

Indigenous Training and Learning Among the Agbaelu People of Central Igboland, Nigeria

By

Nneka Basilia Duruoma

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies

University of Port Harcourt

Email: nnekaduruoma@gmail.com

&

A. A. Derefaka

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies

University of Port Harcourt

Abstract

Teaching and learning in Western style today may suggest that Nigerians especially the Agbaelu people of central Igboland, Nigeria were bereft of such practice before the advent of the Europeans in the Country. A better hindsight on the strength of historical research design on the indigenous people's knowledge template of the area would establish anchored on Functionalism and Tant's theory that the people had very effective training and learning tradition. The following lines are indicative of the processes of training and learning as had been the practice of the people which if properly harnessed together with the currently used Western type would be more beneficial to trainers and learners and the Nation a large.

Introduction

For people to exist as conscious individuals and develop, they should have forms of education. This is to say in all human society, education is as old as their existence. Basically the kind of education practiced by the people of Africa before the advent of western education is known as indigenous education. And education is the process of trying to develop human

individuals in the aspects of physical and spiritual to make them maintain their existence as complete humans in a given society. When an individual is born into this world, he or she did not know anything (*tabula rasa*). Though the brain had some automatic functions that kicked in after birth such as suckling, breathing, some movements of the limbs among others but the mind had to be educated. Education however, has no universally acceptable definition. Most definitions of education are got from different schools of thought according to their beliefs, cultural value and norms, religious background and their social status.

The word education comes from the Latin word *educare* meaning “to lead out from” or bring out of” which emphasized that “leading” is the operative word as opposed to forcing. This is to say that education involves willing submission of oneself to be taught in order to acquire enlightenment. Nyerere (1967) defines education as the transmission of accumulated wisdom and knowledge of a society from one generation to another as a means of preparing the younger generation for their future role in the society and the effective participation in its maintenance and development. Ochiagha cited in Duruoma 2009. Education developed from the human struggle for survival and enlightenment. Noah cited in Umar 2013 defines education as a complex process and network of activities through which society familiarizes the new born with acceptable norms of the society. Bolarin 2007 went further to define education as the process of transmission of the values and accumulated knowledge of society. It is a social process, which neither ends in classroom nor with formal schooling. That is education requires value orientation process, which an individual needs to acquire throughout lifetime for effective adulthood in the society. Cultural value is very crucial to human life, human existence and interaction as a member of a society. Value forms deeply rooted mindsets of commitments by an individual, which have direction on the actions and behaviours in the society. It is a vehicle for social change and unavoidable means of physical, social, political, religious, moral development for lifelong learning and survival Okolo (2009) cited in Umar (2013).

Value system is what individual or society holds to be right, true and desirable. It includes all important religious beliefs, moral attitudes, philosophies of life, political ideologies etc. which help in sustaining the society and the culture. They also help in bringing about the corresponding changes in the society and culture. The implication is that value system is essential for national development and harmonious living. However, value system varies from one society to another, it is crucial to ethical, psychological, sociological and spiritual discourse because it affects thoughts, feelings, behaviours, attitude, choice and goals, value is therefore, a standard that directs behavior in achieving desired goals Umar (2013)

By indigenous education the family as an institution plays a very significant role by familiarizing an infant to be part of it. The learning process of the child continues to the larger society that makes an individual a bona fide member of a particular society in which the individual is acquainted with. It is acquired with support in group relationship and social responsibility such as reverence of the ancestors, age grade association, behaving appropriate with prevailing norm, community social responsibility. This process can be termed education. Fafunwa (1974) defines indigenous education as the aggregate of all process by which a child develops his abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour, which are of positive value to the society in which he intends to live. Through education a society opens itself to every individual to partake in it. The cultural values and societal order are achieved through education. Children are made to pitch-in in family activities where they learn.

Primarily education here, is centered on communal engagement in which children are encouraged to join in collective activities through developing harmony within family resulting in reciprocal bonds. Umar (2013) put it

thus 'our own kind of education which is indigenous, in this system; every member of the society displayed the value of the system. Thus, honesty, respect, patriotism, communalism, hard work and so forth become characteristic hallmark of every member of the society.

