

## SOME KEY ISSUES IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT.** Against a background discussion of the concept and general purpose of education, this article examines some key issues in African traditional education, namely its philosophical foundations, content and methods, strengths and weaknesses. The philosophical foundations of African traditional education are the five principles of preparationism, functionalism, communalism, perennialism and holism. We have highlighted the physical, social and spiritual content of African traditional education and the practical method of teaching and learning. The strengths and weaknesses of African traditional education are discussed and the attention of readers directed to possible areas for further study.

### PRINCIPAUX ENJEUX DE L'ÉDUCATION TRADITIONNELLE AFRICAINE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Avec en toile de fond le concept philosophique et le but général de l'éducation, cet article analyse certains des grands enjeux de l'éducation traditionnelle africaine, à savoir : les fondements philosophiques, le contenu et les méthodes, les points forts et les faiblesses. Les fondements philosophiques de l'éducation traditionnelle africaine sont les cinq principes du « préparationnisme », du fonctionnalisme, du communalisme, de la pérennité et de l'holisme. Nous avons mis en lumière le contenu physique, social et spirituel de l'éducation traditionnelle africaine et la méthode pratique et communautaire d'enseignement et d'apprentissage. Les points forts et les faiblesses de l'éducation traditionnelle africaine sont analysés par rapport à la société contemporaine. Nous terminons cet article en attirant l'attention du lecteur sur d'éventuels domaines d'études plus approfondies.

### *Introduction*

**B**efore the introduction of Western civilization into Africa, education in the continent was purely indigenous. So much has already been written on traditional African education that we only need to summarize existing literature (Majasan, 1967 and 1976; Fafunwa, 1974; Mwanakatwe, 1968; Ocitti, 1973; Snelson, 1974; Tiberondwa, 1978; Adeyinka, 1993; Adeyinka

& Kalusa, 1996; Kalusa, 2000.). Most recent works on new perspectives in African education, *vis-a-vis* the role and impact of Christian missions from the West, include those of Coetzee and Roux (eds.) (1991) and Makgoba (1999). With the penetration of the Christian missions from the fifteenth century, Western culture – notably British and French – had begun to move into various parts of the continent. The Christian missions brought with them ideas from Western culture that culminated in the introduction of formal education, with its emphasis on literary and purely academic work. African parents readily accepted this new education and they began to send their children to the schools fashioned after the European curriculum to learn; they gradually set aside the kind of education, holistic, lifelong, and utilitarian, which they themselves had received. However, the valuable nature of African traditional education has been realized to the extent that today, the call in most African societies is for a return to the indigenous education system, albeit in a modified form. We acknowledge that in the indigenous education of the various communities there were considerable cultural and historical differences. Our concern in this paper, however, is the presentation of the common core of values in African traditional education. Our argument is that an education that has the input of all members of the community, and prepares each individual for a particular profession or occupational activity, should be the norm in many African societies today.

### ***Objectives***

The objectives of this paper are to briefly:

(1) Examine the concept of education; (2) Give a sample of definitions from various perspectives; (3) Discuss the contents, philosophical basis and methods of African Traditional Education; (4) Highlight the weaknesses and strengths of African Traditional Education; and, (5) Direct the attention of readers to possible areas for further investigation.

### ***The concept of education***

Education is “the process of cultural transmission and renewal,” the process whereby the adult members of a society carefully guide the development of infants and young children, initiating them into the culture of the society. For infants and young children, education often takes the form of indoctrination, that is, the process of compelling the child to ‘eat’ or ‘play’ or do his/her homework at particular times of the day. In the training or upbringing of children, a measure of freedom is allowed so that they can have the opportunity of learning at their own rate and behaving in their own particular ways, provided their learning processes and general behaviour do not present a wide departure from the accepted social standards and conven-

tions of their society. Freedom is therefore a relative term and the extent of freedom a person enjoys depends largely on the culture of the society to which he or she belongs and the values which that society upholds. Hence, what society "A" values as freedom may be condemned as an act of indiscipline by society "B". For example, the kind of freedom which some parents in the Western world allow their children and wards,<sup>1</sup> such as calling elders by their names, is seriously condemned in African traditional society (Adeyemi, 2001).

