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THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL YORUBA EDUCATION IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

By

'Layo Ogunlola

Lecturer

Department of Linguistics & Nigerian Languages,

University of Ilorin,

Ilorin – Nigeria

Introduction

It is a general belief of most people in Nigerian society today that the standard of education is deteriorating. A number of factors have been suggested to be responsible for this. While some put the blame on the school pupils/students, others say it is the fault of the parents while some say the government caused it. To others, it is due to the high level of moral decadence in the society.

This paper examines the reasons for the continued fall in the standard of education in Nigeria and the likely effects on the future of the nation. It is observed that the problem continues unabated as a result of the non-incorporation of the traditional education system into the Western school system with special focus on the Yoruba traditional education system.

The Yoruba traditional education system teaches moral (i.e. good character). The belief then was that when good character is imbibed, the child becomes a useful member of his or her society. According to Fafunwa (1974: 2) the aim of traditional African education was to produce an individual who is honest, respectable, skilled, co-operative and conforms to the social order of the day.

The main objective of this paper therefore is to explain what traditional education was and to distinguish it from the formal (school) education introduced by the whitemen. The paper goes further to argue why it would be necessary to go back to the drawing board in order to ensure the building of a virile nation. It is hoped that the paper will go a long way in suggesting ways towards improving the standard of education of the entire nation and thus assist a great deal in moving the nation forward in all aspects.

The Yoruba Traditional Education System

Every nation of the world has its own system of education. For instance, according to Fafunwa (1974: 15) the Greek idea of an educated man was one who was mentally and physically balanced while the Romans placed emphasis on oratorical and military prowess. The priests were considered classical examples of educated elite among the Jews. The English education on the other hand faithfully reflected the local stratification of the population, while the American unavoidably reflected the conditions of American growth and tends toward pragmatism and relativism (Horns 1980: 255 & 273).

According to Fafunwa (1974: 17) because the indigenous education failed to conform to the ways of the Westernized system, some less well-informed writers have considered it primitive; 'savage' 'barbaric' and so on. Such people, Fafunwa asserted, either knowingly or unknowingly have forgotten the fact that to evaluate any educational system, one must determine the extent to which the said system is meeting the needs of a particular society at any given time.

Indigenous African education in general and the Yoruba traditional education in particular places considerable emphasis on character training (*omoluabi*) and this is no doubt the corner-stone of African education in general (Awoniyi, 1978; Ojo, 1978). The principle that guided the people's education then was to make every individual functional. To them, education is a means to an end rather than being an end itself. It is concerned with an immediate induction into the society and preparation for adulthood (Fafunwa, 1974:15). The said system of education emphasizes social responsibility. Therefore, the so-called 6-3-3-4 system of education introduced in Nigeria some years back with the aim of making an individual functional is like resuscitating the existing traditional system.

In the Yoruba traditional education system all parents want their children to be upright, honest, kind and helpful to others and will spare no pain to instill these qualities. They prefer to remain childless than to have children who will bring shame and dishonour to the family. Hence the saying "Akuku bi o san ju eyi rairai" or "kaka ki a bi egbaa obun, ki a kuku bi okan soso oga". It is observed however that in Nigeria, the two major religions (Christianity and Islam) have in no small measure influenced the education system.

Awoniyi (1978: 2) said that the traditional Yoruba education has been operating for many centuries before the coming of the Whitemen i.e. before the introduction of the formal school system. He goes further to say that "education in the Yoruba culture is a lifelong process, the whole society is the school of life".

The essence of such education is to foster good character (Omoluabi) in the individual thus making such an individual a useful member of his/her society. He went further to say that the system is a pattern of education flexible enough to conserve and transmit culture, tradition and experiences of the society.

Fadipe (1970: 311-313) observed that among the Yoruba, the education of the young in the codes of manners, conventions, customs, morals, superstition and laws of his society is achieved through various members of his family and household while Majasan (1967: 18, 151), identified character training and religious education as two main objectives of Yoruba education and showed that other objectives were pursued through the latter. Since the child cannot continuously be under the eyes of his parents, the elders, brothers and sisters, various members of the extended family have a hand in his/her education at one time or the other.

Before the introduction of school education, the Yoruba traditional system of education had been in existence and it is as old as the Yoruba race itself. It was not only flexible to conserve culture and tradition of the people, it also proved adequate enough to transmit the cultural heritage from one generation to another through the use of the language (mother tongue) which is the manifestation of traditional education per se with its sole objectives mainly embraced in the concept of 'omoluabi' (good character). Ojo (1978: 118) refer to Omoluabi as "Eni to ko gbogbo iwa rere po to si je eni ti elegbe ati ojugba ka si ojulowo eniyan". This is to say that Omoluabi is he who combines all good characters and is known by everybody as 'genuine' person.

