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# Philosophical Examination of the Philosophical Foundation of African Traditional Education: Towards A Pragmatic Education in Nigeria

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#### Abstract

Traditional education has been conceived as an outdated and old way of training individuals in the society as a result of modernity, globalization and civilization. Nigeria as a nation that use education as a tool to achieve its national goals cannot afford to abandon its traditional way of educating its people for its merits that needs to be revisited. As long as education is conceived as cultivation of the natural powers of the mind for acquisition of skills through training and instruction, traditional education has a pride place in view of its collective and social activity, multidimensional nature in character and long-life process. Traditional education is philosophically founded based on preparationism, functionalism, communalism, perennialism and holisticism that are still relevant to Nigerian education system today. Despite its conservativeness, informal nature and rigidity the authors made a philosophical examination of African traditional education and recommend that, the School Curriculum in all learning institutions in Nigeria should be revisited critically to reflect the traditional aspirations of different ethnic groups found in Nigeria, Apprenticeship system of training young people should be revisited to produce persons who can take pride in their daily activities, Emphasis should always be on worthwhile activities of individual person even if it makes no meaning to others.

Keywords: Traditional Education, functional, Pragmatic, Curriculum

#### Introduction

There is no gain saying that education serves as an instrument for the development of both the individual and the society. Thus, education is not new to any race and as such, every society irrespective of time and place has evolved one education system or the other. In the light of this, it should be noted that an educational system existed in Africa long before the arrival of

Islamic and Western systems of education. According to Mara<sup>1</sup> the African traditional education system aims at inducting members of the society into activities and mode of thoughts that are in conformity with the norms and values of the society. Mara further pointed out that the African societies were famous for their rich cultural heritage which was preserved and transmitted from generation to generation through the system of traditional education. That is why Fafunwa<sup>2</sup> strongly asserted that, no history of education in Africa is complete without adequate knowledge of the traditional or indigenous educational system prevalent in Africa before the arrival of Islam and Christianity.

The African traditional education has been subjected to several descriptions in order to establish its meaning. However, for better appreciation of the African traditional education as a concept, there is the need to analyze the simple words that made up the concept. In this connection, therefore, Mutiba as cited in Ushe<sup>3</sup> posited that the concept of traditional education can be seen as emanating from the simple coining of the words: "Traditional" and "Education". The word 'traditional' connotes something that is old, ancient, and native or indigenously practiced, while the word 'education' implies cultivation of the natural powers of the mind for acquisition of skills through training and instruction. However, to be more elaborate in defining African traditional education as a phrase, the word "African" also needs to be explained and in this realization, the term 'African', speaks of a relation to, or characteristics of Africa, or its people, language, culture, geography, etc. Based on this view, therefore, the African traditional education was labeled as the informal, indigenous, pre-colonial and community-based type of education. It is generally the type of education that was practiced in Africa prior to the coming of western system of education championed by the missionaries and colonial masters.

These descriptions also resulted from the belief that there were no schools structures or classrooms with professionally certified teachers as is the case in the modern system of education. As opined by Nwaubani<sup>4</sup>, the unique or discrete way through which many African societies educated their young ones to continue with their culture before the coming of western education is called traditional or indigenous education; it operated without elaborate school buildings, classrooms and other instructional facilities as the case with the modern school system. However, in the traditional system certain settings exist in which initiation of learners was done with adult members of the society serving as teachers to prepare the young individuals for their responsibilities as future adults in their communities. Although the traditional education system differs greatly from the modern system of education in quite a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> J.K. Mara. "Virtues and challenges of traditional African education". *Journal of Pan African studies* 2006. 1(4). 15 – 25

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> A.B. Fafunwa. "History of Education in Nigeria. Revised Edition". NPS Educational. Reprinted 2002/2004. P1

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> M.U. Ushe. "The role of traditional education in resolving youth restiveness in Nigeria" *Journal of Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 2014. 4(27). 101 - 107

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> O. O. Nwaubani. "Traditional Education in Nigeria: Aims, Contents, Methodology and Processes". Reviewed by Vicent Ekwelem, University of Nigeria 2008. P54 - 61

number of ways, it was found to have served its purpose of equipping the individual with practical skills to enable him or her play useful roles in the society. Thus, the traditional education system has been a system that met the aspirations of the African traditional societies at that material time.

