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TRADITIONAL AFRICAN MODES OF EDUCATION: THEIR RELEVANCE IN THE MODERN WORLD

MICHAEL OMOLEWA

Abstract – This article explores the characteristics, goals, modes of transmission, teaching and learning strategies of indigenous African education, in which the pursuit of excellence and quality has always been an important aim. Informal and vocational training constitute the core of indigenous education in Africa. Under this traditional system, each person in the community is practically trained and prepared for his/her role in society. It is a holistic system, in which story telling, proverbs and myths also play an important role. The author suggests the adoption of some of the elements of this system into modern-day educational practice as a strategy for improving quality.

Résumé – **MODES AFRICAINS TRADITIONNELS D'ÉDUCATION: LEUR PERTINENCE DANS LE MONDE MODERNE** – Cette contribution explore les caractéristiques, les objectifs, les modes de transmission, l'enseignement et les stratégies d'apprentissage de l'éducation africaine indigène, au sein desquelles la poursuite de l'excellence et de la qualité a toujours été un but important. Dans ce système traditionnel, chaque personne dans la communauté est pratiquement formée et préparée à son rôle dans la société. Il s'agit d'un système holistique dans lequel les contes, les proverbes et les mythes jouent également un rôle important. L'article suggère l'adoption de certains de leurs éléments dans la pratique éducative moderne.

Zusammenfassung – **TRADITIONELLE AFRIKANISCHE BILDUNGSFORMEN UND IHRE RELEVANZ FÜR DIE MODERNE WELT** – Dieser Beitrag erforscht die Besonderheiten, Ziele und Übermittlungswege sowie die Lehr- und Lernstrategien der indigenen afrikanischen Erziehung und Bildung, in der das Streben nach Qualität und nach hervorragenden Leistungen seit jeher eine wichtige Rolle spielt. In diesem traditionellen System wird jede Person der Gemeinschaft speziell für seine/ihre Rolle in der Gesellschaft ausgebildet. Es ist ein holistisches System, in dem Sprichwörter, Mythen und erzählte Geschichten eine große Rolle spielen. Der Artikel setzt sich für die Übernahme einiger ihrer Elemente in die heutige Bildungspraxis ein.

Resumen – **MODOS DE EDUCACIÓN TRADICIONAL AFRICANA: SU RELEVANCIA EN EL MUNDO MODERNO** – Esta contribución explora las características, los objetivos, los modos de transmisión y las estrategias de enseñanza y aprendizaje de la educación autóctona africana, que siempre ha perseguido la excelencia y la calidad como uno de sus objetivos importantes. Bajo este sistema tradicional, toda persona de la comunidad ha recibido una enseñanza práctica y una preparación para desempeñar su papel en la sociedad. Es un sistema holístico en el que también juegan un papel importante las narraciones, los proverbios y los mitos. Este trabajo sugiere la adopción de algunos de sus elementos en las prácticas de enseñanza de nuestros tiempos modernos.

Резюме – ТРАДИЦИОННЫЕ АФРИКАНСКИЕ МЕТОДЫ ОБУЧЕНИЯ: ИХ РЕЛЕВАНТНОСТЬ В СОВРЕМЕННОМ МИРЕ – В данной статье изучаются характеристики, цели, методы передачи знаний, стратегии преподавания и обучения в местном африканском образовании, в котором достижение совершенства и качества всегда является главной целью. Информальная и профессиональная подготовка составляют основу местного образования в Африке. Согласно такой традиционной системе каждый член в сообществе проходит подготовку на практике и готовится к своей роли в обществе. Это холистическая система, в которой устное творчество, пословицы и мифы также играют важную роль. В данной статье отмечаются особые характеристики традиционных африканских методов обучения, и предлагается перенять отдельные ее элементы в современную образовательную практику.

Background

Traditional African education is an integral part of the culture and history of a local community, which is stored in various forms and transmitted through various modes. Such modes include language, music, dance, oral tradition, proverbs, myths, stories, culture and religion. Traditional African education, which is passed from one generation to another, is usually by word of mouth and cultural rituals, and has to some extent been the basis for sustainable development in agriculture, food preparation, health care, conservation and other sectors for many centuries. This mode of education has by and large been used as a way of acquiring lifelong learning.

Contrary to the widespread belief held by early foreign observers in Africa that Africa was a dark continent before their arrival, the continent had already reached a high level of educational development, which had evolved over time. The coming of European (Western) education from the late 15th century onwards disrupted the traditional system and brought the formal school system at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, the learning of European languages, literature, history, philosophy, as well as the science subjects, including mathematics, biology, physics and chemistry.

