

(E)ducation or (e)ducation in Traditional African Societies? A Philosophical Insight

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ABSTRACT The paper is a theoretical –conceptual exploration of the place of traditional systems of educating in African societies prior to the colonisation by the West. The researchers argue that despite the denigration by the west, Africans had an equally worthwhile (E)ducation and not an inferior (e)ducation system. The researchers' case is premised on the understanding that every society has its own tradition of educating its new members and traditional Africa is no exception. The paper provides a critical argument which challenges the authoritative nature of traditional African education for denying children access to critical and creative thinking.

"...the solution to the present predicament of Africa involves throwing off the yoke of History, turning that prison into a palace of hope, understanding Africa, denouncing her vices, nursing her virtues. Above all, it means believing in ourselves." (Osundare 1998: 234)

INTRODUCTION

Writers on traditional education throughout sub-Saharan Africa have given generalized accounts of the system of education based on the assumptions that, because African societies were non-literate, traditional learning was everywhere much the same, with minor variations (Callaway 1975). Although certain tenets tend to be identical throughout Africa, as indeed in all societies, it is apparent that traditional education varied to the same degree that societies differed from each other. In spite of the variety in forms of social organization, reflecting differences in the levels of socio-economic as well as political development attained prior to western colonization, one finds in the education domain in Africa a sizeable amount of common traits which point to the cultural unity of the African peoples. Across the geographical and regional divides and in all tribal groups, traditional education attaches great importance to the social and collective nature of life, the intimate tie with social life, the multivalent character of its means and ends and its gradual and progressive achievement. While we acknowledge that there can be no one African culture and therefore no

one education, African cultures, as Dei clearly puts it, "have more in common with each other than they have, for example, with European culture(s)... (thus) ...beyond ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity there are underlying commonalities or affinities in the thought systems of African peoples" (Dei 1994: 6). African cultures tend to share certain cultural elements more commonly that they can share the same with other cultures outside Africa regardless of whether Western or Eastern.

Given the above background picture, this paper explores the concept and practice of education in traditional African societies. The researchers attempt a critical examination of the following issues of philosophical concern:

- The notion of traditional African education
- The philosophical foundations of traditional African thought and practice
- Traditional educational practices in Africa
- Cardinal virtues and challenges
- Pedagogical instruments used in African tradition

The Conceptions of Education

The term *education* has been assigned a variety of meanings by different scholars and philosophers and in the end one finds "*no univocal definition of education as the concept has been exposed to different and often contradictory interpretations*" (Balogun 2008: 228). Hamm (1989) has proposed that we can have a clear understanding of the concept of education if we

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isolate it by the uses to which it is put. John White uses school aims to explain the concept of education by identifying them as personal fulfillment, social and civic involvement, contributing to the economy and practical wisdom (White 2007). Situating education in the context of Africa, Adeyima and Adeyinka have concluded that education should aim at enabling individuals to survive in a society, cultivate good habits and develop good citizens capable of earning a good living (Adeyima and Adeyinka 2003). The common thread that runs across their conception of education is its function in developing goodness. While Ducasse uses the etymological root of the term as coming from the Latin word “*educere*” (Ducasse 1958: 1) which means to “lead out”, Schofield prefers “*educare*” which means to “*form*” or “*train*” (Schofield 1972: 32).

Despite the diversity of interpretations of the notion, for this paper the researchers will confine education to three categories. First, the researchers look at education as the activity of transmission of a heritage from one generation to the next for the continuity of a culture. Secondly, the researchers place education statistically as the heritage and the paraphernalia that the individual receives in order to be able to integrate himself into his community. Finally, the researchers posit that education is a factor of social change with individuals involved in it becoming transforming factors of their culture. Engaging Hamm’s three uses of education could assist in further clarifying the concept of education. The sociological use implies that education is an instrument used by societies to develop and conscientise new members and entrants (including children) to know and understand the beliefs, values and their ways of life of a people or group. As for the education that goes on in formal schools, Hamm attributes its use as “*institutional use*” (Hamm 1989: 30). This implies that, the education that goes on in schools has institutional use. The third use of education for Hamm is the “*general enlightenment use*” (p. 31). This use combines the earlier two uses though not tied to each independently. While education is meant to socialize individuals and developed through (in most general terms) formal schooling, it is supposed to serve the development of the individuals mind through the acquisition of a particular kind of knowledge and understanding. The question that

the researchers raise then is: To what extent does traditional African education fulfill these definitional categories given that the notions of ‘individual’ and ‘community’ feature clearly across the three goals? Is it education for communal-ity or education for individuality?

The Notion of Traditional African Education

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1990) defines tradition as “... the passing down of opinion, beliefs, practices, customs etc from past to present; especially by word of mouth or practice” (Longman 1990: 1174). The researchers consider ‘traditional’ to mean the inherited values from the past and the traditionalist therefore becomes one who preserves this heritage. Tradition in this context becomes the action of transmitting or handing down from generation to generation; the transmission of ideas and rules, especially by word of mouth or by unwritten practice. The researchers understand traditional African education as the process of transmitting values and customs rooted in African cultural heritage. Traditional African education thus refers to Africa’s heritage in education. It is “... *the education of the African before the coming the European- an informal education that prepared Africans for their responsibilities as adults in their communities*” (Boateng 1983: 322). But how relevant and valuable is traditional education to modern day life? Are all values from Africa’s educational heritage suitable for the 21st century?

