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African Indigenous Education System: Its Relevance in Contemporary Africa

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Africa, as a continent, has gone through various stages of development and before the coming of Arabs and Europeans, African societies had their own education system through which knowledge was disseminated from one generation to another. This system of education was indigenous in nature and it was deeply rooted in people's traditional way of life. When the Europeans colonised Africa, they painted a picture that portrayed Africans as people who did not have any education system worth upholding. This paper therefore, intends to achieve the following objectives; (i) explain the concept of African Indigenous Education (ii) explore the philosophical foundations of the African Indigenous Education system (iii) to examine the characteristics of the African Education system (iv) to state the aims of African Indigenous Education and (v) to assess the relevance of African Education system in contemporary Africa. The study employed secondary research (desk research) and oral accounts to collect existing data. Through a critical review of secondary data, it was concluded that African Traditional Education played a significant role in shaping the way of life of African people. Its practice remains relevant today in the context of shaping African social cohesion, moral values, intellectual growth, economic development, self-sustenance and solidarity.

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INTRODUCTION

The term "education" is defined variedly depending on different schools of thought. As a result of the intensified efforts by scholars and practitioners to search for its meaning, a plethora of definitions have flooded the scholarly arena, rendering it hard to arrive at a common agreement. This scenario, although complex, presents yet another opportunity for scholars to re-evaluate their perceptions of the different contexts within which the different definitions and meanings of education are presented. In this paper, an attempt is made to look at some of these definitions in order to provide a strong basis for discussing the concept of African Indigenous Education (AIE). Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2002) posit that the term *education* is derived from two Latin words, namely *educare*, meaning *to bring up*. From the Latin origin, it is inferred that education is the process of *bringing up* or *guiding children* by the adult members of society. The second Latin word from which education is derived is *educere*, meaning *to draw out* or *to raise up*. This definition brings to the fore a distinctive element of extracting the latent potentialities of individuals through the efforts of the community or members of a given society. In the late 1950s, through the 60s and the 70s, many definitions of education emerged: for instance, Adeyinka defined education simply as the art of learning (Adeyinka, 2002) while Whitehead defined it as the acquisition of the art of the utilisation of knowledge (Whitehead, 1962). Oladele Taiwo, in the preface of his book *Agencies of Education*, defined education as the total efforts of a community to raise its economic, social and political standards of life (Oladele, 1964). Snelson (1974) presented education as a condition of human survival through which one generation transmits the wisdom, knowledge and experience which prepares the next generation for life's duties and pleasures.

However, George Hegel defines it as a progressive perfection of humanity from a simple, uncultivated, primitive mind through the hard disciplines of labour and toil to the consciousness and exercise of its freedom (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2002). Similarly, Adeyinka (2000) defined education as the process of transmitting the culture of a society from one generation to the other. In his recent work, Cremin defines education as the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, provoke or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills or sensibilities as well as any learning that results from the effort (Chazan, 2022). Moore (2010) describes education in regard to the commitment made by society to a desirable type of individual and expected values. He further elucidates that an educated person should have the desired intellectual abilities and should be very sensitive about moral matters, mathematical efficiencies, scientific vision and historical and geographical perspective.

This study focuses on African Indigenous Education (AIE) and its relevance to contemporary Africa. Although African Indigenous Education is not a new concept, its interpretation varies greatly from one scholar to another. Many Eurocentric scholars believe that there was no education in Africa before the coming of Europeans and yet others believe that Pre-colonial African education was so informal that it did not make any contribution to African civilisation. This explains why African indigenous knowledge was discouraged and completely suffocated when European education was ushered into Africa. One way in which the colonial machinery propelled this propensity was to allude to the fact that African knowledge was devilish, backwards and barbaric in nature. In fact, this propaganda not only promoted European imperialist interests but also discouraged many Africans from appreciating and cherishing their own indigenous knowledge systems in the centuries that followed. The general objective of

this study is to explore how contemporary African societies can utilise indigenous educational frameworks to enhance contemporary education by integrating diverse perspectives to preserve African cultural heritage. The intention is to explore how the diverse works of the different African scholars have shaped contemporary scholarship on African indigenous knowledge. The specific objectives of the study, therefore, are;

- To explain the concept of African Indigenous Education
- To explore the philosophical foundations of the African Indigenous Education System
- To examine the characteristics of the African Indigenous Education system
- To state the aims of the African Indigenous Education System
- To assess the relevance of the African Indigenous Education system in contemporary Africa