Indigenous education accomplished within the African perspective is the oral communication of people's account of belief, rules and customs from generation to another. It however, involves learning by observation, imitation, narrative and folklores. This form of learning encourages a child to acquire knowledge more easily within its family and community. In indigenous Igbo communities, children start to learn through their willingness to be active participants in the community. Learning in indigenous way is viewed as an act of meaningful and productive work not as a separate activity. They see themselves as important members of the society when they are allowed to engage in some adult matters. According to Rogoff *et al.* (2010) 'The main model of learning is to incorporate children in various activities where they are expected to be active contributors. The different forms of activities can vary from momentary interactions to broad societal foundations and how those complement their community's tradition'. Indigenous education stems up from the authentic knowledge acquired as a result of long time interaction of the people within a particular environment. We must not continue to shy away from our indigenous ways of doing things. Though controversial the indigenous systems in the face of globalization, (globalization is one of the cultural diffusion and exchange of ideas which has some positive and negative aspects) it has to be looked into because the western systems have not helped us either. Western education as an imported education according to Freire (1973) is a form of alienated or isolated culture that was essentially an attached thing for the people who imported it. Moreover, Paulo explained that such education was not in dialectic link with its context and did not have power to change reality. The indigenous system of knowledge has its own power. Some scholars believe that education should cultivate the developing child on many levels; not only intellectually but also morally and spiritually, emotionally and

psychologically and physically (Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, Fredrich Frobel among other scholars. One of the greatest mistakes of the African intellectual culture is the neglect of the spirituality of the people.

Education as it is now can be achieved through formal or /and informal education. Informal education is the general social process by which human beings acquire the knowledge and skills needed to function in their culture. Ochiagha (1996:10) describes informal education as unorganized and unsystematic yet it accounts for the bulk of knowledge a person accumulates in one's lifetime. Formal education on the other hand is the process by which teachers instruct students in courses of study within institution. This however, is organized and systematic in approach, which after graduation a certificate is issued. Yet another category of education exists, which is non-formal. Non-formal education is any organized educational activity outside the established formal system that is intended to serve some specific objectives (Ochiagha 1996:10).

In Igboland the actual concept of education is to acquire knowledge that is beneficial to oneself and the society. It is a long time process, related to the environment, to assist individuals with saleable skills practical and functional. Indigenous system of education sometimes took unorganized setting, with no classrooms and the curriculum was unstructured. In other words, the learning process to place everywhere and every sound adult is a teacher (mentor) to the child. Significantly this system emphasized humanity, human dignity, respect, honesty while communalism was the basic principle of everybody in the society Dosunmo (2011) hence the saying *igwe bu ike/umunna bu ike* (community is strength). There is also a notion that no Igbo like to do what concerns the *umunna* negatively, as an Igbo man if you fallout with *umunna* you are finished. There are many other Igbo proverbs that point to the community spirit. Fafunwa cited in Umar (2013) listed seven cardinal goals of African education as follows:

1. Development of the child's physical skills
2. Character and moral training
3. Development of intellectual and social skills

4. To acquire specific vocational training and to develop a healthy attitude towards honest labour
5. To inculcate respect for elders and those in position of authority
6. To understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large
7. Development of sense of belonging, the child is taught from the beginning the homogenous nature of the community. He is taught that everyone is his brother's keeper.

Aristotle states that educated people who used reason to make decisions would lead a life of moderation in which they avoid dangerous extremes. Isocrates a Greek orator of the 4th century BC believed in training students who are competent orators. Thus education can be defined as an act of acquiring knowledge especially during childhood and adolescence, which enables one to mix up in the society.

Before the advent of the Europeans, the people learnt through informal education. Family members, neighbours, peer groups, daily experiences from environment, work or play acquaint individuals' attitude, which eventually formed the moral codes that governed behaviour. For a particular culture to survive people had to transmit it, or pass it on from older generation to younger generation. The training and bringing up a child is not just the parents' duty, the community takes part in this. It is believed that a child born is for the community hence the sayings among people '*otu onye anaha azu nnwa*' meaning an individual does not train a child. Apart from the parents, elder brothers and sisters, relatives and neighbours are expected to partake in the training and discipline of a child.

