Applying the Traditional African Education Model for Character Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria, like any other nation of the world, is not speared of the prevailing moral crisis in the contemporary period. Part of these crisis are however, traceable to the new values ushered in during the colonization of Africa and many of which are in direct conflict with African values. This work is therefore, an attempt to reflect on the traditional African education which has character building as its hallmark. This was done by discussing the place of character development in Nigeria today; and the major causes and consequences of character or moral decline in Nigeria. It is the position of the authors that the application of the African model will reshape the education orientation of Nigerian. This can be achieved through "Rational Reconstruction" of African culture, teaching the youths to define themselves as Africans and to determine their essential characteristics as Africans amongst others are some of the ways of avoiding the 'miseducation' and thus, shape the character of the Nigerian youths.

Introduction

Nigeria as a nation must do more than mere economic survival. It must grow in the understanding of what it means to be a human community in the range opportunities it offers each members for full development and their capacity to handle new ethical problems particularly, in the contemporary period of materialism and social changes. This is with the realization that there can be no development of a country if its citizens are morally underdeveloped and immature. Moral development is sine-qua-non for the development of any nation because neither science nor technology can develop a country if its citizens are morally undeveloped.

As FRN (2004:4) puts it, "Education in Nigeria is an instrument per excellence for effecting national development". The document further puts the inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society as one of the national educational goals. Inculcating the right type of values on the other hand depends on the kind of education considered appropriate to the needs of Nigeria, and this can only be adequately determined within the Nigerian cultural-historicity and philosophical orientation. This concern for values and moral is however, an enduring adult preoccupation.

Down through recorded history, the worry about the character of the younger generation is evident. Concern has never been enough to ensure that the youths possess the type of character that can sustain them and the Nigerian society at large. As Okoh (2005:17) puts it, "no society has been developed by foreign scholars or foreign system of thought. The indigenes have always had to develop their own society themselves through scientific knowledge and mastering of the laws of environment in which they live". This therefore, makes it imperative to reflect the African traditional education, and to see its relevance vis-à-vis the modern type of education in order to re-direct the moral lives of the youths especially, as Nigeria starkly grapples with reality in her search for intellectual and moral freedom.

Traditional African Education

Every society has its own system for training and educating its youths; and education for good life has been the most persistent concern of men through history. Africa was however, not an exception. Although its education was informal, but functionality and character building were the hallmarks of African traditional education. African society regarded education as a means to an end and not an end itself. Education was generally for immediate introduction into the society and a preparation for adulthood. In particular, African education emphasized social responsibility, job orientation, political participation and spiritual and moral values. (Fafunwa, 1995:5).

The curriculum content of African traditional education was relevant as it geared towards the needs of the people. There was little or no unemployment as everybody was gainfully employed in one trade or the other. By implication, it means that there were little or no idle minds engaged in frivolities just as the saying goes, "an

idle man is the devil's workshop". The education was continuous and flexible in such a way that mature persons are accommodated in one trade or the other at any stage in life.

In Africa, the training of a child is seen as the responsibility of all adults within and outside the immediate family. As the child cannot continue to be under the guide of his parents all the time, elders, brothers and sisters and other members of the extended family contribute to his/her upbringing in one way or the other. This was aimed at maintaining the solidarity of group on one hand, and secondly, to give the elementary morality or humanity, the motive could as well be religious or superstitious. The absence of any other aspect of education could be tolerated as long as good character was prevalent, but the absence of good character on the part of an individual is the most shameful thing that could happen to the child's own immediate and extended families. As Fafunwa (1995:11) puts it,

> In the traditional Nigerian society all parents want their children to be
> upright, honest, kind and helpful to others, and will spear no pain to instill
> the qualities …all Nigerian parents irrespective of ethnic group, prefer to
> remain childless than to have children who will bring shame and dishonor to
> the family.

To restrain the child from certain things, outright threats or taboos are introduced by the adults. Adults guide the youths by sending them on small errands, telling them stories, teaching them to obey and respect elders, code of behaviour, and the history of the family. In addition to the role of the elders, age groups were also, veritable instrument in shaping the child's behaviour-pattern, abilities and skills required for effective citizenship in the community in which he lives.

