LITERACY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

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Literacy for Sustainable Development in a Knowledge Economy

Essays in honour of

PROFESSOR RASHID ADEWUMI ADERINOYE

edited by

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Indigenous Education: A catalyst for poverty alleviation in Nigeria

I.A. Fasasi and A.A. Omokhabi

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Introduction

Poverty has been recognized as a major factor hindering the process of growth and development in most developing countries of the world. Omolewa (2001) submitted that poverty is the inability to live a decent life with respect to food, shelter, good health care and transport. At different times and during different regimes, the Nigerian government has introduced different policies and programmes aimed at reducing poverty. Education is a universal process occurring in all human societies; it is the process through which a society passes on its culture (social, ethical, intellectual, artistic and industrial attainments) and by which it can be differentiated from other societies or groups. Education can thus occur informally and has deep roots in the environment in which it takes place.

Every society, whether simple or complex, has its own system for training its youth. When a society develops a process related to its environment and passes it on from generation to generation, it becomes peculiar to the members and the environment (Fafunwa, 1974) and may then be safely referred to as indigenous. This informs the term 'indigenous education'. Some of the underlying principles of education in different societies may be dissimilar, but in all cases they are aimed at giving every individual the opportunity to achieve normal growth in his society, acquire skills with which he can feed himself and his family and contribute meaningfully to the common wealth. Some societies emphasize certain

attributes more than others in the process of achieving this standard education. Thus, while most of the developing societies 'kill' the curiosity in their children by restricting their desire to question adults, the more advanced societies encourage theirs to be inquisitive. It is believed that this is partly responsible for their advancement in inventions.

From the study of systems of education in different societies, we know that the environment, the circumstances of the people and what they are struggling to achieve, influence the principles of indigenous education. Thus, in the ancient world, the Athenians and Spartans formulated different principles for bringing up their children. In the same way, societies of the Third World, such as Nigeria and other African countries, where indigenous education is struggling for survival against imported systems of education, have formulated different principles for educating their young ones. These societies exist throughout the world, but attention here is focused on those in Africa generally and in Nigeria, in particular. Broadly speaking, these countries seem to be homogeneous because their environments, certain body characteristics and social organizations are somewhat similar.

Indigenous education is the type of education that was prevalent in Africa before the introduction of Western education. It was a kind of informal education in which all the members of the community were involved. It is a process whereby learning is used for individual, community and global betterment and is characterized by the integrated involvement of people of all ages. It uses community learning resources and research to bring about communal change and is based on the recognition that people can learn through, with and from each other to create a better world. It is an approach that enables individuals and groups to develop their capabilities for a full and rich personal life. Indigenous education is local and relates to people in their local community. The importance of this type of education in the provision of skillful and technical manpower in the community is such that it paves the way for job opportunities in the areas of business education, vocational education, agriculture, and fine art, among others.

Generally, the youth learn by imitating life and the activities of the elderly in the society. Young boys learn the art of farming by following their fathers and other elders to the farm and watching how these leaders clear the land, plant, nurture and harvest the crops. Later, the young ones participate in these activities. Similarly, girls learn domestic work by watching and imitating how their mothers and other elders in the community carry out domestic chores.

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Principles of Indigenous Education

There are several principles of indigenous education. Fafunwa (1974) observed that 'functionalism' is the guiding principle of indigenous education. This was true of early Greek education, particularly Spartan education, which strongly emphasized functionalism. In other words, African traditional education, like Spartan education, is aimed at making the individual a useful member of the community. This may explain why traditional African societies regard education as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Education is therefore intended as a gradual process of induction into the society and a preparation for adult life and responsibility. It is also sometimes seen as preparation for a peaceful death or a happy end. The principle of functionalism goes along with that of self-development.

First, the principle of self-development is characteristic of African indigenous education, as the child is given every opportunity to do things by himself under the direction and protection of the adult. It is believed that each child has his own talents which he must develop but not until he has found out and experienced what happens in the society into which he is born. It is after this that he can take up innovations without embarrassing himself and the members of his family. Before and during adolescence, he has to go through a series of initiation ceremonies to make sure that he understands the ways and wherefore of what happens within his society and also that he makes use of all the opportunities available as required by the society.