An appeal to tradition is itself controversial in the present world. Critics of tradition call for a rejection of the past by advocating a total concentration of and exploitation of modern opportunities in order to ensure the acquisition of optimum benefits for the African peoples. More specifically Africa has been accused of having no long-standing tradition of written evidence of thoughts and practices and so is said to be lacking a heritage to draw upon. Based on this, skeptics about African thought have found ground to diffuse collective community thoughts held in unwritten form; without any one specific thinker as the source. Such collective thought, according to Wiredu is “... *the common property of all and sundry, thinker or non thinker*” (Wiredu 1980: 47). For instance, Wiredu is critical of African folk thought, and

rejects it as non-philosophy insofar as it does not provide supportive arguments though he acknowledges that "...it can be *comprehensive and interesting in its own account...*" (ibid). However, the researchers argue that a people's world-view can readily be considered the bedrock on which to found their thoughts and practices especially when using argumentation, clarification and analysis as tools. As will be shown, the proverbs, folktales, myths and puzzles and riddles used in traditional African thought are not mere doctrines preserved and transmitted from one generation to another but they are rather ideas subjected to critical scrutiny by all parties involved. Some would charge that tradition is disappearing and that it is "*simply no longer able to provide the thread needed to keep the social fabric of social life from unraveling*" (Gross 1992: 3). For them, the process of the fall of tradition creates a fertile opportunity for newness and creativity. While the researchers appreciate the dangers that are implicit by retreating to the so called "better" past rather than responding to our world as it appears to us, the researchers hold that it would be foolish for us to ignore totally the spaces of experiences and meanings that have been nurtured for generations, and on which we can draw for insights about nourishing our own lives.

There are numerous aspects of tradition in Africa and elsewhere that can be recovered, reclaimed and reconstituted by Africans today in their endeavour to reproduce and better their lives. People appreciate and structure their identities in terms of the traditions that make them. Fay illuminates this position by arguing that "*... coming to be a person is in fact appropriating certain material of one's cultural tradition, and continuing to be a person ... means working through , developing, and extending this material and this involves operating in terms of it*" (Fay 1987: 160). The researchers argue for a return to those aspects of traditional African education that were and are still deemed to be valuable and can therefore inform educational reconstruction, especially in the education of children in Africa. In support, Scanlon, in reference to education, points out tradition is inescapable, whether one reaffirms it or repudiates it (Scanlon 1964).

Some European scholars have doubted the authenticity of African traditional education by asserting that Africans had no history, no civi-

lization, no culture to perpetuate and therefore no education to talk about prior to the introduction of western formal education (Amimo 2009). For instance, Hume precluded Africans from the realm of reason and civilization when he wrote: "*I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilised nation of any complexion than white*" (Hume 1996: 228). Hegel categorically stated that "Africa is no historical part of the world ; it has no movement or development to exhibit" (Hegel 1956: 99). Kant agrees with Hume as he asserts that "so fundamental is the difference between two races of men , and it appears to be as great to mental capacities as in colour" (Kant 1997)¹ . By labeling it 'primitive' and incapable of yielding a framework of theories and philosophy and in the process relegating African traditional education to the periphery, these scholars have contributed to a blanket denial of indigenous African education. The researchers concur with Ocitti's dismissal of scholars who have argued that "*... since the Africans knew no reading or writing, they therefore had no systems of education and so no content or methods to pass on to the young*"(Ociti 1973: 105). The researchers remind such thinkers to be mindful of the fact that every society, in some way or the other, has values that have transcended generations. No traditional way of doing things, if subjected to the criteria based on modernity, will pass the test in total, and this is also the case with traditional African education. The criteria for checking on the relevance of the system of education against the 21st century education in Africa will find a range of flaws as will be discussed because not all that is applicable to tradition works in the present. The way a people view their world, their lives, in fact their world-view or philosophy of life will, in a significant way, influence the forms of socialization and education that they transmit from one generation to another. These values may be transmitted either wholly as they are through socialization, education and training or with some modification. The researchers hold that traditional African education was and is still relevant in a number of ways, as will be examined in the sections below notwithstanding the implementation challenges of modernity.

Philosophical Foundations of Traditional African Education

Every human society is characterized by a particular social structure or a patterned order of roles and status sets that are closely linked to the economic and political standards as well as the sanctions of the community. The beliefs we hold about children's learning are firmly founded in our own convictions about what it means to be knowledgeable, intelligent and experienced, and what it takes to become so (Ackermann 2004). Whether implicitly or explicitly stated, it is these convictions that drive our attitudes and practices towards what to transmit, how to pass it on and when the process of such transmission should take place. In short, it is all unmistakably clear that all systems of education, formal or informal are rooted in the world-view of a people that practices it; if by worldview is meant a set of presuppositions which a people holds about the makeup of their world. Vlach defines world-view as "...the overall perspective from which a person or group both consciously and unconsciously understands and interprets the world..." (Vlach n.d.). In addition, every society, whether simple or complex, has its way of training and educating its youth (Fafunwa 1974) although the goals and methods of approach would differ from place to place and culture to culture. Studies by some philosophers on Africa, have revealed that African ways of life, beliefs and values were rooted in some philosophy just like the Indians, Americans and the British had philosophies relevant to their existential circumstances (Gyekye 1987; Serequeberhan 1991; Wiredu 1980). In the section that follows, the researchers present a case for the ubuntu ethic as the central philosophy of traditional Africa around which the principles of communalism, humanism, holism and perennialism gravitate. The researchers seek to demonstrate that the aims, nature and character, and methods of traditional education are all underpinned by these principles.

The Concept of Ubuntu

Ramose describes Ubuntu as a socio-ethical necessity which is not restricted to the Bantu-speaking people alone who use the word but pervades other sub-Saharan ethnic groups sharing similar ideals that characterise ubuntu. He observes that,

... ubuntu may be seen as the basis of African philosophy... (and)... there is a 'family atmosphere', that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between indigenous people of Africa (Ramose 1999: 49).

Eze goes on to further explain Ramose's understanding of ubuntu as a philosophy as well as a culture (Eze 2008) on which African philosophy is founded and as a term used to describe the quality and essence of being a person in most sub-Saharan Bantu speaking peoples.

To explain the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, Ramose starts by noting that the word needs to be hyphenated Ubu-ntu thus comprising of the prefix *ubu* to imply be-ing and the stem *ntu* evoking human (Ramose 2004). He further elaborates that ontologically there is no literal separation between *ubu*-and *ntu* thereby signifying the oneness; the whole-ness of being. However the word *ubuntu* becomes apparent in meaning when connected to *umu*- and *ntu* to form *umuntu* which denotes literally the idea of a human being. From another but related angle *ubuntu* is a descriptive word that connotes the quality of humanness by determining whether *umuntu* (human being) is living within the proscriptions and prescriptions of ubuntu (human-ness). From the foregoing analysis in Ramose's exposition the researchers noticed a revelation of the implicit principles of humanism in African philosophical thought.

