

## HANDS-ON ARTICLES

### *Teachers' Voices*

# HISTORY TEACHERS AND THE USE OF HISTORY TEXTBOOKS IN AFRICA – FROM TEXTBOOK TO ‘DESA’: A PERSONAL NARRATIVE OF TEACHING HISTORY IN TANZANIA

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## **Background**

When I was invited to write my own story about history teaching and how I have been interacting with history textbooks, many questions came to my mind. One of these questions is the long standing one: Am I really a history teacher? Although I love teaching and my family and friends thought that I could make a good teacher, I never grew to become a ‘professional’ ‘trained’ teacher. I have never been to a teacher’s college; nevertheless, I have entered into a teaching career on various occasions. The first was immediately after I finished an Advanced Certificate of Secondary Education in 2004 and was employed at Bondeni Secondary School as a History and English teacher for Form one students. The second time was after I finished a masters degree in archaeology and was employed at Stella Maris Mtwara University

College in the Department of History as a lecturer for education students majoring in history. I have therefore been a teacher, teaching history, using history textbooks in teaching, planning, preparation and in the classroom thus I definitely have a story to tell. The second question was about why my story matters. For the first time, I had to reflect on my own history, from my childhood history textbook, *madesa*, a pamphlet for standard seven known as *Jiandae Vyema Kumaliza Elimu ya Msingi*, a pamphlet for Form four and Form six famous as *Nyambari Nyangwine*, notes, exams and results which my father loved to keep. Although I had neither an idea of writing nor archiving this story in any form, for once in a life time, I thought of the significance of such a story of my own practices and experience of learning and teaching history and how my story exposes the challenges and opportunities for the discipline. This is a self-study rather than researching, reporting and generating a series of findings about 'other' teachers, students and schools which I would have loved to do. In presenting this story, some examples are drawn from my own learning experience.

### Using history textbooks in teaching

While teaching at both secondary and university level, I have integrated textbooks on different occasions. In secondary schools, a few available textbooks were in the library, some were owned by the teacher and a few students had their own personal copies. The basic textbook here was *History for Secondary Schools: Book One*. The textbooks were freely available from all these three sources; however, this was a matter for students' personal effort and interest. As a teacher, the main task was to create notes which all the students would copy in the classroom while teaching. When teaching history in a Form one class, I also used my own Form one notes to compare and enrich the notes that I prepared for the students. The topics which are taught in Form one are: sources and importance of history (i.e. meaning and importance of history and sources of historical information); evolution of humankind and technological development (i.e. human evolution, early, middle and new stone age as well as iron age); development of economic activities in pre-colonial Africa (i.e. agriculture, handcraft, industries, mining and trade); development of social and political systems (i.e. kinship of clan organisation, age set system and state organisation). At the secondary level, the emphasis was placed on the meaning, factors, reasons, motives, success or failure, significance and lessons to learn from a particular historical event. The understanding and

narrating of historical events in English is very fundamental in this class. This is because history in primary school is taught in Swahili. In secondary schools and especially Form one, is the first place where the students learn the subject in English. In instances where the teacher was the same and thus used the same notes from previous classes and years, these notes become *madesa*. Students inherited the notes from previous classes and during history periods they would mark the points of emphasis, read the notes or 'dodge' the classes. As a student, I also benefitted from inheritance of notes from my brother and sister who went to the same secondary school as me. By the time I joined the school, almost seven years after my brother, and five years after my sister; their notes were still a prime resource. This was because all of my siblings made it to high school, meaning that their notes were good enough to enable them to pass the national examination. Secondly, the teachers have hardly changed; therefore, they were still using the same notes to teach. Thirdly, the school had only one history teacher teaching four history classes. Because my father was strict, aware of my time table and occasionally inspected my exercise books, it was very difficult for me not to write the teacher's notes in the classroom. I therefore had to copy the notes during the class and only use my siblings' notes to learn topics ahead and have knowledge by the time the teacher reaches such topics. Another reason why I had to copy the notes was the classroom assignments. Before the teacher would mark the assignment, he inspected the notes and marked them as seen. Because I loved participating in history class, I had to write my own notes and do all the assignments for the teacher to mark. Some students used to borrow my siblings' notes for their personal reading as well. Throughout my secondary school learning I had never owned a history textbook; all I had were teacher's notes which I used for both internal and national examination as my reading materials; this was also the case for most of my Form one students.

As part of assessment, the revision questions were provided at the end of the topic, and I marked students' answers personally or used peer marking in the classroom. The limited number of textbooks necessitated that the questions be written on the blackboard for all the students to copy and answer either as a take home assignment or in a few cases as classroom exercises. For the final examination, what was expected from the student was to present the understanding of the question and topic that formulated the question. Teacher's notes which students copied from the blackboard were memorised and reproduced in exams. Although it was not necessary for the students to reiterate what was presented in the textbooks or notes, teachers' notes

remained the only reliable learning materials. As a teacher, I tried to encourage students to think about what they were learning, although I could never get anything back from them that was different from the notes, word for word. To my thinking, this was partly because they were not confident enough in English to depart from the wording, in case they got it wrong; but also because they shared a strong conviction that what they were taught was the right and only thing they should show that they had learned. My personal experience on using notes for writing exams is more or less the same. The disparities between rural and urban areas in terms of access to textbook and *madesa* was also obvious; while in urban areas the learning and teaching materials were accessible while in rural areas they were not. I remember one of my late cousins copied Nyambari Nyangwine *desa* on a textbook when he visited Dar es Salaam (the capital city) for the first time and saw the pamphlet. It was amazing to see all the national examination questions and their appropriate answers in the *desa*; thus what remained was cramming for the exams! Thus, *madesa* have equated history learning with studying for examinations, rather than seeking for knowledge.

