

# Re-Visiting the Philosophy of African Traditional Education for Economic Development in Contemporary Nigeria

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## Abstract

The deliberate imposition of foreign educational cultures by colonizing powers changed the narrative and African traditional educational system was painted evil and completely discarded. There was a general belief that the philosophy of African traditional educational system was primitive, capable of generating negative results in society. But contrarily, African traditional educational system was generally centred on character training to meet all aspects of societal life. This paper therefore, examined the philosophy of African traditional education, considers its nature, goals, and purposes and repositioned it as a veritable tool for economic development in contemporary Nigeria. It was therefore, recommended among others that the Nigeria education curricula should be overhauled to reflect domestic economic needs which was the hallmark of African traditional education.

**Keywords:** Re-Visiting, Philosophy, African Traditional Education, Economic Development.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education at all levels and in all forms (western or traditional) constitutes a vital tool, which is capable of addressing the present economic challenges facing Nigeria as a nation. To buttress this point, Nateinyin and Toinpere (2018) emphasized that education has been used and will continue to be utilized as a tool for sustained economic development by various countries of the world be it indigenous or modern.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria posited education as “an instrument per excellence for effecting national development” (FRN, 2004, p. 4). This policy statement suggested that education at all levels and forms (western or traditional) should drive economic growth. It implies that the GDP growth rate must depend directly on changes in education growth rate, hence, economic growth can be increased (or decreased) by changing the rate of human capital growth in appropriate proportions (Leigha, 2017).

Nigeria is currently facing economic woes as evidenced in many States battling hardship in the payment of workers salary, backlog of promotion arrears, massive exodus of companies and enterprises, sharp rise in commodity prices (foreign inflation), official looting,

money laundering, brain drain etc. There is also high job loss, falling productivity in all sectors, especially in the “almighty” petroleum (oil) sector, poverty, hardships are souring (Vanguard, Thursday, April 6, 2017, p. 22). There is a conclusive evidence that education is positively related to economic growth, if the above stated assertion is true, then the question is, why has Nigeria’s present western education system not capable of translating and transforming Nigerian economy to the extent it got to the level of recession in the past few years?

The total neglect of traditional education system in Nigeria to seek for solution of human society in the imported and imposed western education system could best be regarded on the foremost evils that befall our nationalities. The resultant effect was the emergence of a cultural conflict that would continue to negatively impact our society. The westernization of the Nigeria education system could probably have set the stage for the hydra-headed socio-cultural challenges to deepen grip on our people and nation. For instance, crime rate and moral decadence increase daily in geometrical progression thereby constituting a variance to expected morality level. This is brought about by mainly modern science and technology amidst other predisposing sub variables such as peer group influence, examination malpractice, poverty, problem of heritance succession, etc. as they affect our daily living and general well-being. There is therefore the need to (revisit) the philosophy of African traditional education and see how it could impact on our contemporary economic development processes.

### **African Traditional Education Defined**

African indigenous education was a lifelong process of learning whereby a person progressed through predetermined stages of life of graduation from cradle to grave (Cameroon & Dood, 1970). This implies that African indigenous education was continuous throughout life, from childhood to old-age.

Mushi (2009) defined African indigenous education as a process of passing among the tribal members and from one generation to another the inherited knowledge, skills, cultural traditions, norms and values of the tribe. African indigenous education is defined as the native, locally developed form of bringing up the youngsters by the older and more experienced members of the society. Being native is by no means to deny the fact that indigenous learning goals, content, structures and methods have not been enriched, or for that matter polluted or both by outside influences.

African indigenous education can generally be defined as the form of learning in African traditional societies in which knowledge, skills and attitudes of the tribe were passed from elders to the children by means of oral instructions and practical activities.

### **GOALS OF AFRICAL TRADITIONAL EDUCATION**

Fafunwa and James (1982) identified seven (7) cardinal goals of African traditional education, they are as follows:

- To develop the child’s latent physical skills;
- To develop character;
- To inculcate respect for elders and those in positions of authority;
- To develop intellectual skills;
- To acquire specific vocational training and to develop a healthy attitude towards honest labour;

- To develop a sense of belonging and to encourage active participation in family and community affairs; and
- To understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL EDUCATION**

The main characteristics of African indigenous education include the following:

### ***It was community oriented***

African indigenous education was community oriented, geared towards solving the problems of the community. The instructional activities were therefore, directed towards the social life of the community, so as to prepare the learners to fit into their community.

Kenyanta (1961) in Mushi (2009) holds that; it was taught in relation to a concrete situation. The boys and girls learnt about birds that were harmful, how they could be controlled and what birds could be eaten. In the same way, they learnt about trees that were good for firewood, building or for propping crops like banana and yams as well as those which resisted ants.

### ***It was practical based***

It was practical based, the learning experiences were made orally and the knowledge was stored in the heads of elders. The instructors were carefully selected from the family or clan. The task was to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes to the young, informally at the didactic and practical levels. Nyerere (1975) say at the didactic level, the teaching process took the form of stories, legends, riddles and songs; while at the practical level, individuals enacted what they had learnt didactically, by imitating and watching what their elders performed.

