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Abstract

Between 1929 and 1941, life in the West African colonial city of Bathurst, Gambia, was difficult. Parents and guidance faced ubiquitous challenges in providing for their families. Due to the depressed economic circumstances of their time, exemplified by the fluctuation in educational spending in the mission and government run schools and the larger colonial economy, parents began pulling their children out of the schools so the latter can look for low-paying jobs to assist their families. One consequences of this was that between 1930 and 1941 it was relatively difficult to find students with certificates higher than Standard VII certificates. This paper draws from colonial reports to analyze childhood and education in the Gambian colony between the 1930s and 1940s.

Introduction

The period from roughly 1929 to the late 1940s was an era of great uncertainty for the people living in Bathurst – the most important colonial city in the British West African colony of the Gambia. This era coincided with the Great Economic Depression of the late 1920s and 30s and the outbreak of World War II – which arguably are two of the most important twentieth century events that are known to have affected large segments of Africa and its diverse population. With the outbreak of the global economic depression and the Second World War in 1930s, the global economy in general and that of Africa in particular was thrown into crises. For example, the decline in government revenue in the Gambian colony is an evidence of this. Government expenditure declined from £194,546 in 1938 to £191,352 in 1939 and to £189,578 in 1940. Also, in the Gambia, as in elsewhere, the cost of food items increasingly went up while exports prices dropped (Wright: 2004, 199). The hardest hit areas appeared to have been the countryside, commonly referred to as the hinterlands. There, in the 1940s, a government official reported that “although the normal inhabitant of Bathurst, being a wage earner, could afford to buy imported food, the improvident farmer would eat his scanty supply of home grown food and spend the money obtained from the sale of groundnuts within a few weeks of the harvest.” Widespread hunger and malnutrition were reported in various parts of the provinces. Because of this problem, the report noted, Gambian youths were found to have insufficient strength to perform the heavy work of loading peanuts into ships.
But even though the challenges appeared greater in the hinterlands, Bathurst also had its share. This is not hard to imagine since many of the residents of the colonial city were still tied to their rural roots where their parents, brothers, sisters and larger extended families still live. Urban residents were still expected to help their relatives back in the villages—an expectation that no doubt added to the pressure that many of them continued to face. In addition, the availability of local foodstuffs in the city’s markets depended partially on the level of prosperity in the nearby agricultural villages such as those in Niumi, Jokadu, Baddibu or Kiang, Jarra or Foni. For this reason, even though by 1941 the people of the Protectorate [provinces] had began growing enough food to feed themselves, they were still unable to meet the requirements of the people of Bathurst. Here, too, several household heads became less capable of feeding their children and sources make reference to a “large urban population [that] live in . . . overcrowded conditions . . . they must obtain food either from the rural areas or from abroad.” The most successful economic protest of the decade, he further writes, was the cocoa boycott of 1937-8. The boycott had been organized by farmers, traders and traditional leaders in part to challenge to European control of the colony but the economic uncertainties of the time may have also played a role in its outbreak.

Obviously, several studies show that the situation was so desperate not just in the Gambia but also in other parts of West Africa. For instance, in the Gold Coast, present day Ghana, Wendell Holbrook writes that “the government’s attempt to introduce an urban income tax to raise revenue in the depression year of 1931 had brought forth angry criticism from the press and from African members of the Legislative Council; and in several towns the proposed tax provoked street demonstrations and, in some cases, riots” (Holbrook, 1985: 350). In northern Nigeria “aggressive revenue drives at the grass roots caused food shortages and full-scale famines in several districts . . . Famines devastated whole villages as the agents of an avowedly bankrupt state watched helplessly” (Ochonu, 2009: 16). Similarly in French West Africa, especially in Dakar, Bamako and Conakry the growth of urban unemployment forced hundreds of youths to join the Tirailleurs Sénégalais (Echenberg, 1991: 112).