The Christian missionaries were later supported by the colonial administration in using the new educational system as a means of cultivating the mind of the Africans to accept European values and practices. The African response to this development was influenced by the reward system and the incentives provided by the acquisition of the new educational provision. However, even during the initial period of Western education, Africans continued to appreciate the basic values of traditional education, which emphasised the inclusion of all, and the pursuit of excellence. They therefore rejected all the attempts to “adapt” the educational system and provide what was perceived as an inferior type of education.

With the attainment of political independence, various countries in Africa continued with the indigenous practice of inculcating moral and ethical values in the learners and making education respond to the communal and social needs of the society, the development of a more appropriate, problem-solving educational curriculum and the promotion of lifelong education. However, efforts to Africanise the curriculum in the 1960s following the independence euphoria did not yield lasting benefits to the people of Africa. This is particularly true of the efforts made towards establishing Education for Self-reliance in Tanzania, Authenticity in Zaire, African renaissance in South Africa, and the whole movement of Africanisation of the curriculum in several countries, including Kenya, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Guinea, Cape Verde, and so on. There is therefore the need to revisit the issue of Africanising the curriculum with a view to ensuring the contextualisation of learning which occurs where the content of the curriculum, and the methods and materials associated with it, are related directly to the experience and environment of the learner.

Characteristics of traditional African education

There is no doubt that Africans who live on or outside the continent are undergoing profound transformations and so are their knowledge systems and practices changing. Their ways of knowing continue to be transformed by diversity in colonial experience, religion, customs and languages and penetration by outside forces including current globalisation efforts. In spite of this situation, it is still important and pertinent to revisit these characteristics in order to show how indigenous knowledge not only preserves the past but can also be vital through its enduring processes to ensure a sustainable future for the African people.

Although Africans do not have the same and equal educational experience in traditional ways of knowing, it would not be out of place to describe the basic characteristic of traditional education in Africa as that which is intimately integrated with the social, cultural, political, occupational, artistic, religious, and recreational life of the people. It is usually stored in people's memories and activities and is expressed in stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, dances, myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and taxonomy, agricultural practices, equipment, materials, plant species, and animal breeds (Grenier 1998, p. 2).

Traditional African education is always used as the information base for the community, which facilitates communication and decision-making. An important aspect of traditional African education is the acquisition of knowledge where everyone is taught different things like the identification of various gods, the planting seasons, good soil and harvest methods, herbs and fishing methods.

Traditional African education is usually generated within the communities. It is based on practical common sense, on teachings and experience and it is holistic – it cannot be compartmentalised and cannot be separated from the people who are involved in it because essentially, it is a way of life.

In traditional African education, efforts are made to ensure that every person develops a set of skills. In the process, provision is made for learning and training centres for the apprenticeship system during which the apprentice is introduced into the craft and skill of the chosen profession. There is provision for graduation and certification of competence on the completion of the apprenticeship. However, the end of apprenticeship does not signify the end of learning. Indeed continuing education through observation, self-improvement and search for wisdom is a life-long process. The apprentice does not, however, just learn the skill of the master. He or she also learns obedience, patience and industry. He or she learns how to respect the master and the senior apprentices and pays dearly for failure to conform. Through a system of taboos and sanctions, every member of the society appreciates the danger of failing to conform.

Traditional African education uses the age grade system in which those about the same age are brought together to share responsibilities, work together and to be introduced to activities that will not be burdensome for their grade. The entry to each grade involves initiation during which the initiated person is made to appreciate the degree of responsibility, accountability and privileges of the process into which he or she is being initiated.

In Africa, learning is not expected to end in the grave. The Yoruba for instance believe that learning continues after death. In the warning, *m'ajokun m'aje ekolo, ohun ti won ba n je l'orun ni ki o ma a ba won je*, (do not eat worms or millipedes, but carefully adopt the practices in your new abode), the Yoruba encourage the dead to cultivate the values and abide by the practices of those beyond the grave (Omolewa 2007). This is a unique development in the educational practices of societies, which emphasise the duration of learning only from the cradle to the grave.

Goals of traditional education in Africa

The major goal of traditional education in Africa is to produce a complete individual, a lifelong learner who is cultured, respectful, integrated, sensitive and responsive to the needs of the family and neighbours (Nikiéma 2009; Omolewa 2007). It is aimed at inculcating attitudes and values capable of integrating the individual into the wider society (Majasan 1967; Fafunwa 1974; Fajana 1978). The ultimate objective is to produce a person guided by wisdom. The product is thus expected to be confident in spite of circumstances that emerge. The personal satisfaction derived from this is expected to serve as a buffer against all temptations and trials. African traditional education is focussed on the attainment of quality education, with centres of

excellence that are recognised and profoundly appreciated by the stakeholders of the educational systems.

