was implemented at the district level. However, the remainder of this article is concerned with a hitherto unpublished qualitative study of educational decentralisation in Uganda by Oryema (2008) who used the idea of prismatic society to link certain traditional cultural traits to actual behaviour that fell outside a modern, rational-bureaucratic framework of policy-making to explain how and why educational practice in Africa can differ significantly from policy intentions.



## EDUCATIONAL DECENTRALISATION AND PRISMATIC SOCIETY IN UGANDA

The study by Oryema used interviews (e.g. with civil servants, politicians, district and town council officials, school staff and pupils), observations (of school facilities, of teachers present, of supervision and inspection), documentary evidence (policy documents, national minimum standards indicators, inspection reports), and field notes/diary to gather triangulated data in a case study that cut vertically from the Ministry of Education and Sports down to two primary schools in Lurabeni local education district, ‘nesting’ (Borgan 1997) along its path different levels of administrative units (schools, sub-county, county, district and national). The case study was used to trace the local realities in the process of the implementation of the educational decentralisation policy. The two schools were from different contexts – one urban and one rural – to explore whether this aspect of context had any impact on decentralisation. The findings of the study illustrate well how certain traditional ways still continue to coexist with and influence the modern values embraced and enshrined in Uganda’s devolution policy. Here we shall analyse the findings according to eight themes:

- family size and structure: the unavoidable burden;
- blood link solidarity: the who, where and what questions;
- superstition and witchcraft: the invisible intimidation;
- perceptions of authority: the cock of the village;
- specialisation problems: a jack of all trades and master on none;
- who is who? gender issues;
- the documentation and records vacuum: are witnesses sufficient? and
- precision and the danger of proximities.

### Family size and structure

In interviews, respondents said that they saw the traditional polygamous, extended family as a burden rather than the proper basis of social life. This was partly because of Western education, partly because of exposure to different ways of life from other parts of the world and partly because of the financial implications. However, the respondents also acknowledged the impossibility of achieving their ideal of a nuclear family because of pressures from relatives and in-laws, which they described as the ‘unavoidable burden’. Relatives and in-laws want to be supported or even accepted to live with the family and it is difficult to say no because of social pressures. The resulting burden takes



the form of the payment of school fees for relatives to gifts, clothing and supporting social events such as weddings and funerals – all of which have to be paid for in addition to responsibilities for the immediate nuclear family.

The consequences of these pressures for educational decentralisation were in terms of both facility provision and trained teachers. In terms of facility provision, the large, extended family meant that there was a constant search for more money – 39 out of the 40 respondents interviewed said this was a key reason for corruption among politicians and civil servants. The losses incurred by contractors building schools and the theft of other building materials were also linked to supporting the extended family. They also affect teacher training and teaching quality as well for a number of reasons. First, because of extended families many teachers cannot afford even the most minimum costs of in-service training such as transport and personal effects, so they fail to take advantage of the training opportunities. Second, as the breadwinner for the family, the teacher finds it difficult to leave the children at home while training. Third, the family burden means that teachers have to find other sources of income as well as their salary. This compromises their school attendance and their preparation of lessons at home. Finally, extended family responsibilities make most teachers resistant to transfers, which makes it difficult for District Education Officers to be able to address quality or disciplinary problems in certain schools.

### Blood link solidarity

Interviews suggested that who you are and where you come from continue to be more important in determining opportunities than what you are and what you offer. This shows itself in favouritism and nepotism in regard to the award of contracts for school buildings, opportunities for teacher training and in teacher recruitment. Respondents in the Inspectorate reported the influence of ‘blood link’ in the favours expected by some teachers because they were related to them. The District Inspector of School noted his own experience when his uncle, who was given a contract for classroom construction, but did it poorly, expected him in his official capacity to defend him. The Chief Administrative Officer related similar experiences of how people from his own place of origin had been putting him under pressure to favour them in many opportunities in the district. However, on a more positive note, in terms of community participation in the construction of schools blood links had strengthened commitment.

### Superstition and witchcraft

Belief in witchcraft continues in this society and is a form of invisible intimidation that has effects on education. For example, the incoming chair of the council suspected the outgoing one of placing ‘deadly charms’ in the office and buildings, requiring the meagre district funds available to pay for a new office, new furnishings and the means of transport to get there and back from his home every day rather than directly

on educational provision. Moreover, one head teacher explained how frightened she was to take disciplinary action against teachers suspected of witchcraft because of the possible harmful consequences. It was also reported that a number of business people were involved in occult practices as they believed it would increase their business opportunities and contracts. Whether true or not, the consistent raising of such issues reflects how belief in witchcraft persists.