In the Gambia, historian Donald Wright states that when President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited Gambia in January 1944, on his way to Morocco, he saw the dark images of underdevelopment or poverty. Thus, when he met with British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, he told him “what [he] about his British Gambia . . . Dirt. Disease. Very high mortality rate . . . Life expectancy . . . Twenty-six years” (Wright, 2010: 176). Surely, hunger was reported in the bigger Mandinka towns so much so that rationing of foodstuffs and other items had by 1942 become the norm (Wright, 175). As if that was not enough, the colony’s cattle industry was ravaged by dreaded rinderpest epidemic that ruined the wealth of the population.

Wright suggests that a change in colonial attitude partly came about after Roosevelt exerted pressure on Churchill’s government to improve education, raise the standards of living, and improve “the health conditions of all backward, depressed colonial areas of the world.” Other colonial sources tended to credit the colonial office’s genuine concerns over the plight of the British subjects living within the empire. In any event, as a direct response to the looming
crises, in July 1941 the Secretary of State for colonies dispatched a circular, which sent to all colonial offices in British West Africa asking administrators to “prepare post-war development schemes and stating as much progress as possible should be made during the war.” One of the results of this was the publication of Development and Welfare in the Gambia (1943), which among other things sought to lay out the modalities of improving “the conditions of service of school teachers, involve a permanent increase in recurrent expenditure.”

This document acknowledged among other things that depressed economic conditions in Bathurst made it difficult for parents to keep their children in school. It blamed the relatively high dropout rate in schools on the growing poverty of the city’s residents. In other words, the report raised concern over the poverty of the African residents of the city, which made it difficult for parents to pay for their children’s educational expenses. It stated that many “boys of the street” do not attend school because their parents could not afford to pay any fees. The situation was further aggrivated by the difficulty of the Missions (i.e. the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Wesleyan Missions) to access sufficient funds for the maintenance of their schools (Blackburne, 1943). With little government assistance, the Missions were mostly dependent on revenue from school fees they charged to parents with children attending their schools.

The most common reaction of these children was to seek employment in the formal and informal sectors. Paradoxically, many of them, especially those with a Standard VII certificate, were able to acquire employment as clerical workers in the already economically depressed colonial bureaucracy. This created a situation whereby there was an “inadequate supply of youths” with a Junior Cambridge certificate to fill the higher clerical posts in the civil service (i.e. children with secondary school diplomas). Generally, these were children between the ages of twelve and fifteen. Those who were successful in laying hands on clerical jobs were at times referred to as “black-coated” workers in colonial reports. By finding employment in the public service many of these children probably used such incomes to contribute financially to the upkeep of their families – a role thousands, if not, millions of children in Africa are to this day expected to play. As Heather Montgomery writes, in several non-Western societies “children can still be seen as an economic investment with specific returns . . . They are expected to look after parents in their old age, thereby guaranteeing a safety net for the elderly” (Montgomery, 2009: 67).

A number of social science studies have emerged over the past decades raising serious questions about the use of “child labor,” employment and/or abuse in various African societies –past and present (Canagarajah and Nielsen, 2001). Also, research on education (and childhood) in sub-Saharan Africa has grown steadily in recent years (Montgomery, 1). However, as far as the Gambia is concerned the literature is thin. One of the few exceptions is Paul Hunt’s pioneering essay on the almudo or Quranic student who are often employed as beggars in Gambia’s urban centers (Hunt, 1993). Hunt examines the phenomenon of urban street children in the Gambia where Quranic students lived by begging in return for Islamic instruction. Since Hunt wrote his essay, no substantial work of ‘Gambian studies’ dealing with issues of children has emerged. Most importantly, historical studies focusing on the socio-political and economic
factors affecting Gambian children, whether in the pre-colonial, colonial or post-colonial periods are non-existent.