Ubuntu, is not a doctrine or a rule but rather a way of life in which one has to learn how to live humanely with others in a given space and time. It is not as a device for instrumental judgment but rather a social process which guides how people think, choose, act and speak. In effect, philosophy of Ubuntu is embedded, derived and best summarized in the aphorism "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" which literally translated means "A person is a person through other persons". This perspective defines the concept of person differently from the Enlightenment conception of a person as a rational being; where rationality is the chief determinant of personhood. From the African viewpoint, it is from the dialectical relationship with the environing community that the individual derives the title 'person'. This led the researchers to a discussion of the relationship between *ubuntu* as a philosophy and the communitarian principles thereof in traditional African thought and practice.

The African conception of a person is understood in terms of a set of beliefs and norms and values the enviroing community holds dear. In Masolo's words the "...identities of persons are shaped by the social worlds in which they play various roles, and are susceptible to change as such social worlds mutate through time and space" (Masolo 2002: 22). This view leaves human identities to be determined by some assumed homogeneous tenets which they share with other members of their group unlike the liberal view. In the latter case the individual has autonomy and dignity and therefore should be free to express his or her unique qualities and dispositions and that these should be respected by the community. To what extent do traditional African education or do African world-views have a regard for the individuality of the child?

The philosophy of communalism or group cohesion is the way African parents traditionally seek to bring up their children within a community, seeing their wellbeing in the welfare of the group. Burrow (2000) affirms that the doctrine of communalism gives primacy to the group or society with emphasis on the enhancement and success of the community rather than individual members as such (Burrow 2000). He reinforces his position by asserting that "*authentic living is a form of participation in African culture ... (and) participation and belonging are the essence of human being and therefore provide foundation for emphasis on community*" (Burrow 2000: 335). Thus by participating persons are always related to one another. In this sense participation is a connecting element, the link which binds together individuals and groups in a relationship.

There is a general consensus among many African philosophers that in traditional African societies, the principles of communality (non-ownership of land by individuals as private property), egalitarianism (the equality of all human beings) and solidarity (mutual dependence and cooperation) were held true. However it must be noted that the principle of egalitarianism is contestable especially given that, for example, the ancestors had higher authority over the living, men over women, chiefs and traditional leaders over the ordinary citizens so it would be a misnomer to refer to traditional African societies as practicing egalitarianism in the etymological sense. Nevertheless, former Senegalese political leader Leopold Senghor states that "...

Negro- African society is collectivist or ...communal because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals...(it) more stress on the group than on the individual, more on solidarity than on the activity, and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy" (Senghor 1964: 49 & 93). In this he gains support from Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye who maintains that the community orientation of traditional socio-ethical thought is located in the "...communitarian features of the social structures of African societies", and at the same time these features are "...the defining characteristics of those societies" (Gyekye 1992: 102). The value traditional African societies attach to fellow feeling, solidarity and selflessness is stressed by Gbadegesin who writes that, "...human persons are conceived as communal beings embedded in a context of interdependence sharing the same common interests and values" (Gbadegesin 1991: 65).

Gyekye proposes the view that communalism does not negate individualism although it is a reflection of "*the limited character of the possibilities of the individual...*" (Gyekye 1992: 155). His argument is that we should not mistake identification with the group for the swallowing of individuality. If individual capacities are different, their capacity to equally contribute to the community is bound to be different. In this way, individuals in traditional African societies are recognized on the grounds of their merit to some degree. Similarly, the individual as self has a will, identity, hopes and wants which can be described as unique. However, we cannot deny that the individual has obligations that are community-oriented. These obligations may still exist but their visibility becomes altered. In this regard the individual gets a sense of freedom, ingenuity and creativity. It is in this respect that the researchers argue for a "self" that is culture-specific; that is an African "self". In other words, traditional Africans have the notion of 'self' relevant to African existential circumstances.

While the researchers agree with the notion of humanistic living in a community of others as proposed by Menkiti (1984), the researchers find his assertion rather an inflated image of the significance of the collective. This notion of the person places him or her as a dependant of the community rather than an interdependent

member of the community in which or she is part. Without being submerged in the collective communal world, the individual human person is neither a static nor a one-dimensional entity but rather complex and dynamic being. Does Menkiti's conception of the community imply that the self is always no more than a functional part of an ethical community burdened with the community's values and norms that focus on fulfilling the common good? The researchers argue against a community of beings whose members are not choosing subjects or moral agents capable of making choices in terms of values and ends. What then are the implications of this on the education of children? Is this education for conformity or education for diversity?

It is mistaken to demarcate societies along communitarian or individualistic lines. Rather communality and individuality coexist though on different strata of the same continuum. How else do we explain an individualistic orientation observable in the lifestyles of traditional African communities which the philosophers above declared to be communalistic? The researchers agree with Iyer's construct of an overarching commonality between the west's concern for individuality and Africa's commitment to the collective. He states that: "*All cultures expect conformity within a given framework, and individualism or individuation is tolerated or in some cases glorified when it falls within parameters considered acceptable to and supportive of the operative ideology*" (Iyer 1996: 124).

It is in the context of communalistic and normative schemes that many Africans mirror and ground their thoughts and actions. From this standpoint of communitarianism, one observes the prevalence in African cultural milieu of an "*interdependent perspective of the self with the emphasis on connectedness, relatedness and interdependence*" (Mwamwenda 1999: 5). But the question that arises is: Does African tradition permit individuals to act outside the context of his community's prescriptions and proscriptions? Without wishing to endorse relativism, the researchers agreed with Nyasani's observation that "*African, Asian and European minds are products of unique "cultural edifices" and "cultural streams" that arose from environmental conditioning and long-standing cultural traditions*" (Nyasani 1997: 56-57).

