

## **How elites in Africa gains power thanks to “learning center” : case of the Lions Clubs association. The underestimated role of education**

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This paper describes the importance of training for Lions clubs on the African continent. It is the club that organises training to acquire managerial skills and cultural capital associated with good speech and knowledge of dress codes. This can be summarised as the acquisition of economic and political skills that members do not possess from the outset. The study is based on surveys in Benin (2011-2015).

The observations will show that schooling is more important than philanthropic projects in West Africa. The reason is that membership is growing significantly in West Africa, a country like Benin has seen its membership increase from 50 to 100 members per year between 2010 and 2020, from 900 to 1500 members.

Training is essential because it will maintain new members in the clubs, teaching them how to run the clubs well: knowing the rules and administration (accounting: leadership) and performing service missions. "If you don't make projects, the members leave!" say the leaders. Training is essential as the new members help create the African group that will achieve independence with 30,000 members<sup>1</sup>.

The Lions Club is known as an elitist service club from the outside (Connan 2016 Gousset 2004), but on the inside it is all about recruiting and training new members (de Hasque 2017). In 2013, the club reminded me of an academy because I had met new members with poor education. In exchange for their presence and their money, they acquired a social distinction in Bourdieu's way. They receive cultural capital (learning culinary codes, ways of presenting themselves and expressing themselves in public) equivalent to their economic capital. (de Hasque 2020).



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<sup>1</sup> According to the Lions Club rules, a minimum of 40,000 members is required to create a self-sustaining group called "Geographic Area". The number will be reduced exceptionally to 30,000 for the African continent.



Zambia, Lusaka, 2019 – 1<sup>st</sup> Africa Forum, first summit of African branch of Lions Club.

The purpose is to show that knowledge does not only belong to the academic world, held by professors in a school or a university. Knowledge is taught in other places. The teachers are members who transmit to the new members a knowledge from which they will create skills /learning (Barbier 2018).

### 1. History and political issue:

Historically, Lions Club International exist since 1913 and appears in Africa after World War II. First clubs were created and conducted by westerners, but quickly in west Africa especially young black elite was involved in clubs (as I noticed thanks to club archives found in Benin). Nevertheless, the association remains small in Africa, max three club per country (approx. 100 members) excepted in South Africa and Namibia, where membership reached 4,000 in the 90s.

The rise of the Lions Club in West Africa and the need of education is linked to the privatization of the economy. It began in 1990 when the Structural Adjustment Programs liberalized the economy; when civil servants left the capitals and radiated through countries to implement state decentralization programmes, particularly in Benin and Togo (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1998). Some of them, already members, created new clubs attracting founders of small businesses. The clubs become incubators of free enterprise thinking, and as the membership grows the need for coaching is felt. Structure becomes sprawling, deployed over hundreds of kilometers, teaching will be the tool to maintain the clubs growth. It will make the clubs efficient, the members will have sufficient knowledge to organize projects and manage the daily administrative life. As I quoted above "If you don't make projects, the members leave», Abeles about Silicon Valley's charity clubs says the same "philanthropy is cement for collective action" (Abeles 2002).

More recently, in 2000, African Lions Clubs wants to create their own branch call a "Geographic Area". Till Sept 2019 they have been attached to a vast group of countries call "ISAAME" including India South Asia, Africa and Middle East since the origin. To reach the objective they have to recruit 10 000 members more to fit in Lions Clubs rules. They made it easier to enter the club, they abolished the cooptation rule, saying "it's an invitation", I quote a Lions Club Governor. In sept 2019 goal was achieved.

Be a Geographic Area means that African Lions have two seats at the Board of Trustee instead of shared with other ISAAME's countries. This ensures international visibility and stimulates

the most senior members who can hope to reach the highest echelon of the association's international presidency. A title that has never before been awarded to an African.

Be a “Geographic Area” means for the highest ranked members that they were recognized as leaders able to manage the continent on their own and proves that they have enough trained members to organise philanthropic projects. Education becomes political (Kaag, 2018: 2) and strategic. The group of senior African Lions Club leaders officially called “African Steering Committee”, wants to be credible in front of the rest the International Board of Trustee, composed by 34 members.

African Lions shows their abilities, their competences, and wants their voices to be heard as far away as the US, which was difficult when they aren't in charge of their own area. Education is a mode of opposition and resistance of the oppressed (Rancière 1995)

Concretely, education is a way to make clubs more efficient and will help retain members or attract new candidates.

## 2. Education programme : What do you learn?

A basic course mandatory for every new member teaches history and rules of Lions Clubs. After few years, members may apply to several positions, inside your club (president, treasurer, secretary and several "committee) and outside your local club to admin a group of club (a zone), and then a group of zone (a region). They receive leadership skills, to speak in public and conduct meeting, to create powerpoint and get knowledge in accountancy.