METHODOLOGY

The study employed secondary research (desk research) and oral accounts to collect existing data from various sources such as articles, African folklore, and ethnography and published books (Denscombe, 2021). This approach provided an indelible opportunity for the researcher to explore and delve deep into a plethora of data that provided strong insights that informed this study. A critical review of the literature was laconically done with a specific focus on the study objectives, hence providing a strong basis to extrapolate the nature and role of African Indigenous Education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Meaning of African Indigenous Education (AIE)

Onwuatuegwu and Paul-Mgbeafulike (2023) explain that African Indigenous Education refers to the traditional education systems that evolved organically within African societies, dating back to

ancient times. It comprised knowledge, skills, values and cultural practices which were passed down from one generation to another in a given society by the African elders. Mushi (2009) defines 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. Amaechi and Duruji (2013) argue that in the old African society, the purpose of education was generally for an immediate induction into society and preparation for adulthood. Specifically, it emphasised African indigenous education as encompassing social responsibility, job orientation, and political participation, spiritual and moral values. Children learnt by doing, that is to say, children and adolescents were engaged in participatory ceremonies, rituals, imitation, recitation and demonstration. They were involved in practical farming, hunting, fishing, cooking, carving, knitting, etc. Recreational subjects included writing, dancing, drumming, acrobatic display, racing, while intellectual training included the study of local history, legends, the environment (local geography, plants and animals), poetry, reasoning, riddles, proverbs, storytelling and story relays.

From the above definitions, it can be construed that African Indigenous Education was not merely a system but a way of life which was deeply rooted in the people's cultural heritage. This type of education manifested itself through the customs, rituals, economic practices, medium of communication, entertainment, religious practices, traditional healing, celebrations, and political systems of the people. Each of the above components of traditional life had an aspect of teaching and learning propagated by the elders whose position in society was highly revered. In this type of education, character building was a crucial element that defined the eccentricity of any traditional society.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

The philosophical basis of the African Indigenous Education (AIE) system refers to the African way of thinking, belief and doing things. In Africa, AIE had a very strong philosophical foundation, which was deeply embedded in the core values of the African way of life. For instance, Ocitti (1973) identifies these philosophies as preparationism, functionalism, communalism, perennialism and holisticism.

Preparationism

Under the philosophy of preparationism, African Indigenous Education equipped young people with gender-based knowledge and skills to enable them to play distinctive roles in society. Boys and girls were deliberately prepared to fulfil socially acceptable masculine and feminine responsibilities respectively. For instance, in many African societies, masculine education produced farmers, warriors, rulers, blacksmiths, fishermen, architects, traders and fathers. On the other hand, feminine education was particularly designed to produce future wives, mothers and home keepers. Through the principle of preparationism, young people developed a sense of obligation to the community by appreciating its history, language, customs and values (Adeyimi & Adeyinka, 2002).

Functionalism

In pre-colonial Africa, societies were predominantly utilitarian and education was delivered in a participatory manner where people learnt through imitation, initiation ceremonies, work, play and oral literature (Ociti, 1971). Among the Baluuli-Banyala of Uganda, children learnt the art and science of farming by following their parents to the gardens and subsequently, they learnt how to till the land, how to plant crops, how to weed and later harvest the crops. Through a participatory approach, the learners were productive as they learnt and the gap between study and the world of work was almost non-existent (Serunjogi, 2024).

Young people grew up from an early age with functional skills, which enabled them to integrate smoothly into their respective communities. Indeed, in African traditional societies and particularly among the Baluuli-Banyala, there was no unemployment because knowledge, survival skills, values and norms were acquired freely from elders through daily or routine activities.

Communalism

In African Indigenous Education, the responsibility of teaching was not only the work of the parents of the child. The whole community was involved in raising and educating the child simply because the child belonged to the community. For instance, among the Baluuli-Banyala of Central Uganda, if a child misbehaved in the absence of the parents, any other responsible adult member of the community could discipline and correct him or her immediately. This implied that it was incumbent upon every member of the community to ensure that young people were raised in accordance with the accepted norms of society. Similarly, labour was also offered communally in shifts during garden clearing, planting, weeding or harvesting in such a way that at the end of the day, the host family served their kinsmen with a special meal and brew. Among the Baluuli-Banyala, a goat would be slaughtered and a millet brew called *malwa* would be prepared for the guests in reasonable quantities in appreciation of the group's work. This communal engagement would be done in turns until all the group members were equally covered. During such communal activities, the children also participated in one way or the other, based on their age and gender. The girls would join the female elders in preparing the meal for the group, while the boys would be on standby to be sent on simple errands by any member of the group.