The aim of traditional education is multilateral and the end objective is to produce an individual who is honest, respectable, skilled, cooperative and conforms to the social order of the day. Although the educational objectives cannot be neatly distinguished, seven aspects have been identified by Fafunwa (1995:6-7) as follows:
(i)   To develop the child's latent physical skills;
(ii)   To develop character;
(iii)   To inculcate respect for elders and those in position of authority;
(iv)   To develop intellectual skills;
(v)   To acquire specific vocational training and to develop a healthy attitude towards labour;
(vi)   To develop a sense of belonging and to participate actively in family and community affairs;
(vii)   To understand, appreciate and promote cultural heritage of the community at large.
Indeed, the central argument of this paper is that the contemporary Nigerian system of education has been functioning with Western concepts of values without emphasis on the aims of the African education. Because we do not function with the aims and objectives of our education, we cannot but experience some cultural and moral disorientations. Functioning with European frame of reference is not only extremely damaging to our sense of identity, but could be the root cause of our present moral decadence.

Character Development

The word "character" is derived from a Greek word meaning 'to mark'. The derivative suggests the visible nature of traits. Visibility is a useful starting point for considering the matter of trend in youths' character.

Character is conduct. Conduct is the essence of character. In essence, conduct is visible, and can often be easily observed. We can only try to form the character of the child if we have an efficient form of feedback. Realistically, the good or bad character becomes overtly reflexive in people's acts and seen by others when it becomes visible. It is therefore understandable that responsible people will not however, be interested in the character of others until it is displayed through evident conduct. But despite the traditional and the practical merits of the visible conduct approach, research reports have shown that it should not stand alone in its deployment as a concept for looking at the character of the youths. It is important to note that words themselves constitute a form of conduct. Politeness, telling the truth in the face of temptation, engaging in lying, etc are all verbal acts. Such acts constitute conduct. It is generally recognized that certain responsibilities are tactically generated by words, and acts which create responsibilities have ramifications for character building.

Goals of Character Development

Three broad goals have been identified by Lickona as quoted by Omordu and Oranusi (2011:46-47) for educating the children for moral and character development. These goals are:
1.   To promote children's development away from egocentrism towards relations of cooperation and
        mutual respect.
2.   To foster the growth of full moral agency, a capacity for moral judgement, feeling, and acting.

3.   To develop in the classroom and in the school, community based on values of fairness, caring, and participation. Classroom and schools dedicated to these broad goals would seek to develop in children the following specific qualities:

(a)   A self-respect that derives feelings of worth not only from competence but also from pro-social behaviour towards others.

(b)   Social perspective –taking (How do others think and feel? How does my behaviour affect the group?)

(c)   Knowledge of culturally important values, including procedural values/such as reasoned arguments, tolerance, of differences, and democratic process) and substantive values (such as honesty, compassion, and justice).

(d)   The skills of cooperating with others towards a common goal.

(e)   Character traits (habitual ways of responding) such as fairness, kindness, truthfulness, and a generalized respect for others.

(f)   An openness to the positive influence of adults as socializing agent.

The Place of Character Development in Nigeria Today

The character traits engendered by our social system that is, by our way of living are pathogenic which can weaken the entire constitution on individual personality as well as the society at large. In Nigeria today, there is widespread concern about the moral crises faced by the country. In practically all aspects of our public life, rampant corruption is noticeable. For instance, those who work in offices see it as a norm to receive bribe before doing the official work. Due to lack of moral education, the Nigerian youths have come to see anti-social behaviours as the only hope of enriching themselves. Thus, stealing, prostitution, political thugery, militancy, obtaining by ticks, and so on have in recent time become major sources of income in Nigeria. As Kayode (2008:38) observes,

> The majority of youths who are currently engaged in militancy, thugery, gangsterism, cultism and other forms of anti-social behaviour are usually people who are aggrieved with the social system and who are deprived one way or the other. The provision of access to quality education (moral education our emphasis) is thus one of the ways of curing the social ills of the society and promoting better regime of human development.

The super-imposition of Western cultural on the African traditional education has contributed to the prevailing ethical climate in Nigeria. It has resulted in a rapid shift in social norms. Behaviours deemed wrong in the traditional Nigerian society are in recent times tolerated and even praised. According to Omordu (2007:32),

> The Nigerian youths today are in a state of confusion on account of
> conflicting messages from parents and elders on one hand and the effects of
> the various mass media such as radio, video, television, books, newspapers,
> computer networks, etc on the other. So, instead of submitting themselves to
> the control and advice of the elders and parents, the youths rather resort to
> personal freedom, personal choice and right to live one's life.

The influence of what is watched and read on the media affects the relationship that exist between them and the others. There is no wonder that killing, hostage taking, cultism, promiscuity, drug addiction, high rate of divorce and other vices are now commonplace in Nigeria today. How then, can the Nigerian youth learn to direct his life through a world full of confusion and conflict? What should be the basis of moral education in Nigeria, the old or new values?

The capitalist frame of reference by which wealth has come to be judged by Africans, makes hoarding of wealth through money the dominant symbol of the 'good life". Hence many Africans have abandoned integrity, conscience, discipline and industry in pursuit of money. Because we stress material wealth at all costs, and as a mark of success, those who do not succeed or who find opportunities blocked because of social inequality usually resort to anti-social and immoral behaviour to get rich; not because they are poorly socialized but because they are too well trained in the prevailing materialistic values of the society. A person who finds himself in this situation and does not know how to handle such aspiration through the legitimate and honest means will according to Okoh (1982:20) "resort to immoral activities which betray the national and common good, for personal gain to attain his goal.

The ideological legacies of materialism and individualism introduced into Nigeria have greatly worked against the economic and social arrangements in the traditional African society. In the pre-colonial African society, the economic system was designed for the welfare of all the people, it was built on Humanism and Communalism. But today, the economic system exists to enable a few to accumulate as much profit as possible. Wokocha (1991:61) quoted Nduka as saying that,

> a society whose economic and social affairs are so organized as to promote
> cut-throat capitalism and commercialism; exhibitionist materialism, elitism
> and the like is unlikely to provide the appropriate moral climate for learning
> such values as cooperatives, concern for others and moderation, such less is
> it likely to promote the spirit and the virtue of sacrifice for the common
> good.

The selfishness the system generates makes leaders value personal success more highly than social responsibility. "Political leaders and business executives make decisions that seem to be to their personal advantage, but are harmful and dangerous to the community. Indeed, selfishness is one of the pillars of contemporary practical ethics" (Fromm 1979:19). Although corruption was possible in the pre-colonial traditional societies, it was minimal and not as endemic as now.

Some Major Causes of Character Decline in Nigeria

The colonization of the African continent ushered in new values many of which are in direct conflict with African values. The values were imposed on traditional, political, economic and religious systems. The British imperialism transformed the previously autonomous kingdoms and tribal oligarchies into dependent units of a central colonial administration. Thus, the traditional system of authority based on age, status and customs were replaced by foreign direct and indirect rule. In the case of the latter, "power was exercised through Nigerian surrogates known as "Warrant Chiefs' who had acquired Western education and the wealth associated with it, the basis of authority shifted from the status to achievement" (Iheoma, 1995:182).

In the sphere of the economy, agriculture which was the mainstay was transformed into cash economy thereby resulting from communalism to individualism as the guiding principle of the economic activity. To compound the problem further, the colonial powers acquired the land either through outright confiscation or through obnoxious treaties which gave exclusive right over land to British power. Africa at this time was denied the opportunity of having the sense of justice and fair play.