Indigenous Education Processes

- Storytelling/folklore (*akuko ifo*)
- Observatory
- Participatory
- Orally transmitted

The art of storytelling is traced from its roots in indigenous cultural societies. Storytelling in education is described as a participatory learning process that promotes community and understanding. In Igboland *akuko ifo* are means through which stories are being narrated to the children, such stories as the history and values of the people. Children at very young age are allowed to play with their mates at the *ama* (way that leads to the house) both girls and boys play together. This rudimentary stage is known as *ikwo-uzuzu* (playing with sand). As the children grow their pattern of play changes and gets more matured. They imitate adults by building *uluo-aghugho* (stick house), cooking with insects, weeds and sands (*irhi-aghugho*), those that have started helping in house chores pick remnants such as bones, pepper from the kitchen for their *irhi-aghugho*. Young children were engaged in meaningful enterprises (Duruoma 2009). At very tender age of about three years, they are given chicken, goats and other domestic animals to tend to which they share the offspring with the principal owner. They owned their own yams, which they were given some portion of farmland to cultivate. The yams owned by children were mostly leftovers gotten from yam farm after harvest. After harvest they team up to go to the harvested yam farms to gather leftovers. They made their own barns by imitating the adults. Among them like adults they respect whoever had more yams, chicken, goats and other animals.

At this time young children were made to start early in life to learn to produce certain agricultural products. This training however is not child labour and shall not be seen as one. The writer then had her own birds, goats and yams and vegetable garden and together with peers competed who would have larger garden. We never saw such engagements as burden rather we were happy to have our own farm products which was more or less a hobby and were very passionate about them. A child could produce as much as could be sold in the market and bought things like cloths and other valuables for him. The economic aspect of this notwithstanding, it helped to reduce juvenile delinquency because the minds of children were meaningfully engaged.

Unfortunately all those practices are going down the drain. If these aspects of culture were maintained and improved on, they would have gone a long way to alleviate food crisis that we are now groaning under. A nation that cannot attain food security is bound to be a mediocre to the supplying nation and therefore, has no say in the sphere of influence. Between the ages of six and eight they become sex conscious, and then the boys begin to separate from the girls. Children learn a lot of things in this group play, both good and bad kinds of behaviour.

This is why they were always allowed to play at the *ama* of an elder who is always at home so that he/she would keep an eye on them. The children in turn do help the elders in some domestic chores such as sweeping the compound (*iza mbara/ama*), fetching goat feed (*irhi eghu*). The people are never soft in disciplining and training of their children. Different measures are taken to make sure that children are properly brought up according to the custom and tradition of the people. Such measures are; teaching, advising and counseling. Any child found wanting should not be spared caning; the gravity of the offence determines the punishment to deter such child from irresponsibility.

As the children get older the fathers bring their sons close to them to make them toe the line of responsible men while the mothers bring their daughters close to teach them domestic chores and to become responsible women in future. The grownup children are now closer to their parents. They learn by listening and watching what the adults do and by asking questions. As they grow, they would be introduced to different customs and traditions according to their age. This does not mean that they no longer play with their mates, they do when the need arises. At this stage some boys become pageboy to their grandfather, father or uncle (*onya akpa nna ya*). They accompany them to the meetings, markets and other visits. Through this medium they learn. It is believed that any child that did pageboy for an elder is very knowledgeable in traditional matters because he was always in the mist of elders who are custodians of custom and tradition (*odibe ndi na ome-nala/ome-ayi*). These are not mere traditions; they

are traditions adorned with good moral conducts. The elders on their own side are religious, therefore, had the dignity and decorum to comport themselves in a manner that they were seen as role model in the community. It is a thing of pride for one to be deeply rooted in the custom and tradition of the land. One usually hears some men express with pride by rhetorically asking "*imakwa su anyaara m nna m akpa or anyaara m nna nnukwu m akpa*" (do you not know that I carried bag for my father/grandfather)