Abimbola (1975: 40) also agrees with Ojo when he writes that: "Iwa is the most valuable thing amongst all other things in the Yoruba value system". He quickly added however that good character may be difficult to have as an attitude but without people who have it, the world would be a very difficult place to live in. This is to say that imbibing good character is the only antidote for building a virile nation and anything short of this leads to social vices such as thuggery, disorderliness, and other social evils one can think of. This is to say that to be a useful member of the society, one has to develop good character "Omoluabi" and this is the main objective of the traditional Yoruba system of education.

In the traditional Yoruba set up, the education of a child is a joint responsibility of the whole society. No wonder then why the Yorubas say "Enikan nii bimo, igba eeyan nii ba a wo o", that is, a child is delivered by only one person while the whole society looks after the child, and because this does not fall in line with the Western system of education, the whitemen described it as uncivilised,

primitive, barbaric (etc) (Fafunwa, 1974: 17). This, we believe, is a biased judgement because according to Fafunwa, "education is the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour which are of *positive values* to the society in which he lives.

In evaluating any educational system, one must consider the extent to which it has met or is meeting the needs of a particular society at any given time and this must be applied to the traditional African education system in general and the Yoruba system of education in particular.

In the Yoruba traditional education system, the education of the child starts from the womb. The Yorubas believe that a childless marriage is a useless marriage and so, the news of pregnancy is greeted with great joy. The expectant mother is given special care, she is prevented from doing any hard task, she is warned to obey the societal myths and taboos, all in a bid to ensure safe delivery because the Yoruba attach much importance to children as the fathers/mothers of tomorrow. Thus, they say:

"Ina ku, o feeru boju"	Fire dies, the ash cover it
Ogede ku o f'omo ropo	The banana dies and is replaced with the younger one.
Bi a ba ku tan	When we die
Omo eni nii wole deni	Our children look after the home.

There are several sayings in Yoruba which border on child education and its procreational values. On the other hand, Western education, according to Taiwo (1980) dates back to 1842 with the arrival of Christian missionaries in Abeokuta with evangelism as their primary objective. Later, they introduced language education (of the local languages) to enhance communication with the people, hence the training of evangelical leaders. It was the missionaries who started the school (modern) system of education in Nigeria.

In Yorubaland, for instance, the Newspapers were the channels used by the missionaries (especially the CMS Mission) to develop the writing of the Yoruba language. Thus, in 1859, *Iwe Iroyin fun Awon Egba ati Yoruba* was established with the sole aim of teaching people to have an extended knowledge of the Yoruba language.

It is disheartening however that despite these developments the British Government still prefer the use of English language as the medium for communication in schools. For instance in 1882, the government ordered that English language *must* be the only language to be used in schools although some

of the missionaries intensified their efforts in ensuring that Yoruba language was developed. Among such missionaries was Henry Townsend who started the compilation of Hymnal Songs in Yoruba language and wrote them down in 1848 and in 1849, Samuel Ajayi Crowther compiled catalogues of Yoruba proverbs while Obasa followed suit by compiling Yoruba "great" words in 1896, which he published in 1927.

In other words, what we are saying is that it was evident that the whitemen attached more importance to their culture and language than those of the Yoruba or the Africans in general. No wonder why a notable Yoruba Poet of old (Sobo Arobiolu) in one of his poems states that: "Bibeli ko pe a ma ni 'yawo meji, Asa oyinbo niwonyen ...".

There is no doubt that the culture of the whitemen was highly emphasised in their system of education. Among the Yorubas on the other hand, the child's education begins as the child observes the habits of the parents or the elders around him or her. He or she was given specific instructions bordering on physical training, health habits, moral training, religious training, etc. These may be in the form of myths and taboos, all in the child's mother tongue (Yoruba). We will examine some of them.

(a) **The Yoruba Myths and Taboos**

Among the Yorubas it is a common practice for the young ones to sit and eat with their parents at meal time. The parents owed it a point of duty to ensure that the child's morsel was not too big and that he/she did not choose the meat not directly close to his/her side (probably because it is bigger than others), that he/she sat in a normal position (comfortable with his/her legs crossed over one another), etc. and anyone who went against those instructions was rebuked and may even be denied the next meal.

The Yorubas also have myths that are meant to teach morals, safety of lives and so on. For instance we have the following as examples:

1. It is forbidden for anyone to stretch his hands into a falling rain.
Lesson: To avoid being struck by thunder.
2. It is forbidden for one to sit on the mortar.
Lesson: It is not hygienic because the mortar is used for food processing and anyone who sits on it can discharge the wind from his anus into the mortar.
3. That one should not bend down while eating rather we are expected to sit right.

Lesson: The law of good healthy leaving stipulates that wrong positioning may affect the food movement in the stomach.

4. It is forbidden to use one's finger to draw lines on the floor.

Lesson: To avoid being cut by a sharp object and also to avoid contacting diseases that enters the body through fingernails.

