This impressive work is an examination of African education in the British colony of the Gold Coast in the interwar years. Broader than its title suggests, the volume sets its particular story in the expansive context of British colonial Africa from the late nineteenth century, delineating the structures, ideas, and cultural influences that both blended and contended with each other to shape African education in the Gold Coast in the interwar period.

Both missionaries and governmental officials played central roles, but their goals were often altered or softened by African influences, influences that sometimes flowed from African elites (both modern and traditional) and sometimes bubbled up from the lower rungs of the society. Missionaries tended to emphasize literary education and moral and religious training. Government officials also favored character education but were especially drawn to vocational and industrial education, particularly at the level of primary schooling.

Professor Yamada finds three general ideological influences at work in the shaping of African education in this era: John Dewey’s ideas on experiential education, English Victorian moralism, and American industrial education shaped by the likes of Booker T. Washington and Thomas Jesse Jones. Together these influences shaped an education that emphasized character over intellect and encouraged the adaptation of students to their particular places in both African society and the British imperial system.

Particularly interesting here is Yamada’s analysis of the reshaping of Dewey’s ideas. She finds that Dewey’s proposals, originally meant to free education from formalism and to promote social reform, were subtly corrupted in the African context, where they were blended with industrial education in an attempt to shape a schooling system that would encourage students to accept their proper positions in the social order and the colonial system.

Industrial education played an especially important role in mass schooling, but also found a place in secondary schools aimed primarily at the training of elites. These schools

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taught such courses as woodworking, bookbinding, metalworking, and car repair, not to prepare students for specific vocations but rather to teach them the dignity of labor, a pervasive goal in African education of this period. Character education and industrial education combined to make students into hard workers and good citizens, even those destined to be leaders of the society.

Despite the power of British elites, Africans successfully made a place for their own traditions in Gold Coast schools. They worked to preserve African languages, religions, and art forms such as singing, dancing, and drumming. Although the Europeans watched carefully for signs of native nationalism, they generally allowed the preservation of significant parts of traditional culture. Unlike the French, who favored assimilationist schemes, the British did not seek to destroy local traditions as long as those traditions offered no significant threat to the Empire.

Yamada balances her treatment of the broad trends in Gold Coast education with an intensive case study of the Achimota School. Originally a comprehensive school with primary and teacher-training divisions, Achimota survived as a strictly secondary institution serving both men and women in a boarding-school context. Too narrow in scope and purpose to represent the whole of Gold Coast education, the school nonetheless provides Professor Yamada with a superb opportunity to observe close up how the various influences on African education interacted. Especially impressive is her ability to make a place for individual agency in the midst of the working of vast impersonal forces. Individuals making daily decisions about educational matters played their own special role in the shaping of Achimota and other institutions of African education, the kind of fact that often gets lost as scholars focus on the larger forces at play in the world.

Both Yamada’s broad survey of Gold Coast education and her highly focused case study of Achimota are based on exhaustive research. The author has visited archival collections across Europe, the United States, and Africa. Her case study uses not just government and school records but local newspapers and, most impressively, interviews with former students. It is this thorough research that underlies her fine-grained analysis and allows her to speak so authoritatively about forces as broad as Victorian moralism and as specific as the response of students to Achimota school life.

The combination of exhaustive research and consistently sophisticated interpretation makes 'Dignity of Labour for African Leaders' an essential source for the understanding of Gold Coast education during the interwar years and an exceedingly valuable resource for anyone seeking to understand African education in the context of British imperial rule.