Second, communalism is another principle of African indigenous education. Members of the community share what they have and do things in common. They have their common markets, playgrounds and shrines. As one indivisible body, they participate in education through various kinds of ceremonies and festivals. Together also, they hunt animals, farm, fish, sell products of their farms, drum and dance, wrestle and sometimes engage in some kinds of acrobatic or intellectual activities. The education of the African child or adult is therefore a continuous activity and every member of the society is involved in it by passing on and/or learning what needs to be learnt in the society.

It is a time-honoured principle and practice in almost all African societies that no individual has the right to exist unto himself alone (Fafunwa, 1974). Everybody has to develop within the society and interact with others for the wellbeing of the society in general. This is why communalism forms the basic philosophy of property ownership, defence and other aspects of social life. Right

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from birth, the child is made to realize that his lot is tied to that of the community, which includes himself, his mates, the elders, souls of the departed and generations unborn. Consequently, if he defaults, he would realize the full implications of it; that it does not end with those whom he sees and talks to but extends to those he cannot see but who see him and follow his actions in details. The principle allows one to own property and be individualistic to a certain extent, but not all the time. The individual is trained to share property, including clothes, with others. Although this sounds unhygienic, there are safeguards against abuse of such a privilege. Under this same principle in the past, land and landed property were not individually owned but held in trust for the community by the acknowledged head, through which heads of families also held them in trust for individuals who could use them at will but were not allowed personal claims.

In the African indigenous educational system, a child is made to appreciate his role as a member of his immediate and extended family, as well as that of the community at large. The early education of an African child is the responsibility of everyone in his immediate environment. When he is old enough to learn a specific trade, particularly in a field that is not hereditary, he is sent out as an apprentice to a master tradesman who may not be a member of the family (Fafunwa, 1974).

According to Sarumi (2001), age groups are generally engaged in communal work. They may help other members in clearing, planting and harvesting crops or help the community at large in road-building or help the paramount chief in performing a given task or assignment. Under this same principle of communalism, people learn thrift through the *esusu* system, or thrift societies. The thrift system today has been modernized to form cooperative and thrift societies. The principle of communalism helps in educating the Nigerian youth to assist their relatives or neighbours when they are in difficulty. They do this by making contributions through their age groups, chief or any other adult member of the society or extended family. Each household is a socioeconomic entity, everybody being his brother's keeper. Moments of joy or sorrow are shared by everyone—for one person's ceremony is everybody's ceremony.

The third principle of African indigenous education is the basic acceptance of the existence of a Supreme Being who coordinates all natural phenomena as they affect man. This is the basis of religion everywhere. It cannot therefore be lumped together with other characteristics like communalism because it is universal in essence. In almost all African societies, it is believed that the Supreme Being should be reached through some intermediary, such as Sango, Obatala,

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Ogun, Osun, etc. This is made to form the basis of authority in domestic and public relationships and helps maintain justice, probity and mutual trust in the society. Hence, anyone educating African children would have to emphasize religion as it affects relationships and social interactions. The inclusion of these three principles, along with the need for the acquisition of basic skills to earn a living, makes the full complement of traditional African education. The skills and methods of learning, of course, differ from place to place and depend on the climatic and geographical conditions.

Process of Indigenous Education

In African indigenous education, the family is the first school for every child and the mother is the first and principal teacher for the first five or six years. From about six years, some educational work is passed on to older members of the nuclear and extended family. From about that age, a boy is 'usually' passed to an uncle rather than the father to begin his apprenticeship as a farmer, fisherman or craftsman. The girl stays with a woman where she learns how to obey and pay special attention to housekeeping. The duration of apprenticeship is only broadly uniform. In the case of farming, it lasts until the young man is about to marry. A full traditional African education and upbringing is not completed until the late twenties or early thirties. By that time, one would have an opportunity for satisfactory home-training, acquisition of practical skills to earn a living, development of moral composure as well as respectable and reliable knowledge of one's environment.

