

5 Adopting and Adapting Waldorf Education

Returning to the Roots Through Waldorf Education in Kenya

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Brief History of Education in Kenya

Not much is known about educational systems of precolonial African societies, often referred to as *Traditional African Societies* (TAS). Traditional education in these societies was a holistic and continuous process integrated into every aspect of life. Its goal was to develop individuals who were respectful, integrated, sensitive, and responsive to the needs of their families and communities. Through traditional pedagogy, children learned essential beliefs, morals, skills, and aspirations, becoming productive members of society (Omolewa, 2007; Higgs, 2008). Similarly, in Kenya, information about the history and scope of education before independence is scarce. However, postcolonial records shed light on the educational landscape. *Traditional African Education* (TAE) in Kenya focused on socialisation and enculturation, ensuring the security and continuity of communal and social systems. This informal education system aimed to transmit accumulated wisdom and knowledge across generations, preparing young individuals for their future roles in society (Mosoti, 2011; Wamonje, 1976).

Kenya's educational system has been shaped by complex and dynamic relationships with its political economy, influenced by factors such as colonialism, postcolonialism, and globalisation (Matasci et al., 2020). Precolonial education in Kenya emphasised the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development. Local knowledge and practices were passed down through oral traditions, and skills were developed through apprenticeship within the community (Nikima, 2009). Moral education was integral, teaching values and beliefs through oral traditions and community participation. The precolonial education system in African societies promoted harmonious coexistence with the environment and emphasised communal living. It nurtured individuals as members of a collective, instilling a sense of responsibility for their actions and the well-being of the community. Education was a lifelong process, taking place within families and society, where older individuals acted as teachers. Practical learning and the transfer of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next were central aspects (Kenyatta, 1978).

The formal institutionalisation of education in Kenya can be traced back to the arrival of Europeans. Prior to independence, most schools were controlled by the colonial government and missionaries. The education system was racially divided, with separate systems for Europeans, Indians, and Africans. Industrial education, focused on agriculture and manual services, was emphasised for Africans living in rural areas (Mosoti, 2011; Wamonje, 1976). After independence, the Kenyan government aimed to eliminate poverty, disease, and ignorance through education. Skills development and the replacement of expatriates with indigenous talent were prioritised. Education was seen as the key to wealth creation, self-development, and environmental sustainability (Sessional Paper No. 10, 1965). Kenya adopted a single system of education, the 7-4-2-3 system, consisting of primary, secondary, high school, and university education (Mackatiani et al., 2016).

The colonial education system, which prioritised European values and individual academic development, had a significant impact on traditional education and the construction of moral personhood. It promoted rote memorisation and obedience to authority, stratifying individuals based on their educational qualifications. The modern education system in Kenya continues to be influenced by Western models, emphasising cognitive development and standardised testing. However, critics argue that it neglects the holistic development of individuals and the cultivation of critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Inyega et al., 2021).

Private education has played a significant role in Kenya's education history, with the *Church Missionary Society* establishing the first formal school in 1846. Private education, including individuals, non-governmental organisations, and for-profit groups, expanded with the commitment to *Universal Primary Education and Education for All* goals (Nafula et al., 2007). The expansion of private education can also be attributed to population growth, demands for higher-quality education, and the government's inability to meet parents' diverse needs (Colclough, 1997; Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Tooley, 2019). Kenya has approximately 8,000 private schools, with some following the local curriculum (8-4-4 system) while others use the *General Certificate of Education* from the United Kingdom (Educational International, 2023).

Background on Waldorf in Kenya

Waldorf education is based on Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy teachings and has expanded globally (Uceda, 2015). The first Waldorf school was established in 1919 in Stuttgart, Germany, and since then, it has spread to various countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Israel, Tanzania, Kenya, Australia, Brazil, and China (Stehlik, 2019). While the Waldorf tradition has a long history, its presence in Africa is relatively recent, with South Africa being one of the first countries to adopt it. Teacher training programs in Africa are overseen by the *South African Federation of Waldorf Schools* and

focus on Steiner's teachings, child development, philosophy, and lesson planning (Uceda, 2015). These programs consist of 12 modules conducted over three years, with each module lasting two weeks and attended by practising Waldorf teachers. Training also emphasises personal development, meditation, and commitment to Waldorf principles in the classroom. Until 2018, these trainings were led by South African trainers and rotated among Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. However, they are now based at one of the Kenyan schools and partially led by veteran Kenyan Waldorf teachers. According to the interviewees, 15–30 teachers attend each module. As part of their training, teachers are also expected to “develop a willingness to work on their own meditative life [. . .] and commit to observing the child in all aspects” and to be “accountable to their colleagues and to the public” in upholding and practicing Waldorf education in their classrooms.

Today, there are educational institutions – ranging from preschool to adult education and training concentrated mostly in South Africa but also spreading in East Africa, to Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Madagascar. It is difficult to assess how many Waldorf schools are in Kenya and East Africa today because different private and informal organisations operate them without one official body that everyone recognises. According to the *Wider Movement: Encounters & Expressions* website, for example, which is supposed to concentrate all the schools in Africa, only five schools, four preschools, and ten adult education and training facilities are identified. In practice, however, there are many more. Furthermore, many schools are inspired by Steiner's teachings, informal educational spaces that are based on his teachings, along with many schools that the government does not formally register. Finally, anthroposophy is a philosophy that has teachings and implications for aspects of human life, including medicine, agronomy, and art, and many centres operate as community centres that include education but do not identify as educational centres or a school. Nevertheless, there are fewer than a dozen official primary schools in Kenya, and a few sporadically spread-out schools and early child development centres in other East African countries. But with only 1% of kindergartens and less than 2% of Waldorf schools in the world, the African continent is by far the least represented in terms of the implementation of schools claiming the pedagogical heritage of Rudolf Steiner in the world.

Because of the nature of Steiner's philosophy, which provides a holistic picture of how society is meant to function, the boundaries between different aspects of life are not clear-cut. Meetings and intersections between different aspects are something that Waldorf organisations in Africa also support. For this purpose, the *All Africa Anthroposophical Training* (AAAT), initiated by the *Human Development and Social Competence Organisation*, is organised every year in a different country on the continent and includes the study of anthroposophical medicine, biodynamic farming, ethical business, child development, and Waldorf education. These were led by South African trainers and established Waldorf facilitators from Switzerland and Germany but,

in recent years, have been joined by teachers, NGO and agricultural cooperatives directors, as well as health workers from Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. The purpose of this modular anthroposophic training is “to bring general teaching and development from Anthroposophy to participants from across Africa who have an interest in human development” (AAAT, n.d.). The first such training was initiated in 2018 in Kenya, followed by one in Zimbabwe in 2020, Tanzania in 2021, and Uganda in 2022.

Many African organisations connect the words of Rudolf Steiner with African thought, leadership, and traditions. Thus the main website, which encompasses all the Waldorf initiatives on the continent: *The Wider Movement: Encounters & Expressions* has quotes of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu on its home page¹ to give this movement validity. Different organisations have identified and emphasised these similarities between certain aspects of Ubuntu learning, a word that translates as “shared humanness,” symbolising a philosophy widespread in many parts of Africa (Bangura, 2005) and Rudolf Steiner’s teaching, particularly in South Africa. For example, the *Novalis Ubuntu Institute* in Cape Town in 1984, which provides holistic learning for disadvantaged communities, does this by combining “the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner and the universal spiritual values embraced in the African philosophy of Ubuntu” (Novalis Ubuntu Institute, n.d.).

Discussion of Methodological Approach

Following a brief overview of education in Kenya and the development of Waldorf education in Kenya, we ask how Waldorf education is perceived by Kenyan teachers. How do they regard Waldorf education in relation to pre-colonial education and to modern state education shaped by colonial powers and educational ideals? And, finally, what is their critique of Waldorf education in the local context, and what potential benefits do they believe Kenyan children could reap from Waldorf education? This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Nairobi. Fieldwork was conducted over a total period of three months in 2018. Data collection began from a broader comparative research project focused on the transnationalism of education and on Nairobi’s established, prestigious international schools – research that fleshed out stark contrasts between the schools’ enclaves of privilege and their immediate urban surroundings (Rey et al., 2021; Kagan & Gez, 2021). During data collection for this project,² we saw that Waldorf schools follow a parallel but quite different educational course from other international schools (Bolay & Rey,

1 The Wider Movement (n.d.). The Wider Movement. Encounters & Expressions. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230802162822/www.thewidermovement.org.za/> (memento from 2 August 2023).

2 The project was funded by the *Swiss National Science Foundation*, project number 161231.

2021). Waldorf education is also rooted in international educational networks, the expansion of international curricula, and the enlargement of idealist and pedagogical projects. However, parents' choice to send their children to these schools, the children who attend them, and the ideals at the heart of these schools are very different.

Beyond the designated fieldwork, our findings draw on the authors' combined decades of research in urban Kenya, and one of the authors has experiences working in Waldorf educational frameworks as a teacher and a parent whose children attend these frameworks. In addition to ethnographic school visits, participation in the first AAA training, teacher training sessions, and informal observations, the core of our data collection included 22 semi-structured interviews with teachers and other staff members working in Waldorf schools in East Africa. These interviews focused on teachers' professional biographies and aspirations, their understandings of Waldorf pedagogical approaches, questions regarding internationalism, connections between Waldorf and local cultures, and their assessment of pupils' schooling trajectories. During the data collection period, we visited three Waldorf schools and conducted formal interviews with a total of 22 Waldorf teachers and facilitators, 17 Kenyan teachers and five from Zimbabwe, Uganda, South Africa, and Tanzania. All interviews were between 30 and 80 minutes and recorded, transcribed, and analysed using content-analysis methods and software. As the interviewees were current employees of Waldorf schools, attempts were made to offset potential biases in their narratives, including the isolation of teaching staff from the presence of their superiors and a promise of anonymity. All the names are pseudonymised in the study. A review of Kenyan and international newspaper articles, reports, blog posts, and online interviews with Waldorf founders in sub-Saharan Africa supplemented these interviews.

Adopting Waldorf to Africa

The Waldorf system of education is based on the three philosophical natures of human beings: thinking, feeling, and willing. In the developing child, the three philosophical natures represent the head, the heart, and the hands of the child. Waldorf education envisions improving human society by helping children realise their potential as intelligent and creative whole persons. This approach to education views children as active authors of their own development albeit strongly influenced by natural, active, innate self-righting forces that enhance their growth and learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). To make children active authors of their lives, Waldorf teachers use carefully prepared aesthetically attractive environments that serve as pedagogical tools and provide strong messages about a curriculum that stresses respect for children. In this section, focus is on the structure, pedagogy, and criticisms levelled against Waldorf education.

Structure of Waldorf

The Waldorf curriculum is based on anthroposophy, adopting a holistic approach to learning that brings together subject areas such as art and music, literature, folktale, mythology, rhythmic musical movements, crafts, natural sciences, foreign languages and varied outdoor activities.

Learning is first done by imitation and imaginary play, while later children are encouraged to develop their ‘feeling intelligence’ and finally reaching the ability to develop independent judgement and the ability to seek truth in the world on their own.

(Finser & Torin, 1994, p. 43)

The role of the teacher in Waldorf education is significant in that they are guides and mentors. The teachers are required to create classroom environments where children bring their thinking, feeling, and will. The teachers are meant to encourage the child’s natural sense of wonder, belief in goodness, and love for beauty. Waldorf education hence focuses on creativity, imagination, and arts while placing strong emphasis on the development of moral values and personal responsibility. Dahlin (2017) observes that the Waldorf education philosophy is similar to John Dewey’s idea of “learning by doing,” also referred to as the “active and participatory” mode of learning. It developed in the context of a growing body of reform pedagogies that connected across Europe during the early 20th century (Riondet et al., 2018).

Teachers compare Waldorf education to Indigenous African education, which remains the cornerstone for contemporary education (Nyangaresi, 2022). They exhibit the focus on learning by doing with less emphasis given to intellectual development. Learning is meant to enhance the development of active listening skills, maintenance of interpersonal relationships, access to research materials, as well as the development of reasoning and judgement. Teachers in Waldorf education are trained in child development and philosophy and are given practical guidance in lesson planning consistent with the curriculum that includes practical work and crafts, eurythmy, art, and mythology. They are expected to nurture their own aesthetic abilities and creatively apply appropriate materials and teaching strategies in lessons for aesthetic classrooms and school environment. To be fully effective in teaching the Waldorf curriculum, such teachers would therefore have to be retrained. This was captured in one of the interviews with the teachers who had this to say:

[W]e put two new schools here in Kenya[. . .]. [H]opefully, we feel like now we have put a seed here. Soon we shall grow and our branches will go all over. Because now there’ll [sic] be looking for teachers who can teach children activities, you know, because teachers were used to go in, you teach the material and you are done. But now the teachers are asking themselves, what activities do we do with these children? We are not trained like that.

(Claudette)

This was also reinforced by another teacher who indicated that:

[W]hen they heard about Waldorf education, they went to Waldorf schools and then they went back to Tanzania and thought we want to have an African version of this, you know Europeans are too organized and different so they came to South Africa and that's where I met them and had much to learn and training. We got to Tanzania, and we thought it was over and for a year nothing happened, and then the people who were running the school here because they're all East Africa they all talk to each other, and we didn't have training down there, and I said let's bring the training here and restart it, it was in 1999, and we've been there ever since.

(Jack)

Retraining teachers therefore helped update the teachers' skills to match the requirements of Waldorf schools. With retraining, the teachers are more likely to have increased efficiency and therefore become more adaptable, thus increasing their job satisfaction and morale.

Local Culture and Waldorf

Mosoti observes that Ubuntu, a concept and philosophy that underpins many African societies, including Kenya, is based on the belief that a human being is a human being through the otherness of other human beings: "I am because others are and because others are I am" (Mosoti, 2011). Although every individual is born human, the formation of humanness that espouses the philosophy of Ubuntu is achieved through the process of socialisation. Within a community, one is therefore nurtured into becoming mature and responsible by embracing the values, norms, and community principles. This nurturing is replicated in almost all African cultures. Ubuntu and Waldorf education are both philosophical concepts that offer a unique perspective on human relationships and personal growth. As philosophical concepts, they are complementary in the sense that they both emphasise relationships as in Ubuntu; relationships with others are seen as essential for persons to truly become themselves, while in Waldorf education, the relationship between the teacher and the student is seen as central to the learning process (Dahlin, 2017). They both adopt the holistic approach to learning: Ubuntu considers the well-being of the person as a reflection of the community as a whole, and Waldorf education equally considers the development of the whole person in the context of the community. Finally, both place strong emphasis on creative expression and the importance of imagination in personal growth and development (Dolamo, 2013).

The local Kenyan culture, like other African cultures with a strong base in Ubuntu, is rich in education and training and is founded on oral rather than written tradition. For a long time, oral tradition was taught in such a way that children were encouraged to use language creatively and effectively

(Mosoti, 2011). Dolamo (2013) observes that proverbs, riddles, and sayings have been the modes of communication in learning within the local cultures. Such communication provided succinct, easily remembered outlines of important ideas and experiences that were part of shared cultural community knowledge.

Through proverbs, riddles, sayings, and songs, children would be taught about justice, right governance, good neighbourliness, collective action, freedom, sharing, servitude, and civility. In all these, the main concern was moulding the child's character. Moral qualities such as sociability, integrity, honesty, courage, solidarity, endurance, ethics, and honour were demanded, observed, and endorsed (Moumouni, 1968).

From the interviews with the teachers, Waldorf education seems to share similar principles of learning with the indigenous local cultures. This is what the interviewees had to say:

I believe that the kind of indication that we had, back in the days knew when our parents were still going to school in very much like Waldorf education, very, very much. Things only changed much later. [. . .] And so I believe that the country needs people who have been taught, like, as a country, but if you look at, say, our traditional cultures, you know, we try and teach in that way, when we use stories and arts.

(Naomi)

This can also be illustrated through storytelling:

A long time ago, children would help out with activities at home. And then a time would come when they would all sit around, and maybe the grandmother, or the grandfather, and then he would tell stories to the children, stories about their culture, you know, he would educate the children on their cultural stories, and they would know them and they [stories] would not die with them.

(Mumbi)

Waldorf schools are known to promote life-long learning, and parents and children who have gone through the system end up forming a community of like-minded people with the same habits and routines. Both parents and children learn through the children's experiences including what they observe. The end result is expected to be children who are more confident, self-motivated, and able to think critically (Stehlik, 2019).

Pedagogy of Waldorf Education

As an alternative educational approach, the Waldorf system of learning has a pedagogy that is more focused on arts and aesthetics than on intellectual development, and children are exposed to numerous games that involve gross

motor movement as well as manual and artistic work like painting, modelling with clay, making toys, singing with rhythmical movements, reciting poetry, and organisation. In the first cycle, Waldorf educators believe that children's life forces are focused on physical development and therefore learn through play and imitation (de Souza, 2012). In the second cycle, teachers focus on developing feelings and imagination to scaffold the emotional development important for future social relationships. Storytelling is seen as an important strategy in emotional development. Through stories, children are helped to create images that will naturally be memorable to them. In both the first and second cycles, eurythmy, physical education, handwork, and woodwork are encouraged. Eurythmy is meant to connect body and soul and a powerful means of expressing oneself artistically. This has been illustrated through the interviews with participants:

I teach lucrative stories. Yeah, but in terms of like pedagogy, like arts it is not all about the curriculum that is in Kenya now even to the Waldorf now because they're trying and it is their effort to make sure that this Waldorf is reaching everybody so if they continue to practice like the Kenyan culture it will hinder them to reach other people to know about Waldorf and they have to do what Steiner said so they have to implement – exactly what Steiner said – local we want to grow and become a big Waldorf school.

(Lewis)

Role-play can also be used in this cycle as illustrated through acting out Biblical stories:

There's a time we did Mary and Joseph, during Christmas, there was a time we did the Noah's Ark, and I was Noah's wife and then during Mary and Joseph I was Mary. And then [chuckles] and there was always so much fun. Then we did [. . .] which other play did we do? that was so important. We did also an Egyptian thing, we did an Egyptian play which was [. . .] I don't remember what I was, but we did some Egyptian play. And I think I was the wife of Cyrus or something.

(Beatrice)

In the third cycle, teachers' focus is on the development of independent intellectual abilities alongside the ability to examine the abstract world with discernment, judgement, and critical thinking, providing children with some autonomy over their education. It is assumed that by the time students are in this stage, their hearts and bodies are connected, and they can be trained in a more logical and structured fashion. With the help of mentorship, learners are expected to reach their full potential and hone their specialised talents and skills.

Critique towards State Schools: Waldorf Education as an Expression of Precolonial Nostalgia

According to the *Directory of Steiner-Waldorf Schools, Kindergartens and Teacher Education Centers Worldwide 2022*, Kenya has three Waldorf schools and five kindergartens, the latter being members of the *International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education* (IAWECE). It is one of only four countries in sub-Saharan Africa whose Waldorf schools are mentioned in this list, with 23 schools and 22 kindergartens on the continent. Only South Africa has more schools in sub-Saharan Africa (14 kindergartens and 16 Waldorf schools), which can probably be explained by the large German immigration in the late 19th century (Viaud, 2017). Interestingly, the other countries with Waldorf schools, Kenya – Namibia, and Tanzania – were once German colonies or protectorates.

This fact underscores the relevance of the colonial historical context, which is also relevant to the expansion of other alternative pedagogies in sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, by contrasting the case of two prominent French and German pedagogical reformers of the early 20th century, namely the Frenchman Célestin Freinet and the German Rudolf Steiner, Viaud (2017) observes that the subsequent spread and current implementation of schools that claim to follow this pedagogical trend across sub-Saharan Africa still follow the geography of former colonial empires, with some rare exceptions.

This historical context may seem paradoxical since, for the teachers we interviewed, Waldorf pedagogy is often presented in opposition to the drifts of teaching according to the state educational model, the 8–4–4 curriculum of the Kenyan state education. This curriculum is in turn sometimes perceived

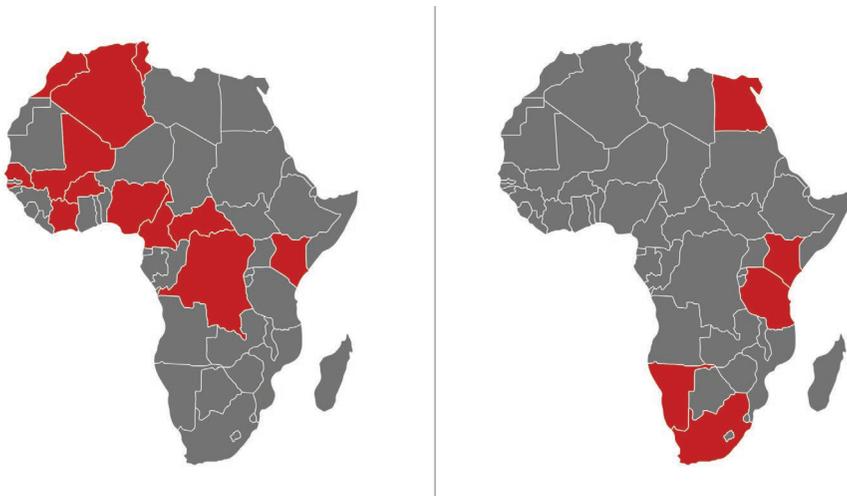


Figure 5.1 Left: Countries with at least one Freinet school. Right: Countries with at least one Waldorf school. (Own illustration after Viaud, 2017, p. 14.)

as a form of extension of an educational system whose foundations were established during the colonial period, as we will discuss later. This raises the question of how a pedagogy of European origin, whose historical implantation in sub-Saharan Africa follows spaces affected by colonisation, can serve as a lever to challenge a mainstream educational model implemented by the Kenyan government.

One of the criticisms of the public school expressed by teachers is the emphasis on cognitive learning at an early age to the detriment of the child's overall development. In contrast, Waldorf education does not emphasise cognitive learning until about age seven. It rather emphasises a holistic approach that includes the child's body and feelings, movement, and experimentation.

At the age of the kindergarten kid, it is a place where we are totally supposed to develop first physically. [. . .] So state schools do it the other way. [. . .] Because I'm thinking they focus in their mind, on the mind first when we're supposed to focus on their body first then they develop. And so the mind was not ready for all these.

(Grace)

I would say, it's totally different from outside there. Because, I would say out there. We taught, but we're teaching the head. We did not mind about their feelings, we do not mind about the doing. It is just the head, head, head, head. And we were teaching facts, just facts, straight away to the fact and that's it.

(Francesca)

More generally, the criticism of the public school extends to the inhumane way in which children are treated, which, according to our interviewee – a teacher in a Waldorf school and a mother – is the result of a profound misunderstanding of child development. This criticism is also indirectly related to the educational methods often favoured in the family sphere, and our interlocutor confided to us that she had been inspired by the Waldorf pedagogical approach to consider the education of her own children in a non-violent manner.

Because there is a lot of mistreatment in state schools and yeah, no feelings, there are no human feelings, you don't feel that the child is a child [. . .]. When I came here. I didn't – I didn't believe [. . .]. No, I didn't believe that. Okay, anything can happen with anything, anything can come out of the children without beating. But I, I really tell people, it's very possible and let the cane be that the last thing I would ever think about. So it's really helped me as a person. And also the Waldorf curriculum really helped me to bring up my children, because I didn't do it to them when they were growing [. . .] and this is the time I see, wow, it was really good and it can really work.

(Grace)

While public education emphasises learning with the primary goal of passing tests in a highly competitive environment, thus earning a top spot in a school environment driven by meritocratic ideals that struggle to live up to their promise, Waldorf education helps children reflect on and build a meaningful life experience that can serve them throughout their lives. The criticism of a system that puts children under pressure without succeeding in giving meaning to their learning comes up repeatedly in the comments of the teachers interviewed.

What we are doing to children in normal education is not what it should be. They get lost. They don't have the . . . the taste of education. They don't have it. Because it's like they are pressurized. they're forced to do this. They have to do this. And sometimes they don't have any reason why they are doing it. It's not making sense to them. [. . .] [Whereas Waldorf education] helps the children to think, yeah, it helps the children to see much more deeper than what it is. It's not just an education of just passing exams. But it's more like that. Yeah. It gives them life experience.

(Nafula)

The role of [. . .] or maybe for us teachers is to develop individuals who are able, out of their own initiative, to impart purpose and direction to their lives. [. . .] [T]he real meaning of education. It's not just to give that knowledge to that child so the child can vomit into you [. . .] but it has to have meaning. When you eat bread, the bread is to [. . .] to work in your body. It's not [. . .] we don't give you bread to vomit it, but it is for you to work in your body. I mean for the education to have meaning in your life. [. . .] [Most teachers think] [y]ou have to get there with a cane. And you know when you get there with a cane you are supposed to inflict fear.

(Bertrand)

In contrast, the pedagogical approach of Waldorf schools insists on the need to cultivate the child's aspirations and not to force him or her to do things that he or she does not want to do. Thus the role of the teacher is to accompany the child in his or her learning process at a pace and in ways that are unique to the child.

The child is the one who helps, yes, the teacher to know what to teach. So with Waldorf, the child is nurtured in many things. The child is not forced to do what it does not want. It is his will, to have a passion for what he/she wants. We don't demand a lot from the child. That's why there's no test to gauge them, we only help the child to understand what is good.

(Rose)

Waldorf teachers also insisted on the difference from mainstream education when it comes to the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the child. One reported from their own experience how he/she was not cared about at school in his/her own childhood, in order to contrast with his/her experience as a teacher as we see in the following quote:

Myself, I went to the normal school. And I could see like, when you come to school, nobody cares about you. So it's you, who comes by the school and you have to do your . . . your classroom work and everything. As long as you haven't done well, or you have done well, nobody's caring about you. Yeah, you just come by the school, do everything and you go home. When you come to the Waldorf, as a teacher, you have to receive a child by reverence, by love, which is very different from . . . from the normal school. And also, I could feel like as long as I'll receive a child, by love, the children [. . .] don't even want to leave the school.

(Fabrice)

Cultivating developmental qualities in children involves following their own pace, their own development, as well as letting them ask their own questions. Yet the act of questioning also represents an important reconfiguration of the teacher–student relationship, particularly with respect to the expression of authority. The educational intention of forming autonomous individuals capable of questioning their teachers or parents thus represents a challenge to the social acceptance of this type of education, as the act of questioning elders may be perceived as a challenge to their statutory position. This reveals the fact that education is not only about education but also about the way in which social relations as a whole are represented:

Okay, because of the foundation, they have been given here, one thing, they don't have fear in themselves. The second thing, they know how to express themselves. under any circumstance, so what we do, the third thing is that they can challenge you even whether you're the mother or the mother about the questions that you are talking about. They won't care whether you are a mother, but if you're doing something which is wrong, and they are not pleased, excuse me they will just be on your face, and actually they tell you, mum can . . . I would like to talk to you.

(Juliette)

Another point of criticism of the Kenyan school system is its subordination to the economy and the productivity imperative, which is directly linked to the pressure to perform. In some cases, teachers have expressed their disagreement with the public school system, which, in their view, treats children

as “machines” or “robots” who can only work from early in the morning to late at night without any breathing time.

Because we are capitalists . . . [in] Kenya and we see the number one as the best person. And that’s what we have been doing; even me, I work very well to get first class degree, if you get 3rd class degree you are not good. So Kenya they have trained people children to work harder . . . so what they do they don’t have tools in them to use but they cram for exams and when they go to real life, practical life, they fail [. . .]. [W] used to help them to be robots.

(Lewis)

In a similar vein, a former Waldorf elementary school student, Claudette, who attended another secondary school – as there is no Waldorf secondary school in Kenya yet – described the contrast in her experiences in these terms:

After I left here, like I went not to a mainstream school, but it just does something similar to this system. It was a private school. [. . .] [I]t was more like a corporate kind of school. So all you were expected to do is perform, perform, perform, perform! So it was sort of, we weren’t doing mainstream learning, but it was more focused on, you have to, because we would set targets like you set your own goals during, like, in the morning, then you know, today I’m going to do math, this amount of math, this amount of English. And if you don’t achieve what you said, now that becomes a problem. So you have to push it to tomorrow’s goals. So if you do that for the entire week, then you won’t achieve the week’s goals because you keep on pushing. So you had to make sure that every day you achieve what you’ve set to do. And you’re human. It won’t happen all the time. But you’re expected to do that all the time. [. . .] There’s no time to breathe. [. . .] I mean, it’s, it was . . . it was . . . it was . . . it was, it was good, it had its good side and it’s bad side, but more negative than positive, but here [at Waldorf] I experienced more positive than negative. [. . .] One thing, I always feel like, our system needs to learn more about the child. It’s not a dumping place. It’s not a place where you can just squeeze knowledge into a child, they need to know that this child needs also breathing space. [. . .] The child is not a machine. The child is a human being. [. . .] I have come to realize that the most important thing is to bring up human beings who are responsible human beings, human beings who understands [sic] the world.

(Claudette)

Several teachers expressed their views on the educational reforms underway at the time of the survey, which aimed to replace the 8–4–4 education system with a competency-based curriculum. Interviewees viewed this change

rather positively, since it would allow a paradigm shift from “passing the test” to the development of competence, even though the implementation of this reform was still pending. Some even considered that the new education curriculum would be closer to the Waldorf education, integrating creativity as one central element of the curriculum. They also saw the reform as a response to the expression of Kenyan parents’ weariness with the limitations of the 8–4–4 system. This would also indicate a change in parents’ attitudes towards educational issues, in which they feel more concerned than in the past.

Finally the Government of Kenya is coming to shape the education curriculum to appear more or less like the Waldorf. I don’t know whether you have heard about it, but the Kenyan curriculum is going through innovation. And they are innovating towards us. They’re bringing creativity and career shaping from a lower age. And they’re bringing mostly creativity which is an element, a big element in Waldorf education.

(Lewis)

For some teachers, the critique of public education is also part of a postcolonial critique and expresses a desire to break with an education system that is widely perceived as a legacy of the colonial era. One of the founders of a Waldorf school in Kenya explained that the education system inherited by Kenyans was designed to prepare collaborators for subaltern positions in the colonial administration. According to him, independence did not fundamentally transform this perspective but rather extended this approach throughout the education system.

The British colonizers, when they brought their education, it also had an English perspective. And you find that the Africans were not taught to [. . .] work in many big companies. They are just to be service providers: make sure that you know arithmetic, you’re able to speak in English [. . .]. So, the basic numeracy and literacy. But when Moi, the second president of Kenya came, he did establish so many commissions. [. . .] But these Commissions kept on saying that education should be approached this way. [. . .] And [he] just went ahead and said we are going to do this. And he adopted the 8–4–4 system of education.

(Lawrence)

The perception of a lost society, somewhat idealised, which would represent the true Kenyan society, faithful to tradition, seems to feed a feeling of nostalgia for a precolonial past that should be revived.

Yeah because what I was telling you about is already broken [. . .]. [W]hat we were talking about our tradition it is no longer there and my neighbour does not bother about me, my neighbour who is supposed

to be my uncle doesn't bother about me[. E]ven if he bothers my father will be serious [and] take him to court but again that my uncle if he finds me doing something wrong he will punish me [. . .]

(Fabrice)

The loss of the social bond and the loss of meaning, fed by an ultra-competitive and purposeless educational system, gives way to the possibility of educational alternatives that allow the personal and collective healing of educational damage. This would help restore the self-confidence of children who have suffered greatly from an inadequate educational system.

Healing, so, personal, community level, and then also healing with the land. And so, a lot of what we see, when we work, we do a lot of programs for younger people, for young people not children. And [. . .] the first part of our work is helping them rebuild their sense of who they are and their confidence in themselves. Because the education system has taken it completely, stripped it out of them. Especially the, you know, the poorest schools in Zimbabwe.

(Juliette)

Criticisms of Waldorf Education

Despite the observed growth and success of Steiner's education, Waldorf schooling has received a number of criticisms over the years. First, it has been argued that the Waldorf educational approach is unscientific, often discouraging educational researchers from getting involved in the study of Waldorf schools. Ullrich (1994a) argues that this is because the approach cannot be placed in any established academic field or discipline, including philosophy, sociology, or psychology. As a result, no basic, systematic academic work accounts for the theoretical grounds of Waldorf education in an open, unprejudiced, and impartial way relating to other streams of educational thought and practice. Second, Al Shehab (2022) posits that Steiner advocates for the use of eurythmy, the possibility of connecting body, soul, and mind into a harmonious unity triangle, but others criticise eurythmy as a ritual act, a quasi-religious practice that has no positive health benefit and that may instead affect the psycho-emotional sphere of one's personality. Third, Stehlik (2019) observes that the Waldorf educational system excessively influences children with esoteric dogma. Similar issues have also troubled some of the local Kenyan teachers who shared their unease because of the merging of the spiritual and the educational, the personal and the professional. For example, Jack says:

The [Waldorf] committee said, 'I think people don't understand well about these 12 senses.' So they had a special workshop for three days for 12 senses. But I noticed that some other teachers don't take it seriously

[. . .]. And even though Waldorf doesn't force anybody they really explained that it is up to you [. . .]. The spiritual side distances – Some people accept it but not fully. Some . . . they start and grow gradually and then they say yes, but some of them say, 'I will work in this way.' So also this helps make people sometimes not take it seriously. I didn't have this questioning because I was fresh from college – others have a lot of experience with other philosophies from the other side of education and questioned it more.

As we can see from Jack's perspective, the spiritual aspects of Waldorf and the expectation for teachers to work on their self-development – meaning their spiritual self and learning of anthroposophy – made many teachers uncomfortable. Furthermore, the reputation of Waldorf in Kenya also makes many of the teachers and parents in Kenya wary and makes the ideas seem foreign, especially because of its unconventional ceremonies that are often misinterpreted as devil worship. For example, Michael shares:

The ideas seem very strange for many Kenyans. Very strange indeed. At the extremes of it . . . whenever you just google about Rudolf Steiner anthroposophy what comes out on the internet, it is not much about education, but . . . ahm . . . but other stuff about sexuality, cultism, and occult science and all that. But the extreme did happen when we had some, something like devil worship in [Kenyan] schools sometimes back and the Education Department in Kenya had to research in different schools and our school was one of them. And they came and they took photos when the director was doing children service, and they thought it was a bit strange . . . and then it was in the newspaper . . . Devil worshipping in Schools . . . But you also get to understand Kenya's a very Christian country. So they come and tell me to leave the culture, what you're doing is not right. Because those are demons you are worshipping. So this is the true God, and that God . . . it was very much because of that narrow understanding to Christianity, and maybe spiritual things. And to what was happening about devil worshipping . . . Ah . . . and things of the sort. So it kind of tainted the school.

Although one of the main characteristics of Waldorf education is that the curriculum is supposed to be delivered in the cultural, geographical, and political contexts of the school, the spiritual and ceremonial aspects, which are at the basis of Waldorf education, can often create suspicion and cause alarm for both teachers and parents in the local context. Furthermore, sometimes the local regulations, requirements, and legislations may conflict with Waldorf principles; for example, the age at which children begin school, the use of standardised tests, secularism, and the emphasis on numeracy and literacy (Stehlik, 2019). The fact that children are not introduced to regular schoolwork that involves reading and writing until they

are 7 years old is a cause of concern to many parents. Parents feel that such intentional delay in intellectual development and failure to expose children to the world of technology may disadvantage them in the modern world of technology and Information Communication Technology (ICT). Besides, the concept of looping (the same caregiver teaching the class for more than two consecutive years), which is central in Waldorf education, cannot be practiced today, where teachers live in a fast-paced and career-shifting modern world. This gap between Waldorf philosophy and the reality in which children live in the 21st century causes many Kenyan upper-class parents to feel concerned about the ability of Waldorf education to prepare their children for their futures.

Is Waldorf a (Re)Invention and (Re)Negotiation of Precolonial Education Systems?

We have already raised this question: how does a pedagogy of European origin, whose historical implantation in sub-Saharan Africa, follow spaces affected by colonisation and empower teachers to challenge a mainstream educational model implemented by the Kenyan government and its colonial legacy? Overall, the practical pedagogy of Rudolf Steiner kindergartens and schools resembles the initiatives of the new education movement that are contemporary to it (Riondet et al., 2018). What distinguishes Waldorf pedagogy from other institutions of this movement is the emphasis it places on systematisation and spatial, temporal, and conceptual ritualisation of educational and pedagogical practice. In contrast to the largely demythologised world of public education, Waldorf pedagogy emphasises the cultural dimension that is at once aesthetic, moral, and ritualistic. This orientation of Steiner's pedagogy flows directly from the anti-modernist world-view that characterises anthroposophy (Ullrich, 1994b). In this sense, Waldorf pedagogy allows teachers to connect to a global (but Western-rooted) critique of the modernist world-view that has fuelled both imperial endeavours and the development of modern educational systems.

The Waldorf educational system is based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, who believed that the purpose of education was to develop the whole person, including the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects. The Waldorf system emphasises the importance of creativity, imagination, and the arts in education, and it places a strong emphasis on the development of moral values and personal responsibility (Stehlik, 2019; Petrash, 2002). The precolonial education system, just like Waldorf, had a strong emphasis in holistic learning and development of moral values and personal responsibility. Both education systems also emphasise the importance of individuals making their own choices and taking responsibility for their actions. This enhances creativity and independent thinking, which promotes autonomy. In addition, pedagogically, both put more premium on

storytelling and other forms of oral communication, which are closely connected to the culture and traditions of the people.

Colonial education system has also informed the adoption of the Waldorf system in Kenya. Colonial education systems were designed to suppress the culture and knowledge of colonised peoples, and the standard mainstream educational system has recently gained more and more criticism from Kenyan parents. They argue that the system is limited because it focuses exclusively on cognitive development and standardised testing, which is not conducive to the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Additionally, this system does not develop a whole person emotionally, physically, and spiritually and does not recognise the importance of self-expression and autonomy, which is seen as critical for contemporary problem-solving. Having recognised the limitations of the mainstream education system, parents have sought out alternative education systems that prioritise the holistic development of the whole person (Akala, 2021). The Waldorf system, with its emphasis on creativity, imagination, and autonomy, has been seen as a viable alternative to the traditional Western-style education system. Although Waldorf education also has colonial origins and is also brought in by European “agents,” Kenyan parents and teachers emphasise the similarities between Waldorf education and “traditional” education and values (such as Ubuntu). Like precolonial education systems in Kenya, they argue that Waldorf embraces holistic education, which promotes autonomy and self-expression through the emphasis on creativity and the arts and is based on the oral tradition, where knowledge and skills were passed down from generation to generation through storytelling and other forms of spoken communication. Furthermore, the Waldorf system has been positioned as an alternative education system that promotes the preservation of culture and knowledge of the Kenyan people, helping recreate and preserve local cultural heritages and traditions through holistic education that relies on storytelling, crafts, and rhythm.

At the same time, many Kenyan teachers are suspicious of anthropology because of its spiritual basis, which is viewed as anti-Christian, and this has hurt the reputation of Waldorf schools in the local context. Furthermore, the delay in learning literacy and numeracy till the age of seven and the absence of examinations and learning through the arts and storytelling are difficult for many Kenyan parents to accept as they are worried that Waldorf does not prepare their children for the future. On the one hand, other parents understand that creativity and critical thinking are necessary to thrive in the 21st century and appreciate the skills that Waldorf education can provide to their children. On the other hand, the neoliberal context and striving for excellence – especially prominent among the upper-middle class of Kenyan parents who send their children to Waldorf – make it difficult for them to fully embrace this educational and spiritual world-view.

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