Perennialism

The philosophy of perennialism emphasised the preservation of the cultural heritage of the community (Adeyinka & Kulusa, 1996). Children

were trained in such a way that they strictly observed their customs and norms without any compromise. Those who deviated from the established cultural heritage were strongly sanctioned (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2002). Under perennialism, members of the community were discouraged from importing alien values that seemed to water down the established cultures – and it was the responsibility of every adult to ensure that the young people were well-grounded to protect and love their heritage. This implies that AIE was conservative and knowledge was not questioned; in other words, criticism of the status quo was not encouraged and each generation was supposed to hand over the cherished values to the next (Mushi, 2009).

Holisticism

This philosophy of African Indigenous Education is sometimes referred to as multiple learning. The implication is that through AIE, young people were trained in multiple skills which catered for their physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual growth. At the early stages, there was little room for specialisation; however, as individuals metamorphosed into the later stages of adulthood at the family or clan level, a certain degree of specialisation took shape. Some families or clans were associated with specific vocations – a clear example is the Bakaara clan among the Baluuli-Banyala, who were known for being born repairers (Mwogez Butamanya, 2003). This was the only clan among the Baluuli-Banyala who were known to be experts in repairing fractures of any form; they would receive patients from as far as other lands outside Buluuli. But generally, during the early stages, individuals were trained in various skills that were related to their gender. For instance, among the Baluuli-Banyala, the boys were physically and vocationally trained in hunting, farming, bark cloth marking, fishing, architecture, carpentry, blacksmithing, pottery, grazing animals, etc. During moonlight or at the fireplace in the compound, intellectual grounding for the boys was done by

elders through oral tradition, such as storytelling, riddles, poetry, songs, etc. Through the oral tradition, young people learnt the history, culture, customs and the various geographical elements that influenced life in their land. Specifically, it was important for young people to learn about the weather patterns by determining which type of clouds or winds caused rain or drought in their land. They also came to know about the historical figures in the land who led exemplary lives, as well as those who had been a disgrace to society. On the other hand, the girls physically learnt how to cook, fetch water from the river or well, take care of children, fetch firewood, weave baskets, knit clothes, clean the house, etc.

AIMS OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

Just like the Western education system, AIE had its broad aims and according to Fafunwa(1991), they are identified as follows;

- To develop the child's latent physical skills
- To develop character
- To inculcate respect for elders and those positions of authority
- To develop intellectual skills
- To acquire special vocational training and
- to develop a healthy attitude towards honest labour
- To develop a sense of belonging and to participate actively in family and community affairs
- To understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large

Amale (2004) summarises the aims of AIE in the following statements;

- To preserve the cultural heritage of the extended family, clan and tribe

- To adapt members of the new generation to their physical environment and to teach them how to harness it
- To inform the young generation that their own future depended on the understanding of the institutions, laws, language and values inherited from the past

CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

The characteristics of AIE are enshrined in the various tenets through which it was practised, such as the curriculum content, methods of instruction, teachers and instructional facilities.

Content of African Traditional Education

The content of AIE was derived from the physical, social and spiritual realities of pre-colonial African societies. To a large extent, the physical environment determined the content of the curriculum in pre-colonial Africa. What the elders taught was meant to help individuals adjust and adapt to the environment in order to harness and derive benefit from it. For instance, a child who grew up in mountainous terrain learnt to combat the intricacies therein and make optimal use of the advantages of the terrain. In addition to the dynamics of the landscape, the growing child had to get mastery of the weather patterns and the plant and animal life in their immediate environment. In the end, it became necessary for the individuals to understand how to tame and make use of the various plants and animals in their localities.

The practical skills the children learnt were also dictated by the environment in which the growing child lived (Mosweunyane, 2013). Learning about the environment also meant that measures had to be put in place to conserve the available resources. For instance, among the Baluuli-Banyala of Uganda, taboos were used as a conservation strategy –an animal was not killed because it was respected as a totem. Both boys and girls who lived in cattle rearing communities learnt all the skills related to

livestock rearing and became experts in activities such as disease detection, treatment, grazing and milking of animals. Among the fishing communities, children learnt such skills as catching, preserving and marketing of fish; these were accompanied by other related skills like making canoes, making and mending fish nets or traps, etc. In communities where the art of pottery was practised, children learnt how to prepare clay and to make clay products like pots and bowls, approximately at the age of five or so. This meant that the educational practices of each society were highly influenced by the physical environment and this helped individuals to live in and profit from the given environment (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2002).

Just as the physical environment played a crucial role in influencing the curriculum of AIE, so did the social environment. In many traditional African societies, communities survived on the reciprocal relationships that existed among families, clans and tribes in general. The African Indigenous Education system was therefore meant to reinforce such relationships. This is why parents ensured that the upbringing of children was tagged to such reciprocal social values. In this context, children were taught to respect elders, to appreciate their social obligations and responsibilities and above all, subordinate their individual interests to those of the wider community (Snelson, 1974; Tiberondwa, 1978; Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2002).

