

WESTERN EDUCATION AND THE NEGLECT OF AFRICAN CULTURAL VALUES IN THE NIGERIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

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Abstract

Western Education commonly referred to as the Whiteman's education has failed to integrate African cultural values into its curricula. Contrary to the ideal which expects education to transmit the cultural heritage of a society to successive generation, Western education has completely alienated Africans from their traditional values. The perceived superiority of the western culture which the Whiteman and the agents of western education claim, point to the fact that the non integration of the African cultural values into western education in Africa was a deliberate attempt to disregard the identity of the people. There is an urgent need to re-evaluate the curricula offered in schools in Africa especially in Nigeria] if we must remain as a people after all, person without a culture is sociologically dead.

Keywords: African; Cultural Values; School System; Western Education; Neglect

Introduction

The general assumption is that knowledge is socially designed and constructed, and therefore socially determined. It is for this reason that the primary beneficiary of such socially determined knowledge should be the individual community or society which provided the existential basis for such knowledge. The major objectives of acquiring knowledge in Africa including Nigeria are amongst others:- providing individual happiness and pleasure, self realization, public morality and to eradicate the problem of economic and technological dependence on the advance countries of the world.

Unfortunately, the type of education that was introduced to the continent of Africa by the missionaries was designed to aid the spread and acceptance of the Christian faith by converting all those who come within the four walls of the mission house (Fanfunwa, 1974). To that extent, education in most parts of Africa is unable to serve and meet the needs of the people for whom they are intended to. Instead, the schools have continued to pursue those objectives set out by the colonial masters and thus making most countries in Africa to depend on foreign assistance for growth, many years after their independence. In fact, Ukeje (1976) had stated that the best that such system had produced for us are students who are Nigeria in blood but English in opinion, in moral and in intellect.

The purpose of education whether western or indigenous is to make the individual live successfully and contribute meaningfully to the growth of his society. To be able to achieve this, the education offered the individual should take into consideration the factors and culture operative in the individual's society. This is because there can be no meaningful and effective education in the absence of culture. The whitemen and the missionaries who introduced school education into Africa had wished out of existence the cultures of the Africans even before they set their feet on the African soil.

Cultural Values and Education

Odia (2005) stated that culture is a very important aspect of the human society. The possession of culture by man differentiated him from other animals and makes him unique in the animal kingdom. Morrish (1974) described culture as a complex whole which include knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society. Ezewu (1983) collaborated this when he wrote that culture is the totality of a people's way of life, the way they do things and the way they feel and behave. This means that to a very large extent, it is culture that determines how members of any social group think and feel, direct their actions and define acceptable ways of behaviour for its members. It must be argued here that since no two societies are exactly the same, no two group culture can be the same. Even in the same group, culture may change from time to time.

Oninyama and Oninyame (2002) referred to values as the aspect of cultural practices, actions or objects that are valued in high esteem in the society. These cultural values are so cherished to the extent that the society wants them not only to be preserved, but wants them transmitted from one generation to another. They dominate a very wide area of activities among the Africans ranging from the tradition institutions through virtues to communalism and group solidarity. The modes of transmission of these values are

usually by means of indigenous education (Itedjere 1997). Education itself, according to Okpilike (20002) is a process by which the community seeks to open its life to all the individuals within it and enables them to take part in it; in attempt to pass on to them its culture including the standards by which it would have them live. The important thing in this definition is that where that culture is regarded as final, an attempt is made to improve on it on the younger minds, where it is viewed as a stage in development; younger minds are trained both to receive it and to criticize it and improve upon it.

The various African societies including Nigeria had interactions since historical times in the area of trade, warfare, arts and craft. While these interactions lasted, there were cultural exchanges but the various societal values were held intact. However, when western education was introduced most African cultural values were cast aside. Western education is associated with formal education which is a systematic and planned procedure for transmitting content to achieve state goals. Western education has to do with teaching and leaning in a school system of certain subject matters with the sole aim of making the individual to live well. But more than this goal, western education as practiced in Nigeria has gone out of its way to relegate almost all aspects of African cultural values to the background.

Some Aspects of the African Cultural Values that had been neglected by Western Education

The first of them is the language of the people. Language is a highly cherished value of any society and it is the wish of every community to preserve and transmit this all-important culture from generation to generation. It is against this background that the National Policy on Education (2004) stated that the mother tongue should be the language of instruction at least at the lower level in our Primary School. Unfortunately, in most African societies today, Western education has tended to torpedo this trend. In Nigeria, English language is the medium of instruction in almost all levels of school. The situation is made worse by making the language compulsory. On the other hand, fines are imposed on pupils who speak their mother tongue, all in a bid to emphasize the superiority of the English language over the language of the people. Today many children and sometimes parents do not speak their mother tongue fluently. In a typical Nigerian classroom, when the teacher asks the pupils to sing any song they know in vernacular or tell any story in their mother tongue, they usually simply laugh at the teacher.

Related to language is the type of names which Nigerians now bear. Name is an important cultural value by which members of a community are identified. When the white men came to Africa they refused to use the native names for Christians Baptism in spite of the fact that some of the names were related to God. For instance, Ogheneovo (only God) Chika (God is greatest) Chukwudi (God exists) etc were all labeled as pagan names. The people were forced to drop such names and took Peter, Michael, Steven etc which ordinarily mean nothing to them as their new names. Today it is possible to see individuals who bear English names for both their first name and their surname.