The word **education** is derived from two Latin words. The first one is *educare* (*educare, educavi, educatum*), a first conjugation verb, meaning "to bring up," "to rear," "to guide," "to direct," "to educate" (Marchant and Charles, n.d., p. 186; cf. Little, Fowler & Coulson, 1968, p. 584). From this Latin origin, we infer that education is the process of bringing up children by adult members of the family and the society, a process of rearing children, a process of guiding, directing and educating children. However, the process of bringing up, rearing, guiding, directing and educating is not limited to children. Adolescents in post-primary educational institutions and adults in post-secondary institutions (such as students in universities) also need guidance and directing. Further, the tasks of "bringing up," "rearing," "guiding," "directing," and "educating" are more than the school alone can offer. All adult members of the society are concerned with all these tasks and in that way complement the efforts of the school. From this clarification, we infer that education is bigger than schooling because education takes place within and outside the school. Indeed, schooling can get in the way or disrupt a person's education, as in the epigram of Sir George Bernard Shaw, the Irish dramatist and critic, who once declared that "schooling had interrupted his education."<sup>2</sup>

The second Latin word from which **education** derived is *educere* (*educere, eduxi, eductum*), a third conjugation verb, meaning "to draw out," "to lead out," "to raise up," "to bring up," or "rear a child" (Marchant and Charles, n.d., p. 186). From this latter derivative, a more comprehensive definition of education emerges: education becomes the slow and skilful process of extracting the latent potentialities of comprehension and dedication, in contradistinction with indoctrination, which simply means "the implanting of a ready-made set of unexamined concepts in the child's mind." In other words, education appears to be the exact opposite of indoctrination, for, while the concept of education embraces the idea of freedom of selection, the concept of indoctrination excludes the idea of freedom and lays emphasis on an unquestioned acceptance of a ready-made set of dogmas, for example, the political dogmas in a totalitarian state (such as Prussia under Joseph II or Russia under Catherine the Great) or the religious doctrines of some Christian Churches or Muslim societies.

As in the case of *educare*, the tasks implicit or explicit in the meaning of *educere* are more than schools alone can give. All members of the family, the peer-group, the age-grade organization, community leaders, the church, the mosque, the shrine or other place of worship, the school and the mass media have their distinctive roles to play. Little, Fowler and Coulson must have thought along this line when they defined education as:

1. The process of nourishing or rearing; the process of bringing up (young persons); the manner in which a person has been brought up.
2. The systematic instruction, schooling or rearing given to the young (and, by implication, to adults) in preparation for the work of life. Also the whole course of scholastic instruction which a person has received (Little *et al.*, 1968, p. 584).

Therefore, we see that education could refer to both the process of training and the product or result of training. A society embracing an alien culture would therefore normally be expected to adopt the process of education introduced by the alien group and the use that should be made of the beneficiaries or products of that education. Apart from our interpretation of the ideas implicit and explicit in the Latin origins given above, there are some other definitions of education which may be of interest in the context of our discussion.

#### **Sample definitions**

Literature on philosophy of education is replete with a variety of definitions of the word "education." While some scholars define education as "the transmission of life by the living to the living," others define it as "the acquisition of the art of the utilisation of knowledge" (Whitehead, 1962). James Majasan, a renowned Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, defined education simply as "the art of learning" (Majasan, 1967) and emphasized the relevance to development of indigenous education in Africa (Majasan, 1976). To Carter Good (1959, p. 191), education is "the art of making available to each generation the organized knowledge of the past." Oladele Taiwo (1964, p. iv), in the preface to his book entitled *Agencies of Education*, defined education as "the total efforts of a community to raise its economic, social and political standards of life." Other relevant definitions of education include those by Snelson (1974, p. 1) who presented education as "a condition of human survival, . . . the means whereby one generation transmits the wisdom, knowledge and experience which prepares the next generation for life's duties and pleasures"; and Lane (176, p. 1, quoted in Kelly, 1991, p. 7) who defined education as "the transmission of wisdom, knowledge, experience and skills." George Hegel offered a somewhat complex definition. According to him, education is "a progressive perfection of humanity from a simple, uncultivated, primitive mind, through the hard discipline of labour and toil

to the consciousness and exercise of its freedom” (Hegel, 1807, translation by Baillie, 1949, p. 807)). This implies that education is a gradual development of the body and mind from infancy to adulthood. Related to Bloom’s taxonomy, it implies a progressive development of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains (or areas) of knowledge. Henry Msango, in a lecture to a group of Distance Education students at the University of Zambia in 1997, defined education as “the process of disseminating ideas from generation to generation,” which is in line with Carter Good’s definition above.