#### **Traditional or Indigenous Education Practice in Nigeria**

The practice of indigenous education form was prevalent in Africa long before the arrival of the types of education brought to the continent by Islam and Christianity. This has clearly indicated that, before the introduction of Islamic and Western education respectively in Nigeria, there had been in practice a form of traditional or indigenous type of education. Historically as well as in the current era, Nigeria consists of many ethnic groups and societies each with its own culture and tradition. However, these diverse groups and societies all have common educational aims and objectives, but the method of teaching differed from one society to another mainly due to social, economic and geographical imperatives.

In Nigeria, the method of educating and training of the youths via the traditional system (which is still relevant up to today) is very similar to that in a host of other black African states, especially in places such as Ghana, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe and likes. The education starts from the infancy stage to adulthood and beyond. It encompasses the adoption of different kinds of games including wrestling, running, drumming and dancing. The youths are also involved in activities such as cooking, dressing, hunting, farming, carpentry, black/gold smith, dyeing and pottery as well as the practice for healthy living and likes. Daniel-Kalio<sup>5</sup> pointed out that, before the introduction of western education in Nigeria, various communities were engaged in informal educational processes: various forms of skills and knowledge were transmitted to young men and women via traditional ways which were not affiliated to physical school structures or classroom settings.

However, it was an educational system organized along well-defined lines; the young women were educated in the art of managing the homes while the young men were trained in tasks that required stamina. Thus, the indigenous education of the young involved the training for social, physical, intellectual, moral and character development to enable the young men transform fully into functional and acceptable members of their respective societies. It is worth pointing out that, critical thinking formed part of the indigenous education curriculum at different phases of the life of the individual. Thus, in the traditional sense, the young Nigerian child continues to learn even after attaining the adulthood stage. It is a form of education that was continuous in nature and lasted for life. However, this assertion might be premised upon Kenyatta's views of the African traditional education which as cited in Adeyemi and Adeyika<sup>6</sup> indicated that, this form of education began from birth and ended with death. In Nigeria, the indigenous

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> B. Daniel-Kalio. "Historical Analysis of Educational Policy in Nigeria: Trends and Implications". *International Journal of Scientific Research in Education*. June, 2018. 11(2). 247-264.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> M.B. Adeyemi and A.A. Adeyika. "Some key issues in African Traditional Education". *The MCGILL Journal of Education 2002.* 37(2). 223 - 240

system of education (which is still in practice in the rural communities) is a method of education which was based on as Nigeria's cultural heritage. The family is the first school or learning center for children; parents (especially the mothers) serve as the first set of teachers. As the children progresses in their growth and development, they continue to learn from their uncles, aunts, peers and other significant members of the community. This has therefore indicated that Nigeria had a system of education, indigenously practiced (based on the African world perspective) before the colonial era. It is a type of education which enables the African societies to transmit their cherished cultural heritage, values, beliefs, norms and skills from one generation to another.

# Goals, Aims and Objectives of Traditional Education in Nigeria

The traditional or indigenous education system in Nigeria and Africa as a whole was designed to produce individuals who will be honest, respectable, skilled and cooperative as well as being a conformist to the norms and values of the society. In this realization, Fafunwa as cited in Umar and Shagari<sup>7</sup> listed seven cardinal goals of the African traditional education as follows:

- 1. Development of the child's latent and physical skills,
- 2. Character and moral training,
- 3. Development of intellectual and social skills,
- 4. Acquisition of specific vocational training and to develop a healthy attitude toward honest labour,
- 5. To inculcate respect for elders and those in position of authority,
- 6. To understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large,
- 7. Development of sense of belonging and encouragement of active participation in the family and community affairs.

In line with the cardinal goals listed above, the aims or objectives of indigenous education in Nigeria can be specifically articulated as follows:

- i. **Developing the child's physical skills:** Nigeria being an African country, its indigenous form of education aims at developing the child's latent physical skills,
- ii. **Character development:** One of the cardinal goals of traditional African education is the development of character. As such, Nigeria being a part and parcel of Africa, its indigenous education aims at molding and shaping the child's character,
- iii. **Preparing the young child for life:** Education in the traditional Nigeria inculcates in the child the required skills to cope with social and life demands,
- iv. **Training the child for self-realization:** Indigenous education in the Nigeria's traditional settings helps the children to discover themselves through teaching them to realize who they are, where they come from and to understand the happening in their environment,
- v. **Inculcating in the child the ability to relate:** Traditional education in Nigeria helps an individual to relate with others in an atmosphere of mutual understanding,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> S. Umar and M.H. Shagari. "Indigenous education: A powerful tool for value promotion in Nigeria". *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences 2013*. 4(12). 9 – 13

vi. **Inculcation of discipline:** Indigenous education in traditional Nigeria aims at inculcating in the child the spirit of self-discipline, self-reliance and hard work. Therefore, a careful examination of these multilateral goals will reveal that the traditional or indigenous educational system appeared to assume the position of a well laid out system, basically for initiation into the society and preparation for adulthood It was a system of education which generally emphasized social responsibility, job orientation and political participation as well as spiritual and moral values. In this realization, the indigenous system of education with several people, to amass a knowledge (regarding the norms, values as well as the laws of the society) that will enable the child to function effectively in his or her society. As noted by Igbo<sup>8</sup> the indigenous education is informal in nature but it has certain similarities with formal education in terms of purpose. It has a well spelt out aims which are geared towards a general purpose of fitting the learners into their society, well adjusted, productive useful members.

# **Characteristics of Traditional Education**

Taking the goals, the aims, the content and method of the traditional education system in Africa, it could be seen that they are intricately interwoven; they are not divided into separate components as the case is with the modern or formal education. However, Fafunwa<sup>9</sup> pointed out that the characteristics of African traditional education are summarized as follows:

- 1. The great importance attached to it, and its collective social nature,
- 2. It's intimate, tied with social life, both in material and spiritual sense,
- 3. It's multivalent character, both in terms of its goal and the means employed,
- 4. It's gradual and progressive achievements in conformity with the successive stages of physical, emotional and mental development of the child.

Also, Amaele<sup>10</sup> submitted the followings as some of the basic characteristics of traditional education in Nigeria:

- 1. The education is a collective and social activity; almost everybody is involved in the training of the child;
- 2. It is multidimensional in character in terms of its goals and methodology;
- 3. It is planned in gradual and progressive steps in order to achieve conformity with the successive stages of physical, emotional and mental development of the child;
- 4. The education relies more on informal instruction;
- 5. The education has limited specialized training
- 6. The education depends so much on oral tradition;
- 7. The traditional education is practical and general towards specific situations;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> R. O. Igbo. "Historical Foundation of Education in Nigeria". **CIDJAP**, 2008; P3

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> A. B. Fafunwa. "History of Education in Nigeria. Revised Edition". NPS Educational. Reprinted 2002/2004. P3

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> S. Amaele. "A Study Guide on History and Policy of Education in Nigeria". Ilorin. INDEMAC Publishers, Nig. Ltd. 2003. P6 - 7

- 8. Religion, ethics and education are very much related, interwoven and inseparable;
- 9. The education is basically conservative and opposed to change;
- 10. The education takes place at any time and place
- 11. The traditional education is a lifelong process

Based on the above submission, therefore, it can be seen that the African indigenous system of education was characteristically integral in experience, nature and scope and as well as being very functional in purpose. However, those gaps associated with our current system of education in terms of functionality may be overcome if the traditional indigenous education system were used to fill-in the gaps.

# **Curriculum Content of Nigerian Traditional Education System**

The curriculum of the traditional/indigenous form of education in Nigeria was in conformity with the African traditional education. The indigenous education has specified subject areas but had no formal examination system, Igbo<sup>11</sup>. Although, the curriculum was not documented it can be considered as having two folds of educational training namely; physical and moral. As asserted by Umar and Shagari<sup>12</sup> the African indigenous education system has a wide curriculum for the realization of its laudable objectives the central ideology of which was to produce individuals who will be useful to themselves and to their communities.