For centuries, traditional education has provided Africa's tribal peoples with practical solutions to the problems of a fluctuating climate. As an example, the Maasai pastoralists of northern Tanzania and southern Kenya traditionally know where to find water, and green shrubs that can be fed to young calves, even during long periods of drought. Likewise, in Ethiopia, often regarded as inevitably dependent on Western aid, the threat of famine was overcome by local expertise, as Worede (in Seabrook 1993) explains.

Traditional African education encourages the acquisition and sharing of knowledge in diverse forms. For example, the Maasai and Barabaig alike of northern Tanzania have developed and maintained traditional knowledge and practices for the management and conservation of the biological resources on which they depend. Their knowledge and practices are empirical, based on continuous observation and their close attachment to and utter dependence on natural resources. The knowledge is stored in cultural and religious beliefs, taboos, folklore or myths as much as in the individuals' practical experience.

Knowledge is imparted in youth through a phased childhood and adolescence. This contributes to a stock of knowledge in human and animal health, in agricultural meteorology and in land use. A combination of cultural, empirical and hierarchical methods ensures the safeguarding and further development of knowledge as well as the effectiveness of existing practices. By favouring utilitarian to hierarchical or theoretical concepts, knowledge is much more easily shared. In essence, traditional African educational systems are often application-oriented.

The children of the farmer or of the nomadic herdsman learn the business of producing food crops or of keeping cattle from their parents. Similarly, the artisan, the craftsman or the drummer teaches his offspring, although he may also take in apprentices who are not members of his family. There is therefore little or no problem about access to the acquisition of most kinds of available knowledge, skills or training, even though specialist educational institutions exist. These include those for initiating adolescents into puberty and quasi-religious cults, as well as into the various age grades of those societies in which such grades exist. Finally, there are periodic conferences in which practitioners like traditional doctors (like the Yoruba *babalawo* or the Bantu *mganga*) diviners, master craftsmen, and members of esoteric guilds, meet to exchange ideas.

Modes of traditional African education

Traditional African education is passed from one generation to another by learning through various modes, which include language, music, dance, oral tradition, proverbs, myths, stories, culture, religion and elders. Others

include learning through specialists, specific names, the holistic approach, integrating theory and practice and traditional African science and technology. Let us now briefly describe how each mode operates to foster learning amongst participants.

Learning through language

Language is an important element in the training of the child, and no one is considered adequately trained without considerable mastery of the use of language for effective communication. Using the mother tongue, learners are usually introduced very early to the system of manipulating figures involving counting, adding and subtracting.

Learning through music and dance

Music and dance are fundamental to the African ways of life. They are introduced to equip the learners with the ability to function effectively in other areas of learning such as language acquisition, speech therapy, literacy, numeracy, and other related themes. They are given to learners to enjoy, thus providing them with an artistic outlet and a way to relax. Learners often anticipate the music and dance sessions with excitement because creativity and choice are usually encouraged and nurtured. Through carefully planned music and dance programmes, learning takes place during initiation, festivities, the age-grade system, home education and community education where everyone is encouraged to learn the norms and values of the society (Omolewa 1983).

Oral tradition using proverbs, myths and stories

The most significant information gathering exercise for the traditional African mode of education is the oral tradition, namely, the collective testimonies and recollections of the past inherited from earlier generations, and transmitted in various forms of verbal testimonies. Oral tradition continues to be a reservoir of inexhaustible wisdom where Africans learn about their origin, history, culture and religion, about the meaning and reality of life, about morals, norms and survival techniques.

Orally transmitted information inherited from past generations may be shared in both structured and unstructured contexts. It constitutes a major resource, which has been classified by many different scholars. Because most African societies have oral, non-literary traditions, they have succeeded in developing complicated and beautiful webs of eyewitness account, idioms, legends, folklore, stories, proverbs and myths for all conceivable circumstances (Fasokun 2005; Oguejiofor 2006).

In Africa, proverbs are embellishments of speech. They are symbols of communication, and in many cases, they form sub-languages of their own.

The language of proverbs gives vent to a whole perspective on the world, and thus constitutes a means of tapping into societies' view of reality. Proverbs are spurs to knowledge, wisdom and morality. They can be prognostic and can challenge assumptions in order to inspire further reflection. They serve as a warning in all areas of human activities or relations. They criticise, praise, advice and teach. In Africa, proverbs cover every aspect of human endeavour and human relations, and thus there is hardly any African imbued to any measure with the culture of his or her people who has not a good stock of proverbs for ready application, though, like in all things, expertise and refinement in their use vary widely.