In a recent work, Adeyinka (2000, pp. 19-20) defined education as “the process of transmitting the culture of a society from one generation to the other, the process by which the adult members of a society bring up the younger ones.”

It is, indeed, a three-stage process. First, a generation inherits the culture of the society from the older generation. Then, they change that culture, for better or for worse – or, we could say, they modify the culture they inherited and adapt it to their own situation: the political, social and economic situations of their time. Finally, they pass on the modified culture to the generation following them. As the society becomes more highly urbanised and detribalised, particularly in an age of science and technology, the process of education becomes more complex. Education could be seen as the process of interaction between the guardians and the seekers of knowledge. It could be seen as a dialogue between the men and women with ideas and skills and the adolescents and young adults seeking to acquire and develop those ideas and skills, knowledge that they need to earn a living in an age of computers, science and technology. Education today is more than what the schools, colleges or universities alone can give. Industry, the mass media, the internet and related sources of learning in society are intended to complement institutionalized education; and, as we now live in a new century, the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no person would be deemed to have been truly educated if he or she is not computer-literate. Further, he or she should be able to tap information through the electronic media, to complement whatever information has been obtained in the formal classroom situation.

From the above, it is clear that education can be defined in various ways. Indeed, there are as many definitions of education as there are educational philosophers, scholars or students. There could even be more, because a single person can define education in more than one way and it is clear from the illustration given above and from the works of Jerome Bruner that one’s conception of education changes as one grows older. The way a student in a college of education defines education, for example, would be different from the way he would define it when he enrolls for a degree course in a university.<sup>3</sup> We change our minds or develop our ideas every day. Education

therefore leads to a change in behaviour and it is clear that the development of the individual is the ultimate goal of all education. We may now offer a general statement on what the purpose of education is, or should be.

### *The general purpose of education*

According to Adeyinka (1993), the purpose of education is to enable an individual to:

- (1) Position himself /herself in the society into which s/he has been born to live;
- (2) explore the world and find his/her own place in it;
- (3) cultivate good habits and develop the right attitude to life and work;
- (4) develop as a good citizen;
- (5) develop his/her potentialities to the full so that s/he could acquire knowledge and training in a profession and so earn a good living.

These ideas are implicit in Brian Crittenden's paper on "Aims, intentions and purposes in teaching and educating," where he argued that the school and the society should play complementary roles in education. The school offers only the literary and academic component of education. Initiation into the culture of the society and the development of good character and socially acceptable behaviour are more than the school alone can give. The aims and objectives, goals and means of reaching them are usually stated in the school's curriculum or subject syllabuses, but the aims and intentions of community-wide education are implicit in the societal expectations of individual members. That is why the wider community has to complement the efforts of the school. We can therefore understand Crittenden's contention that a person could live all his/her life without receiving purposeful education, particularly where aims and intentions are not clear from the start and efforts are limited to the acquisition of book knowledge alone (Crittenden, 1974, pp. 46-51). No wonder Adeyemi (2000) argued for a well-rounded education that would enable citizens live together purposefully in a dynamic global community. This concept of purposeful living is embedded in the following cardinal goals of African traditional education identified by Fafunwa (1974, p. 20):

- (1) To develop the child's latent physical skills;
- (2) To develop character;
- (3) To inculcate respect for elders and those in position of authority;
- (4) To develop intellectual skills;
- (5) To acquire specific vocational training and to develop a healthy attitude towards honest labour;
- (6) To develop a sense of belonging and to participate actively in family and community affairs;
- (7) To understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large.