In all cultures, education is a long and often trial and error process towards the improvement of the individual status. Where it is systematized, it needs constant refurbishing to help it cater adequately to individuals' needs. Where it is not systematized, it relies on oral tradition and the elders of the society to pass on the culture, and on the cooperation of family heads to keep up the tradition. Each culture has formulated procedures that suit its environment for growth and development (Osokoya, 2003).

Sarumi (2001) claimed that the aim of indigenous African education is multilateral and the aim is to produce an individual who is honest, respectable, skilled, cooperative and conforming to the social order of the day. According to him, the seven main objectives of indigenous African education are to:

1. Develop the child's latent physical skills
2. Develop character

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3. Inculcate respect for elders and those in position of authority
4. Develop intellectual skills
5. Acquire specific vocational training and develop a healthy attitude towards honest labour
6. Develop a sense of belonging and participate in family and community affairs
7. Understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large (Sarumi, 2001).

Physical training

The African child likes to explore his immediate environment, observe adults when doing their activities and imitate them. Through games, dance and the like, the African child develops physically. He is always eager to try new things.

Character training

One of the hallmarks of indigenous African education is character training. Sarumi (2006) is of the opinion that it is its cornerstone. Majasan (1975) writing on Yoruba indigenous education believes that the two main objectives are character training and religious education. He is of the opinion that all other objectives are subsumed in these two.

All the members of the family are responsible for training the younger ones to be honest, humble, persevering and of good report at all times. The child is taught directly by being told what to do on certain occasions and by being corrected when wrong. The child is also taught indirectly by learning from the punishment meted out to others who were nonconformists. Moreover, there are proverbs and folktales on moral and ethical behaviour. Severe punishment is inflicted on young offenders to serve as deterrent to others on acts likely to bring disrepute to the family and/or community. The young ones are taught hospitality, etiquette, endurance and other good behaviours.

Respect for elders

Respect for elders is closely related to character training. Africans attach great importance to respect for those that are older than one, to those who are in authority, particularly the kings and chiefs, as well as older neighbours and

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relatives. One aspect of respect is the complicated greeting systems and methods for categories of people. In Nigeria, there are various greeting systems for people and among different ethnic groups. There are particular ways of greeting kings and chiefs, fathers and mothers, and relatives. Drummers, dancers, singers, etc could signal greetings to important personalities, friends and even enemies through their respective media. According to Osokoya (2003), Africans have the most complicated verbal and physical communication system and the child must master the various salutations of his own ethnic group before he reaches maturity. Other aspects of African indigenous education are intellectual training, vocational training and promotion of cultural heritage. These and other trainings are geared towards meeting the basic needs of the individual within the society.

Poverty is defined in various ways by different scholars. Abe (1999) viewed poverty as the state of being poor, as having very little money with which to procure one's basic needs. It is regarded as an aberration, misfortune, deprivation and lack of basic amenities of life for human survival. The level of poverty is not limited to individuals, but it affects groups as well as nations. However, the level of poverty of individuals can build up to affect a nation; hence, there exists the poor nations of the world where the number of those who cannot afford the basic needs of life outnumbers that of those who can afford them to a great extent.

It is clear that poverty is pronounced in Nigeria. Despite the resource endowment of Nigeria, many people still suffer hunger and lack. It was established by a survey on Nigeria's poverty profile that some 50 percent of the rural population live in poverty and that more than 50 percent of this crusted poverty is among women (Onimode, 1996). The rate of unemployment is also alarming. Despite the fact that Nigeria is the sixth largest exporter of oil in the world, the country is third in the group of countries with the highest number of poor people— after China and India. This may be responsible for the high rate of various crimes and corrupt practices in recent times. It is also noteworthy that sub-Saharan Africa has recorded the least success in the global efforts at eradicating extreme poverty and hunger.

Conclusively, this review has established that African indigenous education has the characteristics and principles to develop and empower individuals and make them self-reliant and socioeconomically upright. The education system is comprehensive, effective and work-oriented, equipping one for effective problem-solving and self-reliant life. It is therefore recommended that government should give indigenous education the priority it deserves, by including

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its tenets in the mainstream school curriculum. If the skills and trainings of indigenous education are properly learnt, mastered and incorporated, poverty would be drastically reduced and, ultimately, eradicated in the country.

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