The structures that form the mental structures of individuals from different social, eco-

nomic and even environmental conditions vary from one people to another. This also implies that cognitive capacities of each group of people are culturally determined and therefore differ from one culture to another. Thus the African ways of transmitting values is unique and relevant to their existential circumstances. From a communitarian world-view that characterised traditional African communities emerged an education system that emphasises a community ethos in the young members. But the question that comes to mind is: To what extent can the tendency towards the collective, for the community translate into participation in a community of inquiry? Conversely, can the community-consciousness ethos emphasised in the traditional African societies translate fittingly into children's awareness for caring and collaborative community of inquiry in a formal school setting?

Another important principle contained in traditional African thought and practice is humanism. Life in the African community is based on the philosophy of live-and-let-live. Among the Shona, as in many traditional African ethnic groups, human beings and their lives are held sacred and all must be done to preserve life regardless of whose life. It is the sanctity of human life held in traditional Africa should not however be taken as exclusive since no culture around the globe does not recognise the value of human life. But the researchers give extra credit to African humanism in that human values and regard for human dignity occupy a place of high priority over materialist values. Human life is the greatest value because "*there is an urge or a dynamic creative energy in life...which works towards wholeness and healing, towards building up and not pulling down, towards synthesis and not conflict*" (Dzobo 1992: 227). One may want to attribute the success of humanism in Africa to the fragility of small-scale communities that only survive the hardships through group cohesion and co-dependence. The harsh environmental conditions cause individuals to seek the help of one another and because of the need for the other one may conclude that traditional Africans placed a high premium on the preservation of life. Africans conceive human life as a force that continuously recreates itself with its growth dependent on its inner source of power. The human being who counts more than the material and economic values in the African sense is one who has a creative personality

or creative humanity which is the supreme goal of human development. From a strict deontological humanistic point of reference, persons are treated as ends and not means to ends. Such a Kantian view is not obviously compatible with African communalism. A person therefore is good not because he is good for something, but because he has humanity to create and so he is a creator of the good. The most important thing about a person is that he or she is a person (Ndhlovu 1988). Based on this humanistic ethic, the Shona have the following proverbs:

“Mupfuri haapedzi dura” [A passerby will not exhaust all your food stores so provide him as much food as you can]

“Chembere ndeye imbwa yemunhu ndibaba vevana” [You cannot treat a person as if you are treating a wild animal. Human beings deserve to be accorded the humanity that they rightly deserve]

The popular aphorism “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” emphasises recognition of the humanity of the ‘other’ and signifies that “*To be human is to reaffirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form*” (Van de Merwe 1996: 1). Chieka Ifemesia, writing about traditional humane living among the Igbo of West Africa, sees humane living among the Africans as a concept which can be defined as “*a way of life that emphatically centred on human interests and values; a mode of living evidently characterised by empathy, and by consideration and compassion for human beings*” (Ifemesia 1979: 2). The above proverbs also go to show that the relationship between individuals recognises their worth as human beings and not only for what they possess. People help each other without demanding immediate or an exact equivalent return. Consequently the above emphasise by the virtues of compassion, hospitality, patience, tolerance and respect for the other.

Given the centrality of humaneness, and humanness in the philosophy of ubuntu, the researchers see some contradictions. If an individual is supposed to be respected in terms of his possession of the human potential, why is the child considered an *it* before becoming a person? At the same time the collective image of members of the community will tend to massify members instead of recognising their particularity, their historicity and individuality. This has some ramifications for the aims,

nature and character as well as the methods used to educate children in such communities. To what extent do progressive methods of teaching and learning provide a voice and space in a setting such as the one that is founded on the above philosophical principles?

Cardinal Virtues of Traditional Education

Based on the philosophy of communalism, it is the responsibility of the community to see to it that children are raised appropriately and that as they grow into adulthood they will provide for the older members of the community. The basic understanding is that “... childhood is the foundation which determines the quality of a society... (therefore) societies want to prepare their members to become not only good fathers and mothers, but people who care about life and who understand, both humanely and spiritually the highly unshakeable value of human being that we all are” (Fu-Kiau and Lukondo-Wamba 1998: 4-5). As a result, the major goal of traditional education in Africa is to produce a complete individual; one who is cultured, respectful, integrated, sensitive and responsive to the needs of the family and neighbours. It aims at inculcating attitudes and values capable of integrating the individual into the wider society (Fafunwa 1974; Majasan 1967). In addition, indigenous education is unlike formal western education in that it is very practical and pragmatic and prepares the individual for life passing on the values of life that have been evolved from experience and tested in the continuing process of living. I note that education, in this purview, is generated within the communities, based on practical common sense, on the teachings and experience of the community. But to what extent can this inclusive, practical and community character of the traditional African system of education translate into the modern day classroom?

Among the Shona, children are taught that the truth must be told and that if they are found lying they are punished. It is also important that they know that there are certain truths that are not discussed in public (Gelfand 1973) and if they are asked about them they are entitled to reply “I don’t know”. If one is asked for example: who is your brother’s girlfriend, despite full knowledge they, by virtue of the trust vested in keeping information secret, they will always

say I don't know. It is a virtue to keep family and other social truths secret especially in public. The word *kuvimbisika* (trustworthiness) is used to denote a person who keeps his word and can be trusted. But the question is: to what extent does this kind of thinking promote an individual child to be psychologically moral, emotionally and rationally stable and permit for excellence in judgment? This points to an oppressive form of orientation at an early age that forms the child's beginning; one that supports closed-mindedness as opposed to an open-minded outlook. The researchers' experience among the Shona showed how the child's surrender to non-knowledge, not to know and not to know too much" is a disposition of humility. Kaphagawani says that such epistemological authoritarianism was (and still is) rampant in traditional Africa precisely because the elders were the only ones held to have all knowledge and wisdom, so that what they said had to be believed without questioning (Kaphagawani 1988). In other words, adults (elders) have advantage over the rest of the community. In addition, "...these elders claimed to know what was good or right for the society so their ideas were imposed on the non-elderly" (Kigongo 1992: 62). However, this is characteristic of all traditional forms of educating whether African or non-African. As Dewey writes,

(The old education) was predominantly static in subject matter, authoritarian in methods, and mainly passive and receptive from the side of the young... the imagination of educators did not go beyond provision of a fixed and rigid environment of subject matter, one drawn more over from sources altogether too remote from the experience of the pupil (Dewey 2008: 199).

