

**THE ROLE OF SUNDAY SCHOOLS IN CHRISTIAN SOCIALISATION  
OF CHILDREN IN AFRICA: A CASE STUDY OF AFRICA INLAND  
CHURCH IN KENYA**

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**Abstract**

Since the advent of modern changes in Africa, the African society just like other global societies has been beset with a myriad of moral challenges such as corruption, sexual abuse and immorality, nepotism, theft, drug abuse, violence and lack of positive work ethic. The traditional institutions which used to instill discipline, character, purpose of human life and social co-existence have been undermined and rendered ineffective. This paper contends that Sunday Schools which were founded by Robert Raikes in the eighteenth century can be adapted to religiously socialise children and the youth in Africa. Since Sunday Schools were introduced in Africa from nineteenth century they have been accepted and adopted in most Christian denominations in Africa. Research for the paper was conducted in Africa inland Church Machakos in Kenya where questionnaires were administered to both teachers and officials of Christian education department. Key informants who included Sunday school superintendents and leaders of district church councils were personally interviewed. Participant observation was conducted in eight selected churches. The study found out that Sunday schools lacked basic facilities such as class rooms, reading materials and adequately trained teachers. It was also found that Sunday schools have been neglected by church leaders. The study recommends that improved and well equipped Sunday schools would be attractive and effective in religiously educating African children and youth hence positively influencing them and enhancing their quality of life.

**Keywords:** Sunday schools, Church, indigenous education, Mass media, Christian education

**Introduction**

Since the nineteenth century, African societies have gone through drastic changes which have undermined traditional African institutions. The contemporary African society is reeling under tremendous challenges. In the African traditional society, there were institutions which socialised Africans so that members of the society could play their rightful roles. The colonial governments and the new religions they introduced brought new institutions which were aimed at replacing the traditional African institutions. Some of these institutions have not satisfactorily taken the place of the African institutions. The result of this has been the emergence of social problems and other challenges.

The greatest challenge facing many African societies is moral or ethical. In many African societies there is corruption, nepotism, greed and other acts of irresponsibility. These moral issues point to lack of adequate socialisation on moral issues. There is also lack of virtues such as integrity, hard work, unity, social care, tolerance and co-existence. Individuals especially the youth are exposed to western mass media which instead of inculcating moral values is driven by commercial interests. The mass media in Africa has promoted violence, greed, brutality, individualism and sexual immorality<sup>1</sup>. Some materials broadcasted by the mass media are imported from western societies.<sup>2</sup> The contents of these materials have little relevance to African cultures.

A good number of African youth have been attracted to destructive practices such as alcoholism and drug abuse and sexual promiscuity. When the youth watch T.V. and listen to FM radio programmes they are erroneously led to engage in immoral practices.<sup>3</sup> This has seriously affected productivity and responsibility.

Due to the influence from western media, institutions such as marriage which guaranteed stability and continuity have been undermined. Families in contemporary Africa are not as cohesive as those in the traditional African societies. In some instances due to divorce and death of spouses there are incidents of single mothers. This has created a vicious cycle where children raised by single parents are ending up also becoming single parents.

Rites of passage and especially circumcision ceremonies were pivotal in instilling discipline and responsibility in African youth. They acted as vehicles of transmitting African values and passing them on to coming generations. The rites of passage inspired the young people and provided them with role models. The young people were instilled with creativity and positive attitude. For example, among the Maasai becoming a Moran was something every young Maasai aspired to become. The rites of passage also acted as a source of positive influence. The elders interacted with the young and the latter learnt a lot from the former.

This paper argues that African societies should improve on some of the newly introduced institutions and make them vehicles of transmitting African values and virtues. The paper analyses the introduction and role of Sunday schools in contemporary Africa society. Field researches done on Sunday schools in Africa Inland Church in Kenya - Machakos County in 1989 and 2013 form the bases of the argument.<sup>4</sup> From the findings of these studies it is argued that improved and well equipped Sunday schools can positively influence young people, hence enhancing quality of life among African peoples.

The paper traces the origins of Sunday schools in Britain and explains how they were introduced in Africa. The current status of Sunday schools are analysed using A.I.C in Kenya as a case study.

