

THE ART OF LIFE
IN SOUTH AFRICA

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PROLOGUE

Handwork

IN 1926, Fred Sithole was a teacher at the Lurani Government School, outside Bulwer in the Union of South Africa's Natal Province. Lurani was one of a few dozen schools that the Natal provincial government ran without the aid of the country's ubiquitous Christian missions. In the years since World War I, Natal's education department had embarked on an ambitious program of school building and curriculum overhaul. The percentage of African students who attended schools was small—only between 7 and 15 percent during the 1920s—but those who were in schools experienced new pedagogical imperatives that spoke of education for the sake of “life,” not just for learning. Such new ideas grew out of decades of debate about the role Africans were to play in South Africa's schools and the colonial economy. These debates would likely have seemed quite abstract from both the teachers' and the students' perspectives. For Sithole and his students, new educational theories boiled down to the real, material fact that children devoted at least an hour of their school day to manual work.¹

In his presentation to his fellow teachers in Bulwer, Sithole noted that some schools did a good deal more, citing one in which “two-thirds of the time is devoted to Manual Work.” He was not suggesting such a dramatic overhaul for Lurani, even if his research indicated that their students would have supported such measures. Like many of his colleagues, Sithole had been educated under the old dispensation, when missionary education had focused on classical instruction—primarily the three Rs, which he referred



Figure Pro.1 Basketry class at Indaleni, date unknown, photographer unknown, with the permission of the Richmond/Byrne District Museum (hereafter cited as Richmond Museum)

to as “school subjects.” But that was then; now, in the mid-1920s, he surveyed his students about whether they preferred to spend their time on school subjects or on manual work. Their response was unequivocal: “I think Manual Work must be given more time,” wrote one. “Between these two, myself I choose Manual Work,” added another, reasoning that school subjects “will not help us much when we are old. Manual Work makes us better people.” Manual work took some of the mystery out of school. Its purposes and outcomes were apparent and translatable to life outside the classroom. “We make the baskets even at home when the teacher is not present,” a student explained. Unlike the alchemy of mathematics, which frequently saw students “fail to make a hard sum,” manual work was accessible to all: to make a basket or a spoon or a piece of furniture, “we only use hands and look with the eyes.”

As Sithole saw it, through manual work schools would, in time, pay real, tangible dividends for both students and their community. Why bother with school subjects when “we have no school-fees and money for

books,” a student asked; rather, “we can make baskets and sell them.” The “subjects cannot give us money,” another added, and Sithole drew the collective conclusion: “All students see that Manual Work will help them to earn their living.” This was a selective survey, to be sure; Sithole was a teacher in favor of manual work over and against schooling’s traditional emphasis on the subjects. Moreover, he published the results of his survey in the *Native Teachers’ Journal*, a publication founded by the recently invigorated provincial department of education, which had emphasized manual work (also known as industrial education or handwork) as part of its post–World War I reforms. Yet even if biased and edited, Sithole’s conclusions spoke eloquently to the unfolding ideology of African education in 1920s South Africa. Education “for life” was for the real world beyond the school. Students were poor, and manual work offered them the chance to make some money. Contemporary evidence suggests that even the small percentage of African youth who went to school spent fewer than five years there. Sithole and others contended that those few years were best spent giving students practical skills for the rest of their lives—which meant reading and writing, to be sure, but also basketry, sewing, and woodworking.²

Sithole’s claims were parochial, limited to his school near Bulwer. Yet consciously or not, he invoked decades of global debate about the position of the black student. From the turn of the twentieth century until the eve of World War II, educational theorists across Africa and elsewhere reevaluated whether the European-derived colonial education system was appropriate to the needs of the African child, as increasing numbers of the latter began to enter schools.³ This continental debate was part of a larger discussion about mass education globally, driven by industrialization and urbanization, among the other epochal shifts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In British colonial Africa, these issues took on a new urgency after World War I, following the evolving needs of the colonial political economy and the growing authority especially of American social scientists and philanthropists who were eager to extend their country’s ideological influence.⁴ Reflecting on the precedent of the post-slavery US South, American theorists taught that education worked best when it promoted social cohesion, not the splintering of the community into “educated” and “not educated” segments. Prevailing social and cultural conditions being what they were across Africa, it was presumptuous

and foolhardy to apply metropolitan educational practices willy-nilly across the empire. Rather, education needed to proceed slowly and practically, just as Booker T. Washington had demonstrated in the United States after emancipation and as Washington's acolytes, both black and white, were attempting to replicate across colonial Africa.

