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A STUDY OF THE AFRICAN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION, ITS RELEVANCE AND LIMITATIONS WITH REFERENCE TO THE LUO INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper intends to analyze African indigenous education with a specific reference to Luo traditional education in Kenya. It attempts to critically examine African indigenous education and criticize the notion that Africans did not have an education system. The paper concludes by examining the limitations and relevance of African indigenous education to the modern development of Africa.

Introduction

It has been often assumed that Africans did not have any system of education until the introduction of the Western formal education. When the European missionaries first came to Africa, they came with the imagination that Africans were barbaric, uncultured and primitive. It was also said that Africans did not have any system of education hence their ignorant nature. As a result of all these misconceptions, the missionaries thought African minds were *tabula rasa* on which to introduce education for the first time. Europeans defined education based on literacy and schooling. However, every society depends on education for its existence and sustainability. Africa is no exception. Even before the coming of the Europeans and their education system, there were traditional forms of education. These forms might have varied from one community to another but the goals of African indigenous education were similar (Otiende, Wamahiu and Karugu 1992).

The African education system basically entailed of the social, political, cultural, religious and economic systems of a community. It was also gradual and progressive from the time a child was born to the time he became an adult. The children would basically learn by observing the elders

then practically doing the tasks. Lessons were also acquired from the daily activities and experiences. All these were aimed at sharpening the manual skills and improving intellectual abilities of members of the society. These aspects can be clearly compared to the modern systems of education because the goals, methods of instruction, assessment and content align together. Although over the years, African indigenous education has been replaced by the modern western education, the former still plays a major role in the shaping of an individual's personality (Bogonko 1992, Sifuna and Otiende, 1994).

This paper will vividly analyze the content, goals, methods of instruction and assessment in the African indigenous education. It will also analyze how western education is similar to the former and explicate how all these relate to the contemporary system of education in Kenya.

Education can be defined as the act or the process of acquiring knowledge in a systematic and organized manner. It can also be defined as the development of the abilities of mind that is learning to know, which can be said to be liberal education and practical education that is training. African indigenous education was a life time learning in which one had to go through the predetermined stages of life, from cradle to grave (Cameroon and Dodd, 1970).

Luo indigenous education system

It is believed that Luo community migrated from southern Sudan around 15th BC and followed River Nile. Later they settled in the western part of Kenya around Lake Victoria. The region experiences a warm and wet climate and thus disease prevalence is high. The region also experiences two seasons in a year that is, dry season which begins in December up to around March, during this dry period, members of the community would visit relatives and most of the cultural activities would take place since little was done after which the dry season welcomed the rainy season between March and June. This was a planting season, during this period visits were rare if none since people were busy working on their farms. August was harvesting season and people could gather around the moon light to celebrate the abundance. It is also important to take note that Luo community practiced fishing besides doing mixed- farming that is livestock keeping and also growing of crops such as finger millet, groundnuts and more (Ogot, 2009).

(Chukwunonso and Ejikemeuwa 2021) argue that African indigenous education specifically focuses on teaching indigenous knowledge, methods, and content within formal or non- formal educational systems. In Africa the system was very elaborate as it can be observed in some communities. Learning was formal in the sense that it required specialization. In such cases there were professional teachers who would take the young ones through the system. Most African societies had a non-formal system of education. Learning was as a result of observation from the day- to- day activities that were being practiced by the society.

Luo community had environment in which religion, politics, economics and social relationships were interdependent. The environment in which a society found itself was a very important factor in the curriculum development. For instance, if a community settled around the lake or a river their main economic activity was fishing. This formed the basis of the curriculum to be taught. Africans had an education system which was elaborate and whose objective was to prepare one for adult life. one aim of education was to transmit and conserve from one generation to the next accumulated wisdom and knowledge of the family, clan and ethnic group. This was to adopt children to their physical environment which was crucial to their survival. Indeed, the environment in Kenya was not uniform (Bogonko, 1992).

The Luo community had an organized political system based on chiefdom which was hereditary. 'Ruoth' chief was the custodian of the land for the supreme- being who was supposed to be taken care of by the society. According to Ocitti (1973) on Acholi indigenous education, he explains how the chiefs were respected, that during weeding and planting sessions they would work on the chief's farm before starting theirs.

Margret Ogolla (2004) in her book describes people who did not have food as *Jomifuadhi*, meaning, people who could walk around the villages begging for food. This was not entertained since 'Were' God was the giver of rains and everyone was supposed to work and produce food. One was supposed to work to keep the family out of hunger. Many sacrifices were done in 'Got Ramogi' the hills of Ramogi where it is believed *Were* was dwelling.