The introduction of Western education and religion were also colonial legacies which had far-reaching consequences for indigenous value systems. In the traditional modes of socialization children were taught skills and behaviour patterns which tended to promote the spirit of communalism and cooperative endeaviour. They were taught to subordinate individual interest to the interest of the social group. Iheoma (1995:182) observes that "schooling pulled children in the opposite direction by fostering and encouraging competitive individualism…it is the instrument for social selection whereby men are stratified and placed in new relationship to their fellows" Thus, Western education made possible the emergence of a new elite whose privileges created stratifications wider than anything traditional society has known. Furthermore, the introduction of Christianity by the West with its doctrine of individual solution has promoted individualism and undermined African solidarity. Whereas in the traditional societies, religion provided the most powerful sanctions against moral lapses, the progress of Christianity as Iheoma (1999:182) observes, "has made possible, to a large extent, the aura of superiority conferred on it by imperialism – removed the awe that surrounded traditional religions and consequently, also removed the deterrent effects of indigenous religious sanctions". Crimes which hitherto were seen as offence committed against the community are now seen as sins against the Almighty God. People can now go on to commit crimes with the belief that God is merciful.

Applying the Traditional African Education Model for Character Development in Nigeria

The Traditional African Education Model is a typical reflection on Fafunwa seven point objectives. The model lays much more emphasis on character and values related education, believing that when this aspect of man is made right other aspects will be right. Otherwise, if the affective (character and values related) domain is not put right it will be difficult to get other domains right. For instance, of the seven points agenda for traditional education, put forward by Fafunwa (1995:6-7) five levy credence to character and values related issues. Even the other two points on development of the child's latent physical skills and the development of intellectual skills, have some bearings on character and values related development. The African traditional education model is carefully drawn by the traditional African, Nigeria inclusive to produce the people oriented man through education.

One way of modernizing, integrating and blending the African traditional education in Nigeria with our current way of life is to apply a 'Rational Reconstruction' of African culture particularly, of African thinking, beliefs and practices. Rational reconstruction as Akinpelu (2005:58) puts it,

> is meant, in part the exhibition of the reasons that logically justify our
> holding certain beliefs and practices; and in part, the reorganization and
> systematization of those beliefs and practices, so as to make them coherent

with the modern scientific outlook which, for better or for worse, we have irrevocably embraced; and hence make them cognitively acceptable to the 20th century technological and rational mind.

If we apply this to the moral domain of African studies, the process will involve analyzing, exhibiting, and emphasizing the general theoretical, and abstract organizing principles that underlie our traditional moral beliefs and practices, most of which we had hitherto received and held on to, on the authority of tradition, the elders or some divine eminence. It is to articulate the principles which actually guide specific moral judgements that are made, and to expose the reasons that lay at the back of the minds of our ancestors in issuing, "Do not do this" "it is forbidden to do that" "such is never done" "it is a taboo" and so on. The application of rational reconstruction will help dramatise some of our traditions, and to convince others that we too had a rich culture that we could be proud of.

We shall uphold the obligation to teach our youths to define themselves as Africans and to determine their essential characteristics as Africans and become conscious of the fact that they are Africans and live and act with that consciousness. Okoh (2005:2) observes that "Africa, Nigeria, inclusive is plagued with the problem of '"miseducation' caused by an absence of philosophical base". The Nigerian educational system should therefore involve a well-patterned curriculum based on the African world-view of who man is, the type of society man should live, and the type of things to be valued. We can only build a solid foundation for our youths by emerging and operating from the crippling disadvantages of colonial culture and a colonized mentality and re-establishing the sovereignty of the Nigerian world-view. The Nigerian education should be for the development of man and not materials; a man of good character, a man who develops his skills and knowledge to the maximum capacity, so as to provide services to others first and himself last. To produce a man whose wealth is to the advantage of the society in which he lives.

To produce a society based on the Nigerian world-view through education is to make the Nigerian society a democratic one. It is to produce a society that does not lay too much emphasis on wealth acquisition and exploitation. The Nigerian society through its education should frown at any exploitative, greed-oriented values; tendency based on the social status of citizens on personal aggrandizement and the acquisition towards democratic tendencies based on the principle of welfarism; a society where cut-throat competition is replaced with cooperation.

Conclusion

It is suffice to state from the traditional perspective that the attainment of the good life depends upon good character rather than mere abstract knowledge. Character in this sense, comprises intellectual and moral dispositions which enables the possessor to select and engage in activities of intrinsic worth. However, as Nigeria confronts reality in her search for intellectual and moral freedom, a critical examination, re-evaluation and application of traditional African values becomes of great relevance in order to make the Nigerian society a better place to live.

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