Proverbs are rich sources of African wisdom and philosophy. Africans use proverbs extensively. These are usually expressed not only in words but also in the language of the drums and the sound of the horns blown by the attendants of chiefs (Fasokun 2005). Proverbs convey how to treat people with respect, dignity, empathy and kindness. They enshrine wisdom, beliefs and the accumulated experiences of past and present generations. In most African traditional cultures, the use of proverbs is a common feature of African religion. The "entire worldview of the people" is "rooted within proverbs and wise sayings", and many of these "proverbs govern religious and social behaviour" (Thomas 2005, p. 109).

A myth is a vehicle conveying a certain fact or a certain basic truth about man's experiences in his encounter with the created order and with regard to man's relation to the supra-sensible world. Myths seek to explain what brought about the present uncomfortable order and to indicate that man is destined to overcome the present discomfort. Structurally a myth is timeless, peopled by extra-ordinary figures and enjoys general acceptance in the culture in which it originates.

Myths provide the cultural and social history of the African people. They tell how some things came into being, and talk of supernatural beings. They are the stories of a people's origin and religion. They are stories, the product of fertile imagination, sometimes simple, often containing profound truths. Myths are not meant to be taken too literally. However, most of them express serious beliefs about human beings, eternity and God (Parrinder 1967). Myths serve as a language depicting truths or realities for which history does not provide a full explanation (Mbiti 1991). They are the way a society expresses its traditions, heritage and worldview in its own language. Myths provide the fuel that maintains the systems which govern African societies (Thomas 2005).

The purpose of mythology is more than explanatory. Koech (1977, p. 118) explains the purposes of African mythology in context as follows:

- (1) African mythology acts as a socializing agent. It is used to nourish and continue the traditions of the elders or ancestors. The morals, the norms, conventions, customs, and manners are part of the myth.

- (2) Education is another function of the myth – teaching people, especially the youngsters, the meaning of the universe and those things which belong to it.
- (3) The myth provides emotional and psychological easement by pointing toward the redeeming features in what appears to be a bad situation.
- (4) The African myth is entertainment, and may become a part of drama, art, and of skill. The African mythologist, or his students, seeks to employ all forms of theatrical skill and to put to use every faculty in his delivery.

The story is a primary form of oral tradition used in conveying culture, experience, values, knowledge and wisdom (Fasokun 2005). The stories inculcate values and the advantages of “correct” attitudes of honesty, integrity, accountability and transparency in everyday dealings. Traditionally, Africans have revered good stories and storytellers. Smith (1940, pp. 64–83) has described the uses of stories as educative devices in traditional African societies. Stories are used not only to amuse and express feelings, but also to teach ideal forms of behaviour and morality. Children learn by listening to their elders, imitating or “emulating” them. These stories are usually handed down from one generation to the next; their main concern is to induct the youth into the moral, philosophical, and cultural values of the community.

Learning through culture

Culture is everything that characterises a society such as language, technological artefacts, skills, knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, attitudes, ideas, behaviour, laws, traditions, customs and values (Mair 1972; Maquet 1997; Lawton 1975; Coombs 1985). It is a basis of identity (Magagula and Mazibuko 2007), which largely determines how people view reality (The African Symposium 2004). It functions as a lens of perception, influencing how people view themselves and their environment. For example, African cultural concepts of immortality have influenced attitudes to family size and population growth. Many Africans believe that no person is really dead for as long as the person’s blood flows in the veins of the living. It is therefore rational to maximise one’s genetic legacy by having many children.

It is important to note that culture in traditional Africa can be seen as a spring of motivation, standard of judgement, basis of stratification, means of communication, patterns of production and consumption (Nduka 1964). Traditional African education is therefore stored in culture in various forms, such as traditions, customs, folk stories, folk songs, folk dramas, legends, proverbs, myths, etc. The use of these various forms of cultural items as resources in teaching and learning can be very effective in bringing traditional African education alive for the learners. It allows them to conceptualise places and issues not only in the local area but also beyond their

immediate experience. Learners who are already familiar with some aspects of traditional cultures usually find it interesting to learn more about it through these cultural forms. It also enables active participation as teachers involve learners in collecting folk stories, folk songs, legends, proverbs, etc., that are retold in their community.

