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Sankofa: A Study Into The Teaching Of History In the Ghanaian Education System: A Case Study In Cape Coast Schools

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SANKOFA

***A STUDY INTO THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN
THE GHANAIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM:
A CASE STUDY IN CAPE COAST SCHOOLS***

BY:

KYLA SAPHIR

SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING-AFRICAN DIASPORA

INDEPENDENT STUDY PROJECT

MAY 10, 2001

We must go back to reclaim our past so we can move forward

Dedication

To all of Ghana's teacher who work so hard with so little to education
the future of their country. I admire you all.

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Thanks and much love to all of you!!!

ABSTRACT

I wanted to investigate how history is taught in the Ghanaian education systems at various levels and specifically in Cape Coast schools. I believe that history teaches people who they are and where they come from and thus equips them to learn from their past and prosper due to the analysis of the accomplishments and faults of their ancestors. I was curious to see how and what Ghanaians are taught about their past since their Western style education system has been structured after the British education system. I also wanted to find out how much is taught about the African Diaspora in the lower and upper levels of education. History is not a separate subject until senior secondary school (SSS) so that was the level at which I focused on most. I wanted to discover all the aspects of teaching history in Ghana by looking at the curriculum, teaching strategies, the syllabus, and textbooks to see if History is a subject relating to Ghanaian students live and futures.

INTRODUCTION

I began this project as a search for the truth about the Ghanaian past and how it is presented to students in the schools. I found that in all my years of learning American History, there was a lack of information on minorities and women. Both played a large role in forming what is now the United States of America yet they were seemingly overlooked. The curriculum and textbooks conveniently ignored the contributions and impact of these people on history in the same way that they are denied roles in politics, high-level career positions, education, and in economics. By ignoring a sector of the population in construction the history of a country, you exclude them from existing in her future.

The British set up an education system styled after their own when they colonized Ghana. I was curious to see if the subject of history glorified the British and ignored Ghanaians. History and Social Studies both teach the past to Ghanaian students but I wanted to see if it really related to the young people of Ghana and their daily lives or prepared them for the future. I also wanted to explore how much the History curriculum delves into the African Diaspora and the lives of people today in the Americas whose ancestors has been stolen from African. One African-American student told me that she was asked by a Ghanaian child, “How did black people get to America? I became increasingly interested to see what children in Ghana are taught about blacks in Diaspora.

HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN GHANA

Many people, especially Westerners, believed that there was no education in Africa before the Europeans arrived in the 15th century. Historians, archaeologists, intellectuals, traders, merchants, teachers and other have proved this ignorant belief wrong. The problem lies with the definition of education, which has been restricted to the European style of learning. However, traditional education existed in Africa with its goal being the introduction of young people into society. It taught taboos, history, music, rhetoric and other topics for survival in the society. It aimed to make the child “a part of the totality of the social consciousness” (Antwi 23). For example, among the Akan speaking people future kings and chief would be “secluded for a period and ‘education’ by the elders concerning his leadership role and responsibilities” (Antwi 25). Education was usually informal and conducted in the daily lives of children. Parents and elders passed on tradition, belief, and history to the future generations of their society orally and through music. This is, however, not always accurate due to exaggeration and forgetfulness.

Western styled education began in Ghana in the 16th century with the arrival of the Portuguese. The Portuguese were reported to be the first Europeans to arrive on the west coast of Africa. They landed at Elmina in 1482 and constructed forts to protect their trade with the local people. The first schools “were attached to the castles and torts” and by “1529, the Portuguese had opened one such school” in the Elmina castle (Antwi 29). In these ‘school’, the people received instruction that was based heavily on the Bible (Opoku-Agyemang Lecture 3/20/01). The basic subjects (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) were also taught. The aims of education were to teach the mulatto children of the European merchants and African women how to do bookkeeping, how to trade, while also promoting the Bible. This type of education was just for male children since Western education did not educate females in Europe or Africa until much later. By 1850, “the Basel and Wesleyan Methodist missions provided the main educational drive in the coastal areas of Ghana and over 1,000 pupils who were enrolled in their schools were receiving instruction in arithmetic, reading, and writing” (Antwi 31). Western style education began on the coast and spread into inland Ghana due to the work of Christian missionaries in the country. Schools were mostly run and funded by European missionaries until Kwame Nkrumah assumed office in 1946 and introduced the Accelerated Development Plan for Education (Antwi 38).

Nkrumah provided for the “rapid development of education at all levels” starting with free-tuition for “children between the ages of 6 and 12” in the elementary levels (Antwi 38). The government encouraged the establishment of new schools and subsidized mission schools. The number of technical training colleges, universities, and middle schools grew tremendously during this period. Education has not been an easy aspect of Ghanaian life due to funding and personnel

problems. At the higher levels of education, the number of students decreases due to economic and social pressures at home, especially female students. In the Cape Coast area today there are 1,215 primary schools, 51 secondary schools, and 3 teacher training colleges (Emmanuel interview 4/9/01). There are 1.6 million children at the primary level, 420,300 at the junior secondary schools (JSS), and 120,155 in SSS (Adjepong lecture 3/30/01).

When student graduate from JSS, they choose what area of focus they want for the SSS course or they can choose to go to a technical and vocational, or business and commercial school (Appendix A). If they attend a college or any other type of SSS, they go into Science, Business, Vocational, or General Arts as their choices of study. History falls under General Arts, so it is not a required compulsory subject that all students must learn. The core subjects are English, Mathematics, Integrated Science, Social Studies, and Physical Education. Social Studies at the JSS level may be the only area which tries to help students get educated about their past and the history of African and the world if they do not major in general arts.

WHY HISTORY IS IMPORTANT

Two quotes sum up why the subject of History and why those who write history is of extreme importance to a people. The first is by Martin Luther King Jr., an African-American who fought for civil rights of Blacks in American and around the world.

“When you are written out of history as a people, when you are given no choice but to accept the majority culture, you are denied and aspect of your own destiny. Ultimately you suffer a corrosion of your self-understanding and your self-respect.” (Williams 107)

The second quote is by an African historian named John Clarke.

“History is a clock that people use to tell their political and cultural time of day. It is also a compass that people use to find themselves on the map of human geography. The role of history is to tell people what they have been and where they have been what they are and where they are. The most important role that history plays is that it has the function of telling a people where they still must go and what they still must be.”

Both of these men understand how history is key to a people’s identity with their surroundings and their past. The Akan people of Ghana have a word Sankofa that has a number of similar meaning that are all related to one’s history: (1) “We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we understand why and how we came to be who we are today,” (2) “You must look to your past before you move forward,” and (3) “A return to the past in order to go into

the future.” The symbol is a bird with its head pointed backward to symbolize that one must look back before he/she looks forward.

Westerners often believe that Africa did not have any history before the Europeans arrived because their past was not written down. A professor of History at Oxford University said in 1963 that “there was no African history before the arrival of the Europeans in African; the rest is darkness” (Fafunwa 66). This bigoted, Eurocentric idea is prevalent in how history is written in many formally colonized areas of the world. Since Westerners believe that they are the only people that have a history, they choose to overlook the accomplishments and wonderful pasts of people from other parts of the world by marginalizing them. However, Appendix D shows that Westerners today are fascinated by Africa’s past and want to learn more about their writings, which were previously assumed non-existent due to racist scholars. F.K. Buah addresses this issue of Eurocentrism in one of his many history books on West Africa. He says, “History teaching in our schools and colleges, in the past, has suffered from too much emphasis on the greatness of Europe and too little emphasis on the greatness of other peoples...the time is long overdue when we should undo the harm caused by this approach, by making the story of Africa the chief interest in history lesson in the lower classes of higher institutions” (Buah preface). Therefore, it is important for history to be representative about the people who live in the country that is being discussed and should be done by objective academics.

THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

Any historical event has different perspectives depending upon the historian. This history curriculum in Ghanaian school previously used to be dominated by British and European history. Today, it has changed and is attempting to focus on Ghana and its people. However, I wondered if it made student challenge the norms and question their tradition. I believe history should be used as an educational tool to alter the present and challenge the future. Students need to learn about the former colonial system in order to be able to change the neo-colonialism that the West still uses to economically enslave Ghana and African. Therefore, the goal of an “African history syllabus should be to familiarize the child with his social, political, cultural, and economic environment” (Fafunwa 66). African History should address political, social, and religious aspects of their own heritage before looking at Europe’s encounters with African people. Fafunwa quotes William K. Medlin as saying, “The history of ideas and institutions constitutes perhaps the most crucial element in the framework of the educational process through which young people pass” (65). It is important that

students get educated about their own people and their achievements before glorifying people in far off places.

In Ghana's education systems, primary level of education when the new educational reforms were initiated by the government (Quaye interview 4/17/01). History becomes a separate subject in senior secondary school (SSS). Prior to these upper levels, history is included in Social Studies, which also includes religious and moral education, geography, community, good citizenship, and environmental studies. In SSS, students choose electives to take besides the core classes. At Wesley Girls, general art students take History, Literature, French, and Religious studies. At other schools, the subjects may change slightly but they are basically the same. Students in General Arts are the only ones that learn history past Social Studies in the JSS level.

METHODOLOGY

I began my independent project with a plan. I was going to sit in History classes, then interview the teachers, and talk to some students about the subject and their ideas about its importance and purpose. However, my plan was foiled by the three-week vacation that the schools were on during ISP. This was my first obstacle. Luckily, my advisor, Mr. Anti, has many school connections so I was allowed to meet headmasters and mistresses at various schools. Although, the schools were on break, most of the teachers were still around and some students at the Form 3 level. When schools came back in session, I got to sit-in on some Form 1 and 2 classes.

My first week was spent in Komenda where I hoped to talk to some teachers who taught Social Studies to students at Komenda Teachers Training College. I also wanted to see how teachers were trained to teach Social Studies and possibly History. However, almost no one was on campus and I talked to only one teacher. I did, however, critically look at the SSS History syllabus, the three Social Studies books for JSS, one Social Studies book for primary level 6, and books about education in Ghana. I also did lots of background research and prepared an interview questionnaire for teachers. My interview question for teachers were:

- 1) Could you describe the teaching strategies that you use as a History teacher (lecture, discussion, Q&A, etc)?
- 2) Which do you find most favorable to you as a teacher?
- 3) Which do you think helps students the most?
- 4) Do you use teaching aids (maps picture, excursions, videos, etc.)? Are they available and useful?
- 5) Does the Social Studies syllabus in JSS prepare students for History in SSS?
- 6) Does the syllabus help students identify themselves as Ghanaians?
- 7) Do you find the syllabus adequate? If not what would you add or subtract?
- 8) Has the syllabus changed since you have been teaching?
- 9) Does it address the slave trade or African Diaspora?
- 10) Do the textbooks correlate with the syllabus?
- 11) Are texts easily available and affordable?
- 12) Are the texts sufficient in explaining History or do you use supplementary texts? If so, which ones?
- 13) How frequently do you give tests and assignments?
- 14) What kind of tests do you give: objective, essays, short answer?
- 15) Which one of the three allows you to see the progress of your students best?
- 16) What are your objectives in teaching History?

17) How long have you taught and did your major in History in university?

I altered my question dependent upon who I was interviewing. For teachers at the Training College and at UCC, I discussed these issues in relation to how they educate students in how to teach Social Studies and History. For the students that I hoped to talk to, the questions I asked were as follows:

- 1) What is your favorite topic in History?
- 2) How does the teacher make class interesting?
- 3) Does History impact your life today? How?
- 4) Did the JSS prepare you for History in SSS?
- 5) Do you learn about slavery and blacks in other parts of the world?

My second week was much more productive. My advisor and I drove to three of the five schools I wanted to investigate closer and I was introduced to all the Head masters and mistresses. Together we chose two all-boys schools (Mfantsipim and Adisadel), one all-girls school (Wesley Girls), a day school (University Practice-UPSS), and one co-educational boarding school (Aggrey). I set up meetings with the teachers and arranged for me to sit in on a few History classes. During this week, SSS Form 3 students were taking their practice exams so many classes were not meeting. However, Aggrey and UPSS still had some classes in session so I got to sit in on a few History review lessons. I interviewed three History teachers at the SSS level who taught Forms 1, 2, and 3. I obtained data on certain issues that led me to expand my interview questions and talk to a wider variety of people, for example UCC professor, more teachers and students at the training colleges, and students at the training colleges, and Social Studies teachers at the primary levels. Most of my interviews were conducted in the staff rooms at the various schools or in the teacher's office.

Week three was more hopeful since most classes resumed. On Monday, I interviewed a teacher at Adisadel College who sadly assured me the most of his students would not be returning to class until the next Monday. He said that the boys take their time coming back after long breaks. Then, Tuesday May 1, was a workers' holiday so most classes did not reopen until Wednesday. Even then classes would not be full since most of the schools I was looking at were boarding schools and students would not be returning until Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday. On Wednesday, I went to Wesley Girls Secondary School and interviewed my first female History teacher. Thursday, I went and sat in on two of her classes (Form 1 and 2). It was good to sit in on a different level of SSS so my data could be a little more balanced. However, the classes both just received their exams back so the class was busy looking over and correcting their tests. It was still very interesting to see

how the teacher conducted her classroom and students. I also talked to Dr. Koon, a Professor at UCC who teaches future teachers. He helped me to learn about how education students learn how to teach History and Social Studies. It turned out to be a rather productive week.

There were many obstacles in doing this research because of a few factors. The main one was that schools were closed for most of ISP. There were some classes in session for SSS Form 3's so I did get to observe a few History lessons. When school resumed. I also observed History classes at the Form 1 and 2 levels. However, I was not able to obtain a well-rounded balance of History at a variety of schools and at various levels. Another obstacle was the fact that not every student takes History past JSS Social Studies. Since after JSS students go into a specific area of study, they may never get in depth lessons on the history of African and Ghana. It was hard to find students in or finished with SSS that had studied General Arts, which includes History. I would have liked to talk to the students in the Form 3 classes that I observed; yet I caught them on day before they had a break before finally exams. After class, they all hurried off for home and vacation. In the Form 2 class I sat in on, they immediately had a class after the one I saw so I did not get a chance to talk to them about History. And since most of the schools I looked at were boarding schools, most of the students were not even on campus during ISP. These obstacles made my research not as thorough as I would have like. However, I was successful in obtaining the info that I desired.

