Education and Emancipation:
An African Philosophical Perspective

by

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Abstract

The concepts of education as well as emancipation are a veritable cauldron of interpretations and perspectives. This paper examines the nexus between education and emancipation from an African philosophical perspective. It establishes that while it is generally conceded in many quarters that education is necessarily related to emancipation, the nature of such relationship, (as to whether it is symmetrical, asymmetrical or non-symmetrical) has not been clearly articulated. In filling this vacuum, the paper not only examines the conceptual underpinnings of education and emancipation respectively, but establishes de facto that only an eclectic educational system consisting of indigenous African knowledge system and Western education can bring about holistic emancipation in contemporary Africa. Contrary to contemporary despise and neglect of indigenous knowledge system to the recluse, the paper makes case for an integration of indigenous knowledge system with other plausible forms of education in the contemporary African quest for emancipation.

Introduction

The search for enlightenment and survival gave birth to education. Before the development of reading and writing, preliterate people were surrounded with other humans, animals and natural forces which made each one to struggle to survive against the other. They began to generate things that can make their lives better; these entail gathering food and providing shelter, making weapons and other tools: such skills became the cultural and educational blueprint of people, and then they began to share information about learning language; and acquiring the values, behaviour, and religious practices.

This has been transmitted from adults to children so that it could continue from generation to generation. The preliterate society shows that education has existed since antiquity and traditional African societies are not exempted. But, was education then the same thing as education now? What is education? What does emancipation connote? Was it an instrument of emancipation as it is now or not? Is one a necessarily a means to the other? How can contemporary African societies be emancipated from the shackles of ignorance, poverty, disease, social disorder, moral and political strife? Answers to these and other related questions are provided in the rest of the paper.

The Concept of Education

Akinpelu (1969:184) describes education as an initiation into a worthwhile activity. Williams Frankena (1973:21) states that education takes place 'when 'X' is fostering or seeking to foster in 'Y' some dispositions 'D' by method 'M'. By this Frankena posits that education involves two sets of people; the teacher and the learner. Education has been classified as formal, non-formal and informal. It is formal when teachers instruct students in courses of study in an organised institution, and informal when a learner is exposed to the general social process of obtaining the knowledge and skills needed to operate in a particular culture or society. By this classification, African style of education can be categorised as both informal and non-formal education and it is called 'indigenous knowledge'. This according to Jayeola-Omoyeni (2009:265) "comprise all the indigenous activities such as intellectual, moral, physical and vocational training fostered... for an all round education and development of the children, adults, groups of individuals and the various communities".

However Rodney (2000: 262) succeeded in clarifying that '... some aspects of African education were formal: that is to say, there was a specific programme and a conscious division between teachers and pupils.... The programmes of teaching were restricted to certain periods in the life of every individual, notably, the period of initiation or 'coming of age'. And also, Sophie Oluwole (2000:98) captures a clearer picture of this by emphasising the need to refute the claim that African education is informal; doing this makes it unjust for any foreigner to so regard African education. She affirms that "African education today is programmed on this doubtful ideology. The curriculum from primary through secondary to tertiary institutions is based on the false belief that Africans never developed any form of knowledge, science, technology or democracy'. Thus, she further argue that 'faculty theories of the Greeks, the Romans, the Germans, French and more lately the Americans etc. are all taught to African youths as absolute truths. It is under this ideology that Africans both as scholars and youths remain mentally bound to Western intellectual culture, and what is more baffling perhaps is our continued belief that there is no way we can ever amass evidence for the existence of an indigenous African intellectual culture in pre-colonial times (Oluwole, 2000: 99)".

Whether formal, non-formal or informal, education is marked with a number of criteria and conditions. A summary of R.S Peters' (1967) view on what qualifies as education maintains that: first, the learner must possess the capability to understand what he is being taught. Secondly, what is being taught must be transmitted in a manner that is morally acceptable and thirdly, teaching must be a conscious effort to bring about a positive change in the state of mind of the recipient, and the positive change must be directed at achieving a desirable goal.

From the above, the implication is that the classification of education as formal, informal or non-formal is problematic seeing that the major criteria required by such forms of education to merit as education are related. We may then proceed to ask the question; who is an educated person? Is an educated person anyone who is lettered (possessing the ability to read and write)? Or one who is exposed to formal training and has acquired certain special skills to function? Does education mean the same thing or have the same goals in Western and African contexts.

It must be noted that there is a wide gap between the Western conception and the African conception of education. In the Western conception, Woodrow Wilson expresses that education in the highest sense; ...consists in the power to distinguish good reasoning from bad, in the power to digest and interpret evidence, in a habit of catholic observation and a preference for the non-partisan point of view, in an addiction to clear and logical processes of thought and yet an instinctive desire to interpret rather than to stick in the letter of the reasoning, in a taste for knowledge and a deep respect for the integrity of the human mind. (Wilson 1925: 109-110).