They learn how to solve conflict situation, how to respond to embarrassing questions such as : why do we have as members to pay for the fees, the accommodation of the international president in a 5\* hotel...

All of these courses, except the basic, are facultative but have a cost (at least your travel and accomodations cost) are organized during regional or international meetings. Attend to these courses proves that as a volunteer member you're ambitious and wealthy.

Teaching is organized in restaurant, or hotel. The nature of the premises and the short duration of their status as a classroom (a banquet room becomes a seminar room) made me think to learning centre instead of class or academy. The expression “learning center” (literally “centre d'apprentissage”) appeared at the end of the 2000s in England to designate a new type of university library, proposing an enriched offer of services. “(Bibliothèque de France 2015). The term was translated as “augmented library” (Roche 2015). In the case of the Lions Club, the definition of the UCLouvain fits very well: “A space of knowledge extended beyond the shelves,” (...) stimulating places that promote active, collaborative and experimental learning. “(<https://uclouvain.be/fr/bibliotheques/learning-centers.html>, 2020).

## Education programme : What do you earn?

Learning will bring cohesion between members , old and new comers. Thanks to education they'll compete for the best hierarchical advancement which will have an importance on the ethos of African members. The reason is that, after the formation you'll receive a diploma, a medal a certificate, it allows you to move up the ladder, and that 's the biggest preoccupation of each members !

Indirectly, the several education programs transmit and teach social skills that will reinforce social cohesion between members. I distinguish three types of behavioral skills acquired by

members depending on whether they are newcomers, individuals with cultural capital, or older members.

#### Distinction's skills:

The club is a place where one learns a more exclusive behavior such as interest in music, literature, cooking, which gives you access to the ruling class, (Duval & Coulangeon 2013 ). For small local "nouveau riche" merchants who have fortunately invested in the global economy by making bold bets it is not always easy to feel at their ease in front of lawyers and magistrates that are impressive peoples.

These "traders" do not need training in human resources or accounting, they know all these techniques even if they do not apply them in an orthodox way, they will learn "diplomatic skills" : write reports, make presentations in French or English, or convince superiors, attend dinners with official personalities, spending time in boring meetings. The Club gives them the keys to understanding the "world from above".

#### Recognition:

The most important thing members get in a precarious economic environment is recognition, and this applies to both educated members and wealthy newcomers.

They receive a real recognition thanks to rigorous bureaucratic control through monthly and quarterly reports send to the International HQ based in Chicago. All their actions and projects are known to the hierarchy, which evaluates their performance and congratulates them if necessary. According to Roll's analysis of Nigerian civil servants (2014), it is essential for the quality of work that people feel needed and appreciated, and that quality investigations are organized by non-corrupt staff. I draw a comparison with a public administration rather than a company, because the club presents itself as a structure close to the state, a quasi-state, with uniforms and rules, as well as an administration. And in West Africa, members are considered in the public space as official persons, they benefit from the attention of the police, are received by the political authorities, who are sometimes members of a club<sup>2</sup>.

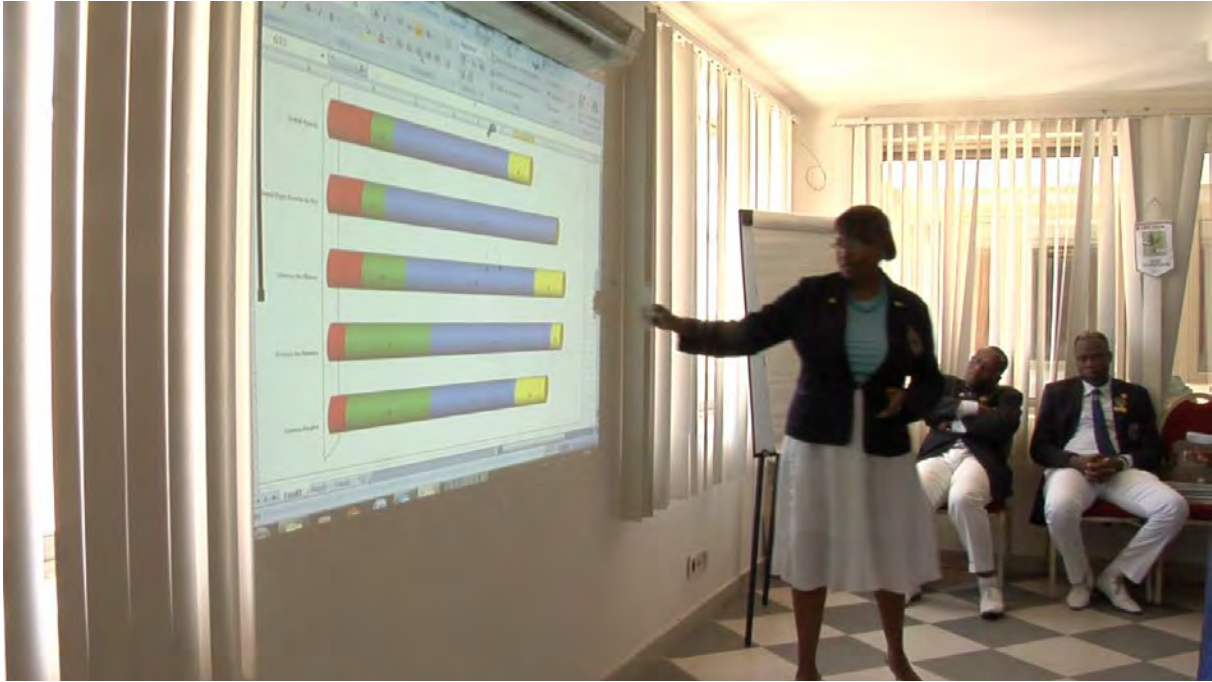
#### A place of reinsertion for the elderly :

