

Sankofa: 'Gazing Back' to Indigenous Knowledge and Skills for Socio-economic Development of Ghana

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ABSTRACT Ghana attained political independence in 1957. Before colonial rule young people were taught indigenous skills like food preservation, weaving of clothes and brewing of gin for livelihood. Unemployment was unknown as no one idled about. Formal school was introduced to educate young people for colonial civil service as clerks, interpreters and preachers. To protect European interests, indigenous economic activities were banned. This did not only stifle development of indigenous economic activities but encouraged school graduates to look down upon indigenous industries. The negative colonial attitude has contributed to high unemployment and low industrialization. This study employed the qualitative research approach where 400 students and school leavers, 10 headmasters, 10 parents and 5 employers were selected for interviews. The study found that Ghanaian school graduates have no specific knowledge and skills for employment. It was recommended that to reduce unemployment and increase socio-economic development indigenous industries should be taught at school.

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism came to Ghana (the Gold Coast as the colonial 'masters' called it) with the arrival of the Portuguese in AD 1482. Through a series of skirmishes and diplomacy among some European nations over the years, the colony finally came under British rule till 1957 when it attained political independence. Before the arrival of the Europeans and its concomitant imposition of colonial rule young people in the country were informally taught indigenous knowledge and skills such as food production and preservation, weaving of clothes, baskets, sandals and brewing of gin by either parents or tradesmen and women in the various communities for a living. Both formal and informal processes of the customary or indigenous education methods were used to transmit knowledge, skills, ideas, attitudes and patterns of behavior (Datta 1998). Unemployment was unknown to the people as no one idled about because people took care of each other. The rich provided the poor neighbours with land or engaged them on their farms to ensure that the livelihood of the poor was catered for. Indeed African indigenous education grew out of the environment; the learning process being directly related to the pattern of work in the society. Rodney (2009) affirms that the pre-colonial African education was outstanding in that it had close links with social, spiritual and economic life, was many-sided and collective in nature.

There was no separation of education and productivity or any division between manual and intellectual education. Altogether African education matched the realities of pre-colonial African society and produced well rounded personalities to fit into that society (Rodney 2009). The colonialists and some missionaries believed that they were bringing education to entirely uneducated peoples, a supposition which would have been valid if education were equated with literacy and formal schooling (Datta 1998). They therefore introduced the formal school with the sole aim to educate young people to serve in the colonial civil service as clerks, interpreters and preachers. In the colonial era, education was such that it served the interest of the colonialist. In a regime of slavery, education was but one institution for forming slaves (Mozambique Liberation Front 1968). As a strategy to protect European markets and economic interests African indigenous socio-economic activities and industries were deemed primitive or unhygienic and outlawed. Those who brewed African gin illegally were arrested, prosecuted, fined or imprisoned. This attitude did not only stifle the large scale development of indigenous economic activities but overtly and covertly taught school graduates to look down upon indigenous knowledge and skills.

Some recent international literature on indigenous knowledge system is poignant on the effects of colonialism on Africa's indigenous (social, economic and political) ways of life. This

researcher has observed that although much of the literature agrees on the value of indigenous knowledge system for Africa's rebirth only a few writers on the topic advocate for the revival of indigenous industries to speed up industrialization and also address the problem of unemployment among the youth. It is for this knowledge gap that the present study was set up to address. Colonialism, among other things, poured scorn on indigenous institutions and practices and directly and indirectly discouraged the development of indigenous industries. In his assessment of the effect of colonialism, Wiredu (2005) affirms that it was not only a political imposition, but also a cultural one which affected, or even perhaps infected African values, religious and indigenous systems of education. It relegated indigenous knowledge system to the background and projected Western values through school education and Christianity. The assumption here is that the colonial attitude towards indigenous knowledge and skills has contributed largely to the high unemployment among the economically active citizens and low industrialization in Ghana and Africa at large. In reality as the country's population increases, the number of economically active people [that is, the unemployment rate] also increases and the government alone cannot provide jobs for all school graduates. It is, therefore, crucial for Africans in general and Ghanaians in particular to look back to their indigenous knowledge, skills and industries to provide some innovations that can address the problem of unemployment and also project their identity as Africans. The indigenous knowledge of our forebears which allowed them to survive and prosper was passed on as teachings from one generation to another and through practice (Manyaka 2006) and the present generation has the moral duty to put them to use for socio-economic emancipation and advancement. Contributing to the debate on indigenous knowledge, Battiste (2000) argues that this knowledge offered succeeding generations the path of knowledge that informs their heritage. In the 21st century, Africans need to adapt to their indigenous knowledge and skills in order to survive. The survival is not just about physical existence but also about maintaining local worldviews... and environment (McKinley 2005). Africans have various indigenous ways of life and as Battiste and Henderson (2000) acknowledge the diverse indigenous ways of life