In part, this essay seeks to make a modest contribution to the scholarly literature on children, employment and education in a colonial city in British West Africa. Drawing from documentary evidence left behind by Europeans, this paper describes some of the challenges that the educational sector in Gambia faced during the 1930s and 1940s and how children fit into that history. It argues that in the colonial city of Bathurst, especially between the 1930s and 1940s, there was a close relationship between economic decline, lower enrollment in the post-elementary schools and the desire on the part of boys of school-going age to seek gainful employment in the colonial civil service.

Missionaries and Education in Bathurst, 1816-1945

The Gambia was a British colony. It was the smallest British dependency in West Africa. Since Britain abandoned its settlement on James Island in the 1829, Bathurst (also known as St. Mary’s Island) remained its most important administrative center in the Senegambia region. The settlement (i.e. Bathurst) was founded in 1816 with the purpose of stamping out the Atlantic slave trade along the Gambia River and the nearby West African Atlantic coastline (Wright, 126).

From 1818, Bathurst’s civil population rose and began to outnumber those of the military. Its population during the inter-war years was nearly was about 14,370. As the size of the settlement’s population continued to grow, it became a fertile ground for Christian missionary activity. The history of missionary enterprise in Bathurst can be traced to 1821 and 1831. Without missionary activity, as Florence Mahoney argues, the process of education in St. Mary’s Island (i.e. Bathurst) would have been delayed (Mahoney, 1963: 142). As soon as the Methodist and the Anglican churches established themselves in the island, member of the church began to serve “the needs of the young - between the ages of nine and thirteen - by imparting a rudimentary knowledge in the three Rs through scriptural texts, adolescent and adult domestic slaves who were otherwise employed during the day, were provided for in evening classes” (Mahoney, 145).

So encouraging were the results that after three years the school provided the Colonial Chaplain with a boy-clerk, since “not a native man could be found who was competent to be his clerk. Another boy in less time became a merchant's clerk. Girls were given special attention in needlework by missionary wives, and some orphans enjoyed the special privilege of living in the Mission House free of charge in return for domestic services rendered after school hours (Mahoney, 145-46)

The schools registered a steady population increase in the 1840s. In 1841, for instance, 172 children had enrolled in the schools in Bathurst and nearby Berwick Town. By 1848 numbers in the city’s schools rose to 298 pupils (Mahoney, 159). In 1849, four priests from the
Roman Catholic mission arrived in the city and purchased land for the construction of a church and house. These men “were followed by four Sisters of Charity, who, once they had found a base, devoted themselves to education, to the assistance of the poor and sick - receiving orphans and abandoned children into their establishment.” For the first time in the city’s history, a boarding school was established on the Island of Bathurst; it was a free school where the children were instructed in religion and domestic subjects. This mission also depended primarily on funds collected overseas, in particular France, for the maintenance of its social work in Bathurst (Mahoney, 164).

From early on, the schools were owned and run by Christian missionaries. As Mahoney writes, education then was not a province of Government but of voluntary bodies. This is also true for other parts of Africa. As Richard Gray writes, in the whole of British West and South Africa, the colonial government assumed limited direct responsibility for education (Gray, 1986: 183). As the case in Bathurst demonstrates, the British provided only begin to give modest financial assistance to the mission schools in later years. As a result, between 1820s and 1850s, the schools were few and the number of available space for city’s population was small.

But by the 1860s expansion in formal education was a feature now of the Gambia; more elementary schools were established, by missionary agency. The Government offered a special grant to the Wesleyans to set up schools in the Kombo St. Mary. In the older schools in St. Mary's [Bathurst] (Mahoney, 169). The historical records show steady progress: Wesleyans alone were educating 403 children in their schools (223 boys and 180 girls); the Roman Catholics had 105 pupils (55 boys and 50 girls); while the Garrison school, under a civilian headmaster, now showed 40 children on its register (26 boys and 14 girls), apart from a special class of 20 Congo boys newly liberated from slavery. With much satisfaction, d'Arcy concluded that “we have no less a number than 659 little people under instruction in a Settlement numbering 6,000 inhabitants, being little more than 9% of the population, which I cannot help thinking is very creditable to the Government and to the community (Mahoney, 171).

In 1879 a local school for higher education was established in Bathurst, both for training African agents, and for the education of the sons of the growing class of African entrepreneurs. The Wesleyan Boys' High School opened with fifteen boys under the headship of the Rev Robert Dixon, with a curriculum little different from that of the Grammar school in Sierra Leone. Mahoney cites other reports that show that the performance of the school was encouraging; they show, overwhelmingly, the sort of lively interest that parents were beginning to take in the education of their children.

The growing economic prosperity of the 1860s and 1870s may have played a key role in this development. The prosperity resulted in preference being given to a boarding school education abroad for a larger number of Gambian boys than before. In 1881, the Boys High School in Bathurst contained 21 pupils, but in the 1880s no fewer than 18 children entered the C.M.S. Grammar school. This figure does not include those who went to the Wesleyan Boys'
School in Sierra Leone founded in 1874. Even the daughters of the “middle class” were also being considered for higher education Freetown. A small number of girls were already in the C.M.S. Girls’ boarding school, the Annie Walsh Memorial School. Those who could not afford sending their children to Sierra Leone sometimes sent their daughters to the Sisters of Charity in Bathurst for special tuition in Domestic subjects, especially Needlework and Dressmaking (Mahoney, 182-83).

Christian missionaries continued to be the sole providers of “Western” education even well into the 1940s. For instance, in the 1940s the Methodists opened the Wesley school in Dobson Street and the Bethel School in Stanley Street; the Anglicans kept the St. Mary’s School and the Roman Catholic managed St. Augustine’s school (for boys only) and St. Joseph’s school for girls. The primary role that Christian missionaries played in providing education in Africa is not unique to the Gambia. In fact, as Richard Gray states, in all of former British Africa, the British left education in the hands of the Christian missions (Gray, 1986).

But obviously by the late 1930s and early 1940s, the optimism of the preceding decades has begun to fade away. The challenges of the inter-war years had brought considerable changes in the settlement’s population. The population of Bathurst and the neighboring district of Kombo St. Mary had been augmented by many thousands of young men and women who left their farms in the countryside and neighboring French Senegal to find work in the colony’s Service Departments. Most of the inhabitants were largely dependent on paid employment for their survival. From their wages, many fed their families both in the cities and those they left behind in their home villages. Many of them often, especially in good times, used part of their wages to send their children to school.

In these decades, the late 1930s and 1940s, the colonial government admitted that the educational system in Bathurst was facing serious problems. Administrators blamed the lack of adequate trained teachers and the poor infrastructure of schools. As of January 1946 it was estimated that there were 3,200 children of school age in Bathurst. Sixty percent of that number attended school (Blackburne, 1943). Sadly the educational infrastructure was not expanding at a rate that was commensurate with the growing school population. As one would expect, standards were low. This was aggravated by the government’s decision to be a secondary stakeholder in providing education to the city’s young population, almost entirely leaving matters of education in the hands of the resource-constrained missions. Although the government had started assisting missionary schools with financial assistance in 1900, this was limited. Only a grant of £350 per annum was given to the Technical school of the Wesleyan mission that year. And for twenty years or so that followed, the Missions continued to occupy the center in providing education to numerous children in Bathurst. Now with family incomes overstretched “parents were too eager to withdraw their boys from school as soon as they could find situations for them as clerks or traders” (Mahoney, 183).

Because of the growing crisis, the colonial government began to support the missionary schools. From then onwards education became the most important sector where the colonial
state co-operated with Christian missionaries (Gray, 1986: 183). No important step was taken by the government until 1930 when an independent Education Department was created. As of 1931, there were six elementary schools in Bathurst with a total of 1,853 pupils on the registers (1,233 boys and 620 girls). In addition, there were four secondary schools in the city maintained by the Wesleyan and Roman Catholic missions (Gray, 1966: 495). There was a Teacher Training school opened in 1930. Another school, the Manual Training Centre (MTC) was opened. MTC was under the supervision of the Public Works Department (PWD). These schools provide education up to the seventh Standards. Five of the schools were maintained by Christians missions\(^9\) and the government maintained a Mohammedan school for the children of the Muslim population.\(^10\) The Muhammedan School was established by the government in 1903. Mohammedan school was operated by committee under the chairmanship of the Director of Education, R. C. Allen, who at the time was a British.\(^11\) Later, it seems to have passed under the control of Trustees of the Bathurst Muslim elders who were provided with “a grant in aid of 500 pounds annually given by the Government of the Gambia and twenty pounds for repairs.”\(^12\) The teachers who taught in the school were however paid by government even though the remaining elementary schools were left in the hands of the missions.

Now with limited assistance from the government, the Christian Missions developed some additional interest in expanding practical training and secondary education to Bathurst’s thousands of kids. There were only four secondary schools in the whole city. Two of these schools were for boys and the other two were for girls. They were maintained by the Roman Catholic and Methodist Missions. The total numbers on the register in these schools in 1932 was 109 boys and 92 girls.

Despite the government’s involvement in providing education to Bathurst growing population of young men and women, the educational sector and the larger economy continued faced stiff challenges. First, there was little incentive on the part of parents to send their children to secondary schools. Also, the city’s unfavorable socio-economic conditions during the inter-war period tended to force parents to pull their young ones from the schools. In short, there seems to be a direct correlation between economic distress and parents’ lack of incentive to keep their children in school.

Added to this, secondary education was scarce. There were fewer secondary and vocational schools that were operational in the Gambia colony in general and Bathurst in particular. While government scholarships were often provided each year for students in Secondary schools, practically more than 3% of the elementary school graduates could not be absorbed in these secondary schools. In this sense, the colonial education system was no doubt in itself exclusionary. It left-out hundreds, if not thousands, of children of school going age.

As mentioned earlier, the 1930s and 1940s were characterized by economic decline, which forced the government to postpone until a later date the collection of the outstanding debts owed to her by its subjects. The colony had during this time incurred a debt of £38,700. Revenue fell to £162, 000 in 1938 to £137,000 in 1939 and to £142,000 in 1940. The causes of
this deterioration were summarized by the then Governor of the Gambia in 1938 as due to “diminished returns from groundnuts [the major export of the colony] reacted on purchasing power and this in turn on imports. Private incomes fell and with them Government revenue.”

During this period the colonial administration undertook a number of measures to retrench staff and curtailed its efforts to provide services. Even the European staff working in Gambia was reduced from 57 to 42. This no doubt had consequences for the schools since many of these “expatriates” from European taught in the schools. Sadly, the gloomy financial outlook which drove them away from the country continued to be weary for most part of the 1940s, if not throughout the decade. To be sure, it was not attractive to be in the Mission schools of Bathurst during this period; however, it is important to note that the high dropout rate was due to the terrible socio-economic problems that engulfed the colony.

Colonialism and Education: Potential Historiographical Implications

The challenges of colonial education are well known to historians of Africa. For instance, virtually all the studies that are reviewed in this essay acknowledges the important role that Christian missionaries played in providing “Western” education in colonial Africa (esp. Mugomba and Nyaggah, 1980; Harik & Schilling, 1984; Van der Veur, 1996; Bassey, 1999). Because of government’s marginal interest in education, and tiny resources available to the various Missions working in Africa, many African colonies continued to lack adequate infrastructure to meet the growing demand for Western education. As Nigerian historian Michael Crowder writes, even though there were instances of expansion during the 1930s and 40s, educational facilities for Africans remained infinitesimal. Consequently, educational standards, he claims, were usually low and only a small number of Africans were able to go to schools of any sort, fewer still to secondary schools (Crowder, 1978: 123).

Other scholars criticized education in colonial by focusing on curriculum issues. Walter Rodney, for instance, believes that the curriculum designed for African colonial schools were poor by prevailing European standards. Rodney claims that the books, the methods of teaching, and the discipline were all brought to Africa in the nineteenth century and the colonial schools remained indifferent to the twentieth century. New ideas that were incorporated in the Europe never reached the colonies, he claims. This includes the positive changes in European science, which did not reach African classrooms, for there were few schools where science subjects were taught (Rodney, 1982: 246).

Echoing Rodney’s view, Majid Rahnema thinks that colonial education policies were designed to separate students from their parents and their cultural milieu. Colonial education, he argues, instilled in students a proud feeling and new alienating values, attitudes and goals, which drove them to gradually reject and/or despise their own cultural and personal identity. Many of the products of these schools acquired a false sense of superiority, which turned them away from manual work, from real life and from unschooled people, whom they tend to perceive as ignorant and underdeveloped (Rahnema, 1997: 158). Ali Muzrui agrees. For him,
African schools seemed preeminently designed to produce rural misfits. An African who completes the equivalent of the Cambridge School certificate examination is regarded as no longer suitable for residences in the rural areas. The young person’s own parents may feel betrayed if the child with such a level of education insisted on remaining in the villages (Mazrui, 2001: 73). That means, as a whole, the educational system fostered unprecedented processes of exclusion against the poor and the powerless. For him, colonial education destroyed all previously established systems of cultural reference by systematically discrediting all previously established mechanisms that different cultures had created throughout their histories for fostering knowledge and culture.

To be sure, in Bathurst, there were problems of access and educational quality. For instance, even though the Missions had from time to time opened schools in various parts of the Protectorate, most of their schools were confined in Bathurst, where their headquarters were situated. This created a rural-urban drift where young boys were sent to the city in order to receive education. The situation was further exacerbated by the preference that rural-folks had for urban schools. A number of Protectorate people (or rural folks) considered Bathurst schools as better educational institutions. As a result, many favored sending their children to the urban schools. These children were sent down to “stay with friends or relatives” who lieu of board and lodging, used these children as house helps. This has in many places, according to Dr. McMath, set up “a minor slave trade.”

There is also a gender bias in the colonial education system. First, the British complained that a number of children who do not attend “secular” school run by Christian missionaries were “Mohammedan” or Muslim girls whose parents “were too old-fashioned to wish that [their daughters] should receive a school education” (Blacburne, 1943). Second, as it existed elsewhere in colonial Africa, the local Mission schools mostly emphasized domestic science training for girls (Mianda, 2002: 147; Gaitskell, 2005: 177). The main domestic science premises were located behind Dobson Street School. In this schoolgirls were instructed in needlework, cooking, laundry and housecraft. They were also taught first aid, home nursing and child welfare. These, the European educationists insisted, constituted an essential part of domestic science training in Africa. For the boys, there was a training center maintained under the Public Works Department (PWD). Male students who attended this center came mostly from Bathurst schools to receive instructions in carpentry and mechanical instructions. Third, the policy makers were also in favor of supporting more schools for boys than for girls. For instance, Dr. A. M. McMath in his 1943 report suggested that it is normal for the number of boys in school to be considerably more than the number of girls. He wrote, “there would be . . . two good girls’ primary schools and three boys’ primary schools.”

But there were numerous other problems that deserve special mention. For instance, the larger issue that worsened the shape of the education system in the 1930s and 1940s was the economic depression. During this time, the educational system in Bathurst was plagued by a widespread unwillingness on the part of young boys and girls to continue their education. Only a few considered enrolling in secondary schools or vocational institutions. Instead, many
boys and girls with elementary education wanted to find employment as clerks, messengers or auxiliary staff in the colonial bureaucracy. Colonial records dating back to this period indicate that children with Standard VII desired to become “black coated” workers. They preferred to leave school as soon as they can read and write in order to obtain employment with the Service Departments or contractors. Many of them worked in Public Works Department occupying the lowest ranks of the civil service.

Prior to 1939 the only educational qualification required for admission to the government service was a pass in Standard VII (a standard below the junior Cambridge certificate), which means children with a Standard VII qualification easily found employment somewhere in the public service. The requirement was even lower in the Police Force. All that was required was that “recruits should have passed Standard V.” There was little inducement for the youths to undergo practical or technical training or continue on to secondary schools. Besides, conditions of employment in the clerical services of government and of the commercial firms was comparably better than those offered in the informal sector, particularly in the craft industry. The Blackburne report mentioned that government clerks and auxiliary staff were better paid than those worked as artisans. For example, in the Public Utilities Department, the African clerks of works were paid £160 per annum. Laborers employed by mercantile firms, were also paid on a monthly rate ranging from 30/- to 36/-. These laborers also received 45 lb of rice monthly. This was comparatively more attractive than the rates of pay for artisans such as carpenters, blacksmiths, masons and porters. The latter’s pay rates ranged from 2/6 to 6/- a day (8 hours). This had created a situation whereby a good number of the youths with little encouragement to undergo practical or technical training. Employment in the clerical sector was therefore preferred than other types of low-paying jobs. With a job the public service, these children’s income could contribute to feeding and taking care of extended families.

Parents rarely opposed their children obtaining clerical employment or other lesser prestigious jobs. Many them may have complied with their children’s decision to dropout of school and enter the colonial civil service simply because of what that could mean for the family’s income. Now with jobs, children and dependents could surrender part of their income to support the extended family. Furthermore, because of the difficulties posed by the economic depression –higher taxes and food prices – parents were probably more reluctant to send their children to secondary schools, which required higher school fees. Hence, this explains the higher dropout rate.

As a response, in 1939 government raised the qualification of employment for clerks to Junior Cambridge certificate. With the new regulation children were required to spend additional one or two years in school. Government anticipated that the raising of the educational qualification would induce school children to attempt to reach the higher classes. This, however, was not entirely successful. The policy was undermined by the need for government to “fill a number of vacancies with unqualified candidates.” It was forced to appoint these “drop-outs” on “a temporary basis.” The goal was to curb the temptation for
children to leave school at an early age. Furthermore, it appears that this was possible because there was no rigid age limit for admission to the public service. Thus, children as young as twelve and fifteen were able to find employment in the colonial civil service many of them as clerks and messengers.

Conclusion

In sum, the Christian missionaries, especially the Anglican and Methodist, have played a central role in providing education in the British West African colony of the Gambia. For most of the colonial period, the colonial government left education virtually in their hands. With very little assistance, missionaries built elementary and secondary schools in not only Bathurst but also in the Protectorate. The Methodist schools founded in Bathurst include the Wesley and Bethel schools in Dobson Street and Stanley Street respectively; the Anglicans run the St. Mary’s School and the Roman Catholic built St. Augustine’s school (for boys only) and St. Joseph’s school for girls. There were only four secondary schools in Bathurst. Two of these schools were for boys and the other two were for girls. The Roman Catholic and Methodist missions maintained both schools. Fewer secondary schools existed in the colony too. As of 1931, the only school run by the government was the Mohammedan school. The government only started to provide some support for the mission schools from the late 1930s. Because of this neglect, the missionaries were overburdened with having to provide education to the growing number of children living in Bathurst.

Despite these challenges, however, the number of schools as well as enrolments continued to grow since the mid-nineteenth century. This continued well into the 1920s. But the historical record seem to show that as crises caused by the Great Economic depression of the 1930s and 1940s spread, and began to touch lives in the Gambia colony, this relatively impressive success in providing education began to disappear. During this period, and given the economic circumstances of the time, children who completed Standard VII had little incentive to pursue secondary school or technical training. Thus, in the colonial city of Bathurst, in this period, there was a close relationship between economic decline, lower enrollment in the post-elementary schools and the desire on the part of boys of school-going age to seek gainful employment in the colonial civil service.