Use of these cultural items in schools as resources or tools for environmental education can be very effective in bringing the environment alive for the learners. Learners are already familiar with their culture and, therefore, they would find it interesting to learn about the environment through these cultural forms. It would enable the teachers to get the learners' active participation in teaching about the environment as teachers could ask pupils to collect folk stories, folk songs, legends, proverbs, etc. existing in the community which have potential value for environmental education.

Learning through religion

Because the African has remained incurably "religious", the young child is introduced very early on to the spiritual world of the ancestors and the Supreme Being, the Creator of the Universe. Music, dance and art are expressions of religion and a celebration of creation. The fear of God is carefully taught and everyone is encouraged to recognise the presence and continuing activity of the Supreme Being who is considered always there to monitor one's activities, motives and intentions. To ignore that presence is considered a crime against one's self and the wider society that has activities related to His celebration.

In Nigeria, the Yoruba describe a well-educated person as an *omoluwabi*, i.e., one that has been shaped in the image of the Creator Himself, and can therefore be trusted and fully appreciated as dependable and sensitive to the needs of others. Thus, for example, young men and women are taught good morals and the resolve to flee from such crimes as theft, adultery, use of foul language and violence.

Learning from elders

African traditional education encourages everyone to respect elders, to accept the values sanctioned by the ancestors, to be honest and dedicated and to be loyal. Traditional leaders, because of their moral and religious authority, can influence their communities in achieving development goals that necessitate behavioural change. In most African cultures, the elderly are accorded a great deal of respect. African culture teaches that, to gain long life, to be wise, to be blessed and protected, one must respect not only the elders of one's own family but also those of the society. In general, older people are addressed using a title of respect and not by their ordinary names. The child is taught social courtesies. He/she learns how to greet people with appropriate gestures, to show respect, to establish good relation-

ships and to thank someone for a good deed. Children are encouraged to express their appreciation and respect by giving gifts.

In a non-literate society, accumulated knowledge and wisdom is stored in the heads of the adult members of the society. As Ki-Zerbo (1990) argued, when an old African passes away, it is a whole library which disappears. Parents, older relatives and others play a very important part in the lifelong learning process of the individual. Wherever possible, however, the focus is on learning within the home environment. This helps to close the “generation gaps” that so often result from formal education. Rather than despising older relatives for their illiteracy, learners are expected to recognise the elders as holders of valuable knowledge, and to acknowledge their contributions at the back of the completed workbook. In addition to their role in teaching, community elders are also included in the assessment process.

Everyone is taught the value of respect for elders and reverence for old age. For example the practice amongst the Mossi of Burkina Faso, which is typical of African communities, demands that elders be addressed in the plural tense. The entire community is expected to learn how to behave towards one another. The society is also encouraged to pay special attention to strangers and visitors whom they are to welcome warmly with open hands, and whose immediate needs are to be met until they have been fully integrated into their new society. The African learns always to be inclusive and believes in the saying “the more the merrier” because the human race began with a single family. Failure to produce a well-rounded, complete gentle man or gentle woman is considered a shortcoming of the home, and such a deficit is ascribed to the Nigerian home in the Yoruba statement *a lai le ko ile*, i.e., one without a home training.

Learning through specialists

There are specialists who teach various skills. Some homes specialise in specific professions. The *ayan*, for example represents a family of drummers in Yorubaland. Amongst the Igbo, there are the traditional medical practitioners, the *Ime Ogwu*, known as the *Babalawo* amongst the Yoruba. There are those who specialise in divination while in Edo State of Nigeria, some families are known for surgical work and the healing of compound fractures, the *Igba efe*. Other prominent specialists in traditional African education are gold and ironsmiths, skin workers, weavers, wood workers, spirit mediums, specialists in medicine, witchcraft practitioners, psychiatrists, healers, circumcisers, musicians, storytellers, historians, etc. These specialised teachers are so much involved with their particular subject that it is not just a profession or a means for economic survival; it is an integral part of their lives and the lives of their clans. Teaching takes place during a long process of apprenticeship during which the learner submits himself and devotes his service completely to the teacher. There is supposed to be a mutual trust and understanding between the teacher and the learner. The knowledge handed

down by non-specialised and specialised teachers is normally relevant and appropriate to the learner. The learning process here happens by doing, living and experiencing the subject matter. As such, it seems to be more natural and thus less boring. Both the learner and instructor have a direct interest in the success of the process.

Learning through specific names

Africans learn also through specific names, which often reflect the babies' circumstances at the time of birth. These include ancestral, spirit, proverbial, birth-related and special names.