### The cock of the village

Traditionally, authority in Lurabeni society has always been highly respected without opposition – he was the ‘cock of the village’, as some respondents called it, with no-one to challenge his or authority in making decisions. However, there is a hangover of these attitudes with some local leaders seeing themselves not as representatives of the people but wanting their word to be final and not subject to opposition. Such an authoritarian attitude led to conflict between the council chairman and the council, resulting in an expensive commission of enquiry, using funds that could have been used on education if there had been more use of modern democratic practice. The teachers interviewed said that supporting teachers to obtain further qualifications was not supported by those in authority in the district because they wished to remain at the top alone and did not want competition from more highly qualified teachers. Moreover, despite some councillors admitting that corruption was being practised by the leader of the council, there had been no attempt by the councillors to use their power to dismiss him, their reluctance to take such steps suggesting the persistence of traditional attitudes of obedience and subordination.

### Jack of all trades and master on none

Modernisation theory emphasises lack of specialisation as one the characteristics of traditional societies (Riggs 1964; Peet and Hardwick 2009). In a traditional society one person carries out different functions, which in a more modern, differentiated society are carried out independently by different people. This manifested itself in this educational district in a number of ways. For example, the provision of facilities is the responsibility of the school project committee in the decentralised education system. Without being given any kind of training, the government has entrusted this committee with the responsibility of monitoring the day-to-day construction work at the school site. In many areas this committee consists of ordinary people with no experience of modern construction. In the two case study schools this was the situation with the result that they were not able to see faults and problems, and the result was poor construction. In terms of inspecting schools, any civil servant can be sent out into the field, irrespective of department, to inspect schools. A veterinary, agricultural or forest officer can be used to do school inspections in the decentralised system. While maybe helping to meet a general shortage of educational personnel, this reliance on lack of specialisation

nevertheless has negative implications for efficiency and quality in the development of a modern educational system.

### Who is whom?

The impact of traditional gender roles is noticeable in relation to the performance of teachers at school. The traditional role of women is that of homemaker, domestic worker, baby sitter and mother with the man in authority in the household. Female teachers interviewed explained that they often came to school late because they first had to provide warm water for their husband to bathe in the morning, prepare breakfast and get the children ready for school before they themselves could prepare to go to school. Interestingly, although male teachers were more punctual at coming to school as a result, the female teachers were still better prepared for their lessons. The head teachers in the two schools (both females) highlighted the difficulties they have in dealing with male teachers because they tend to ignore or underestimate them, having difficulty in acknowledging their leadership because of traditional gender roles.

### Documentation and records vacuum

Traditional education in Africa did not impart writing and reading skills. This made documentation and record keeping problematic and required more of a reliance on memory and witnesses. However, despite the fact that many people now know how to read and write, in this prismatic society the culture of documentation and written record keeping is still weak. For example, the school management and/or project committee indicate that they are not in the habit of recording their observations or compiling reports about building work going on in the school but continue to rely on observation and memory. This provides room for inaccurate reporting, especially when it comes to precise figures, dates and times, which in turn means debates, denials and self-defence when quality complaints arise. While teachers were quite good at keeping written records of their schemes of work and student progress, there were nevertheless many gaps in the written records. In the head teachers' offices documentation was scanty and not very well organised, although the heads tended to blame this on previous regimes. Supervision and inspection done by the heads in their own schools were generally not reported, the assumption being that physical presence was sufficient and the problem teachers were known. In both schools the inventory of school property was not comprehensive and land documents were missing. During the research phrases such as 'Even so and so was present and can testify; if my memory serves me right' were commonly used.

### Precision and the danger of proximities

The people of Lurabeni traditionally tended to be imprecise in many regards, for example, in measurement and time keeping. In relation to time, because there were

no watches, people relied on the position of the sun and times of appointments were approximate, for example, sunset or sunrise. Thus in a society where construction was traditionally done in poles, mud and grass, measurements need not be that precise and estimates could be done by eye assessment rather than scientific measurement. There was evidence of this in the poor quality of building work in the schools. Among teachers and the inspectorate precise time keeping was a problem and there were many instances of lateness. One teacher noted that, 'When a meeting I scheduled to start at 2.00 pm, be prepared to start at 4.00 pm. When you expect a meeting to last for an hour, be prepared to sit for three hours.'

## CONCLUSION

My friend Chimtali, age 14 ... recently entered a government boarding school to pursue her secondary studies .... While Chimtali obviously enjoyed becoming modern, she had not suspected that the secondary school would require such deep changes in daily habits (Fuller 1991: 96).

These traits of Lurabeni society reveal the complexity of operating in the prismatic space between two broad worlds, the traditional and the modern. In the decentralised educational setting, because the people in control are all local and working for local people in a local context, there is a tendency to accommodate contradictions and problems rather than to solve or correct them. This attitude, if not handled carefully, can, as we have seen, put quality in the modern educational sector in danger. While there are no easy or rapid answers to these problems, this article has highlighted the need to understand complex local contextual realities prior to policy making and implementation, whether by governments of international agencies. 'Prismatic analysis' of this kind does, however, help to provide a long-term agenda of the issues that need to be addressed if the aim is to develop a modern, good quality system of schooling. 'Modern' systems such as schools will not function well without relatively 'modern' people in them but this itself requires some long-term social and cultural change. Paradoxically, the only catalyst for this is education and training itself, begging the question of where the modern trainers, leading by example, are going to come from?

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