Ochiagha defines formal education as a hierarchically structured and chronologically graded educational system running from primary through university Ochiagha (1996:10). The European missionaries brought this form of education to the area in the early twentieth century. At the earlier time of the introduction of this form of education through Christian religion many indigenes despised it. Those who embraced it then were seen as good for nothing individuals. The introduction of western education by the Europeans was necessary to them because through this the Whiteman was able to train those who helped them win the minds of the indigenes. When people found out that those who acquired western education were employed as clerks, catechist, teachers, cooks and they were doing well financially; gradually many embraced this system of education. Those who felt they were old sent their children to be baptized and enroll them into schools. The baptismal name however, must be in English which native name was considered as paganism. Community contributed money for the educational pursuit of any of them.

Nowadays people acquire western education without good morality, which is embedded in the indigenous education. The western education was more or less embraced by the people because they hungered for power and economic propensity. They wanted to be and think like the Whiteman. It was taught in western language and interpreters who lacked in-depth knowledge and understanding of the language were used. A television programme by name *Ichoku* aired by the Nigerian Television Authority during the late 1970s and early 1980s was a typical example of this scenario.

The prime characters are Lamaji Ugorji (the local interpreter) and *Nwa DC* (the white District Officer). However, this form of education has become the most dominant system in the country. Many went in pursuit of western education with very shallow perception of what it is all about. This is why Ogwo cited in Duruoma (2009) would say "*otutu na aga akwukwo mana ufodu na agu akwukwo*" meaning many are going to school but few are studying. In fact this lack or loss of focus led so many of the youths into social vices such as armed robbery, cultism in schools, prostitution and drug addiction. Ochiagha (1996:12), states that: Character yields its best proceeds when it is ennobled and vivified by true religion, religious training and character formation, which must influence the outer apparatus of education. Educate a people without religion and make them clever devils. Our country today is a living proof.

There are some organized activities through which people get enlightened. These are done through groups individuals belong. Such groups are *otumuokoro na umuagbogho* (youth group), *umunna* (extended family member especially males), *alutaradi* (wives), *umuada* (married daughters), cooperative societies. Each of these groups would organise meetings where the matters that are of importance to them and the community are discussed. It is also an avenue for learning, people who are not conversant with customs and traditions learn from the village meetings. The movements of kolanut (*ibughari oji*), details of sharing of palm wine are best learnt in the village meetings. In such gatherings proverbs and idioms are mostly used which every adult is expected to understand. It is degrading to lack knowledge of local proverbs and idioms not only to the individual but to the family one comes from. Hence, the local parlance *onye atuoro ilu kowara ya ego ejiri lu nne ya lara n'ishi* (one who is given and explained a proverb to his mother's bride wealth is waste).

The women groups also organize workshops, dancing practices. During *uro-onwa* (moonlight plays) they gather in groups according to their age groups. There, folklore, drums are beaten; dances and performances were organized to educate the youth of the community. Through this medium,

cultures of the people are impacted on the youths while they are having moon light fun. However, it is unfortunate that this culture is going under oblivion. Nowadays youths have preference to western form of education and culture to our indigenous culture. They spend time watching and listening to foreign movies and music which portray western values. This on its own is not bad because our people say *onye ije ka onye ishi arwo ihe ama* meaning a traveler is more knowledgeable than an idle elder in the village. The question then is must we throw away our identity for anything new and foreign. Onyewuenyi (2006:547), states “no nation can successfully dominate another until it has effectively brain-washed the dominated people and made them feel not so sure let alone proud of themselves or their past”.