Ancestral names are those names that are given to newborn babies in recognition and remembrance of the boldness, wisdom and status of a long departed ancestor. Both the living and the dead constitute the extended family. The ancestors are the invisible protectors of the living descendants who usually guard, direct and exercise a disciplinary influence over the family affairs, traditional ethics and social relationships of the community they had left behind. In most African communities, children are named after the ancestors and heroes of their community. In Nigeria, the Yoruba name, *Onipede*, which means a child born after the death of an important person in the family, is an example of an ancestral name.

Spirit names are names of deities and objects; the sadistic mischief of some wandering spirits usually highlighted by the name of the bearer. This is marked by a discussion of "superstitious" beliefs and the significance and effect of ethnic facial marks. In Nigeria, the Yoruba may call on the god, Ogun, in troubled times and when a child is conceived as a consequence of Ogun's mediation, he may be called *Ogunwale* which means Ogun has come back home. In addition, believers of the Sango deity amongst the Yoruba may express gratitude to him by naming their child *Sangobunmi* – meaning "given to me by Sango". The parents may have appealed to Sango for the birth of the child and the spirit of Sango graciously obliged.

Proverbial names usually confirm the fact that anything that is authentically African is underscored by a proverb or an adage. This is borne out by some African personal names and the response they generate. They are also names that allude to a story about the family. The structure of the indigenous names enables us to learn something about the language and literature of the society. In Nigeria, the Yoruba name '*Mosebolatan*' which means "I think my wealth has finished" belongs to the category of proverbial names.

Birth-related names include names of twins and their siblings; names based on the days of the week and names delineating the rank of the families' children. Names such as *Kofi* (born on a Friday in Akan, Ghana), *Kwasi* (born on a Sunday in Akan, Ghana), all refer to the day when the child was born.

Special names are names that do not fall readily into any of the above categories – geographical names; titular names; occupational names. Special

names from Uganda include *Kabiito* (born while foreigners are visiting), *Kamuhanda* (born on the way to the hospital). In Nigeria, the Yoruba have special names like *Yetunde*, *Yewande* and *Iyabo* meaning “the ‘mother’ has come back” (this usually means a female child was born after an elderly woman in the family recently died).

Learning through a holistic approach

Traditional education is not compartmentalised into disciplines but highly integrated (Omolewa 1981). “Every occasion and happening may be used to teach one lesson or another. The holistic approach to traditional African education preaches the doctrine of multiple learning” (Omolewa 1981, p. 21). Odora (1994, p. 84) illustrates this vividly with what happens amongst the Acholi of Uganda, where “in teaching a child how to build a house, the child would simultaneously learn about the selection, strategic location, soil types, grass types, wood types including their resistance to ants, etc. The girl learning to cook would learn simultaneously serving, vegetable types, preparatory procedures, the general welfare system, fuel wood types, etc.”

The holistic approach as a strategy for teaching and learning is valid because the learner is liberated from the authoritarianism of the teacher, the curriculum and the institution. The learner, through this approach is free to develop self-discipline, engage in self-directed learning and self-fulfilment. Learners share their personal experiences and views relating to the themes of the discourse – history, culture, environment and health. They are encouraged to build self-esteem and to ensure that new information is placed in a familiar context. Ideas are exchanged in an environment of open-mindedness and willingness to listen, with an emphasis on what the different ethnic, religious and national groups can learn from one another (Dzobo 1975, pp. 85–86).

Learning by integrating theory and practice

Learning by integrating theory and practice addresses interdisciplinary explorations of how traditional Africans know what they want to know with regard to modes of inquiry in the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences and their application in their day-to-day lives. It addresses how people learn from the past and identifies current approaches for critical thinking in their respective endeavours. It gives learners the opportunity to assess their learning, and reflect upon that learning in relationship to current and future practice, and toward the development of their future careers.

Learners have to complete some practical tasks such as medicinal plant identification, construction of a material object relevant to his/her ethnic group, performance of a traditional song, performance of a dance and/or drum routine, and preparation of a local dish. In addition, they should

explain their cultural significance. These tasks must be carried out to the satisfaction of community elders.

Learning through traditional African science and technology

Africa has a relatively rich body of related science and technologies. This is embodied in the continent's cultural and ecological diversities and has been used by the African people for thousands of years to solve specific developmental and environmental problems. Traditional education and technologies play major roles in biodiversity conservation, sustainable use and prospecting. In addition, their contributions to increasing food production, fighting HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and stemming environmental degradation are considerable.

