

THE NATURE OF AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Within any social set up, there is usually an educational system. This institution is a portent instrument in the structuring of the people and the other social institutions. In this case the personality of the people and their activities are highly influenced by this moulding and remoulding instrument, the educational system. We can therefore, understand why education is so important and the people of every society tend to invest so much time, effort, money and material in it. In fact, the personalities of a people together with their behaviour are greatly determined by the nature and philosophy of education operating in that society. This means that the thinking and actions of a people are generally the outcome of their educational system. Education can be said in this context to be a tool that is useful, not only in the shaping, changing and developing the social structures but also the peoples' attitude to nature life, history and destiny. Education should mean everything to a people of a particular culture and philosophy. And since it plays such a crucial role in the people's life, society history and progress, it is certainly an inalienable gift and right to a people, state or nation.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a people, the Africans have the inalienable right to develop an educational philosophy and system suitable to their peculiar personality and aspirations. When this is denied, as it was during the colonial era and still continuous today, then the world cannot talk of equality of human beings and inalienable rights. Until this is done then human rights are a foreign thing to the African people.

It is, however, quite natural to have a people who have generally been classified as worthy only for servitude (as shown by the phenomenon of slave trade) by the West, not to share the same aspirations with their oppressors. Education is a tool for the liberation of a person and people. In this wise one can understand the enslaving role of Western education in the African society.

This paper is to investigate how Western educational system can be acting as a kind of enslaving instrument and also one that alienates the African's mind.

2. THE AFRICAN AND EUROPEAN MINDS

Human beings possess mind-centers, the sources of the forces for all human activities, the sources of ideas; and hence the things that have shaped the Africans liberation. Control the mind and you can control the person. This is just what colonial education has almost succeeded in doing. On the influence of colonization on the African mind, Prof. A Dickson Mungazi states that “the colonization of Africans by European nations in the 19th Century had a profoundly negative impact on the lives of Africans”¹ The Western Education has been used to effect this planned impact on the African's Mind.

When we examine the programs of studies, we will observe that subjects such as history, English, Literature and so on figured much. These carried with them strong European cultural forces and ideas. It took quite a long time before we could have the study of African history, literature and some African languages. Again if an African had to do philosophy, especially philosophy of education he

had to do mostly Western philosophy and in particular philosophy of education. The ultimate influence of these areas of studies is the inculcation of the idea that the European mind is superior, dominate and therefore more suitable for development. This view is expressed by Claude Levi-Strauss when he “stresses the considerable differences in Mentality between traditional (African) sciences and the developed societies”.²

This difference is highlighted by the fact that “modern industrial civilization are founded on efforts, individual and group competition, a will to power, and at the very least, a desire for freedom which opens men’s minds to the possible, if dimly glimpsed.”³ Thus, the African feels that it is only in others does he find his security, even his liberty”.⁴ Hence to become truly a man one had “to rise to the level of that pre-ordered whole, nature as a whole”⁵. In the mind and thinking of the West, therefore, the African is one who is integrated into” a social order which has a stability and permanence modeled on the cosmic order.”⁶ This social order is seen in closely bound up with the order of the external nature. According to Dalloz, this is a vitalistic philosophy in which “men seek to share in the one life that moves in things and animals and men. They are thus linked to their own origin and rise in the level proper to the whole.”⁷ The force of order in this case tends to dominate the African’s mind. Consequently, with such an attitude of mind “stability and integration are themselves values, the primary social law is balance and that the chief danger is imbalance.”⁸ To maintain this balance, everyone has his determined place.

When we examine such an assessment of the African’s mind by the West, we begin to understand why the West behaved the way it did in 1884 – 1885 at the Berlin Conference. The West had a certain conception of the Blackman, his social philosophy and therefore saw himself as a civilizer of the African. He could not “understand the effective bond between father and son.”⁹ Hence to the European it is “usually sublimated or liquidated in the course of growth.”¹⁰ But if it does not happen, the white man would call it the lack of the will to power. Rather it is not

clear to him” the role of dependence and submission... is not inter-human but metaphysical and religious.”¹¹

What is obvious from this analysis by the West of the African’s mind is a whole conception of reality which unfortunately is different for the two cultures: African and European. It shows a marked difference in attitude to nature between the West and the African. To the West, there is a passive nature presented for “a collective effort to master.”¹² In the mind of the West, “development implies an unconditional priority of culture over nature but outside of industrial society such a priority is hardly ever admitted”¹³. In this way, nature is an instrument for men to use. On the other hand, to the African “the supernatural is unquestionably superior to culture as nature is inferior to it”.¹⁴