In Luo community, polygamy is strongly embraced for continuity of the clan, the more sons one had the more respect he gained from the community. Children were to help their parents in chores and were to remain obedient. Ominde (1952) argues that marriage was mandatory in almost all the African communities and Luo was no exception. In fact, it was a polygamous

society mainly to increase the chances of survival of the off-springs. Transiting from one stage to another was through initiation by removal of the six lower teeth for both boys and girls. Sources indicate that this was due to a disease called *locking jaws* that was experienced when they were in Sudan. When one felt sick and could not open his or her mouth, the gap could be used to pass medicine and food. When they migrated to Kenya they continued with the practice.

Luo community had their own medicine men whose work was believed to treat the sick. One of the re-known medicine men was Gor Mahia. A myth is told of him changing into a goat when the white man wanted to arrest him. Luanda Magere is also another legend whose story has been told over and over for protecting the Luo community against the inversion of other tribes. It is said that his body was tough like a stone. Therefore, whenever they fought with the Kalenjins the arrows would not penetrate through his skin (Ogot, 2009).

Curriculum, content and evaluation system

Education in the African setting started from inception, as is well noted in Luo tradition. When a woman got pregnant, she was supposed to visit *nyamrerwa*, a local midwife. Here she would be trained on how to behave during pregnancy, what food to eat and what to do. Childlessness was regarded as the most misfortune and if this happened, the wife's family would bring another daughter to bear children for the husband. If this persisted the woman could be advised to try and get a child outside the marriage with a cousin of the husband though the family will not disclose this to prevent stigma from the society. It was in this case that a man would marry many wives before being declared infertile. Cases of barrenness were associated mostly with sex before marriage and this was a way of keeping the youths pure before marriage. (Ochieng,2020) in the Luo community childbearing is an obligation that must be fulfilled.

During child birth the woman was expected to stay in the midwife's place for sometimes after the baby was born. A midwife was a close family friend who was trusted and could not harm the child and the mother. After the baby was born, she was supposed to be nursed by the brothers' wives or cousins after which (Japidi) child-nurse was supposed to help the mother to take care of the child usually *Japidi* was either the woman's younger sister or man's younger sister. Naming in Luo community was done immediately depending on the event and season, for example a crying baby was called Akoko or Okoko, a baby born in the evening could be called Odhiambo or Adhiambo, a baby born during the rainy season would be called Akoth or Okoth and so on. It is important to notice that boys' names started with letter 'O' and girls' 'A'. However, there were some few exceptions. A boy could be named Akoko after his grandmother who died long time

ago upon the spirits sending a dream demanding to be named, failure to which a child could cry until it dies. This practice is still very common and the Luo community still believes in this naming system (Ogolla, 1994).

Post-natal care was very important and this was majorly on the hands of (Japidi). A child between one week to around three months, could be carried with a lot of care by (Japidi) since the mother was still weak and she could only do the work of breastfeeding the child and monitoring the child. Afterwards, the child could start sitting and was to be taught slowly how to crawl, almost all the family members were concerned about the newborn that (*Minyuru*) new mother would be encourage to eat a lot of food so that the child could grow faster, even today they say a woman who has just given birth must eat food for the two, so generally the attitude towards children was that of wishing them well. There were a number of ways in which children were encouraged to sit and start crawling. It is important to note that at this stage the central pivot of a child development depended on two people, that is a child's nurse and the mother. A mother could stand few meters away with her arms open to the child and with this, the child could start moving. Flowers or objects could be placed a distant away from the child and the child could be encouraged to go after (Occiti 1973).

After a child had started walking it was anticipated that the child would start talking. For a fact watching a child start communicating with others is the best experience one can ever feel, when a child started cooing showing dissatisfaction or complaining it was a sign that the child was normal and this was a source of happiness. A child was encouraged to speak with *Japidi* and other family members even if the child could not understand what was being said, the ability could increase after a year or two and songs could be sung for the young ones just to encourage them to talk. A child could be shown different things and asked to say what they were and this differed from clan to clan. In places where farming was practiced mostly the farming equipment were available, this was true learning of the family's daily activities (Ochieng, 2020).

At the age of 6 the child was now able to acquire some vocabulary from the playing groups and was able to stand a conversation. The child was now expected to use the correct language and punctuations during communication. Clearly points out that language is a very important aspect in the Luo community. Therefore, those who could communicate well by mastering the language were regarded wise and every parent could encourage the children to communicate well. This was very important because all the instructions were going to be given and children were supposed to follow. In Luo community children who had disabilities such dumbness or

stammering were respected if not feared since it was believed this only happened when the ancestors were angry (Ogot, 2009).

Luo education was to lay the foundation for social-moral adjustment. The first teacher of the child regardless of the sex was the mother. She was to show the baby a lot of love during nursing and nurturing. According to Occiti (1973) a great deal of affection was shown especially by women to babies and young children who were often embraced, cuddled stimulated, nursed, kept warm, petted, caressed, fondled or tickled. A woman who turned deaf ears to a crying baby was regarded as very unkind and unsympathetic. Mother-in-law and other older members of the family could warn her and even sometimes scold her. In matters to do with discipline, aggressiveness of a child and bad behaviors in African culture were not allowed and could not go unpunished. At times this was done through scaring and beating.