African leaders have recognised and stressed the importance of protecting and promoting traditional education and technologies to solve specific problems and improve the continent's economies. Paragraphs 140 and 141 of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) framework document are devoted to the protection and promotion of traditional education and related technological innovations. Paragraph 140 states: "Culture is an integral part of development efforts of the continent. Consequently, Africans protect and effectively utilise traditional education to share this knowledge for their benefits".

In Africa, there exists traditional indigenous knowledge related to the health of humans and animals. In Uganda, for instance, traditional healers and herbal plant remedies play an important role in the health of millions of people. Africa as a whole has a long and impressive list of medicinal plants based on local knowledge. African health practitioners are devoted to teaching individuals how to improve their physical, mental and spiritual health through traditional knowledge. Seldom documented, African traditional knowledge in health care is passed orally from generation to generation.

The African Traditional "Herbal Research Clinic" is a modern clinic facility located in Bukoto in Uganda. It was created to establish a model space, whereby traditional herbal practitioners and healers can upgrade and update their skills through training and certification and learn to respond to common and uncommon diseases using African healing methods and traditions in a modern clinical environment. Their knowledge has been passed on by oral tradition.

In Kenya, there exists traditional indigenous knowledge related to the organic farming movement, which actively engages several groups including non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These include the Kenya Institute of Organic Farming (KIOF), Manor House Agricultural Centre (MHAC), the Association for Better Land Husbandry (ABLH), the Sustainable Agriculture Community Development Programme (SACDEP) and the Kenya Organic Farmers Association (KOFA). These organisations have formed networks that provide training and information to numerous allied

grassroots groups but some are also involved in production, processing and marketing. To some extent, these NGOs have established geographic domains where they advocate organic agriculture in their respective part of the country (Kenya Institute of Organic Farming [KIOF] 1990; Kenya Organic Farmers Association [KOFA] 2002).

Organic agriculture in Kenya, which calls on old ways of farming to help inform new kinds of agriculture, has contributed immensely to the understanding of traditional ways of knowing and the conflictual nature of its co-existence with colonial or subjugated knowledge systems. This practice of farming prohibits the use of manufactured chemical inputs to crop and live-stock production in favour of naturally occurring products and biological processes. By far the bulk of organic farmers' knowledge is orally transmitted, through workshop presentations, mentoring programmes, farm tours, kitchen-table meetings and one-on-one conversations.

Using African traditional modes of education to contextualise teaching and learning in today's classrooms

There is the need for contextualisation of teaching and learning to strengthen and develop the links between the learning environments of school, home and community. This can be achieved by building on the learner's experience from outside the school and providing additional experience within the school programme. This process is enhanced using the different African traditional modes of education, which allow learners to integrate their own learning experiences with the school programme. Agriculture, health and indigenous science and technology may act as a unifying theme in order to achieve this.

Curriculum planners therefore need to understand and appreciate variations in "local knowledge" by identifying unifying themes, which can provide a direct link to the experience of most, if not all of the learners in a particular area, and can be readily adapted through participative processes to fit each local situation. Examples of countries where an integrated approach to curriculum development has been carried out in Africa and which in some cases have involved the contextualisation of teaching and learning, include Cameroon, Ethiopia and Zambia.

In Cameroon, Bude (1985) observes that primary schools in the Anglo-phone region have, since the 1960s, attempted to use the local environment for the development of cognitive abilities, and also as the animation centre for community development. In addition to using locally relevant experience, schools have also forged and developed strong links with their local communities by supplying various services, for example agricultural advice to farmers.

In Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Institute of Curriculum Development and Research (ICDR) described the development and trial of the "general

polytechnic curriculum” in 70 pilot primary schools (ICDR 1993). The use of local, agricultural examples to facilitate learning in mathematics provides an illustration of this. This innovation, however, is no longer in operation under present government policy. In another development in Ethiopia there is the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) where learners are made to see the world holistically, thus making meaning of their surroundings through appropriate connections (PEAP 1996). Learning takes place through the introduction of new information that meets the prior knowledge and experiences of the learners. Learners come to school with knowledge from their homes, friends, environments, radio, etc. This knowledge is not necessarily broken up into maths, mother tongue, natural science, social studies, etc. They come with knowledge and experiences that have meaning to them.

Chelu and Mbulwe (1994) describe the Self-Help Action Plan for Education (SHAPE) in Zambia. One of the main aims of the programme is to improve the quality and relevance of education. The programme has tried to improve and strengthen certain types of learning relating science, mathematics and languages more to the local environment; developing a wider variety of skills, e.g. literacy, numeracy as well as practical problem-solving skills, etc. Learners are made to develop individual potentialities, e.g. initiative, responsibility, creativity; developing positive attitudes, e.g. towards work, local cultural traditions, preservation of natural resources; developing a healthy balance of learning and working to suit individual interests and future needs in order to achieve quality and relevance.