Despite an individual's personal qualities, in traditional African societies, all forms of willingness to conform to traditional behavior patterns are highly cherished. For instance, a humble person does not use offensive words nor does he boast of his achievements, show off his knowledge among his elders or look down on those who are less informed than him. In effect, he must not be ostentatious. Honours are awarded for achievement, successful ventures or services to the community and there is public recognition of services rendered. It is preferred that all people should be the same, enjoy the same privileges and share the pleasures of nature. One who considers himself superior to

others and does not take advice is said to be a proud person and is therefore considered with little regard; not worthy of attention. Yes, we can talk of sharing equitably the resources of nature but it is practically unrealistic to think of people being the same especially given that all humans have individual differences. However, in traditional African communities children are socialized, educated and in many instances indoctrinated to accept and display these attributes. While the said virtues were well celebrated in their time and served the prevailing circumstances, they are challenged in the present situation in Africa.

Whenever the traditional Shona perform their duties nothing is done sullenly, nor is rudeness or a sense of superiority displayed. This display of gentleness, quietness and lack of tension applies equally to men and boys. A person who grumbles, finds fault in others and complains about his lot is not considered unhappy but associated with evil and is readily suspected of practicing witchcraft. This position can be challenged not only on the grounds of irrationality, but also if one considers a docile, unquestioning attitude promoting conformism, convention and sterility. Children are known to be inquisitive about everything that passes their ears and eyes and for a culture to promote quietness especially in children is tantamount to the enhancement of an attitude of benign docility from an early age thereby stifling initiative. The researchers agree with the view of emphasising humble submission to communal norms and values but not as far as stifling reasonableness, open-mindedness and a critical attitude. Patience as the capacity for self-control, an ability to put up with the weaknesses of one's neighbours or friends and an ability to control one's anger or bowing to what one cannot solve by physical force is revered if one is said to grow and develop into a respectable person in traditional Africa. Children who display arrogance, brashness and lack of humility lose their recognition, achievements and respect. It is no wonder how traditional Africans would deliberate on an issue at length until they agree and as such "...consensus is seen as desirable, and dissensus as undesirable, both on epistemic and political grounds" (Horsthemke 2010: 56). But to what extent can these dispositions in traditional African thoughts and practices transfer into 21st century classrooms in Africa? How far

can children from such cultural backgrounds use their experiences to be creative, critical and caring enquirers in the classroom?

Sociability, sincerity, honesty, courage, solidarity, fortitude, morality and most importantly the virtue of honour are, among others the moral qualities constantly demanded, examined, judged, and sanctioned consistent with the intellectual level and capacities of the child. So at home or away from home we find the child is surrounded by a community of others who determine the way they think and act – a background that has social and cognitive effects on the child's participation in communities that call for critical and creative thinking. For Dzobo, creativity is the essence of being and "...*the goal of man's existence is to become creative. The only way man becomes human ...to be human is to be creative and productive*" (Dzobo 1992: 128). While the Shona would revere adults who are critical and creative thinkers they, to a limited extent, permit children to explore into abstractions and challenge the status quo. To that end, it is in an individual who has developed a creative personality and productive life while maintaining a productive relationship with others that the label "person" is given. This sounds contradictory since a person cannot develop creative power without it having been cultivated from an early age. If a community of family cannot nurture in the child the creative attributes it should not expect to have creative adults. However it is the search for solutions to riddles that challenges the Shona children to think abstractly, broadly and deeply.

Africans generally have a deep and ingrained respect for old age and even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, they will not easily forget that his grey hairs have earned him the right to courtesy and politeness. Elders are respected for many reasons – they are believed to be the directors and teachers of the young – they are believed to give the infallible truths and their instructions are heeded for the protection of good behavior among the young. Elders are taken to be repositories of communal wisdom and therefore assume approved leadership in the affairs of the people. For Dei gerontocracy is the traditional African respect for authority of elderly persons for their wisdom, knowledge of community affairs and closeness to the ancestors (Dei 1994). Many African people believe that old age is accompanied by wisdom and an

understanding of the world and therefore it was the duty of the aged to instruct the youth in a socially responsible manner and in return the latter has the duty to respect the knowledge of the elders. The eldest members of society are said to have acquired, due to their age, profound experience of knowledge and wisdom regarding societal matters. Knowledge, to the traditional Africans, constitutes of the totality of all that successive generations have accumulated since the dawn of time both in spiritual and practical life, while wisdom entails the proper application of this knowledge for the benefit of society. Traditional African societies regard knowledge and power as the preserve of those with advanced age and generally familiarity with the traditions of one's community and their applications. This implies the opposite for children –they lack the knowledge and therefore can only acquire it through transmission from the knowledgeable others, the older members of society.

In a traditional African community there can be no knowledge of reality if an individual detaches himself from it (Anyanwu 1989). Knowledge therefore comes from the cooperation of all human faculties and experiences. Thus an individual sees, feels, imagines, reasons or thinks and intuits all at the same time. Only through this does he claim to have knowledge of the 'other'. In this sense, every individual has knowledge and this knowledge depends on his personal experience. Personal experience in the African sense is not confused with self-interested experience but it is also collective and shared experience which makes the existence of a community of persons possible. This view of cooperative living is echoed by Dewey's assertion that "*To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of community...education is a regulation of the coming to share in the social consciousness*" (Dewey 1927: 154). But in traditional Africa there is a need for children to give unqualified respect and obedience to those who are older than them in order to know. Every adult expects respect and obedience from children. On this gerontocratic structure, children can be said to be victims of intergenerational power imbalance especially when they are refused certain rights including knowledge and critical interrogation on the basis of their age. While there

are methods that are employed to incite reasoning, there appears to be a contradiction especially when children are in front of elders particularly those in authority. Few options are available for children to challenge the status quo especially when they have alternative suggestions to those given by the social group. Muyila cites, for example, the case of the Bukusu community in which children are not supposed to question decisions made by their parents and elders even when such decisions are of direct concern to them because "...advanced age is taken as a criterion of not only the truth but also reliability and therefore whatever decision is made by people of advanced age should be taken as it is" (Muyila 2006: 43). Such situations tend to limit the African child's potential to develop a critical and creative attitude even in issues that affect their adult life.

In their daily routine and practices, the researchers observed that the traditional Shona² like precise instructions that are clearly understood by all and dislike vague orders and commands. For any transaction, verbal or otherwise, parties involved must clearly understand what is involved. This desire to have all details clear in one's mind leads inevitably to delay and long discussion with much repetition so that all present understand what is meant. Related to his love for preciseness is the great care taken by the Shona, when introducing a new subject, to clarify all its details. In a Shona village one cannot help noticing that nothing is done with great speed but in a leisurely manner; in a slower, more orderly tempo. To a stranger to their world such discussions often appear long winded, but the object is to explain to all concerned what is expected of them. The quality of precision of instructions is transferred from an early age. To what extent can the thoroughness of explanation and search for detail be a virtue in tradition to be emulated in a community of philosophical inquiry?

It is the researchers' conviction that every society seeks to socialize and train its young members, the goal being the production of an educated person. Given the above cardinal virtues one may ask: What is an educated person in traditional African thought? Drawing from the Akan people of Ghana, Wiredu enters this debate by submitting that an educated person is one who possesses reasonable knowledge of her culture and environment and demonstrates the

ability to construct and defend her arguments, a good degree of moral maturity with an adequate sense of right and wrong and who, in the final analysis, is tolerant and open to dialogue in interpersonal relations (Wiredu 2004). In agreement with the Aristotelian view that the child at birth is morally immature, traditional Africans believe the education that the child receives from the family and neighbours leads the child moral maturity, "*a virtuous individual ... (with) some sense of the constitutive connection between morality and human interests*" (Wiredu 2004: 18).

Among the traditional Shona people, educatedness is attributed to one's ability to engage in productive, refined and polished debates with other community members and displaying a willingness to listen carefully to what others say. A demonstration of the capacity to articulate clear and logical arguments at a *dare* (chief's court) earns one the label *munhu akadzidza* (a learned/educated person) while those who simply follow arguments passively and contribute virtually nothing and are vacuous are given little regard at decision-making gatherings. They are often allocated menial responsibilities such as preparing meat for those who engage in more fruitful debates. This is a form of preparation of young members of the community for community leadership roles. Thus the selection process starts from small family gatherings with adolescents being allowed to participate in solving family disputes together with their siblings and elder members of the family. At this point children are exposed to situations that challenge and test their reasonableness. The use of riddles, puzzles and proverbs was meant to check and improve children's wit as will be detailed in the later parts of the study. However the traditional village would show gender bias in as far as girl/boy participation in such dialogical practices. Women would be relegated to listeners and girls would be confined to the kitchen just as boys whose contributions to debates do not reflect the desired rationality. While traditional African education has often been challenged for not promoting any critical thinking, boys are accorded opportunities that expose them to exercise some rationality- critical, creative and self-reflexive thinking.

In summary, in traditional African societies the educated person carries three cardinal virtues. First reasonableness –that is being logi-

cal, critical, and self reflective. Second, moral maturity and refinement- that is being honest, faithful, dutiful and empathetic to others in the community and third, contributing to consensual dialogue- that is listening to the voices of others without necessarily putting down and dismissing others' subjective views as not worthy of consideration. In fact to the traditional Africans, all that education should lead to is an educated person with a human face, a being with a good character, a human being. The Shona say "*Munhu kwaye munhu akadzidza*"-literally a good person is an educated person; "*Munhu akadzidza ane hunhu*"- literally an educated person is a virtuous person of good character, "*ane musoro*" literally one with a constructive mind and "*ane chimiro*"-literally one with a public standing. This leads me to the question of how traditional Africans transmit values and norms to their young.

Methods of Value Transmission

Whereas western theories of socialization tend to place a great deal of emphasis on the promotion of autonomy, African socialization values and practices, by distinction, tend to be more preoccupied with the cultivation of social responsibility and nurturance (Serpell, Mariga and Harvey 1993). Human offspring are born ignorant of their group or cultural identity but in time they acquire it by socialisation (Nsamenang 1999). Socialisation and becoming a person are synonymous in traditional African communities and the real meaning of ritual pedagogy is for the child to "...pass from the state of nature to that of culture" (Erny 1973: 26). It is the process of leading him out [*educere*] from the "...marginal state and making him accede to the human condition" (*ibid*). As soon as the child is old enough to leave his family home, his education is in a large measure the business of everyone. The child considers it normal to be called and sent away on errands by an adult or older child, scolded or corrected, or advised, consoled, revenged or rewarded by them (Moumouni 1968). The young child completes training by listening to and observing elders, at community palavers and by taking part in the different aspects of social life. Children listen with other children to the stories, legends and legends told by the adults.

During the entire process of physical growth, and intellectual and emotional development, the

child is followed by the entire collective of the community, in a direct or indirect fashion. Through daily activities the child gradually is made aware of and comes to appreciate the material and spiritual basics of social life: values, customs and traditions, and worldviews. Ties of solidarity and fraternity between children in the same age group are woven and reinforced in childhood groups determined by age and later these ties also appear between the children and their elders and between them and the whole community. Developing the disposition to listen, not only to instructions given by elders but also to stories told and to recite and retell them are some of the basic skills transferred to children at an early age.

There are evening gatherings when the father or an elder member of the family tells stories and poses riddles to children of the compound. This provides children with entertainment as well as a form of education. They are asked to repeat the previous night's episode as a test of memory and of narrative expressiveness although this can be criticised for promoting dogma and indoctrination and a denial of access to critical reasoning on the part of the learners. Competition in solving riddles helps to speed up their natural wit. Such evening sessions thus train children's verbal ingenuity and at the same time introduces them to a wide range of oral literature: myths, folktales, local history, proverbs. For Callaway "*this education gave young people a heightened awareness of moral values, ethical discernments, and the comic and tragic dimensions of human life*" (Callaway 1975: 29). The researchers argue that traditional Africans had their own unique ways of doing philosophy in general and doing it with children in particular as shown by some illustrations that follow. Horton's criteria of epistemology and logic as determinants of philosophical thinking alone is narrow given that the two are not only historically unwarranted even in western tradition. His criteria also disregard the philosophical traditions found in other cultures. As demonstrated below conceptual analysis, for example, examines metaphysical, ethical, political, epistemological, aesthetic issues in the African culture and a people's culture influences the selections of concepts to be analysed. To refuse to accept African ways of doing philosophy is tantamount to suggesting that they cannot reflect, neither can they conceptualise their

life-world. Traditional African ways of doing philosophy are as also expressed or reflected in social values and have in no way restricted themselves to absolute conceptualizations. Gyekye cites an example of the Akan community whose philosophic thought expresses a humanistic element through a compassionate fellow-feeling, in the social institution of the tribe in a web of kinship ties and other like social relationships (Gyekye 1987). The researchers discuss below some of traditional Africans ways of philosophizing.

Traditionally, Africans have revered good stories and storytellers well-versed in oral cultures and traditions. Oral storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience in which everyone is expected to participate. There are other accounts however: accounts of the story-tellers being in a position of unquestionable, autocratic authority. Such participation is a necessary part of traditional African communal life and as a result, basic training in a particular culture's oral arts and skills is an essential part of children's traditional indigenous education en route to full humanness. Traditional African culture, like any other human culture in the world, creates stories and narratives as a way of making sense of the world. African stories and proverbs draw upon the collective wisdom of the people to express their structures of meaning, feeling, thought, and expression and thus serve social and moral purposes. Traditional folklore becomes the primary form of oral tradition and a fundamental mode of conveying culture, experience and values and a way of transmitting knowledge and wisdom, feelings and attitudes in oral societies such as traditional Africa. But to what extent can the value of traditional African orature be realized in the 21st century?

Oral tradition is the most significant information gathering exercise for traditional African education. This involves the collective testimonies and recollections of the past inherited from earlier generations, and transmitted in various forms of verbal testimonies. Both formal and informal processes are utilised for the transmission of knowledge, skills, ideas, attitudes and patterns of behavior. Tribal legends are told and retold by the evening fireside and through them much of the cultural heritage of the tribe is kept alive and passed on to the children. Such oral traditions, narrated with care

and repetition constitutes the African child's training in what was often a complicated linguistic system without a script. Oral tradition remains "*a reservoir of inexhaustible wisdom where Africans learn about their origin, history, culture and religion, about the meaning and reality of life, about morals, norms and survival techniques*" (Omolewa 2007: 598). If one were to enter a traditional African village even to date, one observes how any adult who happens to be free can enjoy teaching children traditional games including counting, puzzles, and riddles and reciting children's poems. This does not leave out grandparents by virtue of old age who play a central role of imparting their acquired wisdom and philosophical ideas of the community. As the elders theorize and teach oral literature that covers fables, folktales, legends, myths, proverbs and stories, children receive their socialization and education. Through the indigenous stories children's thinking and knowledge and attitudes are extended. They are, in the process of storytelling, exposed to creative thinking skills as well as the capacity to imagine and understand their world thereby synthesizing, refining and redefining their experiences to open up for future possibilities.

Besides, traditional African stories provide learners with distinct social and cultural experiences. Folktales reflect the traditional culture from which they originate and so their preservation and transmission contributes to the preservation and transmission of the people's culture. However, preservation and transmission, in essence, imply the curtailment of the dynamism expected of a culture. On their positive, stories told around a fire arise from real-life experiences and child listeners often find them linked to their daily lives. Such stories provide a fantasy world, but coming from children's real-life experiences, they allow children to face their fears and frustrations and in the final analysis they acquire the essential survival skills. As much as traditional folk tales are vehicles for teaching the community's value system, they also teach the basic universal virtues of love, honesty, courage, hospitality, compassion and goodwill

Fables in the form of trickster stories convey moral lessons, and are more pedagogic devices rather than literary pieces (Abraham 1962). Common among the Shona are stories are often told of how *Tsuro* (Hare) always managed to trick

and cheat *Gudo* (baboon) on every occasion of their interaction. One such story is when the two parties agreed, upon the initiative of *Tsuro*, to boil each other in a big clay pot. *Tsuro* entered first and when he was burning, he called out for help and baboon removed and saved him. When it was *Gudo*'s, turn, *Tsuro* went out to add more firewood to raise the temperature in the pot. When baboon felt the heat and was burning and cried out for help *Tsuro*, start to celebrate, shouting '*tsviramo*' (literally meaning- You, burn). Most of these tales are carefully constructed to inculcate the societies' values into children without necessarily and formally telling them what to do and how to do it. In most of these stories, a catalogue of likely tricks is set out in the story form and successful counter-moves are described.

Riddles are a method of instruction that is crucial in imparting knowledge and sharpening memory and reasoning ability of both the young and the old (Gwaravanda and Masaka 2008). Gelfand writes that

... this method of instruction is useful in forming the memory and reasoning powers of the child. In his attempt to solve the riddles, he has to consider different possibilities and probabilities and through repeated questioning, he comes to know many features of life (Gelfand 1979: 131).

Riddles test children's judgment and solving a puzzle or a riddle is a source of great intellectual pleasure and it may involve a game in which one child challenges another and the winner is one who knows most (Gwaravanda and Masaka 2008). The asking and answering of riddles is formulaic. A child or elder challenging another invites him to swap riddles. The person so challenged would start posing the riddle before giving the chance to his challenger for answers. The game continues until one of them finds he has no more to ask. When one person or group admits exhaustion of riddles they may pose, the other group claims victory and so becomes the more knowledgeable. In this sense traditional Africans recognize riddles highly for possessing the ability to assist the young gain social values as well as equipping them with yardsticks to measure them.

In the African context, proverbs decorate speech. They are symbols of communication and at times form sub-languages of their own. The language of proverbs finds expression for a

whole perspective on the world, and thus constitutes a means of tapping into societies' view of reality. Proverbs are stimulus towards knowledge, wisdom and morality. They can be analytical and can challenge assumptions in order to inspire further reflection. They criticise, praise, advise and teach. In Africa proverbs cover every aspect of human endeavour and human relations. In effect proverbs are rich sources of African wisdom and philosophy (Omolewa 2007). As Mbiti writes

Proverbs, which are the most important type of aphorism in Africa, have a deeper meaning than stated literally, a meaning which can be understood only through the analysis of the social situations to which they are appropriate (Mbiti 1970: 2).