To analyze my data, I looked at my interviews, my sit-ins, and the textbooks to see exactly what and how History is being taught. Although I had collected only a limited amount of data, I obtained a decent range of information that I had only hope for. I learned things I had not expected and met students that surprised me with their interest and fascination with History. My research makes me look forward to doing more of this kind when I return to America.

MAIN REPORT

THE SCHOOLS

I chose a variety of schools, with the much-needed help of Professor Anti. They represented the different public schools of Cape Coast. Mfantsipim is an all boys boarding senior secondary school I looked at which was begun by Wesleyan Missionaries in 1876 (Antwi 31). The History teacher there is Mr. Stephen Yeboah who studied History at UCC and has taught at Mfantsipim for 6 years. I also looked at Adisadel College, which is a newer, all boys' boarding school. It was started in 1910 and has a little over 600 students (Buah 185). The History teacher is Mr. Bediako Sakyi who has worked there for 5 years and hopes to start a historical society on campus for the public. Wesley Girls High School was started in the 1836 by Wesleyan Methodist missionaries and began as a primary school near Cape Coast Castle (Coker interviewed 5/2/01). It turned into a

secondary school at its present location in 1884 (Buah 185). The History teacher for Form 1 and 2 is Mrs. Naana Coker. She has been teaching there for 8 years and she studied law and History at University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. I wanted to look at the teaching of History at both all boys and all girls schools plus co-educational institutions. Aggrey Memorial Zion Senior Secondary School is a co-educational boarding school and has over 2,000 students. The History teacher is Mr. Taylor who has taught for over 40 years and lived through much of the contemporary History he teaches about. University Practice Secondary School (UPSS) is a co-ed, day school on the campus of University of Cape Coast. The History teacher there is Mr. James Amemasor who has worked there for 2 years after teaching at the primary level for 5 years. I picked these five schools to get a variety of the secondary schools that Cape Coast offers. Many people claim that they are the best secondary schools in the country. I interviewed the History teachers at Mfantshipim, UPSS, Wesley Girls. I also interviewed a Social Studies teacher, Mr. P.K. Quaye, at Komenda Teachers Training College and Dr. Koon, a professor in the Department of Arts and Social Sciences in Education at UCC. Mr. Koon has taught for 5 years at UCC coming from Liberia due to the civil war. They both gave me insight into how new teachers are trained to teach History as one aspect of Social Studies and as its own subject. All of the teachers I talked to were unbelievably helpful and open with talking to me about my topic. I found that History teachers really like to talk about history and get very excited about it. In fact, one interview lasted almost 3 hours (2 of which were basically his History lectures for Form 1-3 in SSS).

TEACHING STRATEGIES

I wanted to find out how History was taught in order to get students interested in learning about the past. I inquired about teaching strategies such as discussion, lecture, and question and answer. I wondered which the teachers preferred and which the students learned from best. I also asked about teaching aid and their availability and their helpfulness. Dr. Koon (UCC) informed me that he encourages his students aspiring to become teachers that they must make History exciting since it is usually a dry, dull subject (interviewed 5/3/01). I found that most of the teachers prefer to use discussion and question and answer to get students to participate and learn. Mr. Yeboah at Mfantsipim said that he assigns readings and then the class discusses the loopholes they find in the textbooks (interviewed 4/24/2001). This technique allows students to critically look at how History is written and by whom. He told me that different texts print various dates for events such as the coming of the Europeans. He discusses the discrepancies with the class and helps them to realize that dates are not as important as the actual event that occurred and who recorded them. Mr. Yeboah says his students enjoy discussion and they often argue over controversial topics like the slave trade and European activity in Ghana (interviewed 4/24/01). He encourages this interactive approach to History lessons. Mr. Sakyi (Adisadel) uses a similar interactive method to learning and teaching. He breaks his classes up into groups of 5 students. He assigns them an essay topic to research and then present to the class on Friday. On Monday and Wednesday he will teach a lesson. Then on Friday, a few groups will present their research and the class, including the teacher, will ask questions. The students are teaching and learning at the same time.

In order for teachers to reinforce previous information, some of them will discuss the previous lesson at the beginning of each class period to make sure the students understand it before introducing new notes and ideas. Mr. Amemasor (UPSS) assigns readings for the students to read before class and asks them to take notes of the salient points (interviewed 4/27/01). However, in some cases there are not enough textbooks for the students. Mr. Amemasor and Mr. Taylor (Aggrey) both outline their main points on the black board and then dictate notes to students. Mr. Koon told me that oftentimes teachers write their full notes on the board for the students because of the lack of textbooks. When I sat in their classes, I noticed that the students could answer all the available. Mr. Taylor told me the breakdown of each lesson:

1. Divide the main topic into areas in his notes.
2. Write the main topic on the board (when I sat in on two classes the topics were Kwame Nkrumah and the rise of the CPP and After Independence in Ghana).
3. Start the lesson with question on the past lesson.
4. Discuss the divided areas that stem from the main topic.

5. Let the students take notes on the topics from the board which he discusses.

In both of the classes he taught the students seemed very interested and excited about answering the questions about knowledge they had retained from previous classes. They did not seem as interested when he simply dictated new notes to them. The students preferred to have question and answer sessions rather than lectures. The first class was all females (about 30 students) and I wondered if this was on purpose to encourage females to speak up in a class and not feel shy because of males. Mr. Taylor assured me that it was by accident that the class was all female and that his other classes were co-ed (discussed 4/26/01). He told me that more female students focus on general arts than males. In his next class, there were both male and female students and I did not notice any timidity from the girls in asking and answering question.

The teaching aids most often used in the History classroom are maps, globes, charts and pictures of famous people and places in African and Ghanaian History. The students' imagination is also key in classrooms with few resources and no access to videocassettes or field trips. All the teachers I spoke to want to take their students out on excursions, to places like the castles and to relevant plays, yet funding for transportation is often lacking. Wesley Girls and Adisadel have their own buses but organizing trips is sometimes difficult for teachers. One Wesley Girls student said that Form I students don't get to go on trips because Form 2 and 3 students will be jealous (Group interview 5/3/01). Mrs. Coker and Mr. Sakyi at Wesley Girls and Adisadel respectively are housemasters and mistresses as well as full time History teachers. The other schools I focused on have no buses to take them on field trips to sites that are relevant to the topics they are studying. When her class is studying traditional medicine, Mrs. Coker sends her students around the campus to look for plants they have been discussing like the Nim tree. Wesley Girls also has a video center where the students can watch cassettes on the topics they are studying. Mrs. Coker told me that students really love excursions and videos since they bring History alive. Her students informed me that she brings in examples of different things to show that deal with their topic. For example, for Egypt, she brought in papyrus paper for the kids to see.

Mr. Quaye at the Teacher's College explained that future Social Studies teachers use discussion, dramatic role playing, team teaching, case studies in schools, fieldwork, and question and answer sessions to learn to teach (4/17/01). He said that question and answer sessions produce immediate results in terms of the seeing how well the students are learning. He uses handouts, diagrams, maps and artifacts in his classes and encourages students to employ these methods in their primary level classrooms. Mr. Koon makes sure his students learn a lot about the content of History and not simply the methodology of teaching. He says these future teachers cannot have one without

the other when trying to teach. Content and methodology go hand and hand to make a successful classroom (interviewed 5,3/01).