It put emphasis on practical learning and the young adults learned by watching, participating and executing what they learnt. The skills like carving, masonry, clay working, cloth making, building, canoe-making, cooking and home management were insisted among the children in the community, these were the skills opened to all, as they consisted of the basic skills, knowledge and attitudes that enabled individuals to live and function effectively in their tribe.

The question of learning by doing is very important. The best way to learn sewing is to sew; the best way to learn farming is to farm, the best way to learn cooking is to cook and so on (Nyerere, 1975 in Mushi, 2009).

### ***It was functional***

The knowledge, skills and values that were imparted were relevant to the social economic needs of the individual. The learners learned the skills that were for immediate and for long term benefits.

It had no paper word-testing and certification but learners graduated ceremoniously. There were basically no formal exams at the end of a specific level of training, but a learner was considered a graduate when he or she was able to practice what he/ she has learnt throughout the period of training. The ceremony was held to mark the completion of training and thus assuming more community responsibilities. This was common especially during what Mushi (2009) referred to as “coming of age” ceremonies and “the rites of passage”.

## **The Philosophical Bases of African Indigenous Education**

Education in traditional African societies did not develop from nowhere, it has its own philosophical bases upon which it was built, these philosophical bases include the following;

### ***Preparedness/Preparationism***

This implied that the role of teaching and learning was to equip boys and girls with the skills appropriate to their gender in preparation of their distinctive roles in the society.

### ***Functionalism***

This was another philosophical base in which the knowledge, skills and attitudes imparted were relevant to the socio-economic activities of an individual. And so, education was for utility value. It was provided for immediate induction into real life in the society. Learners learnt by observing, imitating and initiation ceremonies.

### ***Communalism***

In African traditional societies, learners learnt/acquire a common spirit to work and life and that the means of production were owned communally. The education was also an integral part of culture and history. For example, children upbringing was a whole community role. If for instance, any child misbehaved in the absence of his/her parents, any adult member of the community was responsible to correct him/her on the spot. This implies that even children belong to the entire society.

### ***Holisticism/Multiple Learning***

In this philosophical base, a learner was required to acquire multiple skills. They were either not allowed to specialize in specific occupation, or a very little room for specialization did exist, when a learner learnt about a certain skill, say farming, he/she was obliged to learn all other skills related to farming such as, how to prepare farms, hoeing, food preservation, how to fight with diseases attacking crops and so on. Also he/she had to learn other skills like hunting, house building, cookery and principles required for the wellbeing of an individual, clan and ethnic groups. The learner learned multiple skills and mastered them all.

### ***Perennialism***

This philosophical base ensured that the traditional African communities use education as a necessary tool for preserving the status quo of the tribe.

## **Strengths of African Traditional Education to the society at Large**

- Every member of the community was employed. Children learnt the skills that prepared them to immediately utilize their physical environment for self-employment. The skills acquired by watching and imitating the elders were immediately put into practical use. And thus, the children became productive and useful members in the society as every one of them contributed meaningfully in the economic development of their respective societies.

- It was successful in maintaining the socio-economic and cultural structures of the society. The learners were taught among other things, to preserve their own culture and to get rid of external influences.
- The learner/recipients acquired communal philosophical base point of view, learners were taught to respect the properties of the society and they used their acquired knowledge for services of the society.
- Education was provided to all members of the community although it differed from tribe to tribe.

### **Relevance of Traditional Education to Current Education Practice in Nigeria**

It is necessary to consider ways of integrating some aspects of indigenous education into the contemporary education system in Nigeria. One obvious problem with education in Nigeria is the quest for mere knowledge and certificates. Education is much more than this. Traditional education was very relevant to indigenous culture because it addressed the fundamental issue or relevance and utility. Thus, traditional education in terms of aims, content and methodology was integrated with the needs, aspirations and problems of the traditional society. In short, it was functional because, it enables its products to fit into their respective environment and in the process became functional citizens.

The system was so strong and capable that “irrespective of the level of educational training given during the pre-colonial days in Africa (Nigeria, inclusive), it was functional because the curriculum was relevant to the needs of the society. Unemployment, if it existed at all, was minimal and very few young men roamed the villages and towns with nothing to do (Fafunwa, 1982).

Learners in traditional African societies were innovative and constructive in thinking as they were afforded the chance to abstract understanding from their personal experiences, understanding of the local conditions, and what they already know from their respective communities. In Jigawa State Nigeria, for example, one young Nigerian invented a natural refrigeration system that does not require electricity, gas or paraffin to operate. The system, also known as the “pot-in-pot cooling system” is said to be as efficient as the modern refrigerator. The system can keep perishable foods fresh for up to one month, this instrument has not only helped farmers keep their perishable foods, but has also helped in curtailing the movement of people from rural areas to towns. This reinforces the point that indigenous education was practical and relevant to the needs of society.