With this conception of nature, for example, it cannot be treated as “a mere resource of instrument or material”.¹⁵ This conception of nature by the two minds; African and European minds are obviously going to be inherent in their educational systems. None can therefore wonder why the West treats nature, for example, the way they do. Read the chemistry, physics and other natural sciences of the West and you will understand why they exploit natural resources the way they do, regardless of the dangers this could pose to human life, and the globe itself. To express this folly on this part of the West in their educational training, Walter Russell states it:

*The real fallacy of nuclear fission for industry is that these so called deadly poisonous gases from the radioactive elements in reactors and in the waste products, which are encased in concrete and buried in the sea to protect human life from their admitted danger, are not poisonous in their own environment underground... Men make them poisonous by removing from their purposeful environment to place them in an abnormal environment unsuited to their normal environment.*¹⁶

Dr. Walter Russell thinks that nature should be exploited with due respect for its own system and have as well as the purpose(s) it was created for. Natural resources in “Nature... are fulfilling their necessary useful purpose. They are vitally necessary where they are. They are of benefit to man when underground or distributed in rocks”¹⁷

Today the world shares this view of nature which was long understood by the so called naïve and vitalistic mind of the African. The African mind is transmitted in the traditional educational process: respect and the deep desire to live in harmony with nature. We can also note that it is because of these mental attitudes that while the West recklessly destroyed people and environment, the Africans ought to conserve and preserve life and environment. We can also appreciate why the West is now promoting environmental Education.

Western philosophy and education depreciated nature and hence taught the attitude to the people; (the West did not see a universe built on an order that herald a system. But one dominated by atomic structures, hence they could afford to destroy the environment of Africa since it was not part of their own. The truth which is just being transmitted through natural conservation of environment is that the African mind has some qualities above that of the West. Consequent upon this is the fact that Western education does not quite suite our own mind development. Rather it tends to uproot and to implant that which is not farsighted. Summarizing the view of Davidson Nicol, Mungazi thinks that the “African mind could play an important role in international affairs”¹⁸ It is not an inferior mind that needs to be educated to function well.

3. THE AFRICAN’S CONCEPTIONS ON WESTERN EDUCATION

Since there is the disparity in the both minds, the African has his conception of Western education. As pointed in the introduction of this paper, every society has its basic institutions, one of which is education. But it is equally clear that

these institutions are built on the people's philosophy of culture. European education system is built on the philosophy of culture which tends to emphasize the individualistic or atomic society. The African, who had been subjected to Western education, has but his own system of education has his evaluation of the former system.

In his work, Facing Mount Kenya, Dr. Jomo Kenyatta has argued that the Western system of education seemed to have been for “Civilizing and uplifting poor savages.”¹⁹ This had been because of preconceived ideas in the mind of the West that African cultures are “primitive.”²⁰ It could be observed that the African who is awakened looks on the western civilization with “fear mingles with suspicion”²² This is because the Western type of education has helped to tear him from his society. Dr. Kenyatta notes:

Above all, the African finds that socially and religiously he has been torn away from his family and tribal organization. The new civilization he is supposed to acquire, neither prepares him for the proper functions of a European mode of life nor for African life, he is left foundering between the two social forces”²³

Taught by some Europeans who have racial bias and have misunderstood ideas of the African; meager knowledge of the social functions, the lack of an intimate contact with the real social life of the Africans, failed to realize this vital fact. The consequence for the African society and the education system is that “the Europeans tries to influence his (African pupil in the direction of new habits, standards of life and general Europeanization.”²⁴ Thus, he tends to destroy a social background that he does not understand. In the final analysis the African is educated in values that tend to ignore his aspirations.

However, Dr. Nyerere, shares the views of Dr. Kenyatta when he observes this about colonial education.

*Education was not designed to prepare the young people for the service of their country; instead it was motivated by a desire to inculcate the values of the colonial society and to train individuals for the service of the colonial state.*²⁵

Dr. Nyerere continues his analysis by indicating some more undesirable impacts of Western education on the African mind and life. He notes that Western education laid “heavier emphasis on subservient attitudes and on white-collar skills; it emphasized and encouraged the individualistic instincts of mankind, instead of his cooperative instincts”²⁶ The result of this educational philosophy is the accumulation of individual material wealth which is “used as a criterion of social merit and worth”²⁷ Thus, Western education tends to encourage inequality, and therefore, promoting the “domination of the weak by the strong, especially in the economic field.”²⁸ The final goal of Western education was to “replace traditional knowledge by the knowledge from a different society.”²⁹

Education as a social institution should promote appropriate African values, lifestyle and a proper development strategy. A peculiar African education, one built on the typical African values, must therefore,

