

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CANONS OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

By

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Abstract

African traditional education was a model of teaching and learning that was employed in pre-colonial Africa for the oral transmission of knowledge from one generation to another, which preserved the socio-cultural structures of society. The burden of this research is to explore the meaning and nature of the African indigenous education within the context of the nature of the human person as a basis for education. It further attended to questions that boarder on the purpose and philosophical canons of African traditional education. The method employed in this research is the indigenous holistic method; this method is very important as the African indigenous education is holistic in nature. The research submits that before the advent of colonial masters and missionaries to Africa, the African people had a system of education which attended to the basic needs of the time, and which, although may be ancient, still has great relevance for the education in the 21st century.

Keyword: Philosophy, education, African, Traditional, Indigenous, principles.

Introduction

Education, the most ancient concerns of mankind, does not lend itself to any definite definition. It has the growing quality of a living organism and seamless web. This would first imply that it has life; secondly, it constantly adapts itself to new and changing circumstances, according to time and place, however, maintaining some permanent features or attributes. It adapts itself to new circumstances and demands. While there are changes according to time, there is a presence of permanence which unites the universal experience of education; and while there is plurality according to place, there is a unity which identifies and authenticates the educative experience. It is from the above perspective that one can talk about an African indigenous education. What makes it distinctive from others is not

determined by substantial or ontological factors, but rather by accidental factors domicile in the African traditional cultural heritage.

Although various African scholars have written on African traditional education (Majesan 1967, Fafunwa 1974, Snelson 2974, Tiberondwa 1978, Stambach and Semali 1997, Adeyemi and Adeyinka 2002, Okoro 2010, Ndofirepi and Ndofirepi 2012), the burden of this piece is to explore the meaning and nature of African indigenous education within the context of the nature of the human person as a basis for education. It would further attend to questions that boarder on the purpose and philosophical principles of African traditional education.

The Nature and Meaning of Education

Education, etymologically, is derived from the Latin words: *educare*- which means 'to bring up', 'to rear', 'to guide', 'to direct'. From the foregoing, education becomes the process of bringing up children by the adults of the society; *educere*- which means 'to draw out', 'to lead out', 'to raise up', 'to bring up', 'rear a child'. From this root, education for Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2002), becomes the "slow and skillful process of extracting the latent potentialities of comprehension and dedication, in contradiction with indoctrination" (p. 225). Although the concept education, as observed by Balogun (2008) has been exposed to different and sometimes contradictory interpretations, generally it can be understood as a process of development of the natured and nurtured potentialities of an individual to help him or her fit into the society, in which he or she is a full-fledged member. It is an activity of transmission and a fundamental factor of social change. As a wide frontier, it embraces not just the deliberate processes of school and college, but also the in-deliberate and accidental experiences that a person encounters. Thus, education is not conterminous with schools and colleges. It is rather a process that continues throughout life: it is a process, a system, an enterprise, a discipline and a way of life.

The Meaning of African Traditional Education

For a better appreciation of the concept *African Traditional Education*, there remains the need to analyze the simple words that constitute the compound word. The first concept is **African**: it speaks of a relation to, or characteristic of Africa, or its people, language, culture, geography, etc. **Traditional**: this concept has been contended by scholars, since it is suggestive of that which is ancient, and therefore, no longer practiced. In this work, it is used to denote indigenous practices and beliefs, facts, customs, often handed down from generation to generation, unwritten or written. As such, it combines the idea of the past, the present and the future. It is in this regard that the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1990) defines tradition as “The passing down of opinion beliefs, practices, customs, etc., from past to present, especially by word of mouth or practice” (p. 1174). In the introduction, an attempt has been made to understand the general meaning of education. However, an attempt would be made to situate education within the African context.

African traditional education would, therefore, generally mean the type of education that was obtainable in Africa before the advent of the West as colonial masters and missionaries, which Boateng (1983) avers prepared them for their responsibilities as adults in their communities. It was a method of education that was based on the African cultural heritage, and the family is the first school of every child and the mother the first teacher of the child, gradually into the hands of the uncles, father and community at large. Just as we have Greek education, Western education etc, Africans also had a method of education defined by the African worldview. It was a native, locally developed lifelong process of learning, with well defined goals, structures, content and methods, through which cultural values, skills, norms and heritage were transmitted by the older and more experienced members of society from one generation to another to help individuals be integrated into the society. At the end of such an education, it is true that graduants never wrote final year exams

or were not awarded certificates; however, they graduated ceremoniously and were considered graduates by the society, not because they had papers to show, but because they are able to do what they have graduated in.