(b) The Yoruba Folktales

Apart from myths and taboos, a Yoruba child is given proper education through tales. The major ones being the *Tortoise Tales* and the *Co-wife Tales*.

Olajubu, (1978), define folktale as: "a story in the traditional belief of a community. Such beliefs include respect for elders, hard work, honesty, patience and so on". Olabimtan (1982) in a similar way, define folktale as: "a story handed down from the past, such stories are based on the tradition and history of the people".

Tales are told to children after each day work to prevent children from playing away their leisure time. Such moral tales teach nothing but morals such as goodness to parents, hard work, hospitality, etc. Such tales stimulate the mental, social and physical development of the child. This accounted for why the Yoruba attach so much importance to folktale even though people generally believe it is full of lies especially because of the mysteries involved and the characters.

By participating in the story-telling exercises, the children acted as audience. They took part in folksongs (as in Alo Apagbe), and in questions and answers (as in Alo Apamo). They were happy because they had the opportunity to interact with their peer-groups, and the peer-group plays a vital role in the moral and social life of a child.

In the 'tortoise tale', the tortoise was the main character. The tortoise was usually associated with dubious characters and displayed this always in the tales. In most cases however, the tortoise was punished and at the end, children were to learn from the consequences of the bad morals associated with the tortoise. We can use a very simple one of such stories as an example here. It goes thus:

The tortoise was to visit his in-law and so he had to go and borrow the popular Yoruba traditional dress (agbada etu) from his friend's house, he met them eating and so he sat down to eat. During the process, another person came for the same purpose and excused the friend outside, discussed his mission and was given the 'agbada etu.' After eating, the tortoise now remembered to ask for the traditional dress but unfortunately, another person had gone away with it while

add

the tortoise was busy eating. He left disappointed and he lost his bid to entice his in-law and definitely lost the respect the in-law would have had for him.

The co-wife tales also teach morals. It usually centered on two wives of the same husband who will always be jealous of each other. Both of them would take reward for whatever their actions are.

(c) The Yoruba Songs

The Yorubas also teach moral through songs. Notable among such songs is the festival songs, social songs, etc. During the common Egungun festivals (usually celebrated every other year in some localities) the egungun sings various songs to teach morals and to condemn bad behaviours within the society. They usually know of such behaviours/happenings through informants who are citizens or residents of the locality. It does not matter who was involved even if it is the head of the village or town. Nobody questions their action because their motto then was "N o wi, oba kii p'okorin" i.e. "I shall speak, the king does not kill the poet". It is however unfortunate that today, the king kills the poet no wonder then such morals are no more with our people.

A few examples of such songs are the following:

(i) Against Laziness:

To the Yorubas, whatever we do with our lands lasts. Hence they say "Atelewo eni kii tan'ni je". They frown at laziness and a lazy person has no place in the society. Hence they sing songs to discourage people from being lazy. Example:

Eni b'ola ko romobi
Ola fiya bora sun
Ole lapa ko fi sise
E wa waye ole, o se o

The parents of a lazy man have no child
The lazy man cover himself with suffering
The lazy man has hands but don't work with it.
Imagine the life of a lazy man

(ii) Against Stealing (A Thief):

Stealing is one of the most unacceptable behaviour within the Yoruba society. A thief is a disgrace to his family and the entire society. So they have songs to discourage people from forming the habit of stealing. Example is this:

Kin ni n o fole se laye ti mo wa?
Laye ti mo wa kaka ki n jale

What will I do with stealing in my life?
In life instead for me to steal

Alape me sise
Ba-ba oke ole
Alake ni jina
nle ala

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Thief

<i>Kaka ki n jale, ma kuku d'eru</i>	<i>I rather become a slave</i>
<i>Kin ni n o fole se laye ti mo wa?</i>	<i>What will I do with stealing in my life?</i>

This song has about three verses each pointing to the fact that a Yoruba man would prefer to be a slave rather than being a thief. They have uncountable number of moral songs against bad behaviours such as backsliding, disrespect for elder, fornication, adultery, and so on.

(d) The Yoruba Proverbs

Proverbs embrace the philosophical and socio-cultural value system of the people. They point to the individual, domestic and collective life patterns of the society from which they are derived. Proverbs adopt materials from people's cosmological and social environment. It is a very popular means of transmitting and inculcating good moral values among the people. To the Yorubas, proverbs are "the sayings of the elders". No wonder the Yorubas say "enu agba l' obii gbo" (it is the elder that tells whether the Kola is ripe or not).

There are countless numbers of proverbs that teach one moral value or the other. We shall give just a few examples:

(i) Hard work:

(a) <i>Atelewo eni kii tan ni je</i>	One's hand does not deceive
(b) <i>B'ole o ku, e je o ku, kiku</i>	Let a lazy man die so far his
<i>ati aiku ole ko da nnkan</i>	death or being alive makes no
<i>fun'ni</i>	difference.