However, as noted by Okoro<sup>13</sup> the content of the curriculum of traditional education was comprehensive and based on the philosophy underlying the various job responsibilities in the traditional society. This means that the traditional education system was quite elaborate and it embraces all aspect of human development. By it social design, the traditional education system in Nigeria was meant to provide occupational and professional training. Hence, children are trained to master the main occupation of the immediate communities. For instance, fishing is emphasized in the riverine areas while farming is emphasized in the forest area. Equally, the growing children and youth are trained along the line of honesty, respect, cooperation, patriotism and above all skills acquisition. In the light of this, traditional education in the Nigerian context appears to be practical inclined; it's content, aims and methods were interrelated. However, the National Open University of Nigeria<sup>14</sup> categorized the curriculum of traditional education as follows:

- i. Activities on character building, since conformity was necessary;
- ii. Physical training through physical contests, wrestling and perseverance activities;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> R. O. Igbo. "Historical Foundation of Education in Nigeria". CIDJAP, 2008; P3

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> S. Umar and M.H. Shagari. "Indigenous education: A powerful tool for value promotion in Nigeria". *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences 2013*. 4(12). 9 - 13

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> K.N. Okoro. African traditional education: A viable alternative for peace building process in modern Africa. *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences 2010*. 2(1). 136 - 159

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> National Open University of Nigeria. "EDU 714: History of Education in Nigeria". Course Guide. NOUN Press, 2017

- iii. Art and crafts, carving, painting, modeling, artistic and creative pursuits, song and dances, etc.;
- iv. Intellectual training including singing, counting, games, arithmetic, etc;
- v. Study of facts about natural environment;
- vi. Historical knowledge including stories about the gods, traditions of various societies which were preserved in folklore and regarded as legends handed down from one generation to another.

Meanwhile, Nwaubani<sup>15</sup> also summarized the subject and experiences enshrined in the traditional education to include the following:

- i. Participation at ceremonies and rituals;
- ii. Imitation, recitation and demonstration;
- iii. Farming, fishing, weaving, carving, cooking, knitting, etc.;
- iv. Recreational subjects include wrestling, dancing, drumming, display and racing;
- v. Intellectual training includes local history, legend, local geography, plant and animal, poetry, storytelling, etc.

#### **Teaching Methodology in the Traditional Education System**

There has been a misconception of equating education to schooling. This is because most people when asked about their education, they begin to think and talk about the schools they have attended and the certificate they have obtained, simply because education is closely associated with schooling. Perhaps this is why many doubt the existence of traditional education. However, literature abound revealing that traditional or indigenous education has been in existence in Nigeria since time immemorial and it was practiced in schools without walls. Thus, going by the subject and experiences contained in the traditional or indigenous system of education, it becomes very clear that, the traditional schools comprised homes or families, shrines and specialized professions; where knowledge and skills are obtained through apprenticeship for a specified period of time.

Equally, secret cults and shrines were used for the purpose of higher education in the traditional sense. In the Nigerian traditional societies, the main emphasis of education was on 'mastery – learning. The methods of teaching in traditional education system include indoctrination, modeling, initiation ceremonies, rewards and punishment, imitation, role play, oral literature, poetry, instruction, observation, participation as well as apprenticeship. To this end, the individual training (under traditional education) emphasized practical knowledge, skills and character training, it incorporates various social values the neglect of which, as observed by Okoro<sup>16</sup>, has led to consequences such as youth joblessness or unemployment, neglect of moral values and the disappearance of social solidarity. In line with Okoro's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> O. O. Nwaubani. "Traditional Education in Nigeria: Aims, Contents, Methodology and Processes". Reviewed by Vicent Ekwelem, University of Nigeria 2008. P54 - 61

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> K.N. Okoro. "Women and Peace Initiative in Igbo Traditional Society: A viable option for

peace building process in Nigeria". International conference paper. Cotonou Benin Republic. Book of Proceedings. November, 2009. 2(17). 74 – 87

observation, it will not be an exaggeration to add among the consequences of abandoning the practice of traditional education, that has led to the decline of certain issues which Adeyemi and Adeyinka<sup>17</sup> asserted that traditional education aims to achieve and these include: removal of economic hardships, social poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, ignorance, electoral malpractice, vocational competence, industrial and commercial development, adult literacy and creating a society with moral standards, etc.

# Merits and Demerits of Traditional Education System in Nigeria

**Merits:** Traditional education was believed to have lots of advantages. These advantages were identified to include the fact that it makes everybody a functional member of the society, thereby minimizing the problems of unemployment and social unrest. It also inculcates high level of discipline among the people, transmitting to the young ones such things which the society considered worthwhile. Similarly, it promotes unity in the society and brings peace and happiness to all. It provides physical, social, moral, spiritual growth of the individual. It instills the fear of God and the ancestors which goes to check members' character and behavior. The traditional education is adapted to the need of the society and every member of the society has the opportunity of receiving education in accordance with his or her ability and talent.