The identified principles listed above have far reaching implications for the formal education of today. Translated into modern curriculum and pedagogical theories and practices, the cardinal principles are largely similar to the goals, contents, methods and evaluation techniques of the modern day

institution, although the *modus operandi* may be different. For instance, the seven traditional objectives can be categorised into the cognitive, psychomotor and the affective domains as found in modern day curricular practice. The first objective relates to the psychomotor development of the child through physical participation such as traditional games. The second, third, fifth, sixth and seventh traditional goals of education closely relate to the affective domain of modern day education. The fourth goal is directly related to the cognitive domain. When closely studied, some of the goals may fall into two or more of the domains of educational objectives as categorised by Bloom (1968), depending on how one examines them.

The traditional education of African children is briefly summed up in the words of Kenyatta (1961) while describing the educational system of the Gikuyu (also spelt Kikuyu) people of Kenya:

. . . . it will be found that education begins at the time of birth and ends with death. The child has to pass various stages of age-groupings with a system of education defined for every status in life. They aim at instilling into the children what the Gikuyu call "otaari wa mocie" or "kerera kia mocie," namely, educating the children in the family and clan tradition. Apart from the system of schools which has been introduced by the Europeans, there is no special school building in the Gikuyu sense of the word: the homestead is the school. . . . This is one of the methods by which the history of the people is passed from generation to generation. (pp. 99-100)

This traditional system of education is similar in other African countries. In Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania and Malawi, traditional education of youngsters involves intellectual, physical and attitudinal training in order to develop fully into acceptable adults in the society. In addition, different kinds of games, including wrestling and running, training for healthy living, cooking, dressing, hunting, farming, carpentry, training to become a smith, drumming, dancing, marriage counselling and critical thinking form part of the traditional curriculum at different stages of the life of the youth. Even on becoming an adult, and after the usual rights of passage, the average African continues to learn from traditional education through a lifelong process. This process fosters unity and citizenship in the African man's or woman's immediate environment.

One fascinating example of unity in the traditional sense is illustrated from the *Igbo* culture of Nigeria in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) while describing how a man, Okonkwo pleaded for communal unity at a feast hosted by him for his kinsmen:

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good

for the kinsmen to do so. . . . I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. (p. 118)

This picture of the importance of unity in the traditional community, in conjunction with other expected norms of the society in the past such as honesty, loyalty, bravery, mental and physical wellness, proper hygienic behaviour, exemplary leadership, responsibility and accountability, suggest that all these goals had existed before the advent of Western education. In the developing countries of Africa, such as Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, etc., institutionalized education seems to aim at promoting national unity and international understanding. Some of the aims in African education also include the removal of economic and social poverty, hunger, disease, squalor, illiteracy, ignorance, electoral malpractice, etc; training for citizenship, health improvement, vocational competence, industrial and commercial development and adult literacy; creating a society with high moral standards; and producing adequate or human resources, for economic development. We may stress the point that from the point of view of African societies today, the greatest problem seems to be that of producing and utilizing high-level human-resources to enable the various countries to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in the areas of science and technology, transformation and management of change in education, and so on. Therefore, the future aim of education in every African country is, or should be, the advancement of knowledge and the development and utilization of appropriate skills that would lead to national economic recovery and progress.

In the developed countries, such as those in Western Europe and North America, a central aim of education now seems to be the initiation of youth into a new world of learning, ideas, knowledge, thought and imagination, particularly the acquisition of new knowledge in science and technology. Western countries have passed through the age of discovery and inventions. What education aims to achieve now appears to be the preparation of youth for the utilization and preservation of existing products of science and technology; the understanding, handling and enjoyment of the fruits of the labours of their predecessors. If you want X, press Y (where X could mean a variety of human needs, ranging from information on how to operate a complex photocopying machine or boot the computer, to the use of the vending machine to obtain snacks, tea, coffee or coca-cola; and Y for the specific button to press in each case). This seems to be a major type of orientation that youths are now exposed to in the developed countries. In other words, a primary aim of education in the developed countries is to make young people computer-literate and to relate this knowledge to whatever else they do. However, the situation in many African countries is much



more complex, especially the challenge of moving from past to future types of work and expectations.