At the university, I have taught different courses including History of Tanzania, History of East Africa and Economic History of Tanzania. Unlike in secondary schools, at the university level giving notes is optional and the teacher can choose to give them or not. In both situations, textbooks were then recommended for the students to read and where necessary extracts from the textbooks were made available for the students to make copies and use which then become *madesa*. The extracts might be from those books with a few copies or concerned with important areas for the covered topics. At the university, assessment was in three different forms: textbook-based take-home assignments where students were required to review, revise and discuss different topics either as a group or individuals. These could then be discussed in class as a seminar presentation or submitted for marking. Other forms involved individual tests and examinations. At the university level, assessment involved using books that students had read. The interaction with books in answering questions, giving examples and drawing cases from textbooks was important in assignments and answering questions which was what was expected of the university assignments. For instance, in teaching History of Tanzania (see the course outline in appendix I); the course is divided into five topics including: elucidating how and why present day societies evolved over the last three centuries, the course highlights the major transformations and continuities in the economic, political and social formations of the societies

constituting Tanzania today. It proceeds via a discussion on the origins and consequences of the various forces that have been shaping these societies since (1800), local social dynamics such as lineage and state formation, and external influences, such as cultural intercourse with neighbouring societies, long distance trading and European colonialism. The course also covers struggles for national independence, and the post-colonial situation with sub-topics on the nature of the early postcolonial state, decades of political and economic experimentation 1960s to mid-1980s, and Tanzania in the globalising world of the 1980s and after. The basic readings comprise ten scholarly books published between 1969 and 1999 by authors including Coulson, Iliffe, Kaniki, Kjekshus, Kimambo and Temu, Koponen, and Sheriff. The course is assessed by means of a timed test (20%), a seminar presentation (10%), a written paper (5%), seminar participation (5%), and an exam (60%).

At the university, I have also been involved in the comprehensive examination. This is an oral examination which intends to test the final year students on their different teaching subjects. On this occasion, students are required to come with their own books which they have been using throughout their studies. The reason for bringing their books is that they are provided with a loan each year for books and stationery. Most of the students however, will prefer to copy *madesa* rather than buy textbooks. Thus, asking final year students to bring their books during comprehensive exams requires the students to buy basic textbooks for the subjects they are prepared to teach. To show that they did not only buy the book for the exam but also read them, they are required to cite them while answering the questions. The students are also required to demonstrate their knowledge of topics which use the textbooks they own.

### **Selecting textbooks**

For teachers in secondary schools, choosing textbooks to use is guided by the curriculum. In a few circumstances, a teacher's guide (*kiongozi cha mwalimu*) accompanies the student's textbook to aid in the teaching of the history subject. This is different from the university level where readings are chosen by the course instructors and they may range from textbooks, manuals and monographs to journal articles. The students are also responsible for reading and researching extensively to find books or materials relevant to the course of their study. Given the current widespread use of the internet, during teaching I have chosen to use the same system under which I was trained which is to

use the internet to understand the concepts but never to use sites such as Google and Wikipedia as references/sources. Journal articles available online, online books and other accredited internet materials are accepted. Thus, where internet access is available, teaching and obtaining teaching resources have been improved to overcome the problems of limited textbooks.

I should emphasise, however, that both English and Swahili are official languages in Tanzania. Swahili is used as a language of instruction in primary school and English is only a subject there. In secondary schools and university, English is the language of instruction and Swahili is only a subject. Given the difficulties that face both the teacher and the learner, I use both Swahili and English to explain points to aid comprehension. It is, however, mandatory to answer questions in English during examination, although a few students will tend to mix the two languages in the final exams. At the university level where there is no restriction on books to use, Swahili textbooks are also used by the students although they will write in English in their assignments and exams. One of the Swahili books is *Ufundi Chuma Asilia* written by Bertram Mapunda which is the reference book when teaching the topic of the Iron Age working in Tanzania. Throughout my teaching, especially at the university, I have tried to change my notes frequently. Although I had never provided my own notes to university students, while teaching, I tend to communicate slowly so as to involve students in writing their own notes according to their understanding. Using the blackboard was still necessary for writing words which students considered as new vocabulary or were not sure of the spellings.

## Conclusion

The use of teachers' notes and *madesa* has narrowed the significance of textbooks in teaching and learning history. It has narrowed students' thinking and the notes or *madesa* have been regarded as the only important part of history to know. Students take little or no effort to supplement notes or *madesa* with a textbook even when books were available. With the abundance of internet use, both teachers and students are now able to delve into online resources using mobile phones, USB modems and internet cables most of which are available in both rural and urban areas. This is yet to be done substantially. It is, however, important to use technological advancement not only as a communication medium, but also as a tool for learning and teaching in the contemporary era.