*Encourage the development in each (African) of three things an enquiring mind; an ability to learn from what others do, and reject or adapt it to his own needs; and a basic confidence in his own position as a free and equal member of the society.*³⁰

Since morality is an important objective of the African education, the latter should not encourage “attitudes of inequality, intellectual arrogance and intense individualism among the young people.”³¹ An educational system that is developed on these mentioned factors tends to be elitist, meeting only “the interest and needs of a very small proportion of those who enter the school system”³² Thus, that type of educational structure induces the feeling of superiority, in some few members of the society, thereby leaving an inferior majority group. Such a system militates

against the goal of constructing an egalitarian society. Above all, Western education encourages book knowledge and certificate phobia in the citizens which unfortunately tend to be void of the necessary moral qualities such as the character of the graduates. Hence a person's worth is measured in terms of "the ability to pass examinations"³³

Furthermore, Edward E. Ezewu et al think that the "aims of indigenous education is... to bring up children who should have respect for the ancestors, the elders of the community, appreciate and pursue social values and keep strictly to the social norms".³⁴ Some of these objectives are as follows:

*To develop in the growing child the spirit of collective behaviour; to develop respect for the soil, and the river that provide the means of livelihood; to respect parents who have educated the child; to respect the institution of marriage, marry and perform effectively the marital obligations and bear children to promote the name of the family, the lineage and community; above all to develop a good character.*³⁵

It should be noted that indigenous education is a total education since it devotes itself with "The whole life of the individual submitted into it from birth to death, in character, spiritual, physical and intellectual."³⁶ We can see that African education is holistic and more functional because it does not produce unemployed graduates since it prepares them within their social and cultural backgrounds, respectively. Again, African education does not produce dependent persons as is the case with the graduates from the Western education systems. African education fits squarely with the purpose for which it is created; develop an African mind for an African environment in which he is in harmony or seeks to be in harmony with it.

4. The Need for a Sound African Philosophy of Education

The inherent defects in Western education make it unsuitable for the development of an authentic African identity and personality. This is a right of the African just as is the case of the Europeans; French, English, etc. Each of this

nationality has developed its own identity and personality. It is clear that this authentic birth right of the African cannot be developed by a foreign philosophy of education. Dr. J. N. Okongwu (1946; 448) has remarked in the case of Nigeria that “educational development in Nigeria has been retarded because of the imposition of British educational ideals and practices, which make local adaptation and originality virtually impossible.”³⁷ The consequence of this imposition is that the African is forced to develop “a sense of inferiority and contempt for his own cultural heritage.”³⁸ In this mode of thinking and personality, the African tends to imitate instead of “developing his culture and environmental wealth...”³⁹ This type of personality is simply lopsided because the African hardly understands the nature and spirit (philosophical background) of the Western education system. And because he has abandoned his cultural heritage, there is created” a cultural vacuum.”⁴⁰ In this circumstance, the African is equally not well balanced in his personality. Thus the African may be moving about attending conferences, etc, but he is not a true African, even if he pretends to be one. Uproot one from his cultural background totally and do not replace it with a meaningful alternative, that person is “dead”. We can therefore understand why there is the need for the reform of the educational system for relevance and selective adaptation. But it cannot be done unless there is a proper definition of an African philosophy of education. It is this philosophy that will select the values that will give the students “a sense of social and cultural identity,”⁴¹ and then an authentic and stable personality, confident in itself in the face of the prevailing contemporary educational systems. In the words of Dr. Manuwuiké:

*Education, as it is in most parts of Africa, is alienating the African from his land, his village, his peers, and even from himself. This has produced what was referred to... as the crisis of identity” which has its origin and uniqueness in the acquired ‘colonial’ mentality within the African.*⁴²

Again he thinks that, there is a kind of “Virus’ which forces Africans to think white, and to look for an extra-African raison d’être of things in their local African environment”⁴³ Thus the greatest challenge to modern Africa today is to find ways and means to extricate the people and continent from this educational virus that has almost ravaged the African mind. Only a truly African educational system can do it.

5. THE NATURE OF AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION.

Since Western education is only helping to educate the African to be a psychopath, one with an alienated personality, there is the urgent need to remedy this situation. We know the source of the problem is Western education, a colonial legacy. There is a need not only to decolonize the land but also the African mind. Quoting Ricky Rosenthal, Mamuwuiké observes that “intellectual decolonization of the continent...is in fact the freeing of students, teachers, and Africans themselves from the once – persuasive mentality of the colonizers”.⁴⁴

An African philosophy of education is that which emphasizes the African values, those values that are built on African metaphysics; those that give the African the unique and peculiar African personality. An authentic African personality possesses certain qualities that should be educated into perfection. These characteristics include:

- Hospitality;
- Forgiveness;
- Love for the Collective, the communal;
- The spirit to share with others;
- The permeating role of morality and the religious and so on.