### **Origin of Sunday Schools in Africa**

A concise Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Terms defines Sunday school as: “A school, mainly for children and young people, held on Sundays for instruction in the Bible and the teaching of the Church.”<sup>5</sup> Sunday school programme was founded by Robert Raikes in 1780 in Gloucester in Britain.<sup>6</sup> Raikes who was a publisher of Gloucester Journal started Sunday schools to meet a definite social need. He intended to provide education to children who had no access to it. Due to the Industrial Revolution which had occurred in Britain, most men, women and children were employed to work in industries. Due to busy schedules there was little time for parents to give their children either educational skills or moral instructions. After working in factories for six days, on Sundays the children roamed the streets to pass time. As they idled in the streets, they got involved in evil activities such as petty stealing, street fights, smoking and sexual promiscuity. Both the society and Church did not give these children an opportunity to be positively socialised to lead moral upright lives.

Due to his philanthropic concern Robert Raikes saw it fit to make a contribution to the lives of children who were socially neglected. It is important to note that during this time formal education in England was the preserve of the rich. Children from poor families had no opportunity to acquire educational skills. On such working children, Benson writes:

Working long hours as apprentices during the week and being deprived of any intellectual or moral interest, when Sunday came they ran riot upon the streets.<sup>7</sup>

In the Sunday schools started by Robert Raikes there was reading, spelling, worship, study of the Bible and catechism.<sup>8</sup> After the first Sunday schools attracted many children Robert Raikes through the use of his Gloucester journal publicised them. It was the publicity that made the schools acquire the name Sunday schools because they were held on Sundays. This humble beginning marked the origin of an institution which was to transform the realm of Christian education for many years to come.

The first Sunday schools were aimed at specific groups of children, the working illiterate ones. Later when formal education became accessible to children of all backgrounds the focus of Sunday schools shifted to providing Christian religious instructions. Therefore instead of Sunday schools being used to provide both religious and elementary education to the children of the poor, they were used to provide Christian education to children from all social backgrounds.

Sunday schools were introduced in Africa by western Christian missionaries. In Europe and United States of America where the missionaries came from Sunday schools had become a part of Church programmes. The core business of missionaries in Africa was the conversion of Africans into Christianity. Therefore, wherever they went they introduced Sunday schools as

vehicles of gaining more followers. In contrast to Britain and U.S.A where Sunday schools were initially used to equip children with literacy skills, in Africa from the beginning Sunday schools were used to instruct children in the “word of God” and whenever possible to convert them into Christianity. Some missionaries were convinced that to convert children was easier than to convert adults.<sup>9</sup> Adult Africans, by the time the missionaries wanted to convert them had already acquired African religious beliefs and practices. Some of them, had already made lifelong commitments such as marrying several wives and forming social habits which were contrary to Christian teachings. The children were considered fresh and less influenced by African culture.

The first missionary Sunday schools were organised in communities where at least some Africans had been converted to Christianity. For example, at all mission stations Sunday school classes were conducted. In the first Sunday school classes children sang Christian songs and were taught lessons extracted from the Bible.<sup>10</sup> The people who attended were mainly children. Due to curiosity some newly converted grown-ups attended. The first Sunday school teachers were the wives of the missionaries.

To entice more children to attend Sunday schools the missionaries gave presents such as clothes, sugar and sweets.<sup>11</sup> The effort of opening Sunday schools in unevangelised areas paid dividends because initially Sunday school attracted children but eventually the parents were converted. In many parts of Africa, the opening of a new Church congregation is preceded by a Sunday school.

Sunday schools have become a significant part of the Church in Africa. In many denominations in Africa Sunday schools have been used to provide Christian religious education. In a study conducted in A.I.C Kenya, it was found out that all local Churches conducted Sunday schools mainly for children and youth.<sup>12</sup> Through Sunday schools children have been able to acquire knowledge on Christianity, their denomination and life in general. Sunday schools have become the most significant vehicle of socialising children religiously. In another study conducted in 2013 it was found out that Sunday Schools in Machakos County in Kenya provide Christian nurture.<sup>13</sup>

### **Objectives of Sunday Schools in Christian Education**

Sunday schools have been adopted in most Church denominations in Africa. For example, in a research which was conducted on Sunday schools in Africa Inland Church Kenya it was discovered that all local Churches have Sunday schools.<sup>14</sup> Sunday schools have become the basic religious educational avenue in Africa. Since Sunday schools are widely accepted and spread in Africa, they can be used as carriers of African values and culture.