(ii) Respect for Elders:

This is very vital among the Yoruba moral values and the people seriously frown at anybody that goes against it. Thus, we have proverbs like:

(a) <i>Ai fagba fenikan ni o je aye gun</i>	Failure to honour/respect the elders makes life wobble.
(b) <i>Oro agba bi o se l'owuro yoo se lale</i>	If the words of elders do not come to pass in the morning, it will definitely come to pass in the evening.

(iii) Backsliding:

This is not encouraged among the Yoruba. The following proverb is for backsliders:

Ofofo o gb'egba, ibi ope lo mo Backsliding does not earn you A kobo besides thank you

(iv) Disobedience:

It is not a good omen for a child to disobey his/her elders. He/she is supposed to obey instructions or advice. Several proverbs are used for teaching obedience to the words of the elders. An example is this one:

(a) *Tinu mi ni n o se, ebo nii* It is my own decision I will follow,
da fun ni declares a sacrifice for such person.

Generally speaking, we can affirm the fact that the Yoruba teaches good morals that make everyone in the society become an "Omoluabi". It is unfortunate however that despite its importance, today it is either proverbs are not said or learnt at all or when they are said or learnt they are mutilated and when you ask even a university undergraduate what happens, they say that the informal education system of the Yoruba has been overtaken by "civilization" i.e. formal school system.

(e) Intellectual Training

The Yoruba have their own system of counting. No matter how great the numbers involved, it was not too big for them to count. For instance, 6,084 is Orin-le-legbaata, o le merin. The breakdown of which is as follow:

6,000	-	Egbaa meta (egbaata) = 2000 (Egbaa) x 3
80	-	Ogun merin (Ogorin/orin) = 20 (Ogun) x 4
04	-	Eyo merin (Erin) = 1 x 4

Such counting can be used for any number.

The Yorubas also have names for different fractions such as follow:

$\frac{1}{2}$ = Ida meji / idaji / abo

$\frac{1}{4}$ = Ida merin / idarin

$\frac{1}{10}$ = Ida mewaa

Not only this, they also teach morals through the use of poems such as

Ijala, Ese-ifa and so on. According to Fafunwa (1974, p27) "The Ijala chant is one of the most important intellectually spoken arts developed by the Yoruba and according to Adeboye Babalola (1964) one of the themes of the Ijala genres relate to various aspects of the Yoruba ways of life. During festivals (the Ogun festival for example), the hunters also sing to condemn bad morals within and outside their immediate community.

The immigration of some birds indicates the beginning of certain season e.g. Cattle egrets (*lêkeleke*) indicate the beginning of dry season when the harvesting of some crops begins. *the eagle*

With the introduction of school education most of the moral lessons given through the traditional education are no more taught. The school system does not give room for them and this invariably affects the moral standard of our school children of today and a child who is not taught to behave well may not be useful to himself, his community, his family and the whole nation because the school curriculum is not designed towards the training of good character in children. As earlier said the Bible (the gospel) was the main concern of the apostles of school (formal) education.

Most moral values of the society are already forgotten and this affects all aspects of the people's lives such as eating, dressing, respect for elders, respect for societal values, etc. The so-called "civilization" is fast breeding thuggery, hooliganism, cultism and the likes in our society. A visit to most Nigerian tertiary institutions today will testify to this claim. The school curriculum does not pay attention to the needs of the society; students now go to school to pass examinations whereas according to a one-time Nigeria Minister for Education, Professor Fafunwa, Education is what remains in man when book work is removed. Most school graduates of today only pass through the school without the school passing through them. They remain their old self without their behaviours been moulded positively. *Print*

The government is crying fowl everyday calling on heads of school to pay serious attention to the issue of cultism in their various institutions, yet they have not been able to find a lasting solution to it. This is because the said moral education referred to earlier is no more there.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have been able to establish the fact that the falling standard of education is an issue to be addressed. Secondly, we have also been able to prove that moral education which is the sole aim of the Yoruba traditional

education system has a vital role to play in the course of making efforts to improve the general standard of education the end result of which is expected to result in building a virile nation.

We are not saying that the school system of education has done no good to our educational upliftment and national development. After all, it introduced writing which in no small measure helped in conserving the Yoruba tradition and culture. Nevertheless, since the aim of the school education did not centre on character training, it may be difficult to achieve a veritable national development through it. As said earlier in this paper, without good character, the world as a whole would be a very difficult place to live in.

Good character does not breed bad behaviours such as the ones already mentioned, no wonder the Yoruba will not spare anything to inculcate good morals in their young ones and at the same time condemn bad morals in their adults through all available means such as the ones already highlighted above with the whole society serving as "the school of life".

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