In the area of commerce young male children of about six to ten years are sent to relatives or friends to learn trading or handwork. At the end of the apprentice the trainee is settled to start his own business. This system of training is locally known as *Igba otibo/igba boi*. It is an apprenticeship system popular among Igbo. This is a well-organized informal system which is incorporated in the educational system. Bulk of the population is found in this sector of economy. There is the popular saying amongst the people that the “Igbo apprenticeship system produces more millionaire per capita than Harvard business school.” The apprenticeship lasts between four to eight years, which can be equivalent to the years, spent in the government established schools. *Otibo* is an age long system that has been metamorphosed into what it is today. The enterprising nature of the Igbo people is embedded in this system of apprenticeship. It is an institution on its own. Apart from those who started the apprenticeship from the basic, there is another ancillary stage that is known as *imu ahia*. This lasts between three months and one year. The intricacies of buying and selling of the particular line of business are taught the apprentice. After my Masters’ degree programme, I went to learn trading on electrical appliances under the master of electrical dealer who is not as academically qualified but is deep in the knowledge of importation of such trade.

Through education a society opens itself to an individual to partake in it. The people believe in specialty and tutelage as well gives due recognition to it.

The cultural values and societal order are achieved through education. Thus family as an institution plays a very significant role in a child's conduct or misconduct because affection, emotional support, socialization and religious training of a child start from the family. Education ought to grow in accordance with the need and demand within indigenous learning system that emanated from the culture of the society and continually developed naturally. Educational system and purpose should come from the society itself, based on identity, philosophy and worldview. In Igboland Children are thought to obey taboo and forbiddance, followed by ritual ceremonies and accepted conduct through socialization from their lineage background. They imbibe and learn the values from the society in which they are regarded as life mechanism of their community. There are some indigenous organized activities through which people get enlightened. These are done through groups individuals belong. Such groups are *otumuokoro na umuagbogho* (youth group), *umunna* (extended family member especially males), *alutaradi* (wives), *umuada* (married daughters), cooperative societies. Each of these groups would organise meetings where the matters that are of importance to them and the community are discussed. It is also an avenue for learning, people who are not conversant with customs and traditions learn from the village meetings. The movements of kolanut (*ibughari oji*), intricacies of sharing of palm wine are best learnt in the village meetings. In such gatherings proverbs and idioms are mostly used which every adult is expected to understand. It is degrading to lack knowledge of local proverbs and idioms not only to the individual but to the family one comes from.

The women groups also organize workshops, dancing practices. During *uro-onwa* (moonlight plays) they gather in groups according to their age groups. There, folklore, drums are beaten; dances and performances were organized to educate the youth of the community. Through this medium,

cultures of the people are impacted on the youths while they are having moon light fun. However, it is unfortunate that this no longer exists in. Nowadays youths have preference to western form of education and culture to the indigenous culture. They spend time watching and listening to foreign movies and music which portray western values. This on its own is not bad because our people say *onye ije ka onye ishi awo ihe ama* meaning a traveler is more knowledgeable than an idle elder in the village. The question then is must we throw away our identity for anything new and foreign. Onyewuenyi (2006:547), states “no nation can successfully dominate another until it has effectively brain-washed the dominated people and made them feel not so sure let alone proud of themselves or their past”. Through education a society opens itself to an individual to partake in it. The cultural values and societal order are achieved through education.

Conclusion

The uniqueness of the system with regards to parenting among the people is that the responsibility in taking care of a child is not only to the biological parents. It is intriguing to know that this system is where a brother trained a younger brother or sister and they in turn help to train the younger ones or older siblings. This is why it is said that when parents are dead, a child would always have parents. This is because the extended family is there to cushion or parent the child (Igwemezie 2018:39). The family as an institution plays a very significant role in a child’s conduct or misconduct because affection, emotional support, socialization and religious training of a child start from the family.

These processes as outlined above were functional in training and learning among Agbaelu people of Central Igboland and had been observed to still be useful when harnessed with the current Western tradition of education in Nigeria. Therefore, the authors are of the position that proper harnessing of these traditions would lead to better training and learning in the land.