For senior members, the Lions Club is an opportunity to regain a central place in society. In Benin, for example, where civil servants are retired at the age of 55, I have met many "old" members who are happy to devote time and money to Lions Club events. In return, the club benefits from their experiences and network to grow.

The club gives new meaning to their lives, creating abilities/responsibilities that some of them had not previously valued as civil servants or junior staff.

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<sup>2</sup> You can see and perceive it, in my film on Beninese Lions Club members shooted and edited during my PhD fieldwork. "The Lions" (a 90-minute documentary) <https://vimeo.com/168629615>.





top to bottom Benin, Cotonou, 2014 Basic formation and presentation of club performances – Congo, Brazzaville, 2015 Governor seminar - South Africa, Johannesburg, 2019 club president’s seminar (role play).

### 3. Analyse based on the fieldwork

A “learning place” is a weapon for association:

Education maintains members attracted to a club that showcases success.

Poorly educated shopkeepers will find a place in the group of 30,000, thanks to the training that some “poorer” members will give them as teachers.

Education becomes as much as philanthropic work a keystone of the club. It can even be argued that on the African continent, it exceeds the philanthropic investment that is often organized from the north (de Hasque, 2018).

Education supports the growth of a private and liberal association:

Description of the “learning centers” shows the interest in managerial skills in Africa (Akinyoade, Dietz, Uche, 2017) and the implicit competences received by members which concern diplomacy, the art of receiving partners, the art of negotiation. Education increase the social importance in society of entrepreneurs (Akinyoade, A., & Uche, C. (2016). The private associative dynamic needs education as much as it invests in new places in order to propagate

itself.

The creation of the geographical area has shown that the skills will be cumulated to create a continental structure. It is a win-win commitment.

Education as salary :

Education in a privileged context serves as a meritocratic incentive. Certificates and diploma become salaries, thanks to the seminar you can grow and be recognized as a leader.

An entrepreneur or a civil servant can earn more with a benevolent work than at his office. It attracts because it puts power on stage, it connects members with other entrepreneurs, it is a place where a member can show his abilities.

Thanks to the club, the member wants to project himself in a less uncertain future, he sees himself as a literate, wealthy and charismatic leader.

#### 4. Conclusion

Education is at the heart of political issues, a private club is using it to emancipate itself by making a political project come to concrete.

By making political use of education, the entrepreneurs of Lions Clubs renew the pan-African concern of WEB Du Bois and Booker T. Washington who embodied black leaders capable of competing with Westerners, thanks to the schools they attended (Marable 1999). It is therefore not surprising to find references to these historical figures in the literature produced by entrepreneurs who have successfully established themselves as models ( e.g Ashish J. Thakkar's biography 2015). These entrepreneurs put emphasis on education to acquire the necessary drive to restore pride to the continent (eg. Leke, A., Chironga, M., & Desvaux, G. 2018). To this end, they set up foundations, academies (e.g. African Leadership Academy), which, as the African branch of the Lions Clubs has done, will transmit lessons and stimulate their students to become self-reliant and find sources of income. For entrepreneurs, knowledge is a valuable asset, this value is important to them today and they are willing to devote the required resources. What will happen tomorrow, when entrepreneurs lose interest in education, when schools will no longer be the ideal vehicle to keep the flame of pan-African entrepreneurship burning, when they feel that creating intellectuals is no longer the solution to business? The question deserves to be asked, not because these few private foundations occupy an important place in the field of education, but because the educational policies of States adopt the same practices, referring to statistics and the quantification of results in order to decide on investment and evaluate the results of learning (Fichtner, 2016: 262). As does the Lions Club, using controls such as guaranteeing a salary and a return on investment. The consequence is a loss of control over education (Charton 2015:11), which is not a commodity. It is a phenomenon that is already under way, and the success, performance and stimulating energy generated by African associations should not obscure the fact that this energy is based not on social consensus but on the will of a small group of leaders.

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