The spiritual environment also played a critical role in influencing the content of what children learnt in AIE. In traditional Africa, almost every event or occurrence was accorded spiritual significance. As such, events like birth of twin babies, death, disasters like floods or drought were tagged to the spiritual beliefs of the community. Therefore, the education system of the time also tended to focus on religious teachings and practices of the customary society of the time. In this way, young children received instruction on the influence of both malevolent and benevolent spirits and the importance of appropriating the spirits to avert such

disasters as sickness, death and other related pestilences.

Methods of Instruction in the African Indigenous Education System

Onwuatuegwu and Paul-Mgbeafulike (2023) argue that teaching in African traditional education was often informal and occurred through observation, imitation and practical experiences. A lot of emphasis was focused on hands-on learning with apprenticeship models. Oral tradition, which included storytelling, folktales, myths, adages, history and proverbs, were highly used to convey cultural and moral values. This method helped to enhance the intellectual growth of children through the mastery of the history, culture and geography of their localities. The children became familiar with their immediate environments, including the hills, swamps, rivers, lakes, plains and forests. The methods of instruction were less structured and the line between the teacher and the learner was thin. Learning was by initiation, observation and repetition of what the parents and other adults did. In most cases, knowledge was delivered at the household level, covering practical skills. Through socialisation, skills and knowledge were reproduced from generation to generation and were gained through learning by doing (Getahun, 2020).

Teachers in African Indigenous Education

In many African societies, elders played a central role in teaching children through the inculcation of good manners, norms and societal values. The elders were expected to play a parental role in teaching, advising, rewarding and punishing children in the community (Tiberondwa, 1978; Blackmore & Cookskey, 1980). The teacher in pre-colonial Africa never stopped learning; this implied that the teacher was also a learner. The elders who were the teachers were viewed as custodians of knowledge by those who were taught and what was taught was never questioned (Mosweunyane, 2013). The teachers were there to inculcate the dominant values which the learners were to master and pass

on to the younger ones. The elder generations passed their skills, knowledge and experiences to the new generations. The teaching was gender-based, such that the boys were trained by their fathers and other male adults in the community, while girls learnt the skills to manage their household from their mothers and other additional skills from women in their communities (Getahun, 2020)

Relevance of African Indigenous Education in Contemporary Africa

It is important to note that although African Indigenous Education was informal in nature, its relevance to contemporary African societies cannot be overemphasised. Fafunwa(1982) argues that no study of the history of African education is complete or meaningful without adequate knowledge of African Traditional Education. Today, the unique values which African societies feel proud of, such as the customs, languages, discipline, work education, socialisation, entertainment and many others, are part of what African Traditional Education emphasises.

Nyerere (1976) also calls for a return to African Traditional Education when he posits that the only way African societies can maintain their identity and stand out as a people with unique values is to preserve and consolidate those very positive elements of customary learning. He maintains that although Western educationists tend to downgrade the existence of the African education system before the coming of Europeans, current evidence across Africa proves otherwise through a plethora of structural and cultural settings where knowledge was productively transmitted from the old to the young generations. This explains why in traditional Africa, everyone was productive and to a great extent, there were no job seekers. This is what we crave in order to shape the lives of young people in contemporary Africa. Mosweunyane (2013) also adds that the patterns through which African Traditional Education was transmitted stand out to

be relevant in creating sustainable livelihoods and meaningful co-existence

Marah (2006) submits that African traditional Education had a process that intertwined with the social, cultural, artistic, religious and recreational life of the people. This in itself is construed as schooling because it empowers people with the relevant knowledge of general existential realities. This knowledge is essential in contemporary Africa, for it serves as the foundation upon which knowledge is acquired. As Adamu and Rotshak (2023) emphasise, we still need the customary knowledge due to the fact that it leads to character building, solidarity, social cohesion and acquisition of vocational skills, strong moral rectitude displayed in an honest and sincere search for self-sustenance

CONCLUSION

It can therefore be noted that before the coming of Europeans, Africa was richly endowed with its own indigenous education system. This type of education was native in nature and deeply rooted in people's way of life. It placed much emphasis on character building and the upbringing of acceptable members of society. Through elders, knowledge was disseminated from one generation to another. The knowledge was delivered in an informal but practical way and aimed at producing members who were productive and useful to society. As such, there was nothing like unemployment because work education was emphasised right from childhood. This paper, therefore, concludes that there are a number of virtues in the African Traditional Education system which should be cherished and upheld in the contemporary African societies to promote the African heritage.

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