SYLLABUS

History is included in different subjects during the primary levels and becomes its own subject at the higher levels. At the basic levels 1-6, students learn environmental studies, which includes Science, Social Studies, History, Geography, and Religious and Moral Education. At the JSS level, History is included in Social Studies which also contains learning about Ghana's land, people, culture, history before the arrival of Europeans, after their arrival, colonialism, independence, and today (Quaye interviewed 4/17/01). Mr. Quaye informed me that Social Studies helps students identify as Ghanaians, the African, then as members of the world. It also addresses real, everyday issues that Ghanaian students face. At the SSS level, students learn about the importance of History, Ancient World History, and continually move into Ghanaian History and contemporary issues (Appendix B). The SSS syllabus is a much specific and detailed version of what is skimmed over in JSS Social Studies. The JSS syllabi complement each other in teaching about Ghanaian History yet at the SSS level there is more in depth discussion on the importance of history and its relevance in Africa and Ghana.

Almost all the teachers I interviewed said that the JSS syllabus did not prepare students for History at the SSS level. They complained that the JSS Social Studies syllabus is too broad and general in terms of history since it must address so many other topics. A few topics overlap, such as the discussion on the UN and OAU, but not enough for students to have a good background in African History. Mr. Yeboah believes that the SSS syllabus is well prepared, yet other teachers found that it still is too broad to cover in only 2½ or 3 years. When I asked students at Wesley Girls, they all said that JSS Social Studies gave them a good background in History for then they entered SSS. They felt prepared since they had a basic knowledge of the subjects that they would look more in depth in at the SSS level (Group interview 5/3/01). Most teachers think that the SSS syllabus is more relevant to their students than the JSS one since it is strictly about Africa. Prior to the 1987 reforms, Mr. Amemasor told me that History has been primarily European and their effects on African (interviewed 4/27/01). In Form 1, students learn about the early civilizations of Africa starting from Egypt then to Ethiopia and onto the central, southern, and western African states. Mr. Sakyi claims that this is to teach SSS students that, "African is not all rubbish" (interviewed 4/30/01). Mrs. Coker said that her students find Form 1 boring since they cannot directly relate to ancient civilizations. However, when I asked them if they enjoyed learning about ancient civilizations, they told me they loved learning about different people, places and what they did long ago (Group interview 5/3/01). In Form 2, there is a focus on ancient Ghana and its social, political,

religious, and economic activities prior to the Arrival of Europeans (Sakyi interviewed 4/30/01). Form 3 looks at Ghana since the presence of Europeans on its shores. Students look at the social, economic, and political reasons for why they came and then why they stayed to colonize (Amemasor interviewed 4/27/01).

Mr. Yeboah adds what he sees necessary to the syllabus. He looks ahead at the syllabus topics and textbooks to decide if he should investigate further into a topic he wishes to teach. For example, the syllabus does not really go into detail about people of the African Diaspora. He explains to his classes the role of slaves in the New World, their impact and the people of the Diaspora today like Marcus Garvey and Muhammad Ali (interviewee 4/24/01). Mr. Amemasor, Mr. Sakyi, and Mrs. Coker look in depth at how historians write African History since there was no written record before European arrival. They teach students about alternatives to written records like oral tradition, linguistics (griots), ethnomusicology, ethnobotany, serology, archaeology, and biology in discovering their heritage. Mrs. Coker thinks that the syllabus skims over some areas. For example, in the text there is only one line on indirect rule but on the final exam there was an essay question on indirect rule. She believes teachers must look critically at the syllabus and add what they think the students may need to know. These teachers work off the syllabus and improvise by teaching what they think is necessary to give their students a well-balanced view of African History.

TEXTS

The history textbooks that the government offers are crucial in determining what aspects of history are taught and ignored. I wondered if they were sufficient, if they were easily available to students, if teachers had any say in the writing of them, and whether there are prescribed supplementary texts to the government textbooks. Almost all the teachers said that they used supplements since the books given by the government were not adequate. Three historians (J.K. Fynn, R. Addo-Fenning, and J. Anquandah) write the approved government text. Mrs. Coker who teaches Form 1 and 2 uses supplementary texts written by F.K. Buah and Boahen to complement the government textbook. In Form 3, some teachers used the book *Ghana: A Historical Survey* by Vincent Okyere, a graduate of University of Cape Coast. Everyday there are new revelations in African History so there are a lot of new texts being written by Africans and Ghanaians in particular (Sakyi 4/30/01). The text correlates with the syllabus yet teachers find it a necessity to give reading beyond the government text since it is not detailed enough about most topics. The text is only 300 pages long and is used from Form 1-3. There is no way that it can be thorough enough for teachers when it is only about 100 pages per year. At Wesley Girls, students post up the daily newspaper on a bulleting board in the hallway for students to read. There are also newspapers in most of the

school libraries that I looked at. History teachers will sometimes quiz students on current news, encouraging the students to read the newspaper.

At Komenda College there are no texts for the students and at Aggrey and UPSS the texts are limited or not delivered to the schools till the end of end of a term. At most primary schools, students and teachers must borrow books from other schools in order to have enough. The problem also exists at the SSS level yet the schools I looked at had good funding by parents and alumnae so books are easily accessible. Wesley Girls has extra texts available in the library. The Aggrey and UPSS teachers must dictate notes since there is a lack of available textbook.

ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

I wanted to know how often and what kind of tests the teachers used. All the teachers I talked to use a combination of both easy and objective, or multiple choice, tests. Mr. Taylor showed me a mock examination for Form 2 students (Appendix C). In a term, the schools recommend at least 3 tests, 2 major tests at the end of the first two months and then a final exam at the end of the third. Individual schools and teachers design the tests. Mr. Yeboah's final exam consists of 60 objectives and 5 essays, while Mrs. Coker gives her students 50 objectives and 2 essays for their end of term exam. She told me that some schools only give 20 objectives and 1 essay (interviewed 5/2/01). Mr. Amemasor often gives old WAEC (West African Examination Council) exams for students to prepare for their final. Mr. Yeboah said that he gives tests every week or two, some in class and some take-home. Others only give the recommended amount of three tests. Mr. Sakyi likes to give short answer tests that are basically a broken up essay. When the students finish the test, they have basically constructed an essay out of individual ideas (interviewed 4/3/01). Most teachers found that both objective and essays are equally important. Objectives show that the students are doing their reading and picking out pertinent points. While the essays show the quality of writing that the students have. Mrs. Coker prefers essays to objective tests because she believes that essays make students think and apply their knowledge. She thinks objective tests are just pure memorization and repeating of the texts. Essays allow the students to learn to write History yet she finds it hard to grade the large amounts of essays for her big classes (interviewed 5/27/01). Mr. Sakyi believes that objective tests are important because they make sure the students know salient dates, people, and places they are studying (interviewed 4/30/01).

Most teachers said they give assignments after each lesson and go over the work in class to make corrections. Mrs. Coker said that at Wesley Girls, the administration plans out the homework assignments and makes sure that students all have them written down in their homework book (interviewed 5/2/01). She also assigns research project for the students. One example is that she has

the students create questionnaires, pass them around the school, collect the data, and analyze them. She believes it gives the students initiative by doing fieldwork and shows them a small taste of being a historian. Her students told me that they feel proud and excited that they get to express themselves in class by showing their independent work. At Mfantsipim, the students have assignment books which Mr. Yeboah grades and then the students make corrections in class. The students learn from what they do wrong so they can study what they may not know for the test. All the teachers agree that going over tests and assignments in class helps the students to fully learn the history they are studying.

OBJECTIVES

I asked about the teacher's objectives in teaching History and whether the syllabus is adequate and practical in reaching these objectives. The teachers all had various objectives and goals in teaching History. Mr. Yeboah's main objective is to have students perform well on the WAEC tests and at the upper levels of education. He thinks it is important for schools to compare their standard by the results of these tests. He later mentioned that it also makes students more patriotic and enlightened about the various religious and ethnic group in Ghana and the rest of the world. He views History teachers as being socialist since they believe everyone is of equal importance in a country (interviewed 4/24/01). Mr. Amemasor believes that "Those who ignore the past condemn themselves to not knowing the present" (interviewed 4/27/01). Most of the other teachers agreed that History is: about reconstructing the past and taking pride in the accomplishments and achievements of the students' ancestors; encouraging young people to strive for these achievements and more; to help student identify with their Ghanaian and African heritage; to understand contemporary problems and find solutions for them by looking at past mistakes; to promote patriotism; to make students critical minded in forging ahead and in writing their own people's history. These objectives were mentioned by the various teachers I interviewed and are also the one's prescribed by the SSS syllabus (Appendix B).

SIT-IN RESULTS

I was allowed to sit-in and observe 5 classroom sessions from Form 1-3 at Aggrey, UPSS, and Wesley Girls. The History teachers at each of the schools, Mr. Taylor, Mr. Amemasor, and Mrs. Coker, all employed humor and references to relevant events to get students to interact and respond in the classroom. Mr. Taylor talked about the Ghanaian flag and the meanings of each of the colors. He also had the students sing a patriotic song, which got the whole class excited and laughing. He was promoting Ghanaian patriotism and helping students relate to their own History. Mr. Amemasor compare old British political parties to the NPP and the NDC in order for students to understand those earlier political parties. Mrs. Coker compared Ghanaian cultural practices to those in ancient Egypt. She talked about the commonalities between their religious, governmental, and social aspects of life. This helped bring to life history from thousands of years ago to relate to the student's lives today. When discussing oral tradition, she said that song was included the telling stories and the history of Ghanaian people. The class then sang 2 songs for me about the story of the Fante founders and Yaa Asantewa fighting the British. The whole class was involved and it shows how alive oral tradition is today since everyone knew the songs due to them having been passed down through generations.

I learned that History classes are taught either 7 or 8 periods a week. One period is 40 minutes long, yet many times 3 periods are crammed together creating a 2-hour long lesson. Mrs. Coker said that at times it is strenuous but you cover a lot of materials in that much time. History is a difficult subject to digest in large doses so the 2-hour lesson probably is not the most productive classes. Three of the 6 classes that I observed were 2 hours long and I could see the interest and focus level decline after 1 hour. The people who design the history schedule should reassess this strategy in teaching History since its results may not be positive.

The students asked some intelligent and probing questions in class. A few examples are "How did the myth of the superiority of whites get broken after WWII causing Black Nationalism to rise?" "Why did Ghana claim that she was independent in 1957 when she did not fully rule herself since the Queen was still the Head of State?" "Why did Nkrumah use socialism?" and "Why did the USSR fall?" (Asked by Aggrey and UPSS Form 3 students). In Mrs. Coker's class, students went over their exams, she had a number of students come to the front of the class and tell the class the correct answers to the essay questions. If students would giggle at their classmate's mistakes, she called them to the front of the class to try and teach in front of almost 40 students. She did this to show how difficult it is to teach and to respect those who are trying. The class was very involved and excited to be able to show off their knowledge to their classmates in both Forms 1 and 2. In all the classrooms, when the students were participating, their attention was fully on the subject. When

they were not asking questions or when the teachers just lectured on History, they became more disinterested.

I noticed some glaring differences in terms of the resources in the schools that I visited. At Aggrey and UPSS, the classrooms had no windows, no desk for the teachers, the paint was chipped on the walls, and there were many loud distractions. At Wesley Girls, however, I found freshly painted walls, windows and doors that closed, a black board and bulletin board, desks for the teachers to sit, and enough desks for the students. The differences reflect the capacity of the amount of learning and teaching that can go on in the various schools. The better the resources in the schools, the more the teachers can focus on the students and the students can focus on their studies. If teachers have no resources say to teach History, it is hard to get the students interested in the subject. If they are not paid well, it is hard for them to be enthusiastic about their jobs. Ghanaian teachers work against tremendous odds, and yet I observed wonderful teaching and enthusiasm in the few schools I visited.

CONCLUSION

I was able to achieve the aim of my study even with all the limitations I faced. I entered this project with the belief that since I did not receive a fully representational history of American in my education, other places might also have this problem especially because of colonialism. I surmised that whoever writes the textbooks and designs the syllabus now, presuming it was the British, gets to present the history they want. Yet, I was proved wrong by my research. I found that prior to 1987, the topic of History was focused on British and European influences on the world and on Africa. The British people imposed their European History on Ghanaians and other former colonies since they found no written history of these places. The government and the Education Service made some educational reforms in 1987 that helped retell the story of African and Ghana from an African perspective (Quaye 4/17/01). The Curriculum Research and Development Division of the Education Service in Ghana now designs the texts for schools. Three Ghanaian historians in Accra (their names are mentioned above in the Text section) write the history text that is currently in use at the SSS level. Since independence and due to recent governmental reforms, the education that Ghanaian children receive today is written by Ghanaians and relevant to their lives as Ghanaians as well as African.

I was also curious to find how many students actually take History at each of the schools in Ghana. Since it is an elective and not a core subject, I wanted to see how many students pursue General Arts, which includes History. However, I was only able to find the number of students in the various electives at Wesley Girls SSS (Table 1)

<u>Programmes</u>						Total# of students
Form	General Arts	Home Econ	Visual Arts	Science	Business	
1	163	24	16	181	35	
2	107	36	16	181	32	
3	133	24	21	138	31	
Total	403	86	53	500	98	1,140

Table 1. Number of students in each programme at Wesley Girls SSS in 2001

I also found the number of students in the History elective in 1999 at Wesley Girls (Table 2). I acquired my data from the Assistant Head Mistress' office on posted on the walls. Even though, Table 2 is from 1999 it is the most recent data that I found. It was interesting to see that so many girls are enrolled in the Science and History electives. About 10% of the student population took

History in 1999. I would have liked to find the data at the other schools but the information is not as easily accessible as it was at Wesley Girls and could be done in future study.

Form	Number of Students
1	41
2	33
3	31
Total	105

Table 2. Number of History Students at Wesley Girls in 1999

My research has shown me that history is a dynamic subject that changes dependent on the perspective of the author, the teacher who is teaching it, and the people who construct the syllabus. From observing a few classes, I got to see first-hand how the subject of History is being taught in a various Ghanaian schools. Judging by student reactions, I saw that interactive methods, such as question & answer sessions and discussions, got the students most involved and responsive. History needs to keep students participating rather than simply listening in order for them to register the information (Appendix E). When teachers dictated notes or lectured, the interest level of the students decreased rapidly. These strategies are necessary but are not the most creative way for students to learn history. A combination of both lecture and interactive lesson plans appeared to work the best in the classes I observed. The subject matter is also important since students become engaged in topics that they can relate to. Ever since educational reforms reconstructed the History syllabus, Ghanaian students are now learning about the past of Africa and Ghana rather than Europe.

The History syllabus seemed to be a base point for teachers to supplement in order to reach their goals in teaching. The teachers I talked to often bring outside reading and knowledge into the classroom to expand on topics that the syllabus skims over. The effort by the teacher determines how much the students will learn about history since the textbook and syllabus are broad and generalized sources. The teachers I observed appeared to really enjoy their jobs and the subject matter they were teaching and therefore caused students to also become enthusiastic about the subject. However, Ghanaian schools are lacking in funding and incentives for students and teachers. Most teachers do not have enough textbooks and rarely get money for excursions. Without exposure to historical sites, students are denied first hand interaction with what they learn in the classroom. Hopefully, the new government will propose reforms that will spend more money on education and teachers. The curriculum planners should also reform the core subjects by adding History, making it

compulsory rather than an optional course. Without young people learning about the past, they will not know how to move toward a brighter future.

TEACHING ABOUT THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

I was interested in seeing how much is discussed about the slave trade and its effects on Africa and the Americans in the textbooks and also in the syllabus. I found that in the JSS Social Studies books they do deal with European contact, trade, and slavery. In Pupil's Book 2, it reads, "In the 18th century, slaves became the most important need of the European traders. The Europeans brought goods like cloth, tobacco, and drinks, and also firearms to exchange for *the things* they took away" (my italicizing of things emphasized how slaves, human beings, are being referred to as things) (p.87). Later the book discusses the effects of the slave trade on West Africa by saying, "The most damaging effect of European contact with West Africa was the great loss in population" and "The African slave traders made a lot of profit. This made them fail to see that the very people who should develop West Africa were the young people who were being sold into slavery" (Pupil Book 2 p.88). The text attempts to show students that the slave trade was detrimental to the development of Ghana. The book then poses the question to student: "Do you not agree that these African slave dealers were very selfish? They were greedy, and so they sold their own people. People who wish to be respected in society should never use their neighbors to make themselves rich" (p.88). The text is attempting to send a moral message to students that they should not allow anything like slavery to happen again to their people due to greed and profit. It also gives an estimate of how many people were lost due to slavery saying, "...over 16 million West Africans were carried away as slaves to the Americas. This does not include the several millions who died in the slave raids and those who died on the way to the coast" (p.88). I was surprised to find these numbers and harsh realities in a text meant for JSS students. It is great to see that they are not trying to gloss over the sad epoch of the slave trade and make it seem like the trade made Africa as rich as it did the Europeans. In fact, later it says, "Europeans always make sure that they do only what benefits them. For this reason, Africans must always think carefully about anything Europeans propose, before they accept it" (p.88). The anti-European sentiment shows that Ghanaians are teaching their children to be weary of a people that have detrimentally changed the development and growth of their country. Even though it seems like the JSS text deals with the issue of the Diaspora, most of the information is from one page of one textbook. This would be the only knowledge students receive about slavery in West Africa if they do not major in General Arts and take History at the SSS level.

Talking to students helped me to obtain a clearer picture of what students are actually learning about the slave trade. I talked to a student in Class 6 about how much he learned about slavery and blacks in the Americas. He told me that Britain ought to pay Ghana back for all they have taken when they traded with Ghana. He has learned that Europeans gave Ghanaians “champagne, guns, and fancy clothes for people and gold” (Oppon interview 4/28/01). He said gold and people are much more valuable than champagne (meaning alcohol) so England owes Ghana. When I inquired about what he knew about the history of blacks in the Americas, he said that they were servants to the whites and sometimes they intermarried creating African-Americans. He told me he went to the castle when he was in class 2 but that was all he knew about slavery. When I talked to a student that graduated SSS and who had not taken History in SS, he assured me that he never really learned about the slave trade in school. He said his parents and brother really do not know that Africans were shipped across the ocean as slaves. His mom believes that African were held prisoner in the castles, but not as slaves. None of his family took History past JSS and he blames the lack of this information is due to Europeans still controlling what is taught in schools (information obtained through informal interview with Samuel Bakame 4/30/01). What he knows about slavery is from his own personal interest and investigation into the History of Ghana. These two students from the Ghanaian education system seems to not have a full representation of the horrors and effects that slavery had on the people of Africa and in the Diaspora.

Students in Form 1 at Wesley Girls confirmed the lack of teaching about the Diaspora in the JSS level (Group student interview 5/3/01). They told me that they do not really learn about blacks in other parts of the world. They are simply taught about the countries that interacted in the trade of human beings and they take trips to the castles. One student said that slavery does not have an impact on her life today but it is good to learn about it so it does not happen again. Another student said she thought it was nice when African Americans come to Ghana and are proud of being African. They all told me that they like to learn about how whites are treating blacks in other parts of the world today. There is an interest level in Ghanaian students about the people of the African Diaspora that should be addressed more fully in history at all levels of schooling.

At the SSS level, the textbook skims over the atrocities that the slave trade caused to the people of Ghana and those transported to the “New World”. It says, “The Trans-Atlantic slave trade made a great contribution to the development of the New World” (SSS text 211) yet it does not mention the arrested development of Ghana and Africa. It simply states that the slave trade “brutalized Ghanaian and changed the character of slavery in their society,” “suppressed the growth of Ghana handicraft industries” (SSS text 213-4), and it discouraged productive labor since more wealth came from the slave trade than from farming. It does not even mention the brutality of slavery to those Africans transported to the “New World.” It states that the without the labor of the

African slaves the “great cities, railways, public building, and highways” would not have been constructed. It does not mention the hardships, the blood, the sweat, or the agony that the African slaves in American went through to create a country in which they could not even reap the benefits. It does point out a few token African-Americans who were involved in American art, literature, sports, and music. However, this does not seem sufficient in really teaching Ghanaians about their black brethren in other parts of the world.

When I asked the SSS teachers about how they dealt with Pan-Africans and the Diaspora, they all said that they must add to what the text and syllabus suggests. In class, they will sometimes mention the accomplishments of some renowned African-Americans and the founders of the Pan-African movement. However, they must do their own research and an investigation about these people since the textbook does not explain much about people in the Diaspora. The teachers also said that they take excursions to the castles. When I went to Cape Coast castle to inquire about the number of Ghanaian students and the frequency at which they came to the castle, the man at reception could not give me any answers. He said that schools write to the castle to ask about visiting and they send schools some information before they arrive. At Elmina Castle, the woman told me that the number varies depending upon the week. Sometimes they get 300 students in one day and sometime none in a week. Many students, mostly the primary and JSS levels, frequent the castle though. I went to Cape Coast Castle with my Komenda brother, who is 7, and when we entered the male slave dungeon he gripped my hand in fear of the darkness and cold feeling of the entryway. His response is probably a reaction that most children and adult have when entering the frightening dungeon, which brings to life the fears that their ancestors must have faced when they were forcibly put into the castle. Visits to the castles help students to picture and experience what they are reading about in books and learning in the classrooms of people long ago. The castles are excellent historical sites for students to visit and the museums do a good job in explaining the history of the slave trade. However, the castles have been changed and refurbished too much to resemble what they must have looked like hundreds of years ago. Historians should be attempting to preserve the castles but not alter the truth of how they looked and felt when they were used. Future students will not be able to experience the sites as being historical when they look brand new and touristy. Excursions are extremely important for History students in order to them to visualize and bring to life what they hear and learn in school about the past which they think may not affect their lives today. By showing students historical sites that still exist, they will realize that history is not really such a far off time that they cannot relate to.

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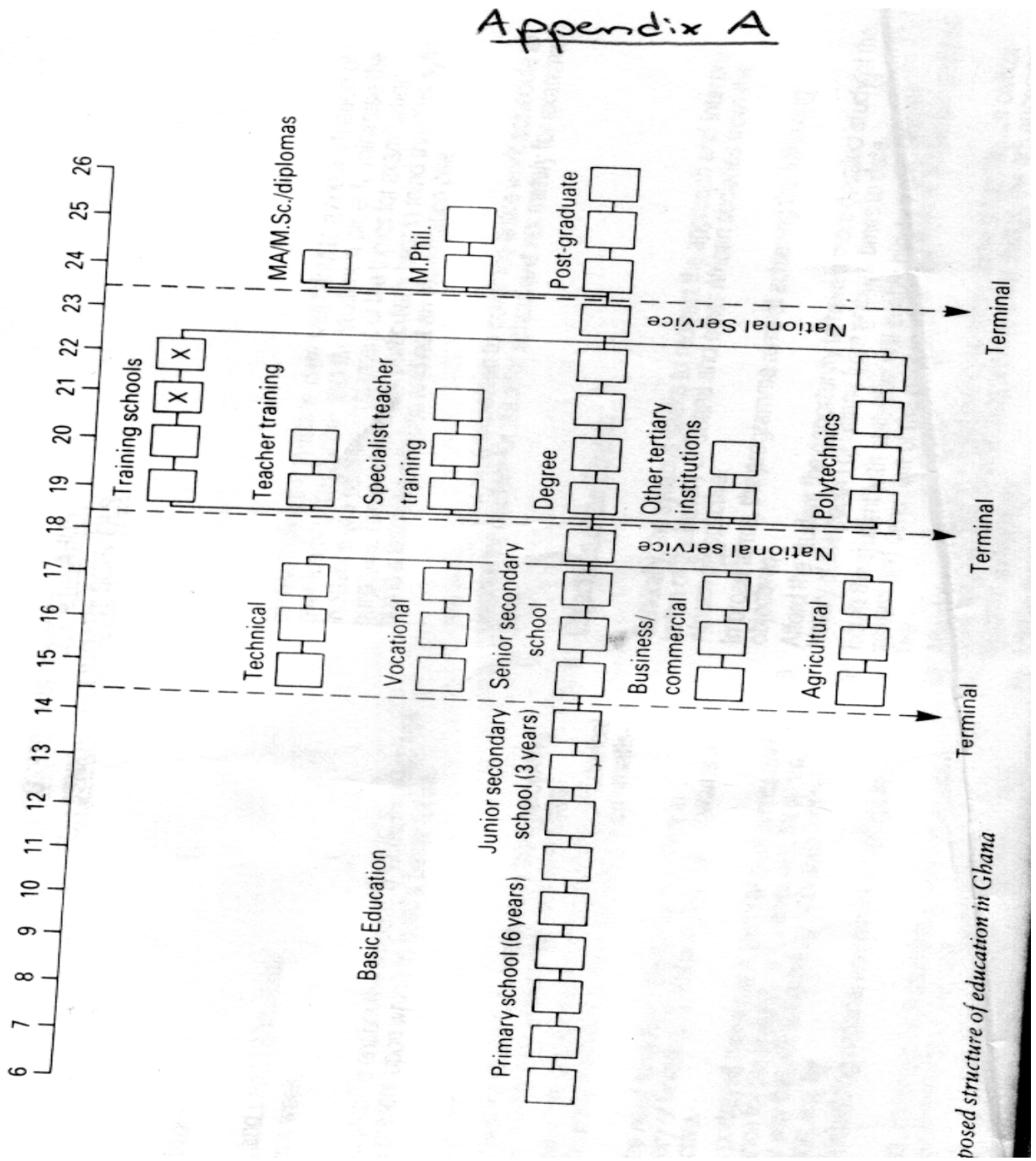
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Appendix A



Appendix B

SUGGESTED HISTORY SYLLABUS FOR SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

1. Title of Subject: History.
2. Duration (in years) and Period Allocation: 3 years of 7 periods a week
3. Rationale for Subject: To enable the student to study the past, use it to understand the present upon which to build a better future.
4. Need Assessment Summary
 - i) There is a pressing need for students to break away from perceiving History as merely the memorizing of historical facts and dates.
 - ii) There gathering, presentation, and especially, interpretation of historical information in pre-university instructions, have generally been unsatisfactory.
 - iii) There is, therefore, the need to redirect the study of History in general, and the history of Ghana and Africa in particular, towards a more African prospective.
 - iv) History is sometimes portrayed merely as a study of past events and people with no relevance for the present. It is necessary, therefore, to present History in a way that will bring out is necessary, therefore, development of a nation, e.g. by
 - a) making it a tool for building national and patriotic feelings in students,
 - b) using it to motivate and encourages students to want emulate and build on the achievements of the past.

5. Introduction

This syllabus is designed in lines with the no-going reforms in Ghana's Education System which seek to make education relevant to the needs of the Ghanaian society. The Senior Secondary history course is a sequel to the JSS Social Studies Programme and is designed, among other things, to cement the development of the spirit of national awareness and patriotism in the student. The programme offers an opportunity to the students to appreciate the achievements of his ancestor, develop a pride in being a Ghanaian and an African and feel challenged to show loyalty to his country and always seek means to build on what his ancestors had achieved.

In developing the syllabus, care was taken to avoid a situation of over-loading the teacher and the student in order to minimize the incidence of a selective treatment of the topics for examination purposes. The teacher must particularly bear in mind that this syllabus is a teaching syllabus and not an examinations one

This means that he is expected to cover the entire work schedule to prepare the student for life after school and not merely for examinations.

6. Objectives of the Course

Generally the syllabus seeks to redirect the approach and interpretation of the history of Ghana and other African societies from the African prospective.

In broad terms, the programme aims at achieving the following objective.

- i) Afford the student th
- ii)
- iii) e opportunity to have a more detailed study of the history of the people of Ghana from ancient times to date.
- iv) Equip the student with skills that will enable him to interpret the actions and behaviour of the people of Ghana from a Ghanaian perspective.
- v) Afford the student an opportunity to study some other African civilization with the aim of indicating among other things, the advancements made in earlier ages.
- vi) Enable the students to relate events in Ghana to those of the outside world.
- vii) Enable the student to appreciate the factors that make for national and international unity.
- viii) Enable the student to acquire the skill of gathering and analyzing historical data objectively.
- ix) Enable the student to acquire habits and attitudes to identify his personality as a Ghanaian and an African, with a heritage worthy of pride, preservation and improvement.

Syllabus Outline

A. Board Outline

Year 1

1. Landmarks of African History up to 1800.

Year 2

2. Cultures and Civilizations of Ghana from the earliest times to AD 1700

Year 3

3. History of Ghana and the wider World from AD. 1500 to the present..

B: Complete Syllabus Outline. Select Topics:

Year 1 Landmarks of African History Up to 1800.

1. Introduction to African History:

- (a) History as a subject.
- (b) Sources and methods of African History.
- 2. African Pre-history from the earliest time to 500 B.C
- 3. Civilization of Paranoiac Egypt from 3000 B.C
- 4. Civilization of Axum and Ancient Ethiopia
- 5. Civilization of Northern Africa.
- 6. Origin and Spread of Bantu Civilization.
- 7. Swahili Civilization of the East African Coast
- 8. Civilization and Cultures of West African Sudan from 500 B.C
- 9. Civilizations and Cultures of the West African Coast.

Year 2

Cultures and Civilizations of Ghana from the earliest times to A.D 1700

- 1. Introduction to the History of Ghana (Sources and Methods).
- 2. Pre-History of Ghana, 500000 B.C. – AD.1700;
 - (a) The first hunter, 500000 B.C.;
 - (b) The first farmers and village builders, 2000 – 500 B.C.;
- 3. The peopling of Ghana: Northern, Forest, and Coastal Zones.
- 4. The rise of states and kingdoms.
 - (a) Northern Zone;
 - (b) Forest Zones;
 - (c) Coastal Zone.
- 5. History of technology.
- 6. History of Economy.
- 7. History of medicine.
- 8. Social and political organizations.
- 9. History of art.
- 10. The coming of the Europeans.

Year 3

The History of Ghana and the Wider World from AD. 1500 to the Present

- 1. The world situation by AD. 1500.
- 2. The changing patterns of trade, AD. 1500 – AD. 1900.
- 3. Social and political developments, AD. 1500 – AD 1900.

4. The partition of Africa.
5. Social, economic, and political development in Ghana, AD. 1900-1957.
6. Independence and after: The Nkrumah era.
7. Post-1966 Ghana.
8. Ghana in the community of nations.

Appendix C
AGGREY MEMORIAL ZION SECONDARY SCHOOL
CAPE COAST

MOCK EXAMINATION, MARCH 2001

HISTORY 2

TIME: 3 HRS

ANSWER 5 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss how Archaeology and Oral Tradition help in writing African history.
2. Discuss the contributions of the Christian Missionaries to the economic development in Ghana in the nineteenth century.
3. Examine the political organization of the West Africa Sudanese States.
4. Describe the social and political organization of one of these states Akan, Ga, Ewe.
5. Describe the factors for the partition of West African in the nineteenth century.
6. Why did the British Colonial Administration in Ghana introduce the Concept of Indirect Rule?
7. Why did the educated Africans oppose the policy of indirect Rule?
8. Examine the economic developments during the British Colonial Rule in Ghana.
9. What were the main features of the Guggisberg Constriction of 1925?
10. Discuss the reasons for formation, achievements and future of one these institutions
 - (a) The Poll Tax Ordinance of 1852.
 - (b) The Fanti Confederation of 1868.
 - (c) The Aborigines' Rights Protection Society of 1897.

Appendix D

Northwestern professor uncovers 16th Century Writing by black African that contradict many Western preconceptions.

African manuscripts rewriting history

“it really is monumental,” said David Robinson professor of African history at Michigan State University. Until recently, even distinguished scholars would have pooh-poohed the idea that such a cache of historical documents could exist in the heart of Africa.

To be sure, a tiny group of specialists recognized that Africans had a written tradition. But even such a celebrated historian as H. Trevor-Roper wrote in 1963: “Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness.” The centerpiece of Hunwick’s find in modern-day Mali was a African historian who wrote in the 16th Century. Timbuktu was then the center of a flourishing culture, and its strategic position on the Niger River made the city the commercial hub of West Africa.

The version of al-Katt’s chronicle that Hunwick found contained previously unknown material from al-Kati’s predecessors –which now pushes our part of the continent back to the mid-15th Century. Ismail Haidara, the young Hunwick, is descended from al-Kati, whose family has handed the manuscript from one generation to the next ever since his death in 1592. As his name might suggest, al-Kati was a Muslim, like many people in Timbuktu, and he wrote in Arabic, the holy language of Islam. But he wasn’t Arab. He was a black African –a fact many Westerners would find difficult to reconcile with their preconceptions. Black Africans were supposed to be illiterate, at least until 19th Century Christian missionaries taught them forms for native languages.

Oral traditions

In recent year, anthropologists have helped scholars in other field to recognized the importance of oral traditions, both as markers of culture and as a way to establish the history of non-literate people. Yet that very recognition also can contribute to the misconception to that people with rich oral traditions couldn’t, at the same time, have a written history. “Europeans liked to think of Africa as a continent of song and dance,” Unwick said. “Black Africans weren’t supposed to know about writing, which is how Trevor-Roper could think them as lacking a record of the past and thus without a history.”

As Islam spread across Africa during the Middle Ages, Hunwick said knowledge of writing passed from the Arabs of the continent's knowledge of writing passed from the Arabs of the continent's northern regions to black societies farther south. For the most part, those conveyed read and wrote Arabic, but in some cases they also used the Arabic alphabet to create written forms of local languages, such as Fulani.

The process, he noted, was remarkably similar to the transmission of writing among European people. The Romans adapted their alphabet from the Greeks, for example, and in turn the Latin alphabet was adopted by French, Spanish, English and German speakers and others to give written form to their languages.

But the role of Arabic in African literacy was largely overlooked until recently, even by Africans themselves. Early in his scholarly career, the British-born Hunwick taught at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. "There was a classics department where Latin was taught, because the university had been established by the British when the country was their colony," Hunwick recalled. "But there was no department of Arabic studies. I convinced the dean to establish one on the argument that Arabic was the Latin of Africa."

Slaves in America

One piece of evidence for that statement is that a number of black Africans brought to North America as slaves were literate in Arabic. One of the earliest autobiographies by an American slave was written in Arabic by Umar ibn Sayyid, who was held in bondage on a North Carolina plantation. The thought that blacks could read and write was as troubling for American slaveholders as it was for European colonialists, Hunwick noted. So if a slave was literate, both ruling groups reasoned, that must mean that he or she wasn't really a black African but a "Moor" – that is, a darker skinned Arab.

When a white American published an account of another literate slave, Abdul Rahaman, he went to great pains to establish the slave's identity as a Moor – in face of contradictory evidence, such as Rahaman's extremely dark skin. "Constant exposure to a vertical sun for many years, together with the privation incident to the lower order of community, and an inattention to cleanliness, will produce a very material change in the complexion," the author assured his white readers. It was the need to combat just that kind of racial prejudice that drew Hunwick into African studies. When he was a young man in the 1950s, Great Britain still had compulsory military service, which he served in Somalia, in eastern Africa. "I was an officer but not a gentleman," Hunwick said, explaining that contrary to prevailing colonialist mores he socialized with the African troops under his command. He was impressed by the egalitarian quality of their society, which contrasted sharply with the rigid class lines he had seen in England. He also discovered how wide the compass of writing was in Africa, despite what history books of the day said.

400 manuscripts

In 1964, he began traveling through northern Nigeria, searching out manuscripts in private hands and microfilming them. Eventually, Hunwick located and filmed some 400 such manuscripts, making them available for the first time to Western scholarship.

Hunwick's infectious enthusiasm



"The lecture method of teaching is the best way to transfer the teacher's notes to the students' notebooks without ever passing through their minds."

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