

Forest Conservation in Kenya: Lessons from the African Traditional/Indigenous Education

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Abstract

Forest conservation is a critical issue in the world to-day. This is because forests are covers, shields and insulators of the mother earth. In effect, they are determinants of life. They are the basis of world climatic conditions; sources of fuel, water and food, and instrumental in maintaining soil texture and fertility that are essential for agricultural activities. Hence: the need to conserve forests for posterity.

The present efforts to conserve forests seem not to be effective at all. These efforts are undermined by population increase that has exerted pressure on land use, mismanagement of land use and inappropriate education systems in practice. The consequence has been deforestation rather than conservation of forests. Therefore, there is increasing need to seek alternative approaches of conserving forests in Kenya. One of these approaches is to turn to African Traditional/Indigenous education that has important lessons of conserving forests from which the modern societies can learn. The nature, scope and the administration of this type of education has important information, and principles and practices that can be applied to forest conservation. This type of education was universal, well integrated, utilitarian and preserving in nature. These features are major requirements for forest conservation to-day.

This paper attempts to examine the lessons modern society can learn from this form of education to manage forests in Kenya. These may provide a solution to the rapidly disappearing forest cover in the country that is threatening to cause serious political, social and economic woes.

Key Words : Forest Conservation, Traditional Indigenous education, Alternative Approaches

1. Introduction

Forests are an important natural resource on which mankind has depended since time immemorial. They have been a source of fuel, water, food and provided shelter for human life. In addition, forests are a source of wealth directly or indirectly. But their role in supporting the survival of human race is currently threatened by wanton destruction. Forests are to-day being cut down, burnt or otherwise to pave way for agricultural activities, constructions of all sorts, commercial purpose and other human resorts. This situation is being promoted by ignorance, greed and modern life-styles. Further, the design, development and administration of modern education systems do not provide appropriate solutions to the worrying problem of deforestation in the world to-day. This has led to seeking alternative measures to dealing with this problem since the present ones seem not to be succeeding. One of these approaches is to draw lessons of conserving forests from the African Traditional/Indigenous education that was comprehensive, inclusive and based on the needs of the society. But before examining the relevant lessons that can be drawn from this type of education that are useful in conserving forests in Kenya, it is important to explain the concept of the African Traditional/Indigenous education and the African view of forests and forest conservation.

2. African Traditional/Indigenous Education

This was the form of education widely practiced in Africa before the coming of Europeans (Ssekamwa, 1972). It emphasized life skills, survival of the community and preservation of nature. These facts were reflected in its principles and practices.

This education was universal, utilitarian, practical and responsive (relevant) to the needs of the society (Bokongo, 1974). It was given to all members of the society save for a few specialized aspects and it also placed emphasis on productivity for the good of the entire society. Further, this education was practical-oriented. Learning was by doing, examples and storytelling and, more often than not, it responded to the needs of the

society and nature. The latter was done by teaching and practicing survival measures to sustain the society. The example of these measures was protection and preservation of forests through the use of taboos, rites, customs, living styles and mainstreaming of learning about forests in the African Traditional/Indigenous education. In this way, all members of the society were properly educated in the value, importance and need to conserve forests as an essential resource. This practice created and promoted awareness about forest conservation and what can be correctly referred to as the African view of forests and forest conservation.

2.1 The African View of Forests and Forest Conservation

This refers to how the African considered forests in relation to his/her survival. In most African societies, especially those residing in forested areas, forests were considered important companions. They were essential to protect man from heat, rain and other vagaries of life. In other words, forests provided shelter and security to man. They were also regarded as sources of food (fruits, leaves, roots and barks) to sustain life.

Further, forests were used as medical institutions where the society would obtain herbs for management of various illnesses and turn to for treatment of psychiatric problems. In some societies, forests were used as shrines for conducting certain rites, burying the dead and protecting water points. These were aspects of African Traditional/Indigenous education intended to develop and protect forests for posterity.

Shifting cultivation, which was widely practiced in Africa, was a form of forest conservation. People moved from place to place to avoid dangers, disease-ridden areas and to conduct both arable and pastoral farming. In the process of doing this, they allowed vegetation to regenerate. Hence: practicing forest conservation.

From the discussed features of the African Traditional/Indigenous education and the African view of forests, it is possible to establish lessons that can be drawn from this form of education to conserve forests in Kenya to-day. However, some of the lessons may not be applicable to-day because of the changing times and emerging issues in modern societies.