(Bogonko 1992) A child was to conform to morals, customs and standards of the community, Africans could motivate children to encourage good behavior by encouraging them, rewarding, approval and praise. Another aspect of learning was on feeding habits. During the first three months or a child could purely feed on mother's breast milk. Breast feeding a child was serious that a mother could sit down and allow a child to breastfeed anywhere and anytime. Whenever a child cried for food, the little one could be introduced to solid food slowly, at the beginning with cow's milk and later (nyuka) Porridge. The mother was the one to decide when to start weaning. In case the mother died, and left an infant, (*Japidi*) would become the wife and in this case, she was supposed to breastfeed the baby and become its foster mother. In a nutshell transition from breast feeding to adult food was gradual as the mother could observe the child's reaction. The period when most infants were completely weaned varied from one year to one and a half. There is this belief that boys could be weaned earlier because of the gluttonous nature than girls.

Sleeping habit was also another form of learning whereby the young infants were allowed to sleep anytime of the day. Children from the age of six could rarely sleep during the day and when it happened, they could be suspected to be sick. In the evening, just after the cattle had arrived young boys could make fire around *dwo*ll (fireplace) where they could gather after evening meals for stories, after which the young ones could be put to sleep on the hides (pien). Children who refused to sleep could be threatened that wild animals would come to eat them.

Toiletry was taught to infants from the first day where mothers allowed the young ones to empty bowels on a mother's thigh. This was generally for the mother to make observations for any stomach problems. After two weeks, the mother could hold the child between her legs to allow

the little one to empty the bowels on the ground. This continued until the baby could be taken outside the house. At the age of six they could go to the bushes around the homestead (Ocitti,1973, Bogonko 1992, Sifuna 1990).

Safety and precaution were very important. However, this did not deter the parents from allowing the children to play. Girls were taken care of since they were supposed to stay in the homestead and help the mothers in house chores, boys on the other hand were allowed to play in the field. Girls were taught mostly on how to maintain a family and to make husbands happy. Women were supposed to be loyal to their husbands and mostly assist them in generating wealth for the family.

At the age of eight, education took another twist. Here boys were to accompany their fathers to the field and do adult chores though under supervision. Young boys were to go to the farm with their fathers. Afterwards they would go to graze the cattle. All this was to prepare the boys for adult life. Boys were to observe fathers building huts since in Luo tradition, women were not allowed to touch the roof of the hut during building. The young boys were to take charge in the building of the hut. It is very clear that any African indigenous education was to make the child all round, a jack of all trades and a master of all. Games and mimicking played a very important part in the learning of the boys. For instance, boys could do mock hunting practice 'dwar'. This was to prepare boys to defend the clan against invasion and also wild animals. Boys were expected to be providers and protectors. In all this Luo community was a community which valued girl child. This was basically because fathers viewed them as a source of wealth when they got married. Therefore, girls were expected to stay in the homestead and help the mother in the daily activities of the house. Later they could nurse their younger siblings as this prepared them for future life of marriage and motherhood (Okot,1979).

Luo community had a rich oral literature. Community myths about legends like Luanda Magere could be told to make young boys feel courageous during wars. Music instruments such as *nyatiti* were played during ceremonies and that was generally to encourage and to pass the Luo culture and beliefs. These songs were also meant to praise people who had sacrificed for the community or prominent chiefs. (Shujaa stories 2019)

Another aspect was specialized learning which was specific and could only be passed from father to son or mother to daughter. This included rainmakers, medicine men, blacksmith, midwives and so on. In rare cases a friend could request that his son be taught a skill and he was supposed

to pay afterwards with a goat or a cow. Young boys could be allowed to practice alongside their fathers through apprenticeship (Bogonko, 1992).

In general, Luo community had an education system which was through, imitation, work, play, oral literature, social ceremony and formal teaching like hunting. Luo indigenous education was to develop character, physical aptitudes, moral qualities and social knowledge to an individual. Oral traditions and storytelling mostly were told in the evening when everyone was done with the daily chores. Luo indigenous education often relies on oral traditions and storytelling as a means of passing down knowledge. Therefore, incorporating diverse teaching methods, including storytelling and oral history, can make learning more engaging and inclusive since some learners will be learning in form of entertainment (Osogo, 1971).

What are the limitations and relevance of African indigenous education to modern development of Africa?

It is true that despite having many positive impacts Luo indigenous education had some limitations. In traditional education, the parents were to compel children rather than to guide them. They indoctrinated rather than stimulating children to get the best from them. At times, adults can be overwhelmed by preservation of the older traditions rather than to hope for a better future. The old dominated all decision-making by controlling the learning of the young ones. Hence this created no room for creativity. Any questions were considered as rebellion which would be punishable for the sake of culture preservation (Occiti 1973, Ngesu, 2020).