### *Philosophical foundations or principles of African traditional education*

Like any effective system of education, customary education in Africa was based on sound philosophical foundations. These foundations or principles have been rightly identified by Ocitti (1971) as preparationism, functionalism, communalism, perennialism and holism. The principle of preparationism, which underlined both formal and informal educational practices, implied that the role of learning and teaching was to equip boys and girls with the skills appropriate to their gender in preparation for their distinctive roles in the society. Pre-colonial education, even in the most centralized and stratified societies, was gender-based, with boys and girls receiving that kind of education which enabled them to fulfil socially defined masculine and feminine responsibilities respectively. Male education thus produced farmers, warriors, blacksmiths, rulers and other male-dominated occupations from which women were excluded. On the other hand, female education was predominantly designed to produce future wives, mothers and home-makers. The principle of preparationism further meant that male and female education prepared its recipients to adjust to the community and to play a useful role in it. Children developed a sense of obligation towards the community and grew to appreciate its history, language, customs and values. This is perhaps one of the greatest attributes of indigenous education as opposed to Western education which tended to alienate young Africans from their cultural heritage (Kelly, 1991).

Related to the principle of preparationism was the principle of functionalism. With few exceptions, if any, traditional educational practices in pre-colonial African societies were predominantly utilitarian (Ocitti, 1971). It was a participatory kind of education in which people learned through imitation, initiation ceremonies, work, play, and oral literature. In this way, the learner was productive as he/she learned and was smoothly integrated into the community: the gap which today exists between study and the world of work was absent in pre-colonial society. Indeed, there was no unemployment in African traditional societies.

The third principle of African indigenous education was communalism. In African traditional education, all members of the society owned things in common and applied the communal spirit to life and work. Children belonged to the community and every member of the community had a stake in their upbringing. For example, if a child misbehaved while the parents were not present, any other adult member of the community could discipline and correct him/her on the spot. Clearing, planting and harvesting were done in a group, on a shift basis for example; a group could clear Mr.

A's farm on one day and move on to clear Mr. B's farm on the following day. The process was repeated during planting and harvesting seasons and during the building of huts. There was also in practice the thrift and credit system whereby individual members of the community contributed fixed amounts in cowries<sup>4</sup> at regular intervals, to be collected by a member of the group at a time. For example, if Mr. A collected the group's contribution at the end of one week, it would be Mr. B's turn to collect it at the end of the following week. This was a form of compulsory saving for all adult members of the community, and the money collected in bulk could be used for a worthwhile venture, such as buying farm products for sale in the local market.

Perennialism constituted the fourth philosophical foundation of indigenous education. Most traditional communities in Africa perceived education as a vehicle for maintaining or preserving the cultural heritage and *status quo*. This partly explains why traditional teachers discouraged pupils from experimenting with the unknown and imposed heavy sanctions on those who tried to do so. In short, education in indigenous African communities was conservative in nature. Because of this, it had only a little progressive influence in the minds of young people (Snelson, 1974; Ocitti, 1973; Adeyinka and Kalusa, 1996).

The fifth philosophical foundation of customary education was holism or multiple learning. It is true that in economically, socially and practically advanced societies like the Zulu, Ashanti and Nupe, there was a high degree of specialisation in learning. However, as earlier noted, few African societies developed to that extent. In the latter societies, education provided little or no room for specialisation, but equipped both boys and girls to undertake a multitude of occupations that required related skills. Among the Acholi of Uganda, for example, a boy who was taught to construct a house was also expected to learn related lessons like the geography of the building site with regard to the source of water, geology and location of neighbouring villages. He was also expected to possess knowledge of the right types of trees and grass for construction of walls and for thatching (Ocitti, 1971). Similarly, a child destined to become a fisherman, as already noted, learned not only to catch fish but also to preserve and market it; to make and mend nets; to manufacture canoes and to erect temporary fishing huts. The holistic nature of customary education enabled young people to acquire a variety of skills that made them productive in many ways. A male individual in most non-literate communities could, therefore, embark on a variety of occupations without difficulty. He could work as a builder, farmer or fisherman. A woman worked as a gardener, housewife and cook, besides being a caretaker and nurse to her children.

### *The content of indigenous education*

The content or subject matter of traditional educational systems emanated from the physical, social and spiritual situations of pre-colonial African societies. The physical environment influenced the content of the curriculum in that what was taught was meant to assist the child to adjust and adapt to the environment in order to exploit and derive benefit from it. As Castle (1966, p. 40) argues, "Whether the child's habitat was dominated by mountain, plain, river or tropical forest, he had to learn to combat its dangers and to use its fertility." To come to terms with the physical environment, the growing child learned about landscape, the weather and also about both plant and animal life. As the child grew, he/she learned to understand the uses of both plants and animals in his locality, in addition to the taboos associated with them.

