

The Virtues and Challenges in Traditional African Education

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This paper examines the virtues and failures of traditional African educational systems, in the context of continental Pan-Africanism, and argues that traditional African educational systems must be complemented by a Pan-African educational system that transcends confocalisms and micro-nationalisms.

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The process of traditional education in Africa was intimately integrated with the social, cultural, artistic, religious, and recreational life of the ethnic group. That is, 'schooling' and 'education', or the learning of skills, social and cultural values and norms were not separated from other spheres of life. As in any other society, the education of the African child started at birth and continued into adulthood.

The education that was given to the African youth fitted the group and the expected social roles in society were learned by adulthood. Girls were socialized to effectively learn the roles of motherhood, wife, and other sex-appropriate skills. Boys were socialized to be hunters, herders, agriculturalists, blacksmiths, etc., depending on how the particular ethnic group, clan or family derived its livelihood.

Because there were no permanent school walls in traditional African educational systems, as in the case of the Western countries, some European writers on African education tended to be blinded by their own cultural paradigms and viewed traditional African educational process as mainly informal. Some early European writers on Africa in general went to the extent of saying that Africa, especially south of the Sahara, had no culture, history or civilization. Murray (1967: 14), for instance, states that "...outside Egypt there is nowhere indigenous history. African history has always been 'foreign' history."

Laurie (1907), in his *Historical Survey of Pre-Christian Education*, did not even include Sub-Saharan Africa in his scheme of analysis or exposition; he started with Egyptians and ended with the Romans. He equated education with civilization and culture as he knew them and, by implication, Sub-Saharan Africa was primitive.

Boas (1983: 180) defines “primitive as those peoples whose activities are little diversified, whose forms of life are simple and uniform, and contents and form of whose culture are meager and intellectually inconsistent. Their inventions, social order, intellectual and emotional life should be poorly developed.” Boas goes on to justify a civilized culture by using technical developments and the wealth of inventions as yardsticks. The types of technology he singles out as making a culture civilized are those which go beyond merely satisfying daily basic needs; thus, Eskimo techniques are primitive since they do not greatly reduce the Eskimo’s daily physical preoccupation with livelihood. One sees that Boas is favoring West European culture as a measure of civilization; however, the academic tradition of putting Europe at the pinnacle of civilizations has now largely been addressed and refuted by both Western and non-Western scholars and other people of ideas.

Brickman (1963: 399) goes beyond Laurie’s, Murray’s and Boas’ conceptions of civilizations and primitiveness by continuing with the Egyptian origins of African education to state, at least, that “African education dates back to ancient times in Egypt, to the establishment of Muslim mosques in the centuries following the death of Mohammed, to the University of Timbuktu in the sixteenth century, and to the missionary schools in the nineteenth century.” Brickman goes on to concentrate on the May 1961 Addis Ababa Conference of African Ministers of Education, UNESCO representatives and the other observers concerned about the development of education in Africa.

What is apparently missing in Brickman’s survey is the education provided African youth before the coming of Islamic religion into Africa, especially south of the Sahara. Even with the case of Egyptian civilization, some historians have ascertained that Africa south of the Sahara affected north Africa considerably. Diop (1978) has used archeological evidence to substantiate that Kush, or Africa south of the Sahara, influenced Egyptian civilization immensely and that the empires of Ghana, Mali, Songhai, etc. attest to the cultural unity of Africa. Of course, to completely determine which region influenced which, and even to what extent, are some of the problems in African history need further investigation.

Traditional African Education

Watkins (1943: 666-675), Ociti (1973), Scanlon (1964), Mbiti (1967), Kenyatta (1965), Boateng (1983: 335-336) and others have described traditional systems of African education prior to the coming of Islam and Christianity, using several African cultures or societies. Scanlon (1964:3) states that “the education of the African before the coming of the European was an education that prepared him for his responsibilities as an adult in his home, his village and his tribe.”

The Africa youth’s ethnic group and community were held cohesively by rules and regulations, values and social sanctions, approvals, rewards and punishments, etc. into which he was inducted.

He or she was taught social etiquettes, agricultural methods and others that ensured the smooth running of the social entity of which he was an integral part. The boys observed and imitated their father’s craft and learned practical skills which they performed according to their capacities, as they matured into manhood and were now heads of their own households. The education of girls was differentiated from that of boys in accordance to the roles each sex was expected and socialized to play for the remainder of their adult lives (Kenyatta, 1965: 95-124).