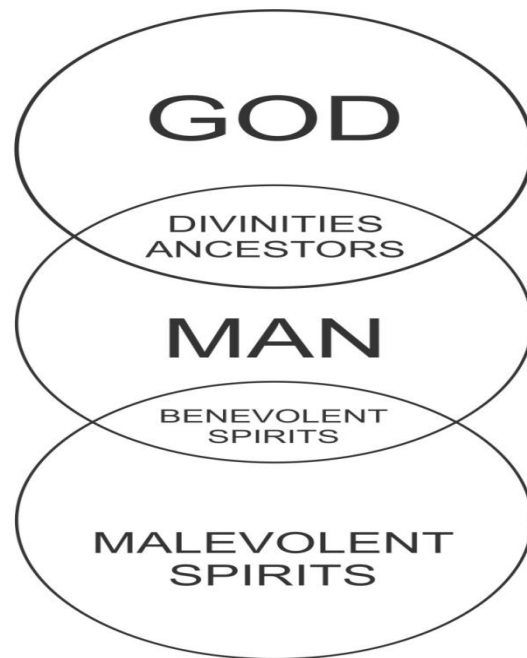
The Human Person as the Ontological Foundation of African Indigenous Education

The quality, method and parameters of education employed by any particular people are fundamentally determined by the people's concept of the human person. In African ontology, its cosmology is heavily anthropocentric. That is, the human person is at the centre of the universe. Mbiti (1969), therefore, asserts that "Man is at the very centre of existence and African people see everything else in its relation to this central position of man... it is as if God exists for the sake of man" (p. 92). Corroborating with Mbiti, Metuh (1985), avers that "Everything else in African worldview seems to get its bearing and significance from the position, meaning and end of man" (p. 109). The idea of God, divinities, ancestors, rituals, sacrifices etc., are only useful to the extent that they serve the needs of the human person. It is in this regard that Udechukwu (2012) avers that man, in African cosmology, has been given a high and prestigious position.

However, the human person is a being that has its origin and finality in the Supreme Being. This implies that the human person in the African universe is best understood in his relationship with God his creator, to whom, from the Igbo perspective, he is ontologically linked with through his *chi*, the spark or emanation of God in each person. The human person in African worldview has a purpose and mission to fulfill; he/she comes into the world as a force amidst forces and interacting with forces. Good status, good health and prosperity are signs of the wellbeing of a person's life-force, and man struggles to preserve it through an appropriate relationship with the spiritual forces around him. The goal of every human person, according to Kanu (2015a) is to achieve his *akara chi*, the destiny

imprinted on his palm by his creator. In the search for one's destiny, Kanu (2015b) avers that the human person is not just an individual person, but one born into a community whose survival and purpose are linked with others. Thus the human person is first a member of a clan, a kindred or a community.

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From the foregoing, the human person has been given a high and prestigious place in the economy of creation. He relates with God, the divinities and spirits and tries to maintain an ontological order in the universe. This would therefore require the development and maintenance of moral character on the part of the human person. To be at peace with fellow human beings and God, there are several elaborate taboos, modest limits of order in the political, economic and social arenas. These values are transmitted to the human person through a process referred to as education, received from the family, the community and society at large. The nature of the human person in African ontology is the basis of education; he is educated because he is a human being; animals are not educated. The human person occupies a fundamental place in the scheme of things and thus, must relate and behave

differently from other creatures. This explains why the family, the community and society work hard to educate the human person.

The Purpose of African Traditional Education

The aim of education in traditional African society is multilateral. These aims could be articulated as follows:

1. To prepare the young for life. Education in Africa is always for a particular purpose. There is nothing like a purposeless education.
2. To help people to realize themselves. Self-realization is at the heart of African indigenous education. The first thing a child is taught is who he or she is, where he or she has come from, the heroes that have come from his clan, etc. self-realization helps him or her to know how to comport the self.
3. To help people to relate with others in an atmosphere of mutual understanding. Life in African traditional society is relationship. To be is to relate, to cease to relate is to move towards annihilation. It is in this regard that individuals are taught to relate with one another.
4. To inculcate the spirit of self-reliance, industry, versatility and self-disciplined. In African traditional society, people are trained to be self-reliant. They do not wait for the government to give them employment. They rather work hard to contribute to the general society.
5. To make the educated aware of his or her responsibilities and privileges. These responsibilities and privileges go with status. There is no status in traditional African societies without responsibilities and privileges. Thus, before a person attains that status- married, etc, the person in question is taught the responsibilities and privileges that go with them.
6. To develop a person's latent physical skills.
7. To develop the character of a person.

8. To help a person to understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community or society.

The Philosophical Canons of African Traditional Education

Ocitti (1971) enumerated five canons or philosophical principles that are vital to Africa indigenous education. They provide a foundational structure on which Africa indigenous education was built. These canons include preparationism, functionalism, communalism, perenialism and holisticism.

a. Preparationism

This principle asserts that people were trained for the purpose of equipping them with a particular skill for the fulfillment of their particular roles in the family or society. Knowledge conferred was always for a particular purpose-skill for an awaited responsibility. For instance, the boys were trained for the purpose of fulfilling male roles in the society. Boys, on the one hand, were trained to be hunters, farmers, carving, canoe making, tinsmithery, palm wine tappers, pot making, clay working, fishermen, warriors, blacksmith, butchers, leaders, dancing, etc. Girls, on the other hand, were equipped with skill for feminine roles like cooking, wives, home-keeping, sieving, cloth making, grinding, pounding, dancing, caring for a baby, etc. because of this particular orientation, boys and girls were trained to be self-reliant, responsible and obliged to the community.