can only be fully learned and understood by means of pedagogy traditionally employed by the indigenous peoples themselves. Indeed Africans cannot reflect on the present destiny without analysing the grafting between the ancient values and the modern values in a context of accelerated globalisation, fashioned by a boundless liberalism with its share of all types of trading- currencies, money, merchandise including migrants, men, women, children etc (Diop 2000). Reflecting to adopt and innovate is, therefore, the key to the production and processing of indigenous knowledge and skills. Mashelkar (2002) aptly affirms that a nation's ability to convert knowledge into wealth and social good through the process of innovation will determine its future and this is what I think Ghana and Africa as whole must do. The world now stands at a crossroad in search of new human centred visions of development for the alleviation of poverty. All the agencies of the United Nations are seeking to promote paradigms of sustainable human development that build on knowledge resources that exist in communities (Odora Hoppers 2002). As a continent Africa is seeking its own renaissance and seeking to establish the terms of its development. Ghanaians must take historical evolution and hence lessons from the past into account in order to be able to establish a viable educational project that addresses the current needs and context of the country.

Objectives of the Study

This study was undertaken to:

- explore the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in job creation and socio-economic development of Ghana
- advocate for the integration of indigenous knowledge system into the formal school curriculum to enable school leavers acquire knowledge and skills for the establishment of local industries and also to appreciate and respect their cultural identity.

Sankofaism: The Meaning and Significance of an Indigenous African Thought

Sankofa is both a philosophical thought and a cultural custom of the Akan, the single largest ethnic group in Ghana. *Sankofa* comes from three Akan words- *san* (return), *ko* (go) and *fa*

(take) which literally means, 'go back to reclaim'. Proverbs and symbols are extensively used by the Akan to communicate and convey important messages in everyday life. *Sankofa* is symbolically depicted by a mythical bird that flies forward but most of the time with its head turned backwards and an egg in its mouth. The backward gaze indicates that there is wisdom in learning from the past in order to understand the present and to shape the future. The egg in the mouth of the bird as represents the 'gem' or knowledge of the past upon which wisdom is based. The egg also signifies the generation to come that would benefit from the wisdom (Galloway 2004). The forward and backward gaze of the *Sankofa* bird resonates an Akan proverb which states that it is not wrong, shameful or too late to go back for something you have previously forgotten (*Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki*). The Akan believe that the past illuminates the present and that the search for success is a lifelong process, in fact a journey. Life is a journey, and sometimes as people undertake a journey they may have left some very important things home and have to turn back to fetch them before they continue. Similarly, there is always the need for introspection to reflect on important past issues in order to plan a suitable strategy or action to bring about the needed improvement. People literally need to take steps backwards to reclaim the past so as to understand the present and why and how they have come to be where they are and who they are today.

This indigenous philosophy intimates that humans cannot know where they are going unless they know where they are coming from. People's past is as important as their present and the future and so to make the best out of the present and plan for the future Africans must 'gaze backward' to the past for appropriate guidance to ensure future success. No matter how far Africans have literally travelled in life they must always 'return home' (that is do some retrospection).

The interpretation of the philosophy by various African philosophers and scholars such as Dzobo (1976), Galloway (2004), Tedla (1995) and Quan-Baffour (2008) clearly indicates that *Sankofa* is not only an indigenous African philosophy or proverb but also a way of life or practice. As a practice it brings Africans face-to-face with the new awareness of historical realities and African identity. The Akan always say '*Tete*

wo bi' (the past has something important to teach the present generation) hence the urgent need for Ghanaians to reclaim their indigenous knowledge and skills for the country's development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in four districts (Techiman, Nkoranza, Kintampo and Wenchi) in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana. The four districts are mainly agricultural with very few opportunities for employment in the formal sector, a situation which encourages school leavers to migrate to the cities in search of jobs. The subjects or participants for the study were therefore drawn from the entire population of all high school students and graduates in the four districts. In describing population, Polit and Beck (2008) say it is the aggregate of cases having a common and designated criterion that is accessible as subjects for a study.

Sampling Procedure and Recruitment of Participants for the Study

The research participants were recruited from the entire population of all high school students and graduates in four administrative districts. The purposive sampling technique was used in recruiting 400 participants [200 students and 200 school leavers] into the study. The technique which was a form of non-probability sampling (Polit and Beck 2008) enabled the researcher to select those participants who had much information about the problem under study and could articulate and or explain issues regarding the phenomenon or the problem being investigated (Brink 2006).