In the research conducted in A.I.C., it was found out that Sunday schools are mandated with four main objectives.<sup>15</sup> The first objective is to provide Bible teaching. The long term intention of Sunday school is to bring Bible teachings to

people of all ages in a community. In America and Britain, Sunday schools have been turned into Church schools which organise Bible studies for all members of the Church.

In A.I.C Kenya, Sunday schools are conducted for children and young people of ages between three years and twenty one years. The Bible teachings given are intended to train the current generation for Christ. It is also supposed to be conducted in different ways for different age groups. Children are supposed to be grouped according to their ages and taught by trained teachers who understand their feelings and interests.

The second objective is to bring children to Christ. Sunday schools are intended to provide an atmosphere in which individuals will come to accept Christ as their personal saviour.<sup>16</sup> Sunday schools are supposed to familiarise students with Christian teachings. A.I.C being an evangelical Church aims foremost at evangelising children and eventually leading them to accept Christ as their personal savior.

It was found out that the third objective of Sunday schools in A.I.C is to help in preparing children for Church membership. Sunday school is a training ground for Church members from children. After children are converted they are taught the main teachings of the Church. The lessons of Sunday school are prepared in such a way that they emphasise the main Christian doctrines and practices which A.I.C. Kenya shares with other protestant churches. Through such lessons, children are prepared for eventual full Church membership which is achieved after one is baptised. Sunday schools are used by many Churches as nurseries through which new Church members are recruited and nurtured.

The fourth objective of Sunday schools is to relate the Bible to daily life. The stories found in the Bible took place many centuries back and also concern people and cultures that are unfamiliar to children in Africa. Sunday school aims at making children understand the meaning of the stories and happenings in the Bible by relating them to African experiences. After relating the stories to daily life, the teacher is supposed to show the students how to behave when confronted by similar situations.

### **A Critical Evaluation of Sunday Schools in Africa**

Before embarking on evaluating Sunday schools' role in Christian socialisation of children and young peoples of Africa, it should be noted that Sunday schools are universally manifested in all Christian denominations in Africa. Although the missionaries used them as a tool of evangelisation they have become a significant feature of African Christianity. They play a crucial role as the foundation of Christian nurture.<sup>17</sup> Many Christians in Africa still remember their attendance of Sunday schools.

Though Sunday schools play a crucial role in the Church in Africa, their attractiveness and effectiveness are hampered by a myriad of challenges and shortcomings. Sunday schools in Africa lack basic facilities such as study rooms,

seats, writing materials, and blackboards, lesson books, teaching aids, registers and stationery. They are in many parts of Africa conducted in the open and with the minimum of the basic requirements.<sup>18</sup> They are conducted by few trained teachers. Since Sunday schools are conducted on a voluntary basis, their success is determined by the willingness of the volunteers. Many a times they are run by untrained personnel. They are poorly supervised for example, in a study that was conducted in A.I.C. Kenya, it was found that pastors and Church elders rarely supervise Sunday schools. The standards of Sunday school vary from one local Church to the other. Though there are well structured channels of management, due to their voluntary nature it is very difficult to maintain same standards in all congregations.

Sunday schools are still popular in both urban and rural areas. In the study conducted in A.I.C Kenya, it was observed that Sunday schools are more popular in rural areas than urban centres. In the rural areas due to lack of infrastructure such as power and leisure facilities, many children still find Sunday schools very attractive. In the urban areas due to mass media and other modern innovations children are attracted to these than Sunday schools.

Many aspects of the curriculum that was initiated by the missionaries are still being used. A well articulated, Sunday school curriculum has the potential of empowering young Africans with knowledge about Christianity, African culture and African situation. Theological education in Africa has not succeeded in equipping Pastors with skills which enable them to bring new ideas in Sunday schools. The curriculum and materials used in Sunday schools need to be redesigned so that they critically address the African perspective. Children in Africa need to be sensitised from early age about the African challenges. There is need for retraining Sunday school teachers so that they may be effective in articulating Sunday school teaching in a way that will stress African identity, the place of the gospel in the African situation and the challenges besetting African societies.