Bibliography

- Abrahams, R. (1987), Sungusungu, Village Vigilante Groups in Tanzania: African Affairs. The Journal of the Royal African Society, 86(343),179-196.
- Achebe, C., (1986), Arrow of God. Heinemann.
- Agbo, B., Usua, N., & Edego, O., (2013), Concepts in African Communication System, Celwil Publishers Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
- Agrawal, A., (1995), Dismantling the Divide between Indigenous and scientific Knowledge in Development and Change, 26,pp.413-439.
- Alagoa, E.J., (2014), Oral Tradition. Onyoma, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
- Andah, B.W., (ed), (1995), Rethinking the African Cultural Script. West African journal of Archeology, Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Chikaire, J., et al (2012), Indigenous Knowledge System: The Need for Reform and the Way Forward. Global Advanced Research Journal of Agricultural Science, 1(8), 201-209.
- Emike, A. J., et al (2016), Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) and Sustainable Development in Nigeria: The Candidature of Language of Immediate Community (LIC). American Research Journal of English and Literature (ARJEL), 2, 1-13.
- Ikime, Obaro, (ed), 2006, Groundwork of Nigerian History, Heinemann, Nigeria.
- Makinde, O. O. & Shorunke, O. A., (2013), Exploiting the Values of Indigenous Knowledge in Attaining Sustainable Development in Nigeria: The place of the Library. Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal). 908.
- Mawere, M., (2010), 'Indigenous Knowledge Systems' (IKSS) Potential for Establishing a Moral, Virtuous Society: Lessons from Selected IKSS in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa 12(7), 209-221.
- Ndubisi, I., (4th ed) (2015), Mmanu Igbo, A collection of Igbo Proverbs, Cana-Point Publishers. www.canapointpublisher.com

- Ogbalu, F.C., (1981), *Omenala Igbo: The Book of Igbo Custom*, University Publishing Company, Lagos.
- Okorie, O., (2013), *Philosophy in Indigenous Igbo Proverbs: Cross-Cultural Medi for Education in the Era of Globalization*, Open Journal of Philosophy, 2013. Vol.3, No.1A, 218-221 (<http://www.scirp.org/journal/ojpp>)
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2013.31A036>
- Okoroafor, S.I., (2019), *Pearls of African Culture (Readings on Oguta to the Niger Delta 'Head'*, Debbichuks Printing and Publishing, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
- Okorie, O., (2013), *Philosophy in Indigenous Igbo Proverbs: Cross-Cultural Medi for Education in the Era of Globalization*, Open Journal of Philosophy, 2013. Vol.3, No.1A, 218-221 (<http://www.scirp.org/journal/ojpp>)
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2013.31A036>
- Okoro, M.O., (2018), *Foreign language Pangs of Igbo Tradition, Culture and Ethics*.
- Orugbani, A., (2005), *Nigeria Since the 19th Century*. Paragraphics , Port Harcourt.
- Paran, A. & Williams, E., (ed) (2007), *Reading and literacy in developing countries*. Journal of Research in Reading, 30(1), 1–6.
- Pidatala, K. & Khan, A. R. (2003), *Women & Indigenous Knowledge: A South-south Perspective*. IK Notes 63.
- Pottier, J. (2003), *Negotiating Local Knowledge: An Introduction*. In Pottier J, Bicker A and Sillitoe P (eds) *Negotiating local knowledge: power and identity in development* (Pluto Press, London), 1-29.
- Puffer, P., (1995), *The Value of Indigenous Knowledge in Development Programs Concerning Somali Pastoralists and Their Camels*. CIKARD Associate; Iowa State University.

- Tella, R. D., (2007), Towards Promotion and Dissemination of Indigenous Knowledge: A Case of NIRD. *International Information and Library Review* 39(3-4), 185-193.
- Vygotsky L.S., (1978), *Mind in Society: the Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press.
- Van, O.B., & Duijkers, D., (2012), Teaching in a Play- Based Curriculum: Theory, Practice and Evidence of Developmental Education for Young Children. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 44, 1-24. Doi: 10.1080/00220272.2011.637182
- Van Wyk, J., (2002), *Indigenous Knowledge System: Implication for Natural Science and Technology Teaching and Learning*.
- World Commission on Environment and Development, (1997). *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wiredu, J.E., (1997), *How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought*