

# KENYA'S FORGOTTEN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL MOVEMENT

James Stanfield

The European model of schooling was introduced into Kenya towards the end of the nineteenth century with the first school opened by the Christian Missionary Society near Mombasa in 1846. While few schools were built further inland until the turn of the century and the building of the Uganda railway, it is estimated that mission schools had been established throughout Kenya by 1910. In response to the increasing demands for education the colonial authorities established a Department of Education in 1911 and missionary societies began to receive government grants to help fund the building of new schools. However, only those schools which adhered to the principles set out in the 1909 Fraser Report qualified for government funds. Therefore, while academic education was to be given to European and Asian children, African children were to receive industrial and agricultural training. Christian teaching became compulsory and African customs and traditions were subsequently neglected. Furthermore, African children were barred from learning English until the last year of primary school.

While much has been written on the influence of both the Christian missionary societies and the colonial authorities on the development of education in Kenya, less attention has focused upon the African reaction. A common interpretation of this reaction is that while African communities may have been initially suspicious, they soon recognised the importance of education and embraced it enthusiastically. However, this interpretation has been challenged by John Anderson in his 1970 publication 'The Struggle for the School', which helps to shed light upon a well-kept secret, the rise and fall of Kenya's independent school movement.

Following a ban on female circumcision by three missionary societies in 1929, the Kikuyu in Central Province began to boycott mission schools and demanded an end to the monopoly on education held by the missions. After failing to persuade the government to open its own secular schools free from missionary control, the Kikuyu began to open their own. During the early 1930s extensive fundraising activities took place, school buildings were erected and self-help groups formed. Each independent school was governed by a local committee, responsible for the recruitment and payment of teachers, the setting of school fees and other fundraising events. As independent schools became established joint meetings were organised and at a

gathering in August 1934 the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association (KISA) was set up. While KISA emphasised the need to negotiate with the colonial authorities, some independent schools wanted to remain entirely free from direct European influence. A rival association, the Kikuyu Karinga Education Association (KKEA), was therefore established soon after. By 1939 there were 63 Kikuyu independent schools educating a total of 12,964 pupils.

To help meet the increasing demand for trained teachers both KISA and KKEA agreed to support the opening, in 1939, of Kenya's first teacher-training college at Githunguri, the site of the Kikuyu's first independent school. Originally intended to train teachers, the College soon included an elementary, primary and secondary school, with enrolments increasing to over 1,000 by 1947. It was this independent school/college where Jomo Kenyatta would later become the principal, providing a base for his future campaign for Presidency. The rest, of course, is history. A police investigation of the Mau Mau early in 1952 sealed the fate of the independent schools. When the government declared a state of emergency later that year, both KISA and KKEA schools were closed.

The rise and fall of Kenya's independent school movement suggest that comments such as those expressed by the Provisional Commissioner for Kikuyu province in 1929, 'It is indisputable that the Kikuyu people, in their present stage of development, are incapable of organising, financing, and running efficient schools without European supervision', were entirely misplaced. Just as E. G. West has previously shown that the vast majority of families in mid-nineteenth-century England were capable of financing and operating their own schools without government support, so too were the indigenous communities in Kenya during the first half of the twentieth century.

These findings also help to shed light on the importance of independently controlled schools in a free and democratic society. In Kenya's struggle against colonial rule it was their schools which first gained independence providing the momentum for future reforms. Finally, on becoming President of Kenya in 1964, Jomo Kenyatta championed the Harambee spirit of self-help which he believed the future development of Kenya would depend upon. It is now clear where the inspiration for this movement came from.

**James Stanfield** – University of Newcastle upon Tyne