Most of these qualities if not all, are diametrically opposed to those of the West. When we look at these qualities, we can say that the African is not materialistic in his life style; and hence you did not find him going to conquer territories and

thereby amassing wealth which could be used to dominate, like the West did in the past and is doing today. The real African education is thus one that has educated the qualities in the African mind; caused them to blossom and also enhance a truly African identity.

The African has his peculiar wisdom which places the human being at its center of its operation. This wisdom should permeate the African activities so as to give them the African spirit. For example, there is certainly wisdom in the African's emphasis on the respect for one's parents and elders within the community and in the family, in particular. The Creator of the Universe, Yahweh has given this same social ethics as a law when He states: "My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments. For length of days, and long life, and peace shall they add to thee"⁴⁵

But, as you can deduce from Dalloz's words, this respect for parents is "liquidated by growth".⁴⁶ This means that at certain age the European child has no reason to obey his parents. Thus this divine injunction to all mankind is thrown away. In the West, "the spiritual, moral and social aspects have suffered wanton neglect and consequent gross decline".⁴⁷ The result is a high accumulation of wealth, and "low moral – spiritual development".⁴⁸ Our education system should conserve these values and transmit them to the next generation. Africans have in their wisdom developed a certain number of values which have man at the center. Some of these values are:

- The human person;
- Respect for life (Cf. Gen. 9:4);
- The extended family;
- Solidarity: "the positive will to and the practice of living and working together".⁴⁹
- Communalism: "the spirit to commune together with God, nature and culture."⁵⁰
- Hospitality: Love to welcome strangers in their midst.
- Deep religiosity: For the African, "life is religion and religion is life"⁵¹

- Sacredness of nature;
- Communication, and so on. These have not exhausted the list. All these values should be developed in the African educational system. Some of these values have been rejected by Western philosophy hence the nature of philosophy of nature and education. For example, nature is not sacred to the West; it is a mere instrument for human use. Yet man and nature are symbiotic elements. The African philosophy of education should not make the mistake the West made in seeing the relation between nature and man as one between master and servant. Hence nature is passive.

When these values are ingrained in our educational philosophy and schooling programmes, we should take the next goal which is re-educating the African's mind. Prof. Chinweizu has stated this miseducation clearly in The West and the Rest of Us.

It was a miseducation which sought to withhold from me the memory of our true African past and to substitute an ignorant shame for all that the West had done on the continent, it was a miseducation which sought to quarantine me from all influences...it was a miseducation which sought to cultivate in me that kind of inferiority complex.”⁵²

As could be seen from the observation by Chinweizu, the African mind should be rescued. This can be done only by the educational system. Consequently, an African philosophy of education has the onerous task of undoing what had been induced in the African mind for more than a century. The Africanness in the African must be revived, for it has its importance to us, our development and society.

6. CONCLUSION

The African mind is therefore not just a shapeless system, but is one with all the qualities that other systems or minds have. Therefore, there is no reason why

the West should continue to dominate the African. Slavery and slave trade ended about two hundred and fifty years ago. The world through technology has become a global village. Hence there is no reason to lack behind. Africa has a reason to incorporate itself with all its identity into the global phenomenon. An African, for example, once occupied the prestigious seat of the Secretary General of the U.N., this function requires that such a person must have a level head for everything. This requires intellectual abilities.

Presently, African needs genuine development. This can hardly be done with Western education because it does not have the developmental elements, especially those elements that can bring about genuine development. To achieve this desired goal, in the words of Prof. F.C. Okafor, there is need for “the propagation of the national philosophy (of education) and the “national culture”^{.53} This is not an easy task as those to carry out this assignments are not those “the educated” African is more a product of his European education than of his indigenous African environment”.^{.54} We cannot afford to play with our destiny. We must develop a genuine African philosophy of education, if we need to succeed. Dr. Manuwike has, however, suggested that we could develop that type of philosophy by blending the traditional and progressive values. He notes: “it is the task of education and educators in Africa to demonstrate that traditionalism and progressivism can be compatible”.^{.55} To share this view G. O. Onibonoje et al argue that “it is possible to remove too much individualism and selfishness from public life through...communalism”.^{.56} Communalism provides the necessary checks and balances we need to grow as a character fitted for steady and steady social being. The proper education enables one to love his/her environment. Western education is not inculcating this spirit in the educated persons.

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