Watkins (1943: 666-675) has described the traditional process of education in West Africa; she calls the traditional African educational institution the “Bush” school, for the Poro and Bondo societies conducted their training of boys and girls respectively outside of the village or town. The training given to the youth prepared them for military, family, agricultural, and cultural purposes. Mental and moral training are also undertaken. Each youth must go through this training before he could be considered a worthy member of the society. The length of the training of boys differs from those of girls, but it usually takes several years before a boy is passed from adolescences into adulthood. The traditional method of teaching used is what Westerners would today call ‘Mastery Learning’ (Block, 1973: 30-36) and thus failure was virtually nonexistent; every effort was made, encouragements given, incentives provided to make sure that even the most coward goes through, say, the circumcision process. Group instruction, group assignments, apprenticeship and age groupings to experience a particular significant event were the most common methods employed to instruct the young. Private instruction by one’s brother or sister, or one of the parents was also provided. Repetition, imitation, internalization and practice were the main methods used for learning, so that by adulthood, the African was a full member of the community.

Smith (1940: 64-83) has described the uses of folk-tales as educative devices in traditional African societies. Stories are used not only to amuse and express feelings, but to also teach ideal forms of behavior and morality. Children learned by listening to their elders, imitating or 'emulating' them. These stories are usually handed down from one generation to the next; their main concern was to induct the youth into the moral, philosophical, and cultural values of the community.

In West Africa, there were griots 'walking dictionaries,' historians, or verbal artists who memorized the history, legends of a whole people and would recite them and teach their apprentices or audiences, publicly or privately; direct instruction was also employed.

One of the major avenues through which the African youth received his or her education was, and still is today in some quarters, during several grades or initiation ceremonies. For the Tiriki group in Kenya, East Africa, Basil Davidson (1969:81-85) has provided the following description:

Until you are ten or so you are counted as a 'small boy' with minimal social duties such as herding cattle. Then you will expect, with some trepidation, to undergo initiation to manhood by a process of schooling which lasts about six months and is punctuated by ritual 'examinations'. Selected groups of boys are entered for this schooling once every four or five years. ... All the initiates of a hut eat, sleep, sing, dance, bathe, do handicraft, etc. ... but only when commanded to do so by their counselor, who will be a man under about twenty-five.

...circumcision gives it a ritual embodiment within the first month or so, after which social training continues as before until the schooling period is complete. Then come ceremonies at which elders teach and exhort, the accent now being on obedience to rule which have been learned. The Tiriki social charter is thus explained and then enshrined at the center of the man's life.

Throughout Africa, initiation rites and the various rituals involved in the passage from childhood to adulthood were cultural devices to inculcate the spirit of the community in the youth. As Western schools Americanized or Europeanized their people, so did traditional African schools Africanize their own people. For the case of Tiriki again, Davidson (p. 85) continues that during the initiation:

There is inculcated a sense of respect for elders, of brotherhood among members of the age set in question, and of skill in practical matters such as the use of arms. The parallel may be wildly remote in context and content, but one is irresistibly reminded of the English public schools. Even visiting Tiriki mums are said to be like their English counterparts, alarmed for their offspring but jealously proud of their progress.

Camara Laye (1954: 128-129), in his excellent autobiographical novel *The Dark Child*, describes his circumcision experiences in Guinea, West Africa:

The teaching we received in the bush, far from all prying eyes, had nothing very mysterious about it; nothing, I think, that was not fit for ears other than our own. These lessons, the same as had been taught to all who had preceded us, confined themselves to outlining what a man's conduct should be: we were to be absolutely straightforward, to cultivate all the virtues that go to make an honest man, to fulfill our duties toward God, toward our parents, our superiors and our neighbors. We must tell nothing of what we learned, either to women or to the uninitiated; neither were we to reveal any of the secret rites or circumcision. That is the custom. Women, too, are not allowed to tell anything about the rites of excision.

Ociti (1973: 105) has also described the education of African youth under the traditional system, stressing that the process starts from the time of the unborn child and refutes writers who have construed that "... since the Africans knew no reading or writing, they therefore had no systems of education and so no contents and methods to pass on to the young." For the scholars who think Africa was 'Tabla Rasa' with respect to educational institutions and processes, "...education... meant Western civilizations; take away Western civilization, and you have no education."

On the contrary, the educational systems that existed in Africa prior to the European colonization of the continent, as we've tried to demonstrate, taught the African child to avoid affairs that the community scorned. The African child was educated to know, internalize and practice roles appropriate to sex and age. In the early years of childhood, the child's education is largely in the hands of the biological mother, and the community assumes the greater role as adolescence approaches. Thus, language training is received from the mother, and the extended family. The peer group, or age-set also become significant as the youth approaches the stage of circumcision. At this stage orature, comprising of myths, legends, folksongs and folktales, proverbs, dances, etc. are all in line to prepare the youth for adulthood. Thus, "before the advent of the Europeans African indigenous education was quite adequate in so far as it met the requirements of the society at the time"(Ociti, 1973:105). And "like any good system of education, it had its objectives, scope and methods which clearly reflected the ways of life or cultural patterns of the clan or chiefdom" (p. 105). Traditional African systems of education were, and are still so effective "that a total rejection of the African heritage will leave African societies in a vacuum that can only be filled with confusion, loss of identity, and a total break in intergenerational communication" (Boateng, 1983: 335-336); Boateng claims that "the essential goal of traditional education is still admirable and remains challenging" (p. 336).