African virtues such as honesty, humility, loyalty, hard work, truth and respect have been undermined by western education. These virtues which are essential ingredients of the African society are gradually being seen as uncivilized. Materialism has taken the place of honour and hard work. Respect for traditional institutions has also diminished. People are no longer fair to each other. There is a break down of social discipline all in the name of civilization. The capitalist tendency of western education has corrupted the communal and cooperative spirit of the people to the extent that parents complain that they can no longer ask their children to do any service to them without the children asking for remuneration.

The African traditional religion is another area that has suffered a setback through western education. Western education was introduced by Christian missionaries who saw education as a potent instrument of evangelization. Consequently most cherished traditional religions had to be cleansed for Christianity to find its root. Today people commit atrocities against the land and their fellow men knowing that the belief in the African gods and ancestors (which are renowned for instant justice) has waned seriously; and in their place is the Christian faith whose God is so merciful that judgment is left to the last day. Having also taught the forgiveness of sins no matter what sins they are, people are no longer afraid of the consequences of doing evil. Again, communalism and group solidarity which characterized the African societies have suffered greatly. According to Oroka (1990) the African is his brother's keeper. African societies believe that the individual cannot successfully live in isolation. They believe in corporate existence characterized by a web of closely-knit kinship, social and religious relationship. Then came western education which tended to emphasize individualism, and communal life was thrown overboard.

Western education has also undermined the moral values of African societies. The emphasis on paper qualification promoted cheating and insincerity both in the school system and in the larger society. A certificate is seen as a means to an end is also seen as justifying the means. Side by side with western

education was western economic system with emphasis on capitalism and individual competitiveness. African entrepreneurs could now employ family members with the sole aim of exploiting such employees for maximum gain. This type of economic pursuit cannot promote the appropriate moral climate.

Another area of interest is the warfare of the African. The Africans is a proud and brave man. This accounts for the stout resistance which the European imperialists received from many African rulers and people. Today the educated African is not sure of himself; he can no longer be sure of defending his integrity and the integrity of his land. he feels inferior and sees almost everything African as obsolete and unprogressive. He is more favourably disposed to European way of doing things in the name of science and technology. But on the closer look at it, he is just a consumer of products produced outside.

Other areas of the African culture that have suffered neglect are the African marriage institution, the feeding and dressing patterns of the Africans. Africans themselves look down on the traditional marriage type and prefer the Christian or Court marriage both of which are full of pretences and mistrust. Today marriages are arranged by young men and ladies outside the knowledge of their parents. We also hear of some terms as distant marriage, marriage by extension, and contract marriage. All these are alien to the African pattern of life. Similarly European food types now find their way to our tables at the expense of African dishes. The young school leavers and many married women are unable to make food for their homes. They depend on fast foods joints, take away centres and heavily depend on Indomie noddles for main dish. In the same way, European dresses now dominate our wardrobes to the extent that the African females (married or single) now wear European clothes types that expose aspect of their womanhood which in the African culture is expected to be kept sacred. The situation is worsened by students in the universities. To say the least, Africans have lost their identity. Quite recently it has become the in-thing to identify with any of the leading football teams in Europe – Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal e.t.c as a mark of development but not with any of the African teams. If we are not careful this so called “fans” may lead to gangsterism and consequently cult groups.

Conclusion

As at today western education has been fully absorbed into the African society. But contrary to expectation the major objective of education had not been achieved in any part of the African continent. This is partly due to what Anene (1966) referred to as the non-integrating nature of western education to the African culture. The Whiteman himself came to Africa with preconceived ideas of the superiority of his race his religion and the customs and institution of his country. Apart from the economic resources in Africa for which reason they came, every other thing in Africa was uncivilized and unfit for consideration as part of the school curricula. No wonder then that western education was out to cleanse African culture values and practices. The result of their activities on the African soil had resulted in the total loss of the African pride, the submergence of the African language, the breakdown of moral and social discipline, the dethronement of communalism and the shift from honour to materialism. To say the least western education is an agent of cultural obliteration in Africa.

Recommendations

Africans must realize that every society in the world has its own distinct cultural values and traits. Sociologically, no culture can be regarded as inferior to the other because culture varies according to the society that has fashioned out such culture for their existence. However, this is not to say that African culture must remain static in this changing world. What we need is a deliberate attempt to integrate these aspects of the African culture that are of value in the present world into the school curriculum. The following cultural values are recommended for inclusion in the school curricula.

1. Small scale farming in the form of school gardens should be introduced at all levels of education. The department of Vocational Studies/Agric Science should be made to manage the programme. Some hours of a particular day should be devoted to practical work in the farm.
2. Home Economics should be taught in the schools. At the secondary school level, it should be made compulsory for all female students and optional for the males.
3. Greetings and respect for elders must be taught to all pupils and students in the schools. This can be done through morning and afternoon assemblies in the case of primary and secondary schools. Let children learn to stand and greet when a teacher enters the class. Exchange of greetings irrespective of class, sex, age should be encouraged among pupils and students.

4. Encourage African dressing patterns during sports e.g. catching the train where young boys and girls are taught traditional wears. At the university level, while no attempt should be made to discourage modernization, indecent dressing should be discouraged.
5. Mid-day meals should be introduced in the schools especially at the primary and secondary school levels. The menu should be prepared in such a way that African diets are served.
6. Local dances, games, songs, warfare, art craft should be introduced at all levels of education. The need for this becomes obvious in this era when self employment is being emphasized.
7. In order to make the recommendations come through, there is the need to re-evaluate the contents and method of teaching both social studies and citizenship education in the schools.

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