In spite of the poor conditions of service, working in the clerical service appeared to be attractive to these children and their parents. Boys and girls were reluctant to adopt any career other than becoming what chauvinistic colonial authorities often called “black-coated workers.” To become “black-coated” workers meant increased social mobility as one would be able to take a much more active role in making financial contributions to help sustain ones’ family. It placed these children in relatively privileged positions in Bathurst society.

Notes
7 In 1821, the settlement of Bathurst was placed under the authority of a central government in Sierra Leone. But these posed numerous administrative challenges and in 1843 the Gambia colony was separated from Sierra Leone. Twenty-three years later the British government, however, decided for reasons of maximizing cost to merge the Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, and Lagos into one Colony. It was not until 1888 that the Gambia was once more separated from Sierra Leone. During this period, the British controlled only Bathurst, the “Ceded Mile” (settlements located on the westernmost territory on the North bank of the Gambia River) and McCarthy Island, located about 150 miles in the interior. The present boundaries of the Gambia were established by an Anglo-French Convention in 1889. But Britain would not establish formal control over the entire country until 1893. In that same year, it declared the rest of the country as part of the Protectorate.

8 The 1931 census report estimates the national population to 200,000.

9 One of the schools was run by the Anglicans and the remaining four by the Roman Catholics and Wesleyans, each running two schools.


11 The first elementary school started by the British in the Gambia begun in 1826. It was started by the Wesleyan, now Methodist, Mission. By 1860 schools had also been established by the Roman Catholic and Anglican Missions.

12 NRS, Banjul, CSO3/144, 1903

13 Development and Welfare in the Gambia, “The Background,” January 1945

14 Certainly, colonial development programs, not just in schools, reflected a rural-urban disparity. Even though the urban areas experienced unique problems, level of development (and in this case in education) in the Colony and Protectorate was largely uneven.

15 The Anglicans had opened a school in Kristi Kunda in Basse (Upper River Province) and the Roman Catholic ran St. Joseph’s school also in the same town. There was also a government school in Georgetown called Armitage School which was opened in 1927.


17 Dr. A. M. McMath, Report on Infant and Girls’ Education, Sessional Paper No. 4/1943 in Development and Welfare in the Gambia, June 1943, p. 16. Dr. McMath, Lady Education Officer for Gambia and Sierra Leone, was in January 1943 invited by the Governor to visit the Gambia

18 See Gail P Kelly, “When I Become a Fonctionnaire”: School Knowledge in French Colonial Africa, 1918-1938. Occasional Papers Series, Number 11 State Univ. of New York, Buffalo. Comparative Education Center. This is one of a series of papers on comparative education, this report considers curriculum and student life under
colonialism through an examination of school knowledge in French West Africa in the first decades of the twentieth century. The monograph is divided into three parts. Part one describes the educational system of interwar West Africa. It emphasizes school organization, admissions and matriculation policies, the composition of the teaching staff, curriculum, and student enrollment. Part two contains translations from interwar elementary and primary textbooks. Part three is composed of translations from students' class notebooks. Focus is on students' French compositions and, in some cases, teacher corrections. What the notebooks reveal about how students perceive themselves, their school, and their aspirations for themselves once they graduate is evaluated.

19 Another option was for the children to join the Gambia Police Force since this institution only required all recruits to have Standard V (which is lower than the Junior Cambridge certificate). However, the opposition of the literate population of Bathurst prevented educated youths in the Gambia to enter the Force. A major reason for their opposition could have due to the low pay, which was 1/9d per diem per recruit. This compares unfavorably with, for instance, the rate of pay of probationary staff in other departments. But while the parents’ reluctance could have been due to low pay, parents’ perception of police service could also have been part of the problem.


20 Development and Welfare in the Gambia, June 1943; See also Dr. A. M. McMath, Report on Infant and Girls Education, Sessional Paper No. 4/1943 in Development and Welfare in the Gambia, June 1943,
References