Short-Comings of Traditional Africa Education

Traditional African education, like any system of education, had and still has its own weaknesses and strengths. In the modern context, however, and in light of Africa's moves for rapid economic, political, technical and cultural developments, traditional African education falls far too short from what continental African needs to accomplish. Traditional education was confocal and therefore exclusive of others who did not belong to the particular ethnic group. If it were not so, the various inter-ethnic wars in Africa would have been less. Granted, there were many other reasons that gave rise, and still do, to ethnic antagonisms, but the educational process and content are not immune and cannot be discarded out of the variables or reasons that cause ethnic antagonisms.

Traditional African systems of education did not produce 'scientists' as we know scientists today and did not produce great military men, at least not great enough to counter the onslaught of the British, French, German, Portuguese armies and South African Trekers, hence Mazrui (1980: 123) observe that 'this history of Africa's military weakness has continued to haunt African leaders and thinkers' and the late President Sekou Toure concludes that 'it was because of the inferiority of Africa's means of self-defense that it was subjected to foreign domination' (p. 123).

There are many other weaknesses in traditional African education that could be pointed out, but is it not sufficient to say that these weaknesses are reflected in the past and present undeveloped condition of Africa? African farmers and traditional healers still use traditional methods of farming and healing the sick. Infant mortality, starvation, and the peripheral position of African women in politics-that-makes-a-difference, etc. are still rampant in Africa. Certainly, much of Africa's problems could be attributed to colonialism, capitalism, neo-colonialism and thus, Western exploitation of Africa's raw materials and other commodities but, must all of Africa's problems be blamed solely on Europeans? And, in fact, is it not Africa's failings that subjected her to her current peripheral position in world politics, economics and mechanization?

The weaknesses in traditional African education were explicitly revealed with the advent of Christianity and the European formal school system. "Tribal education was not an education for change" (Ociti, 1973: 107); it demanded conformity, but not individuality, creativity or individual uniqueness. It taught strict obedience to the elders' rules and authority, which were not always necessarily founded, so that when the missionaries brought their schools into Africa, it became a 'refuge' for those Africans who wanted to be different from other members of the group (Achebe, 1958). The old system "...assumed that human nature was constant; that there was no revolution to upset the status quo of the old order" (Ociti, p.107). To this old order's amazement, Western schools in Africa became places to go to earn diplomas and degrees, and therefore social prestige, fine clothes, cars, houses, economic and political power.

Traditional educational systems still exist among the African masses but Western schools confer much more, especially onto those who complete the universities, whether they are employed or not. The hope that they will one day be employed or even underemployed and maybe frustrated in their employment is still more comforting than to be unschooled and without the paper certificate from a Western school, prestigious or not. And many university teachers know this very well and "...can attest that the vast majority of African students today are first and foremost job seekers who aspire to well-paid, high status, materially comfortable occupations" (Sklar, 1967:11) their degrees, political alliances and ideological conformity can get them. It has become the ineluctable case "...that one who possesses a diploma, can bargain, whereas those without certificates have no cards to play" (Hooker, 1975: 20). And in the case of Africa at the present, that means the majority who cannot 'play.'

Conclusion and Recommendations

The virtues and challenges of traditional educational systems aside, it is crucially important that continental Africa implement a Pan-African educational system that will facilitate the economic, political, and cultural reconstruction and integration of the African continent. The curriculum of pan-African education will be pan-African centered and will aim at the expansion of African people's cultural and intellectual repertoire.

In 1963 Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia recommended to his fellow African leaders that "A massive effort must be launched in the educational and cultural field which will not only raise the level of literacy and provide a cadre of skilled and trained technicians requisite to our growth and development but, as well acquaint us one with another." And that "Serious consideration should be given to the establishment of an African University, sponsored by all African States, where future leaders of Africa will be trained in an atmosphere of continental brotherhood. In this African institution, the supra-national aspects of African life would be emphasized and study would be directed toward the ultimate goal of complete African unity"(Selassie, 1963: 287-288).

In 1989(278-282) and 1999-2000(12-26), I recommended that, to materialize Pan-African integration, Haile Selassie's Pan African University should be established and that the curriculum should Pan-African centered, with an integrated staff, faculty, and student body. Until we educate African people to see Africa as a whole, our development projects will remain fragmented and ineffective. Therefore, in the face of larger and larger economic units, African people should do more to materialize Pan-Africanism in economics, culture, politics, and education (Marah, 1989; 1998: 271-288).

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