The first objective that is geared towards bringing Bible teaching to children is still relevant. Through the lessons, Bible memory verses and Christian songs children learn the contents of the Bible. Although the approaches used in different Sunday schools may be different, children are provided with Bible teachings. The Bible teachings assist the children to acquire a Christian world view. This world view equips them with values, virtues and experiences.

The second objective of bringing children to Christ is not as significant as it was during the missionary period. Today Christianity has entrenched itself in a significant portion of African population. The missionaries were very keen on conversion because Christianity was largely unknown. Today many of those children who attend Sunday schools come from Christian families. Hence the stress should not be conversion per se. By being Sunday schools pupils at a time when their conscience is in the process of formation, though they may not accept Jesus as their personal saviour a very strong Christian foundation is laid. For

those children and young people who after Sunday school fall off Church participation, the Sunday school teachings they receive remain the only systematic knowledge of Christianity and morality they have. The knowledge helps them in their future lives.

The third objective of relating Bible teachings to daily life is the most significant in contemporary Africa society. Sunday schools are supposed to interpret the meaning of the stories to an African audience. Though this objective is pertinent to making Sunday school teaching relevant, in most cases the teachers are academically and theologically challenged to creatively apply the lessons. There is need to empower the Sunday school teachers with relevant knowledge. Most of those who volunteer to become Sunday school teachers especially in the rural areas only have low levels of academic education.

The fourth objective of Sunday schools is to prepare for Church membership. Through Sunday schools Churches across Africa nurture children to eventually become useful members of the Church and society. After children join Sunday schools they go through several classes. In the various classes children are exposed to a variety of Christian teachings. By the time they stop attending Sunday schools some of them are already full Church members. Former Sunday school teachers join other careers and are drawn into the Church as Church elders. Attendance of Sunday schools motivates African Christians to become Church and society leaders.

Sunday schools have contributed to the expansion and growth of Christianity in Africa. Through Sunday schools Christianity has expanded across the African continent. In the study conducted in A. I.C Kenya, out of the eight Church congregations studied, six were started as Sunday schools.<sup>19</sup>

Through Sunday schools Christianity is spread to non-Christian families. Some parents who are not Christians encourage their children to attend Sunday schools so that they may acquire good qualities. Six of the Pastors who were interviewed said it was after they attended Sunday school that they later convinced their parents to become Christians.<sup>20</sup>

Sunday schools have created leisure opportunities for many children in Africa. Sunday schools keep children occupied for some part of the weekend. Sunday schools offer children of different age groups opportunity to meet and socialise. As they socialise they make friendship relations among themselves. Socialising enables children to practice some of the things they are taught such as loving one another, being truthful and being your brother's or sister's keeper. Through Sunday school lessons, children deepen their understanding of Christianity and morality. Through appropriate application of lessons children learn the right things to be done and the wrong things to be avoided. Sunday school teachers provide children with role models to emulate. Observing teachers and Christians with good behavior helps Sunday school pupils to mould their characters. To have disciplined children is a great treasure to the family and the society at large.

### **Improving Sunday Schools for Effective Children Socialisation**

Due to the challenges contemporary African society is going through it is incumbent upon the Church that Sunday schools are well equipped so that they complement the traditional institutions such as the family in inculcating moral values, promoting peace, justice and co-existence. Improved Sunday schools would be valuable assets to the Church and society.

Sunday schools should be equipped so that they are attractive and effective to all Sunday-school-going pupils. Due to the technological changes contemporary society has gone through, there is need for similar innovations to be reflected in Sunday schools. In some Church denominations not all eligible children attend due to the unattractiveness of some Sunday schools. Modern children would be attracted and retained by the quality of Sunday schools. Children of different age groups have various needs which should be addressed by improved Sunday schools.

Sunday schools, still remain a viable vehicle for transmitting values and attitudes. They have existed for a very long time and have proved to be effective in religiously educating children. In Church and society, awareness of their significance should be created so that all Church members can be fully involved in them.

After having creating awareness the next step would be to re-assess the curricula of Sunday schools. After assessment, new curricula need to be arrived at. In redrafting the new curricula, there is need to prioritise themes such as peace, discipline, hard-work, justice, love, unity and co-existence. Consideration should also be given on whether contemporary society needs an ecumenical curricula. Due to the diversity and pluralism in contemporary society an ecumenical curricula may be the most preferred. The curricula should embrace concerns such as enculturation so that African world view and contexts are incorporated. After the curricula is developed appropriate learning materials should be developed. In the past, some learning materials have not reflected the realities in Africa.