It is argued that the invention of the pot-in-pot cooling system by the young Nigerian could have been a result of the abstraction of his understanding of a refrigerator and what he knows from experience at home (Mawere, 2014).

It is important to re-iterate that the introduction of the 6-3-3-4 system especially the emphasis on vocational and science education in schools derived largely from the failure of the old system of education to solve societal problems. In fact, the formal western education has had to contend with the curriculum planners though (and perhaps erroneously) that there was no way the indigenous educational system could complement it. The trend of development in our education in recent time shows that this attitude was indeed a big mistake.

### **THE CONCEPT OF ECONOMY**

Literarily, an economy could be an organization of money and resources within a country or community, etc., especially in terms of production, distribution and consumption of goods and services (Robinson & Davidson, 2007). The system or range of economic activity in a

country, region or community (Pickett, 2000); or, the relationship between production, trade and the money supply in a particular country or region (Wehmeier, McIntosh, Turnbull & Ashby, 2005 in Mushi, 2009)

In economics, it is viewed as a technology of solving basic problems of daily living, what goods and services to produce, how to produce, and for whom to produce (Begg, Fischer & Dornbusch, 2003). In the West, this term loosely refer to “any specified collection of interrelated marketed and non-marketed productive activity; ... productive activity in a region of one country, such as the economy of eastern Canada; ... one country, such as the UK economy, or ... a group of countries, such as the economies of Western Europe” (Lipsey, 1989, p. 18).

To the Indian, apart from being ‘a system by which people get a living’, an economy comprises firms, factories, mines, shops, banks, ships, roads, railways, aircrafts, offices, schools, cinemas, hospitals, houses and the rest of them which provide the Indian people with the goods and services which they either use themselves or sell abroad in order to be able to buy imports (Jhingan, 2012). In Nigeria, the term economy comprises of practical farming, fishing, weaving, cooking, carving, knitting, ... wrestling, dancing, drumming, acrobatic display, racing, etc., while intellectual training ... local history, legends, the environment (local geography, plants and animals), poetry, reasoning, riddles, proverbs, story-telling, ... profound native philosophy, science and religion and so on, which provide the Nigerian people with the goods and services which they either consume by themselves or exported abroad in order to enable payment for imports (Fafunwa, 1974, p.16).

## **Economic Development**

Economic development is generally perceived as consisting of improvement in the various aspect of the life of entire population of a country or is an increase in living conditions, improvement of the citizens self-esteem needs and free and a just society (Todaro, 2011). Economic development is manifested in the greater ability of the people that is the nation to draw from domestic resources (human and material resources) to solve their problems.

## **Traditional Education for Economic Development in Nigeria**

Traditional education was established on the basis of customs and values which were purely proper and different from one community to another, since each community had its distinctive features which were reflecting the particular way of life of people in that particular community, education was practiced differently to meet the immediate environment needs, thus, education was influenced by the environment.

Leigha (2017), argued that the present economic challenges experienced in Nigeria is as a result of the mismatch between the training her graduates received in universities and the economic requirement of the nation, he further stressed that for Nigeria to recover her real (domestic) economy, there must be a re-alignment of courses taught in schools to reflect domestic needs.

The “survival and progress of Nigeria as a nation will very much depend on the educational provision in the nation, well adapted to the social and economic demands of an independent Nigerian nation (Ukeje, 1995; Amaele, 2011); the driver as well as the transmitter of the economy is the traditional education system which the nation has ignorantly or deliberately abandoned for borrowed western system.

Economic development in Nigeria can only be guaranteed until and unless the youths are empowered (prepared and equipped) with the small scale (often despised) domestic skills (Akande, 2017). As a matter of fact, it is the small and medium enterprises that provide over

60 percent employment in developed economies and not the conglomerates. If our youth are equipped with vocational skills; they will not only be self-employed, they will employ other youths and collectively will provide the highest number of jobs in the economy. Over 65 percent of jobs in the US are provided by small and medium enterprises (Akande, 2017).

During its 2002 first operation, the NDE Agriculture programme created self-employment for 2000 graduates nationwide and each new farmer employed about five other people as farm helps. Consequently, 1000 jobs were created on the farm. The final effect could be chain job creation, the right tool to employ is the traditional system of education and economic challenges will be a thing of the past (Ebong & Leigha, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

Traditional or indigenous education is the cornerstone of achieving economic growth in contemporary Nigeria and by extension to all African countries. There is need to look back at what point Nigeria abandoned her indigenous education system that provided live-long job opportunities for all, to embrace western education that has brought unemployment to university graduates with master degree. If Nigeria must permanently get out of its economic challenges, the educational system of the country must be re-defined and its curriculum content made relevant to the peculiar needs of her various ethnic groups, which was the hall mark of the abandoned traditional system of education.

## Recommendations

The following are recommendations made:

- The Nigeria education curricula should be overhauled to reflect domestic economic needs.
- The educational system should be decentralized to reflect domestic needs.
- Teachers should be re-skilled for effective domestic (indigenous) education delivery.

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