2.2 Main Lessons Drawn from the African Traditional/Indigenous education on Forest Conservation

The African Traditional/Indigenous education is full of useful lessons that can be applied to modern forest conservation. Since the principles and practices of this form of education were developed and used in traditional societies, there is need to review and moderate these suggested lessons to confirm to modern needs before they are adopted to modern strategies of conserving forests in Kenya. It is important to note that the lessons to be learnt from African Traditional/indigenous education in managing forests are a reflection of the total package of this form of education system. Although they are discussed separately herein below, they are so much inter-related and inter-dependent that one cannot talk of one and fail to touch on the others. Further, these lessons are the features of the African traditional education as described by Kwame Nkrumah (1963), Nyerere (1967) and Okot-Bitek (1969). The main lessons of consideration are as out-lined below.

2.2.1 Universality of African Traditional Education

In African traditional societies, all members of the society were given “general” education for adaptation to and survival in the community. However, specialized aspects of this education system like medicine, witchcraft, etc were restricted to identified communities and/or individuals. As Occiti (1970) says this was a precursor to the United Nations Human Rights Charter of 1948. This principle and practice in education ensured that all members of a society shared the same experiences, including the awareness of forest management. Hence it was easy to regulate such activities like land use, forest conservation and water use through established cultural practices like rites, taboos, censorships and exclusiveness in forest use. In other words, through the African Traditional/indigenous education people were educated to understand and appreciate the value and role for and need for forests in the survival of their respective societies.

Since education is a powerful tool for educating people, advocating for and transforming the society, it is possible that adoption of universal education the Tanzanian way (Sr. Claire, 2011) may facilitate the adoption and implementation of this lesson. Kenya has attempted to introduce Free Education projects twice, in 1974 (Sessional Paper 6, 1974) and 2004 (Sessional Paper 2, 2004) but this was not universal. Therefore, resources allowing, universal school and university education should be introduced to facilitate the adoption of this important lesson that can be effectively used to conserve forests in Kenya.

2.2.2 African Traditional Education was Integrated

African traditional education was highly integrated (Chinua Achebe, 1965). Education was culturally-based, environmental and utilitarian in nature. That is, all aspects of life were taught to equip individuals with relevant life skills. The value of this approach of administering education was that beneficiaries understood and appreciated the relationship between and among the aspects of life including the importance of forests. This enabled the adult generation to prepare well the youth in forest management strategies.

The problem foresters are facing in Kenya to-day is that they are dealing with a society that has undergone a disintegrated and exclusive education system in the name of specializations. This principle and practice has alienated a large proportion of the Kenyan population from actively participating in wholesome life including forest management services. These people cannot be blamed. The society never equipped them with relevant competencies for this work. Therefore, there is need to re-introduce the colonial system of education where “general education” was conducted from standard (class) one to Standard (class) eight to equip learners with basic life skills that were meant to integrate them in their communities (OHMS, 1953). This enabled these learners to understand themselves in relation to their communities and environment.

2.2.3 African Traditional education was Utilitarian in Nature

This is an important feature of African Traditional education that provided a functional lesson for conserving forests in Kenya. This education system emphasized productivity, practical work (hands on experience), experiential learning and the need to prepare individuals for life. This meant that people were educated to view everything they did as useful and essential for survival. Consequently, forests were viewed from utilitarian point of view. That is, they can be manipulated by man to provide both basic and social needs (Kafu, 2007). Hence, the need to manage these forests properly.

However, modern education has tended to have limited use of forests to man. Concern is on shelter, fuel, water, climate, timber and preservation of soil texture and fertility. But forest conservation is a cultural activity. Without considering cultural attachment to forest management forest conservation efforts are bound to fail. African traditional societies were able to conserve forests not by viewing them as commercial concerns but as resources for the survival of the society. In order to do this, they censored the misuse of forests through introduction and practice of strict taboos, rites and exclusiveness. There were forests set aside for sacrifices, burials, circumcision rites, medical use, water towers/points, fishing sports, etc. These areas were jealously guarded and any breach was severely sanctioned. There is need to do this as the Far East Asian countries are practicing (Jung, 2007).

2.2.4 The African Traditional/Indigenous Education was Practical in Nature

The African Traditional/Indigenous education was, by nature, practical. It involved moving around, producing things, demonstrations and doing all sorts of activities. Forest conservation involves the use of these activities. In African traditional setting everything done was practical. Learners were exposed to a wide range of learning experiences observations, listening to, touching, tasting and smelling. As alluded to elsewhere above, these exposures were essential for utilitarian purpose. The lesson to be drawn from this practice of conserving forests in Kenya is that there is need for regularized/arranged visits/tours to forested land for Kenyan people to see for themselves the beauty of forests, the destruction of these resources that is being perpetrated and the afforestation efforts that are being conducted by individuals and the government. And apart from introducing integrated school curricula, there is need to emphasize the protection of forests, afforestation and fire fighting strategies in education. This practice will ensure forests are protected and conserved through internal tourism.