The examples of contextualisation for teaching and learning described above have implications for the school curriculum. The school will need to contribute towards deepening or fostering the apprehension of the cultural environment by endorsing its values for the socialisation process and thus by integrating cultural manifestations into the learning contents (Bude 1985). Eisemon (1989) is of the view that the content of agricultural instruction and its articulation with instruction in modern science is particularly important. Also important is connecting instruction in modern science and modern agriculture to indigenous knowledge systems, building upon the knowledge and skills learners possess from social experience. Duit (1991) opines that, since learning is an active construction process and can only take place based on previously acquired knowledge, learning has to do with constructing similarities between the new and the already known.

Riedmiller and Mades (1991) are of the opinion that the handling of regular school subjects should be localised, by relating the topics of the separate subject syllabi to the local environment. In this way, the subject is the point of origin; the environment then functions as a teaching aid to illustrate academic themes and to serve as a practical ground for applying the acquired knowledge and skills. In order to accomplish the art of utilising experience as a means of contextualising in teaching and learning, there is the need to find ways of supporting teachers, both materially and psychologically, to

enable and encourage them to develop new strategies and approaches that will facilitate the use of contextualisation in the classroom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, perhaps the best way to preserve traditional education would be to integrate it into the school curriculum. In teaching any school subject therefore, it is wise to start with the knowledge about the local area, which students are familiar with, and then gradually move to the knowledge about regional, national and global environments. This essentially follows the philosophy of embarking on teaching and learning “from the known to the unknown”, which could be adopted if education is to be effective. In most societies, indigenous people have developed enormous volumes of knowledge over the centuries about different subject matters especially in the areas of informal and vocational training, which constitute the core of indigenous education in Africa. Under this traditional system, each person in the community is practically trained and prepared for his/her role in society. It is a holistic system, in which story telling, proverbs and myths also play an important role.

There is the need for the adoption of some of the elements of this system into modern-day educational practice as a strategy for improving quality. For example, it has been established that the indigenous community is a rich source of storytellers. Indigenous stories are therefore a culturally and environmentally rich resource for teaching. To this end, schools could devise the strategies of using stories as teaching methods and categorising them according to a range of themes in different subject areas. In doing this, different schools would need to consult and work together with indigenous people (local elders, parents, nurses, doctors, monks, nuns, priests and other members of the community) by inviting them as guest storytellers or co-teachers to class to tell their stories – or to sing, act, dance, perform puppetry, etc. while developing the curriculum. This would encourage learners to learn from them and to appreciate and respect their knowledge. Such a relationship between young and older generations could help to mitigate the generation gap and help develop intergenerational harmony. The integration of traditional education into school curriculum would thus enable schools to act as agencies for transferring the culture of the society from one generation to the next and to explore the benefits of linking the learning process more closely to learners’ everyday experience in order to help them to make better sense of what they learn.

While the integration of indigenous knowledge into formal education offers many advantages, attempts to do so may encounter difficulties and challenges like the Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) of South Africa, which stipulates the knowledge, skills, values and/or attitudes that an individual is expected to demonstrate in a given learning situation at the end of each

learning process. The teacher's role might have to change from being a transmitter of knowledge to a mediator and facilitator of learning. The expectation for the student would need to change from a passive receiver of knowledge to an autonomous learner, reflective thinker and problem solver, who is actively involved in his/her own learning and construction of knowledge. Indigenous knowledge which is increasingly disappearing with the death of older people who are the bearers of such knowledge needs to be collected, documented and made readily available for teachers.

It must be emphasised at this juncture that the author is aware that the politics of curriculum development are complex and few African governments have taken the trouble to overcome sectarian (religious) or ethnic conflicts that hamper such curriculum enterprises. However, for many African governments, this issue is better left alone than confronted despite its advantages. Whatever position may be canvassed by African governments on this important issue, we cannot run away, out of convenience, from addressing the adoption of some of the elements of the indigenous system into modern-day educational practice as a strategy for improving quality. This should be tackled in a creative manner especially in this increasingly globalised world with its threat to cultural identities. We should seek to understand it, expand our views and practices, and not just discount it in favour of what we have always done before. African governments may have to take the important subject at the policy level, especially at this time when there is a call for an African renaissance and sustainable development. African people should not be intimidated by the argument about the complexity of this challenge but must confront the subject as a priority for survival in this increasingly global world.

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