b. Functionalism

According to this principle, African traditional education is practical and participatory in nature. Thus, the pupil learns through working with or observing the master. For instance, young men learnt the art of farming by following their fathers to the farm and learning how the land is tilled, the crops planted, the land weeded and crops harvested. As they learn they begin to participate in these activities. Once he or she becomes a student, the

person begins to participate in what is learnt. For instance, when a boy wants to be a medicine man and he is admitted, he learns by going to the master into the bush to get the herbs needed, to fetch water for him, to clean up the shrine, to grind the medicine, he watches him call upon the gods, he listens to him invoke the gods, he learns the words, the gestures etc. as the master does it, he follows in his step. In this way, the student becomes fully integrated into the occupation even before he graduates. Even before he graduates, he has begun to practice. Education therefore is always practical, not in a vacuum, but with a practical concrete context.

c. Communalism

In African traditional education, the responsibility of teaching was not solely the responsibility of the parents of the child. This is based on the fact that the child is not individually owned. There is an Igbo adage that says: “Nwa bu nwa oha” (A child is for everyone). The parents, family, the community and society are all involved in the training of a child. In the absence of a father, an uncle can teach or correct a child. When a child does something wrong like refusing to join his age grade in sweeping the village square, eating in the morning without washing the face or chewing stick, refusing to surrender his or her chair when an elder enters, etc., a fellow villager can correct or scold the child. This is also very important as one thing done by another could have adverse consequences on another. Thus, teaching another person or correcting the other is a good which one does to himself or herself; and to leave the person without correcting or teaching the person is do oneself harm. This makes teaching a collective responsibility. More so, by communalism, it is also meant that the education was community oriented, that is, geared towards the solving of community problems. The instructional

activities were geared towards the social life of the community, so as to prepare the pupil to fit into their community.

d. Perennialism

Generally, perennialism as a principle believes that in our world of upheavals, and uncertainty, it is beneficial to stick to certain absolute principles. It, therefore, sees education as a way of preparing the child to become acquainted with the finest achievements of his cultural heritage, to become aware of the values of his heritage. When African traditional education is said to be based on the perennialism canon, it simply implies that African indigenous education was conservative and prepared the young to always maintain the *status quo*, that is, to maintain the cultural heritage that has been handed down from one generation to the other. From this, we see why it was necessary in traditional African societies to have taboos- these helped to preserve the *status quo*. It is in this regard that Mushi (2009) avers that “criticism about what they were taught was discouraged and knowledge was not to be questioned. Questions seeking clarification on aspects not clearly understood were encouraged” (p. 39).

e. Holisticism

In traditional educational system in Africa, although people were trained to specialize in a thing, they also got other trainings alongside- people were productive in all areas. It was a multiple kind of education. Although a person is a trained hunter, he can as well farm, butcher the game caught, preserve the meat or market it. The fact that a person is a trained dancer or wrestler does not mean that he wouldn't be able to farm, build his house or hunt around his house. This is the same with girls. Although a hair plaiting, she could as well cook well, dance well, take care of the home and even help another woman give birth.

People were trained not just in regard to skill acquisition, Emenanjo and Ogbalu (1982) aver that people were trained in different areas of traditional education in order to produce educated individuals. No domain of education was left out. People were trained to be educated physically- this concerns activities that aid the development of the physical body; secondly, morally- the educated must lay restraints on his or her boundless urges and impulses; thirdly, character training- this is the basis of the African commitment to education. A positive change in a person during education is very fundamental in Africa. fourth, intellectually- which has got to do with a person's ability to integrate observed experiences, conceptualize and seize a situation; fifth, vocationally- this focuses on job-oriented education, which involves the acquisition of skills. Thus, for one to say he or she is education, one must show signs of growth and development in these domains of education.

Conclusion

The foregoing study on African traditional education reveals that it was a model of education that ensured that everyone who went through it was employed- it was practical and tended towards self-reliance. It was also a system of education that preserved the socio-cultural structures of society. It instilled national pride in the learner and inculcated a communal spirit rather than an individualistic attitude. However, it also suffered some limitations which include: its curriculum being confined only to the categories common to a particular clan or society; in the bid to preserve the status quo, criticism was not entertained- thus, knowledge was passed on from one generation to another without critical appraisal; it was dominated by oral tradition, making it difficult to preserve accumulated knowledge and skills, added to these is the secrecy that surrounded the content of traditional education. In the midst of these weaknesses, however, African traditional education has great

relevance or implications for modern African education. Its value that needs to be imbibed is that of self-reliance- many people in our time acquire certificates and do not know what to do with them for themselves and for the society. Another area of interest is that the modern day education needs to learn from the traditional by developing problem solving educational curriculum rather than abstract models that become irrelevant in the face of concrete challenges. More so, the idea of Universal Basic Education introduced by many governments in Africa under various names can become more successful when the modern society goes back to the traditional model to see it made sure that the entire society was educated. Education was at the time for all. With the prevalence of corruption in Africa, there is the need to imbibe the multilateral model that produced both skilled and honest people.

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