Paul Monroe of Columbia University's Teachers' College called this Washington-derived scheme "adapted education." Monroe had no particular expertise in colonial pedagogy, but he was nevertheless assigned by the US State Department to issue a report on education in colonial Africa in 1919. Monroe's conclusion was simple: African society was at a different stage of development than European society. Monroe believed that although education for Africans should contain "the essential elements of modern civilization and Christian culture," there was nothing more essential than equipping students with "modern methods in industry and agriculture."⁵ Until the 1910s, dominant imperial practice was to import metropolitan teaching to the colonies, "with little or no adaptation or curriculum reform to accommodate local circumstances."⁶ With faith in the potency of European culture, metropolitan educationists and their far-flung missionary networks were cultural imperialists, trampling on African traditions in the name of progress and neglecting what Monroe called the "unique genius" of African societies.⁷ Monroe condemned this. South Africa had been exemplary here, at schools such as Adams College and Lovedale, where those who devised the curriculum learned from the best practices of metropolitan society and foreswore any adaptation to African economic and social circumstances.

The situation changed dramatically during the years bracketing World War I, under the influence of one of adapted education's most strident proponents, the South African and Natal-born Charles Loram. Loram was a graduate of Teachers College, where he had studied with Paul Monroe and completed a PhD on the "education of the South African Native." Upon returning to Natal to serve as the chief inspector of native education in 1918, he quickly ascended to the highest echelons of the native administration. In 1920, he left the Natal Education Department to serve on the Union's Commission of Native Affairs; in 1921, he joined the Phelps-Stokes Commission on its educational survey of the region.⁸ Loram's reputation was built on his efforts in Natal, where he worked assiduously to reshape the province's approach to African education. As

historian of South African education Peter Kallaway explained, Loram had left the United States “deeply wedded” to the adapted education model. The desire of Natal’s African population for schooling and the provincial government’s interest in a more scientific approach gave him a suitable laboratory for his experiments.⁹ It was Loram who organized the Lurani Government School and Loram whose insights and authority provided the context for Fred Sithole’s confident assertion that the best education began with the hands.

Loram had reviewed the education systems of the US South while studying at Teachers College; he had traveled both to Tuskegee and to Hampton, and not surprisingly, he found a worthy model in Washington’s adaptation of the white school form. Washington had done more to advance the Negro than any white American, he claimed, “and so will it be with the Native peoples of South Africa.”¹⁰ Washington had valorized the image of the African American farmer and craftsman, tilling the land and producing useful goods. Loram’s syllabus similarly demanded that manual training take up an increasingly significant proportion of the learning week. “The course in industrial training should have taught him the simpler Native crafts, the useful European art of sewing and the elements of practical agriculture,” Loram contended, “while proving that there is nothing lowering in manual work.”¹¹

Loram’s tenure as chief inspector of native education in Natal was short but evidently long enough to enact much of his program. Within a year, 73 percent of the African schools were doing manual work; by the mid-1920s, that number had risen to 86 percent.¹² Historians have noted his success; more and more, Loram’s tenure in Natal is seen as a rehearsal for the apartheid government’s efforts in favor of “own lines,” or adapted education. Such teleologies aside, the fundamental fact is that over the 1920s, more and more African students entered schools like Sithole’s, there to work with their hands.¹³ Carpentry and woodworking; basketry and sewing by children in schools—this was to be the foundation of a future African society’s economy in their villages and native reserves.

This separate future was, of course, an illusion. White artisans looked jealously at African vocational training. Indeed, previous efforts to promote African industry had foundered because of outspoken white opposition, and it was far from certain that handwork would save Africans “from going up and down the streets looking for jobs.”¹⁴ Even more fundamentally,



Figure Pro.2 Carving tools and carved objects at Grace Dieu Mission, late 1920s, photographer unknown, Historical Papers Research Library, University of the Witwatersrand, File AB750Ga8.36, with the permission of the Anglican Church of South Africa

“adapted education assumed that Africa would continue to consist of exclusively rural societies”—small in scale, cheaply supported by domestic agricultural production—but the 1920s instead saw the dramatic decline of independent African farming and the beginning of a still-ongoing tide of urbanization. Industrial education was premised on the faith that African students could sell the things they made in school, yet by the end of the 1920s—and especially with the onset of the Depression in the 1930s—the market for African industrial work seemed to have dried up.¹⁵

Loram and Sithole’s own department took note of this. In 1929, a regional inspector named Dent surveyed his schools and concluded that the market value of their crafts was uncertain. In fact, “in most cases there is no visible market, and the articles accumulate to become mere lumber,” he informed the provincial authorities. But he did not call for students to stop working with their hands; rather, he suggested that the department cease to emphasize the “market value” of student work “to the exclusion of other aspects of Native crafts.” Dent proposed a shift “in the purpose” of handwork,

away from “inculcating industry to aesthetic appreciation.”¹⁶ If not industry, then why not art? The last was an intriguing idea, and other educationists developed it over the course of the next decades. All the while, African students in South African schools continued to work with their hands—to build, weave, model, and carve—sometimes for an hour per day and sometimes more.