Thus, for him the educated person is one who " … is to be discovered by his point of view, by the temper of his mind, by his attitude towards life and his fair way of thinking. He can see, he can discriminate, he can combine ideas and see whether they lead; he has insight and comprehension. His mind is a practiced instrument of appreciation. He is more apt to contribute light than heat to a discussion and will oftener than not show the power of uniting the elements of a difficult subject in a whole view; he has knowledge of the world which no one can have who knows only his own generation or only his task".

According to Fayemi & Adeyelure (2009:44), education for the traditional Yoruba is a life-long process. Thus, education is seen as any act or experience that has an integrative and formative effect on the mind, character, skills, physical and spiritual abilities of the individual to enable him/her live effectively and responsibly in the society.

In the African conception, an educated person according to Akinpelu (1969; 178) can be described as one who combines expertise in some specific economic skills with soundness of character and wisdom in judgement. One who is equipped to handle successfully the problems of living in an immediate and an extended family; who is well versed in the folk-lores and genealogies of the ancestors; who has some skills to handle minor health problems and where to obtain advice and help in major ones; who stands well with the ancestral spirits of the family and knows how to observe their worship; who has the ability to discharge social and political duties; who is wise and shrewd in judgement; who expresses self not in too many words but rather in proverbs and analogies leaving hearers to unravel his or her thought; who is self controlled under provocation, dignified in sorrow and restrained in success; and finally and most importantly, who is of excellent character.

While the Western conception of education is individualistic, the African conception of education is holistic; socially and functionally oriented. Both orientations have varying value. On a daily basis, Western individuality is eating deep into African societies; for instance, in recent marriages, communalism becomes a vice and the 'me and my wife syndrome' is raised above the traditional African communalistic style which used to exist.

It is then no understatement that this disparity is the root of inherent societal problems in Africa. Olufowobi (2006) avers that 'if education means the bringing up of individuals in the society, then every society has a system of training its youth for good living'. It must be recalled that Africans had develop their communal patterns which guarantees consistency and peace in their societies before the coming of the Europeans. Unfortunately, colonialists introduced formal education laden with individualistic ethos as against the communalistic lifestyle of Africans.

This problem is not new; Edward Blyden (1964:81) mentioned it, saying that '... the precise problem of the education of the African is to develop his powers as an African.... The method which had been pursued ... has been absurd... because it has been carried on without the study of the man and his intellectual possibilities...producing, as a rule, only caricatures of alien manners, who copy the most obvious peculiarities of their teachers, with all their draw-backs and defects'. And in the same vein, Moyibi Amoda (1978:29) expressed that 'the problems of the black and African world are seen as caused by the experiences of Western civilization. A clash of civilization, African and Western, is assumed as the hegemonic level. The African civilization defined in this formulation as black maintains its integrity while its authority is denied through the imposition of alien will; its existence and legitimacy remain implicit in the people. At the social level, Western values are incorporated into traditional values leading to cultural confusion and alienation of the colonised ...'

There is no doubt that Western education succeeded in alienating Africans from their traditional social institutions. Afolabi and Isiquzo (2000:33) stress that 'traditional rites and customs' have lost their living content. Thus, contact with colonialism deprived them of their original functions. The African then become more uncertain of which culture to adopt, he/she became a lost person without identity.

The issue of the imposition of Western values on the African communities is a situation that need not punished, but it should lead us to inquire into the essence of education. If African societies have been permeated with Western education and Western conceptions of "an educated man", did Western education also introduce to Africa the true essence of education? The answer is no! What then has such education done to Africans? Since Western education as introduced to Africa, it did not generate the true essence of education, therefore there will be a need to either redefine the essence of education or redefine the kind of education needed to achieve desirable results in Africa.

Emancipation: The Essence of Education

The word "education" can be traced to its Latin root "educere" meaning "to lead a person out" Plato maintained that the essence of education is to lead a person from the dark cave of ignorance into the limelight of knowledge by turning the eyes of the soul from darkness to light. This implies that freedom should be the end product of education. Education should emphasise the ability of the learner to recognise problems and attempt solution to such problems with little or no assistance.

Consequently, (Wei Bo, 2009:2) posits that 'on the one hand, one needs to get into the world of civilization through learning knowledge, skills and social rules; on the other hand, he or she also needs to break out from its bias and ignorance, especially transcend itself, and these two steps make up a full circulation of education'. Thus, in Wei Bo's view, the environment is a major contributor to learning. However, the learner must also possess the skills that enable him or her to make rational judgements in the society. It is sad that Western education as passed on to Africa disrupted the perception of Africans about their environment: having obtained some sort of emancipation into the world of (Western) civilization through the so called formal education, yet, he or she is still unfit to make meaningful contributions to the immediate community. This incapacity is evident in the underdevelopment of African nations.

Is it necessary that education should precede emancipation or should be its consequence? We may posit that there is a logical relation between education and emancipation. This relationship could be described as symmetrical, in which case, the former has relation to the latter and vice versa. Education should proceed to emancipation, since no form of freedom can be enjoyed in the absence of education. As reflected in African indigenous knowledge system; no one can be respected in the society except they have undergone adequate trainings that expose them to the values that make self useful for personhood, and relevant to society. As a result, (Fafunwa 1971) described education in the pre-colonial period as functional and purposeful seeing that the curriculum was relevant to the needs of the society. And in support of this position, (Majasan 1967: 61-65) maintains that ' the goal of Yoruba traditional education which was applicable to most African societies, prior to Western education, was the production of an Omoluwabi, that is the production of an individual that is responsible and capable of taking care of himself and contributing positively to the development of his society'.