2.2.5 African Traditional/Indigenous Education Emphasised Role Modelling

African Traditional/Indigenous education used role modeling as one of the most efficient methods of preparing individuals for life. The individuals selected to teach the young were those found to be good role models. They were normally competent, individuals with good leadership qualities to be emulated by others, ethical, well-behaved, responsible and those who were found to be knowledgeable and experienced. These are attributes that are a far cry in modern education system and the general society. This explains why logging in forests is going on under the nose of those charged with the responsibility of protecting them. These are individuals with no

moral authority to do this work. Therefore, there is need to integrate ethics in the present Kenyan education system and develop and instill life skills of co-operation, responsibility, leadership, morality. All these competencies are learnt through socialization process as an agent of learning.

2.2.6 African Traditional Education Placed Emphasis on Communalism

This was one of the two beacons of Nyerere's (1967) work – *Education for Self-Reliance*. Nyerere's (1967) position is that African Traditional education developed and promoted the attribute of *sharing* and *owning* of property by people as a community. This was extended to the management of forests for the purpose of conducting the rites, ceremonies, and other communal activities like worshiping and medical use. The consequence of this practice was not only to check but also control deforestation practice since forests were owned by community. This fact was taught to all members of the society through the African Traditional education. If this feature is to be integrated in modern education system, then innovative strategies of teaching must be developed and used. These strategies normally promote interactive learning, co-operative tendencies in individuals, and tolerance and care for property in learners that can be useful in conserving forests in Kenya today.

3. Challenges of Integrating the African Traditional Education Principles and Practices in Modern Efforts to Conserve Forests in Kenya

This refers to mainstreaming viable experiences provided by the African Traditional education in forest conservation policy frame-work in Kenya. As the biblical saying goes, this would be like putting “new wine in an old skin bag!” These are two different systems of operations that need careful and proper planning and synchronization. However, the main challenges modern foresters in Kenya face when attempting to apply practices of conserving forests as embraced in African Traditional education practices include the following:

a) Generation Gap

There is a disturbing difference between the modern Kenyan Society and the traditional African societies. The former has little or no trace of “*africanness*” in it. This is a highly modernized, sophisticated people who have embraced foreign, western culture through Christian and Moslem teachings and, by extension, foreign culture. They have little understanding of what African Traditional education is all about let alone practicing it. Therefore, mainstreaming the principles and practices of African Traditional education is not an easy task since there is hardly any literature on these features!

b) Attitude Towards African Traditional Practices

The modern African, including foresters of to-day, has a negative attitude towards anything African (Kafu, 2009). The latter is viewed as primitive, retrogressive and uninspiring. Therefore, it may not be possible to embrace the strategies advocated for in African Traditional education for forest conservation. This may require massive mobilization of the Kenyan population to adopt the traditional African practices of forest conservation as taught through the indigenous education system. This is an uphill task, for the Kenyan authorities to undertake.

c) Education Systems

There is a big discordance between the African Traditional education systems and the modern education system. The nature, scope and features of the curricula of these two systems of education are widely different. The African Traditional education was broad, utilitarian and focused on the needs of the African societies which were simple and communal. But modern Kenyan education curriculum is narrow in scope, rigid in nature and highly academic (Sifuna, 1978). This curriculum is intended to serve the modern, highly sophisticated Kenyan society of to-day and it encourages individualism and exclusiveness. These differences make it almost impossible to merge the features of the two systems of education in forest conservation drive to serve the interests of the modern Kenyan society.

d) Resources needed for mainstreaming the Practices of African Traditional education in Modern Forest Conservation efforts

This is another important challenge which refers to logistics, expertise, funding and time-frame. Times have changed in Kenya to-day. Ownership of property is individual, policy frame-work governing affairs in Kenya is state driven and, as alluded to above, there are few or none at all experts in African Traditional education left in Kenya and the present economy of Kenya cannot support any changes in the existing education curriculum to mainstream African Traditional education practices. Besides there is no time for this sort of innovation in education when the rest of the world is forging ahead with new and modern innovations in education! This is a reality in Kenya which cannot be easily wished away.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the concept of African Traditional education, the African view of forests and forest conservation, the potential of the African Traditional/indigenous education in conserving forests in Kenya to-day and, the challenges of mainstreaming this potential in modern education system to facilitate the strategies of conserving forests in Kenya. The main conclusion to be drawn from the discussion is that the principles and practices of the African Traditional education hold a bright future for forest conservation effort in Kenya though there are big challenges ahead to be overcome!

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