Traditional education was appropriate in the past because, the society was situated in one area, and movement to the outside world was limited hence interactions with other societies were limited. This type of education had minimal changes from one generation to another since it was transferred as a whole. African Indigenous education was not an education for change but rather for custody of the culture. Tribal education was to maintain status quo but modern education is dynamic and keeps on adjusting to the new human wants and needs (Occiti 1973).

The traditional education was a clan affair and nothing more since contact or interaction with the outside world was imaginary. Therefore, education was to prepare one to help the clan, and take roles in the clan thus little attention was put on others. This was appropriate in those days but today, we live in an interdependent society and a good system of education is the one which will make a progressive adjustment to modern life. In the world full of new innovations and

technology we need an education system which will help us tap the natural resources and also for daily survival (Bogonko 1992).

According to Ngesu (2020), African traditional teachers discouraged venturing and experimenting with the unknown. However, constructive thinking is important for any society today. Traditional education may be considered unsuitable since it offers little scope on constructive thinking. It did not allow one to be innovative and make judgments since one had to learn what was already in the system. The opinion of an individual was not important in traditional Education. More focus was on the norms of the community. However, the society today requires people with different points of view if it is to progress in all aspects.

Traditional education was both formal and informal. Formal education was given not to discover but to indicate action to be imitated or a doctrine to be accepted. There was hardly an attempt to explain concepts. Emphasis was on recognizing, accepting and assimilating the already known concepts. The work of the learner was to imitate and tap knowledge, there were no questions to be asked since learners were expected to be submissive throughout the process of learning (Sifuna 1990).

Some scholars have looked at traditional education as pressure from without which was intended to imprison the mind of an individual instead of releasing one to invent, discover, build and produce. Traditional education was meant to be an adjustment to living (Occiti, 1973, Sifuna 1990).

Relevance to the modern day

African indigenous education often focuses on a holistic approach thus incorporating not only academic knowledge but also practical skills, moral values, and community engagement. In education one had to be a jack of all trades, master of all. Modern education can benefit from incorporating a more well-rounded approach to learning (Sifuna, and Otiende, (1994).

African indigenous education is deeply rooted in local cultures, traditions, and historical backgrounds. Incorporating culturally relevant content and perspectives into the curriculum can enhance student's sense of identity, pride, and belonging. Luo Indigenous education often involves the community in the learning process. Encouraging greater community engagement and participation in modern schooling can foster a sense of responsibility, support, and shared learning.

Luo indigenous education often emphasizes a strong connection to the environment since the land had everything on it which was from god and man was only supposed to take care of what was on it. These teachings can sustain practical learning. Integrating environmental awareness and sustainability into the modern curriculum can help create more environmentally conscious citizens (Sifuna 1990).

If the modern education system can borrow these aspects of African indigenous education, then it can become more inclusive, culturally relevant, and better equipped to prepare students for the dynamic complexities of the world.

Inter marriages in Kenya have also led to the death of Luo indigenous education. For instance, when two different cultures interact, either the strong one will stand or both will die and a new one will be created. Many Kenyans today have married from different tribes and even races thus making it difficult to continue practicing traditional education. In addition, educators do not know what to modify and preserve from the African Indigenous education. Competency Based Curriculum has tried

to take some aspects into consideration like introduction of African indigenous languages in grades 4, 5 and 6 and some lessons allocated for them (Otiende, Wamahiu and Karugu 1992).

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that African communities had a clear system of education. African indigenous education was guided by clearly defined goals/aims, the content to be taught, methods to be used in the teaching and learning as well as who were the educators. According to Ngungi Wa Thiongo in his book '*Decolonization of the mind*' (1986), the minds of Kenyans have been colonized by a foreign language and culture which has made them forget themselves.

Even though Europeans would like us to imagine that they are the ones who liberated us from illiteracy, the discussion above has successfully managed to prove otherwise. Literacy and numeracy were not the only way to define education. However, the African system of education had some shortcoming which needed to be improved. Since the mode of instruction was basically orally, a lot of information and knowledge might have been distorted as it was being passed down from one generation to another. The system also lacked professional teachers who would work specifically on teaching learners according to their fields of specializations. The education was basically conservative therefore, learners were not given an opportunity to

discover or come up with new ideas. Hence, techniques used were very ancient yet there was need for improvement. There are a number of things which the African indigenous education has borrowed from Western education such as formality, literacy and numeracy. Moreover, the later can also borrow from the former aspects such as specialized training, learning from environment and nature, practicality, functionalism and upholding culture.

Despite western influence, there is need to trace back to the African roots and teach children about their history and African heritage.

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