**Demerits:** Demerits of traditional education include belief that in the first place it is too rigid, too conservative, and to some extent lacks critical examination. It is full of dos and don'ts, as well as fears and threats. It is also not open and as such it does not give enough room to research. It is mainly informal, hence limiting the span of knowledge, and it does not have well defined structure, duration or time. It equally has a limited scope in terms of content and curriculum and it lacks uniformity in terms of standard since the standard varies from teacher to teacher and community to community.

#### Philosophical Foundations of Traditional Education in Nigeria

Traditional or indigenous education in Africa (just like any other effective system of education) was based on sound philosophical foundations. These foundations or principles have been clearly identified by Ocitti as cited by Kanu<sup>18</sup> and they include:

- a) **Preparationism**: this principle implies that in indigenous education people were training to equip them with required skills for the fulfillment of their gender role in the family and the community.
- b) **Functionalism**: this principle implies that traditional or indigenous education is practical and participatory in nature; children learn through working and observing their masters.
- c) **Communalism**: this principle implies that in indigenous education the training of children was a collective responsibility of parents, family and the community. This signified that the child is for everyone.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup>M.B. Adeyemi and A.A. Adeyika. "Some key issues in African traditional education". *The* MCGILL Journal of Education 2002. 37(2). 223 – 240

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> I. A. Kanu. "The philosophical canons of African indigenous education". Augustinian Institute, Makurdi Benue state, (nd)

- d) **Perennialism**: this principle implies that traditional or indigenous education is a way of preparing children to become acquainted with finest achievements of their cultural heritage.
- e) **Holisticism**: this principle implies that traditional or indigenous education was a multiple kind of education. People were productive in all areas: a trained dancer can also be a good farmer.

The authors of this paper believe that, in Nigeria, the practice of indigenous education has been maintained up to today due to it's richness in terms of ideology for the production of physical, creative, employable, honest and law abiding men and women in every society. Practical orientation and functionalism are the hallmarks of the traditional education system<sup>19</sup>. In this reality, therefore, in Nigeria today, there are young men and women (especially in the rural communities) who by courtesy of traditional or indigenous education, are regarded as *'professional'* not because they have school certificate to show, but because they are able to perform their vocation with all elements of professionalism. This goes to show that traditional or indigenous education in whatever mode it is provided, the object of the training is to produce a Nigerian who is capable of surviving and leaving decently amidst all odds in life.

#### Conclusion

In the light of the above philosophical discussion, the authors observe that, the philosophy of traditional education in Nigeria as an African country was quite pragmatic in nature and operates based on the principle of productivity and functionalism; it aims at providing a gate way to the life of the community. The philosophy in the context of traditional education in Nigeria centers on the people's way of thinking, beliefs, feelings and way of doing things. In this direction, Okoro<sup>20</sup> noted that, individual training incorporated various social values such as honesty, respect for the worth and dignity of others, hard work and productivity, self-reliance as well as collective orientation towards maintaining social values and order, those formed the central idea of the African traditional education system. Thus, in spite of the few theoretical abstractions, the main objective of the traditional education (based on its philosophy) was the inculcation of a sense of social and communal tasks to every individual member of the society. In this realization, therefore, the major feature of traditional education was apprenticeship system of learning in which learners learn under a master.

# Recommendations

In view of the forgoing therefore, the authors recommend the following:

1. The School Curriculum in all learning institutions in Nigeria should be revisited critically to reflect the traditional aspirations of different ethnic groups found in Nigeria

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> S. Umar and M.H. Shagari. "Indigenous education: A powerful tool for value promotion in Nigeria". *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences 2013*. 4(12). 9 – 13

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> K.N. Okoro. "African traditional education: A viable alternative for peace building process in modern Africa". *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences 2010*. 2(1). 136 – 159

- 2. Apprenticeship system of training young people should be revisited to produce person who can have pride in their daily activities.
- 3. Emphasis should always be placed on worthwhile activities of individual person even if it makes no meaning to others.
- 4. Every teacher should pay emphasis on the value dimension of their subject and find meaningful ways of inculcating it in their students.
- 5. Traditional education should be made to be open for value clarification, critical examination and flexible with time.

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