It should be recalled that the quest for independence from colonialists as raised by the nationalists in various African countries came up as a result of their exposures to some sort of education. Although, political emancipation was gained, African leaders paid less attention to ideological emancipation. In the words of Afolabi & Andrew (2000: 42), "after political independence...the colonial masters did not go finally... they maintained the strings by building the psyche of the African through the Western education". This shows that the concept or idea of emancipation has transcended that of mere freedom from external (political) domination or aggression to that of an innovative progression aimed at putting resources together for the betterment of the immediate society and a determination to meet global challenges of the times.

In the African context, education has resulted into some sort of emancipation, which is not pragmatic enough, which could be described as "negative emancipation". The reason is not far-fetched. In the search for formal education, Africans naively acquired the wrong type of education (Western based education that has failed to operate in African society). Most African nations were exposed to educational programs that maintained white superiority by distancing students from their own culture and history. This is what Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (2000:264) put forward when he expressed that '... colonial schooling was education for subordination, exploitation; the creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment'. Therefore, rather than having a society full of educated and enlightened members, African society has a population who are 'illiterates' as a result of cultural diffusion established by the colonial imposition. Conversely, today African nations in a struggle to overcome depressed economies and antiquated class systems.

Emancipation for Africa

The word emancipation lacks its full meaning if there is no freedom from restrictions. Emancipation is expected to remove all forms of restrictions from the educated. Hence, we may surmise that any form of education that does not give birth to emancipation is unjust. The implication of this is that justice should be a summation of education and emancipation, that is; (Justice = Education + Emancipation).

As pervasive as formal education is, it has become a confine such that there are still lots of unequal social relationships in modern times; the so called powers subjugate lesser states, the rich oppress the poor as much as the ruler does to the ruled. How then can Africa break out of these confines to achieve emancipation? (Okoro, 2000: 45) opines that emancipation from oppression is not an easy task. The oppressor cannot emancipate the oppressed, because he is the "author of violence". The oppressor practices a system which dehumanizes and creates a very deep dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed. It is the duty of the oppressed to emancipate himself from the oppressor.

Having previously established that Africa at the present has a 'negative emancipation', Okoro prescribed a genuine key to emancipation: '...authentic emancipation should be done through the means of education.... To attain such a state of genuine emancipation, one needs education of profound research....' (Okoro, 2000:45). This also is the charge given by Paulo Freire in his work *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Freire 1972:25). He explained that pedagogy makes the oppressed to realise that 'so long as they live in the duality where "to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor" an education to liberation is useless'.

Consequently, three important things necessary for emancipation are: choice, the power to remove barriers to freedom and the power to achieve the objective of one's choice. If Africans will be free from all forms of oppression, these three tools must be used in their struggle for ideological emancipation and consequently justice. The questions here are: does Africa possess the ability to use these tools; is Africa ripe enough to face the task, and how to prioritize this task for African leaders? These questions, if dissected in this work could move us into other discourses outside the present issue of discussion and so, perhaps it could be subjected to further future debates by scholars. Here the place of choice refers to the urgency of mind decolonisation, whereby African education refuses to stay in the category of informal education, under the excuse of a lack of early literacy.

Conclusion

It must be noted that Western education cannot be rejected in its totality because of how much it has permeated into our knowledge system, more so that the world is gradually growing into a global village within which all kinds of cross cultural activities are taking place, and African people are not excluded. However, it is an urgent task for us to raise our indigenous knowledge system such that it competes favourably with any other knowledge system. This must be reflected at homes, in governance and in schools' curriculum at all levels.

Perhaps Oluwole (2000:109) has summarised our plight best:

> Africans today do not know who they are because they never studied nor tried to discover who they were yesterday. However, they have been told they are inferior to whites. Do our youths not deserve to be allowed to find out for themselves who they are? Do we not owe them the duty of providing them with an African education which allows them, to reach their own conclusions on the basis of evidences? Through Western education, we have mostly misled African youths. And we, in doing so, have inadvertently designed a hopeless future for them. We feed our children with falsehood and half-truths both about Africans and about the whites. The twenty-first century offers an unparalleled opportunity to correct the basic error of African education in general and African studies in particular.

Indeed, the opportunity to correct the basic error of African education is upon us. Western knowledge has exposed us to the outside world, but indigenous knowledge will restore to us our inward beauty, identity and pride. It behoves us to choose where indigenous education belong so we can proceed in putting measures in place to attack any hindrance to emancipation (which we hope to achieve by returning to indigenous knowledge), and then stimulate our powers to achieve the objectives of our choice. True emancipation lies in our return to indigenous knowledge with a meticulously synthesised introduction of Western knowledge.

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