Sunday schools though a significant aspect of the Church have not been given sufficient attention from the top Church leadership. In the study conducted in Sunday schools in A.I.C Machakos County in Kenya the participation of Pastors was revealed as follows:



	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Pastors who are Sunday school teachers	1	12.5
Pastors who occasionally visit Sunday schools	2	25
Pastors who wait to be consulted	5	62.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Peter Mutuku Mumo, "Study of Christian Sunday School Programme"

The above figures show that of the eight Pastors of the eight Sunday schools studied 12.5% of them are Sunday school teachers, 25% of them occasionally visit Sunday schools to advise teachers and encourage pupils while 62.5% of them wait for the Sunday schools leaders to consult them.<sup>21</sup>

Sunday schools are delegated to the lowest echelons of Church leadership. Sunday schools provide the Church with a forum through which it can implement some of its core objectives such as creating a God fearing and just society. A just society does not just happen it is created by devising appropriate programmes. Church leaders should be seen to be in-charge of Sunday schools. Children and youth are greatly encouraged when they see their top Church leadership being part of Sunday schools.

The area of recruiting Sunday school teachers also needs to be addressed. Though teaching in Sunday schools is voluntary, the Church should set basic bench marks to be followed. The Church has a duty to ensure that those who are appointed as Sunday school teachers are mature, God fearing, with basic education, committed and of high moral integrity. Sunday school teachers should be selected from different occupations such as teaching, nursing, social work and even house wives. They should be a mix of young and old men and women, probably of eighteen years of age and above. On the nature of recruitment of Sunday school teachers, H. Lotz comments as follows: "It should be kept in mind that a programme administered on basis of volunteer leadership must always result in great withdrawal and replacements."<sup>22</sup> To have a situation where all the teachers desert at the end of the year although for justifiable reasons is disastrous to continuity in Sunday schools. For continuity each Sunday school should ensure that there is always a skeleton staff that will be introducing new teachers to the Sunday school.

In the selection of Sunday school teachers the Church elders should approach the people they think could make good Sunday school teachers. Those who are approached would feel honoured to be selected out of many to teach in Sunday schools but if not approached they might never volunteer to be Sunday school teachers. After the Sunday school teachers are selected there is need for them to be equipped with appropriate teaching methods. Due to the changing methodologies of impacting knowledge, Sunday school teachers should be trained to be facilitators other than masters of knowledge. Children should be involved in the learning processes. Question posing methodology of teaching should be used to help the pupils learn from the known to the unknown.<sup>23</sup>

Sunday schools should be equipped with basic facilities such as classrooms, learning materials and teaching aids, and stationery. The Church should solicit for assistance from Church members to provide facilities to enhance effective learning. It should also allocate a vote in its budget to cater for Sunday school provisions.

Sunday schools should be extended to other groups in the Church. After completing Sunday school pupils find that there are no other systematic programmes in the Church. In this era of information technology, the Church should devise ways of transmitting Sunday school's lessons on F.M. radio, internet and television. This is a big challenge to the Church but it should move in tandem with innovations and technological breakthroughs of the times. It is only through this that the Church will continue to be relevant and visible in the changing times.

### **Conclusion**

In recent history the African society has witnessed incidents of moral deterioration. Traditional African societies had developed institutions that supplemented each other in socialising individuals so that they become useful and productive members of society. The family has an enormous responsibility of socialising and producing members who cherish peace, discipline, good manners, co-existence and responsibility. Due to various changes African society has gone through, the family as the cradle of justice and peace, is greatly constrained to play its traditional role of creating stability and a just society.

It is imperative that other institutions in modern society be strengthened to compliment the family in this noble responsibility. Sunday schools which were founded in Britain after the industrial revolution have been accepted and adopted in many Church denominations in Africa and need to be adequately equipped to supplement the Church and family in religious socialisation. Sunday schools are conducted for young people from as early as three years and provide weekly lessons which champion Christian virtues. If well-equipped they will go a long way in religiously socialising young people in Africa.

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