The inclusion criteria or eligibility criteria (Polit and Beck 2008) ensured that the sample is defined and restricted to make the population as homogeneous as possible. The criteria for inclusion to explore the problem were:

- attendance of High School;
- completion of High School;
- age of 18 years and above;
- being unemployed and
- willingness to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Twenty (20) focus group interviews were conducted on the 200 High school students while

the 200 school leavers were interviewed as individuals. The snowball approach was used to track the 200 school leavers to participate in the study. The identified school leavers were traced to their individual homes where with their permission in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted between September and December 2011. All the interviews were conducted in English, the official language of Ghana and with the participants' permission the information was recorded. The researcher also kept a journal in which he recorded field notes about incidences that were heard, seen, experienced and thought about throughout the data collection period. The investigation focused on issues related to career interests of participants, the existing school curriculum and the type of learning experiences that can ensure employment of school leavers.

In addition to the 400 subjects 10 headmasters of Senior and Junior High schools, 10 parents and 5 employers were also interviewed to find their views on the suitability of the school curriculum for current context of the country. The responses of the additional participants were used to triangulate those of the students and school leavers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main objective of this exploratory research was to find out about the major weaknesses of the existing school curriculum and how the integration of indigenous knowledge and skills can assist school graduates learn skills that would not only make them employable but also contribute to the socio-economic development of the country.

Of the 400 youths who participated in the study 270 were males and 130 females. The participants' ages ranged between 18- 27 and all the school leavers who participated in the study (N=200) were unemployed. The responses of both students and school leavers regarding career aspirations indicated that students always dream of employment in high places. Both the current students and school leavers [N=400] affirmed that at school they dream of working in firms, industries and government departments. The reality however dawns on them when they leave school and begin to look for work; that is the time they realize that the school education did not prepare them for any specific

work. When school leavers fail to secure job with their certificates they become frustrated. The school graduates and their parents indicated their frustrations in various ways. The following extract from the statement of a young woman of about 24 years summed up the frustrations of school graduates in Ghana:

Since leaving school three years ago I have never worked. I have travelled

to the cities and towns so many times with applications but everywhere I went

I was told they need practical skills like textile designers and ICT

which I never learnt at school. It seems the type of subjects I studied

cannot fetch me work. My parents do not have money to sponsor me for

tertiary education. I am now a burden to them. Having spent so much money

on my education they expect some return.

The above response indicates how irrelevant some of the subjects studied in Ghanaian schools today are to the current needs of the country. With the inroads made by technology and globalization there is a need for the country's authorities to rethink the school curriculum if school education is to be meaningful to students, parents, communities and the nation at large. Regarding the learning experiences that can provide school graduates with relevant knowledge and skills the respondents [N= 400] were unanimous in their responses that they need to study job related subjects at school to enable them initiate their own jobs when they fail to be employed by state departments. This response was collaborated and affirmed by headmasters [N=10], parents [N=10] and the managers of firms and industries [N= 5]. They agreed that the school curriculum needs to be transformed by integrating more local and global employable skills into the existing one. The headmasters lamented that policy makers and government departments- that is, education, labour and industry do not seem to speak to each other hence implementation of policies delay. One headmaster had this to say:

We do not have funds to buy equipments such as computers and hire

Teachers to teach new courses in indigenous technology and computer skills.

The department of education is slow in responding to our requests.

The above response is a clear indication of the inadequacy of Ghana's current school cur-

riculum. Hountondji (2000) affirms that in most African countries the present educational systems were set up at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century with clear primary aim: formal education was intended first and foremost to train young people for civil service. Thus little or no provision was made to educate people to do their own work and this has become the major reason for unemployment.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the results of this exploratory study that school education in the present form does not prepare its graduates for specific skills because when formal school started in Ghana and in Africa in general the indigenous populations were educated outside the context of their own cultures and environment. Although political independence was achieved in 1957 the result of this investigation validates the assumption that nothing or very little has changed and the school still does not adequately prepare the youth for employment. The paper concludes that the country's authorities- politicians, policy makers, curriculum planners, educationists, parents and communities- must make a 'backward gaze' to incorporate indigenous knowledge and skills into the formal school curriculum to ensure that unemployment among the youth reduces and the country achieves economic growth.

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APPENDIX

- i. Tete: Akan word meaning the past
- ii. Sankofa: Akan word which means go back to reclaim or take; to literally return to the past in order to move forward.