The physical situation further influenced what practical skills the child learned in order to prepare him or her for future responsibilities. Boys and girls who lived in fishing areas, for example, learned such skills as were required to catch, preserve and market fish, and manufacture and mend fish-traps, nets and canoes. In wooded areas, like the north-eastern part of Zambia, where the "cut and burn" system of agriculture was the mainstay of the economy, children from the age of six acquired much knowledge of trees and their household uses (Rodney, 1972). In either way, the educational practices of each society were influenced by the physical environment and were meant to prepare the learner to live and work in and profit from the given environment.

If the physical situation had a bearing on the subject matter, so did the social environment. The survival of most traditional communities was to a large measure dependent upon a network of reciprocal relationships that knit the family, clan and tribe together. Traditional educational systems were meant to reinforce such relationships. It is therefore not surprising that parents and other adults in the community ceaselessly gave their children instruction in social etiquette that upheld reciprocal ties. Children were taught to respect elders, to appreciate their social obligations and responsibilities and above all, to subordinate their individual interests to those of the wider community (Ocitti, 1971; Snelson, 1974; Tiberondwa, 1978; Mwanakatwe, 1968).

The content of traditional curriculum also derived from the spiritual environment. In pre-colonial Africa, where every event (like the birth of a child, death, sickness, flood or drought) was accorded spiritual significance, education tended to focus on religious teaching or instruction. Young children received instruction on the influence of both malevolent and benevolent spirits, and purification practices; they were also taught the value of propitiating the spirits to avert such disasters as sickness, death and pestilence. It

may indeed be argued that a greater portion of indigenous education in Africa centred on religious training. Religion played a key role in the life of children and adults alike: it provided a rallying point for the community and backed up socially-accepted values and norms such as honesty, generosity, diligence and hospitality (Castle, 1966; Ocitti, 1971). The contents of traditional African education are intimately tied to their cardinal goals, as identified by Fafunwa (1974, pp. 9, 20-49).

### *Method of African traditional education*

As is true today, a wide range of teaching methods prevailed between and within non-literate societies in Africa. In societies like the Nupe and Ashanti of West Africa, amongst whom education was a highly specialised activity, formal means of teaching were common and professional teachers existed. Such teachers taught a pre-determined body of knowledge in an organised sequence over a period of time, sometimes lasting many years. They also received payments in kind from parents of their pupils, although these were usually called 'gifts.' Professional teachers were used in training young children in diplomacy, medicine, hunting, copper- and iron-manufacturing and other specialised occupations. Both theoretical and practical approaches were employed in teaching, with pupils being encouraged to recite poems, riddles and songs, etc. "Schools" and "classes" were usually held in secluded places or at the king's or chief's palace. The graduation of pupils from such "schools" took place after they had sufficiently mastered their courses; it was often marked by feasting, ceremonial dancing and rejoicing (Tiberondwa, 1978).

In pre-colonial Africa, initiation ceremonies were common in both centralized communities and those that were acephalous – without a central chief or leader. The initiation activity enjoyed a high degree of formalism: it was characterised by teaching and learning of pre-determined material in a specific physical setting where there was a clear-cut distinction between pupils and teachers (Rodney, 1972; Tiberondwa, 1978; Datta, 1984). As in the training of young people for specialised occupations, initiation ceremonies lasted for varying periods. Among the Poro society in West Africa, for example, initiation schooling went on for as long as five years while the Tonga of Zambia initiated their female children over a period of between six weeks and four months (Datta, 1984). In either case, initiation ceremonies were meant to offer specific instruction in a wide range of areas, including farming, weaving, fishing, diplomacy, history and mothercraft. Female initiates underwent physiological, social and moral education to become capable mothers and wives. On the other hand, male children who were initiated were trained to become defenders of their villages and good providers for their families (Kalusa, 1998). In most societies which practised initiation ceremonies, the end of the initiation itself was marked by circumcision for

boys and clitoridectomy for girls which in turn symbolised the transition of the initiated from childhood to adulthood (Kenyatta, 19618; Datta, 1984; Rodney, 1972). Initiation practices were widespread and have been documented among such diverse ethnic groups as the Sidamo of Ethiopia, the Masai of Kenya and Tanzania, the Nandi of Kenya, the Tonga of Zambia and the Zulu of South Africa (Datta, 1984).