Although not amounting to philosophy, African proverbs contain a great stock of ideas that generate various philosophical issues, including metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and science. To understand the implications of an African proverb, one has to appreciate the social situation from which the proverbs arose. For instance among the Shona to say *Chara chimwe hachiswanye inda* (literally meaning one finger does not crush lice) cannot be correctly interpreted by someone who does not understand an environment in which lice, common especially among the impoverished people, are eliminated by singularly crushing them using their fingers. Due to their frequently impoverished situations Africans had no alternative methods of removing the lice from their clothes or blankets save for the use of the finger – thus the aphorism. In essence the proverb is meant to express the collective/ communalistic character of human beings living together. The proverbs of a community or nation is in a real sense "*...an ethnography of the people which, if systematized, can give a penetrating picture of the people's way of life, their philosophy, their criticism of life, moral truths and social values*" (Akpobaro and Emovon 1994: 1). In Africa proverbs differ in terms of function and level of theoretical meaning in respect of time and place. For example, among the Yoruba, the proverb has become so interwoven with living speech that can be heard at anytime and on each occasion. Proverbs also serve as means of achieving clarity and conciseness in discourse. The Yoruba say '*A proverb is the horse which carries a subject under discussion along; if a subject under dis-*

cussion goes astray, we use a proverb to track it' to indicate that in every statement made to reflect decisions taken by Yoruba people, proverbs are vehicles used in driving home their points. Proverbs in this case throw light on the concrete reality of lived experience; they serve as important pedagogical devices because they provide essential case material on which pedagogical reflection is possible. For example the Shona say, *kandiro enda kandiro dzoka* literally meaning the plate goes and the plate returns. This is meant to emphasise the reciprocity principle to the participants. It amounts to saying if a neighbour offers you a plateful of maize meal powder (when you have none in your home); you must remember to return to the original source the same. This however does not imply revenge or an eye-for-an-eye type of retribution. By prising apart the proverbs and stories, people are able to reflect on the meanings and implications embedded in the experiences. Traditional African education draws on these teaching devices to informally structure educational programmes that encourage learners to listen to stories and proverbs and reflect on them to derive meanings that inform and guide conduct.

Closely linked to fables are myths and legends that are told about the different communities. Myths and legends not only supply accounts of the community's origin, but also relate precedents to present-day beliefs, actions, and codes of behavior (Segy 1975). It must be pointed however that in many African societies, while myths may not refer to what actually happened, they are not wholly untrue. Myths are at times only exaggerations of history in the same way as what is supposed to be history may only be a mythicised event. For example below is a South African myth about Van Hunks and the devil.

Jan van Hunks, a Dutch pirate in the early 18th century, retired from his eventful life at sea to live on the slopes of Devil's Peak, Table Mountain. To escape from his wife's sharp tongue he often walked up the mountain where he settled down to smoke his pipe. One day a mysterious stranger approached him and asked the retired pirate to borrow some tobacco. After a bit of bragging, a smoking contest ensued, with the winner's prize a ship full of gold. After several days, Van Hunks finally defeated the stranger, who unfortunately turned out to be the devil. Suddenly, thunder rolled, the clouds

closed in and Van Hunks disappeared, leaving behind only a scorched patch of ground. Legend has it that the cloud of tobacco smoke they left became the "table-cloth" - the famous white cloud that spills over Table Mountain when the south-easterly blows in summer. When that happens, it is said that Van Hunks and the Devil are at it again (Adapted from: <http://www.roadtravel.co.za/news/article4.html>).

However in African societies, much history contains myths and many myths contain historical truths (Boateng 1983). Besides supporting authority myths in traditional Africa often prop up morality, ritual, law and sanction. By ensuring common understandings, which sustain intergenerational communication, myths seek to rationalize the existing order where "subjects find subjection less irksome... when all are convinced that the existing order is divinely inspired" (ibid). From the above one can identify and distinguish elements of speculative thought. Myths are, as Gyekye writes, "... *imaginative representations of religious or philosophical (metaphysical) ideas or propositions; they presuppose conceptual analysis and conceal philosophical arguments or conclusions*" (Gyekye 1987: 15). The use of myths as a mode of doing philosophy is, of course, not unique to traditional Africa as Platonic philosophy, for example, essentially employs the mythical style. Likewise traditional Africans use myths to ask questions that concern the essence of life, death, the nature of reality, human destiny, and the origin of God to mention a few. What is of significance for this study is the extent to which the above methods develop in children critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinking as doing philosophy with children in the 21st century? To what extent can the methods of inculcating traditional African values be engaged as the stimulus for developing communities of philosophical inquiry in the classroom?

CONCLUSION

In this paper the researchers argued that in traditional African communities children are brought up as part and parcel of the larger group, the extended family and the community at large. Children are generally seen as lacking in the basic characteristics of adulthood; and in order to achieve these defining features, they have to go through certain elaborate rites that eventu-

ally confer adulthood on them. The teaching methods in traditional Africa embody some good and bad practices when mirrored in light of the educative process in modernity. The rigid expository methods of instruction compel learners to rote memorization of large chunks of content materials. To a large extent learners are not encouraged to construct their own questions on the content taught with teacher pronouncements taken as absolute truths coupled with harsh punishment to ensure compliance and obedience. However traditional African education has as one of its virtues the adaptability to learner environment. Taking place informally during the course of living in the home and in the community, children come to be educated through what they experience in their interaction with objects in the physical and social environment. The ability to reason and form solid judgments is considered extremely important despite the number of theses that have been put forward to denigrate the wisdom and the philosophy of the elders in Africa, South of the Sahara and the accompanying absence of individuality especially among young members of society. Hence the case for an equally worthwhile (E)ducation and not an (e)ducation prevailed in traditional African societies before the introduction of western education.

NOTES

1. Eze, E.C. (1997) see reference list
2. Shona in this paper refers to a people that occupy most of Zimbabwe save for the Western and South-western parts. It is also a local language used in these areas

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