In the majority of non-literate African societies, however, the greater portion of education was informal. As Rodney (1972, p. 261) argues, this kind of education was acquired by children "from the example and behaviour of elders in the society." Under this system of education, methods of teaching were less highly structured and the line between the teacher and the pupil was thin. Learning was by initiation, observation and repetition of what parents and other adults did and encouraging the young to do it. It was also done through oral literature and play. These enabled boys and girls to learn about the history of their tribe and enhanced their mental development. They also acquired such qualities as perseverance, self-control, courage and endurance. In this informal way, children developed an aptitude to perform their masculine and feminine roles.

It is important to stress that in societies where education was largely informal, parents were predominantly responsible for teaching their children. They inculcated good manners, norms and values into their offspring, using their household as the "school." This household education covered practical skills and continued as long as the child lived with his/her parents. The educational efforts of parents were supplemented by the efforts of the other adults in the community. All elders in the society were expected to play mother and father roles in teaching, scolding, advising, rewarding and punishing children in the village or community (Blackmore and Cooksey, 1980; Tiberondwa, 1978). Among the Banyaruguru of Western Uganda, an adult who showed no interest in the education of the young people in the community was regarded as inimical to the community. He or she was often branded a witch (Tiberondwa, 1978). This observation, which also applies to many other societies in Africa, denotes that the task of teaching and bringing up children in pre-colonial communities was a collective responsibility.

#### *Weaknesses and strengths of African traditional education*

A major shortcoming of African traditional education is that it focused almost exclusively on the clan or tribe and hardly prepared its recipients for outside contact. Practically, this meant that the skills and knowledge possessed by a given ethnic group could not be easily transmitted to another tribe (Tiberondwa, 1978). Moreover, the absence of literacy implied that the accumulated knowledge and skills could not be preserved in a written form. This prevented the transfer of the same from one locality to another

and from one generation to the next. Many wise Africans have died with their own wisdom.

A close examination of traditional methods of teaching further reveals that customary education was wanting or deficient in this area. Tiberondwa (1978) has rightly observed that among some tribes in pre-colonial Uganda, for example, there was too much reliance on inculcation of fear and punishment as a means of teaching. Among the Ankole, "slow learners and offenders were killed to discourage slow learning and scare young people from committing similar offences" (Tiberondwa, 1978, p. 10). This means of teaching could only produce learners who, out of fear, were obedient and submissive. They committed to memory ideas that they did not understand and the values they had no right to question. Indigenous education thus tended to kill the spirit of initiative, innovation and enterprise, all of which are (or should be) promoted by modern education in Africa.

In spite of its shortcomings, traditional education was an effective way of preparing young people for their future. It was a successful means of maintaining the economic, social and cultural structures and stability of the societies in which it was practised. Without doubt, indigenous education prepared both boys and girls to come to terms with the physical, social and spiritual world of their time; it also prepared them for the world of work. Pre-colonial education was effective because no able-bodied person in traditional African society was unemployed (Kaunda, 1966). Children were trained in skills that made them become productive and useful to themselves and to the society. Similarly, the absence of social tension (which today manifests itself in various crimes and divorce rates) points to how successful indigenous education was in promoting and enhancing sound human relations within pre-colonial African societies. Through traditional education, young people acquired a communal rather than an individualistic outlook. Education was instrumental in helping people to subordinate their personal interests to those of the wider community and to appreciate the values, norms and beliefs of their society. Thus, indigenous education prepared children to play their roles in the family, clan and the tribe as a whole.

Pre-colonial education should further be credited for its enormous capacity to preserve cultural heritage. In precolonial Africa, education served as an important tool for preserving and passing on time-tested skills, customs and knowledge from generation to generation. It was indeed through their education that young people learned to appreciate and value the heritage of their forebears: their language, norms and such attributes as chastity, honesty, diligence, valour, hard-work, generosity and hospitality. Once children understood and appreciated their cultural heritage, they too passed it on to their offspring who in turn did the same to their own children. In this way, the continuity of the tribe's pattern of life was assured.

### *Conclusion*

African traditional education focused on the training and skill development of the individuals in various local communities. It enabled every member of each community to be gainfully employed. It had its foundation in the five principles of preparationism, functionalism, communalism, perennialism and holism. Its content was based on the physical, social and spiritual environments of the time. There was no clearly defined method of instruction and no standardised method of testing the learners for the purpose of graduation and certification as is the case in the present-day educational institutions. The content of instruction and the duration of learning or apprenticeship were generally determined by the master. A major problem in the practice of education in pre-colonial Africa was the inability of the people to write and keep records, which would have enabled local teachers and master-craftsmen and herbalists to preserve their wisdom and knowledge for the use of the younger generation. Since the knowledge concerning many professions remains undocumented, it is high time for Africans to document the cognitive aspect of their professions in black and white. A situation where a master in a profession dies with his knowledge should not be allowed to continue. A typical example is illustrated when a traditional doctor dies without documenting the various herbs used to heal the sick.

Nevertheless, traditional education served the overall needs of traditional African societies, because learning generally involved training on the job and everybody was gainfully employed. In spite of the introduction of Western education into Africa, aspects of African traditional education exist everywhere. The introduction of a common curriculum for non-formal education in Africa and the standardisation of evaluation practices leading to the award of 'certificates' and 'diplomas' to those apprentices who successfully complete their training is an area that should be of interest to educational practitioners in Africa. To a large extent, traditional education embraced the idea and practice of indoctrination. For the present-day learners in Africa, it is necessary to introduce the idea of reflective thinking, to lessen the fear associated with the teaching and learning environment in the traditional school. To this end, Adeyemi (1998) has called for the inclusion of the examination of an issue-oriented curriculum in the indigenous education of the African learner. Finally, a balance should be struck between the practice of the traditional and modern day education in a continuing attempt to produce a well-rounded citizen. In other words, we are calling for a merger of what is good in African traditional education with the good aspects of the formal education of the Western type. We see as an appropriate balance, or "ideal" for the contemporary world, a synthesis of the traditional and modern cultures, that is, a mingling of what is considered good and beneficial in the African traditional system with the practicable, useful, and equitable components of institutionalized education in the

present-day, urban/industrial societies. This is the direction that education in both developed and developing countries should take. However, this synthesis of cultures continues to be a major challenge in the context of many contemporary African societies, where politicians often perpetuate the status quo in order to remain in power. A desirable goal would be for them to work with other social groups to bring the people they are governing to new levels of knowledge and skill, through the blended educational approach we have explored above.

### *Suggested areas for further investigation*

In this paper, we have discussed some key issues in African traditional education, focussing on the philosophical foundations, content and methods, weaknesses and strengths. Scholars in each African country may want to investigate the principles, content and methods of education in their respective countries before the coming of the Christian Missionaries and Colonial Administration. It would be especially valuable for future research if each aspect could be investigated in turn, and with a concern for its possible relevance or adaptation to contemporary social realities.

### NOTES

1. In African traditional society it was a usual practice for parents to have guardianship of other children whose parents were poor or dead. In Africa, such children in the care of foster parents are commonly referred to as "wards."
2. Quoted in Majasan 1967. 1976, p. 103.
3. In Nigeria, a college of education is lower in status than a university. It offers three-year programmes for secondary school graduates, leading to the award of the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) in subjects taught in the secondary schools. The NCE is an equivalent of GCE (Ordinary Level) plus professional training for teaching (which includes teaching practice), normally at the junior secondary school level. NCE holders are eligible for admission to Nigerian universities for 2-3 year academic programmes, leading to the award of the Bachelor's degree in Education (BEd), the Bachelor of Arts degree in Education (BA Ed) or the Bachelor of Science degree in Education (BSc Ed).
4. Cowries were small white shells used as currencies in traditional African society for the purchase of goods and services before the introduction of British paper money and coins (Pounds, Shillings and Pence) during the colonial era. They were used to complement the 'trade by barter' system, whereby farmers and craftspersons exchanged their products for other goods and services they needed.

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