A Critique of Western Education and Search for a Functional and Environment-Based African Education

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Abstract

This article understands western education as a colonial scheme that seeks to perpetuate a western understanding and interpretation of Africa and African life, breeds African elites under the same framework and consequently fosters western interests within a seeming African struggle. Set against the background of this western education which is still in place even in its colonial schemata, the work made a critical analysis of the understanding of wealth/ poverty and development/underdevelopment and made a paradigm shift in what it referred to as re-education of the educated and re-interpretation of the understood which requires a new philosophy, objective and method in education. The aim of the work is to derive a functional and environmental friendly education for Africa.

Keywords: Miseducation, African Education, Re-education, Development, Poverty

Introduction

The continent of Africa has often been regarded as chronically barbaric, savage and backward safe for the historic intervention of Europe. Most often, to buttress this European conversion of Africa which purportedly set the latter on the wheel of development, the killing of twins, ceaseless intertribal clashes, illiteracy, weird religious practices that included human sacrifices and so forth, all prevalent in Africa before the advent of Europe are recalled. Proponents of this European redemption of Africa seem to suggest that Europe's primary drive for coming into Africa was to redeem Africa from savagery; that out of compassion Europe designed to offer Africa a chance to survive an inexorable calamity and find its relevance in the comity of nations. Was the drive of Europe to come into Africa sustained by its benevolence or by a presumption to play the benefactor to an Africa that needed its support to survive or by an entirely selfish purpose that keeps the ultimate interest of Europe secured by the psycho-socio-political gimmicks that presents as serving the interest of Africa? In the first place, there is no doubting the fact that the marriage of Europe and Africa was a forced marriage whose fundamental aim was to expand European territories and to give it better control of the world's economy and politics. If Africa was anywhere to be found in the scheme of colonial events, then it will be located within the confinement as reserved for the cow heavy with milk from which the needed milk is extracted and which is in turn fed with the straw (the waste from the farm of human food). Democracy, Western education, Science and Technology are instances of the content of this European developmental package (the straw) to Africa (the cow) that are most often mentioned. In what could be regarded as a western-favoured judgment, it could also be said that very many African great minds have been produced by this western education – Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Aime Cesaire and so many other greats. But the big question is: was that education they received orientated towards the enhancement of Africa and African life or was it directed technically, tactically and ultimately against Africa? Meanwhile this essay adopts the hypothesis that education is both a cultural and environmental evolution. Such education is aimed at producing individuals who are both relevant and functional within the environment and culture that evolved that education. Consequent upon this hypothesis, these African great minds looking at Africa from western binoculars constitute the internal machine, operating according to western design, right in the core of Africa to stagnate its essence and shroud its existence in western categories. It is worrisome to the sensibilities of this writer that most African great minds are more useful to the western world than to the African world. For instance, the 'Father of the Internet' – the great Philip Emeagwali is from Nigeria but the relevance of his expertise can only be felt in connection with Microsoft of America and the Internet; Kofi Anang is from Ghana but is the strongest negotiator for world peace especially in Syria without much relevance in his native Ghana; Prof. C. C. Soludo has helped many nations to revise, re-invent and consolidate their economy but was not able to do much in Nigeria and Jerome Udoji before him.

The litany may be endless but it goes a long way to ground the consequences of our hypothesis that such education like they had can only serve the environment that evolved it. In this essay, we intend to evaluate the effects of western education on African minds and analyze how far that state of affairs has contributed to the impoverishment and underdevelopment in the African continent.

The Western Miseducation Scheme for Africa

The commonplace impression created to Africa and the whole world is that education came to Africa through the West (Europe and America). The present writer wants to emphasize that the education so described is Western Education which must be distinguished from African Education, Oriental Education and so forth. The suggestion here is that education is not foreign to African life; education is part and parcel of all human culture, Africa inclusive. It is Western Education that obviously came with the West. This education was defined by Berg (2012) as "a process of cognitive cartography, mapping out experiences and finding a variety of reliable routes to optimal states of mind when you find yourself in non-optimal states." Earlier in the work, Berg tried to debunk the traditional definition of education as "the delivery of knowledge, skills and information from teachers to students." Obviously this traditional definition which may have been the standard for Western Education is complex because to come to the heart of the issue of the definition, 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'information' have to be explored further. This definition also presumes that the student is a kind of blank space to be filled by the teacher. Berg's 'Cognitive Cartography' makes it clear that what are developed in the process of education are the categories of the mind specifically in a graphic clarity. We are not saying that Western Education was not able to achieve this goal of Berg; but are rather curious whether the mind so produced are African and for the growth of Africa. The interaction of Africa with Europe in the scheme of Western Education makes the latter 'the teacher' and the former 'the student'. In other words, going by the traditional definition of education adopted by the West and debunked by Berg, Western Education is the delivery of knowledge, skills and information from the West to Africa. As if there were no knowledge, skill and information in Africa or the process of its dissemination before the advent of these westerners. It is then not difficult to see why Chinweizu (1978, xiv-xv) referred to the process of Western Education as Miseducation. He doled out an endless list of the consequences of that education:

> It was a miseducation which, under the mystique of "Modernizing" me into some "civilized" condition, had worked to infect me with intellectual meningitis that would twist my cultural spine, and rivet my admiring gaze upon Europe and the West. It was a miseducation which sought to withhold from me the memory of our true African past and to substitute instead an ignorant shame for whatever travesties Europe chose to present as the African past. It was a miseducation which sought to quarantine me from all influences, ancient as well as contemporary, which did not emanate from, or meet with the imperial approval of, western "civilization."

Chinweizu simply meant to impress that there is a disconnect between Africa and the educated African; that the process of western education is but a deliberate and sustained effort of the West to disrobe the African of anything African and make of him a stranger who looks upon his environment and people with disgust and loathe. Western Education is a program to produce from within Africa agents for further impoverishment and enslavement of Africa economically, politically and ideologically. This is miseducation which was also lamented by Onyewuenyi (1994) after having been trained in the anthologies of western (Hegelian) metaphysics without an iota of knowledge in and about African Philosophy.

The Failure of Western Education

On the whole, we are of the opinion that if education is what Berg wrote it is; and we accept it is, then education is not a stranger to Africa. Due to obvious western interventions, African Education did not evolve but melted into the burning heat of Western Education that consumed African minds. The resultant white minds in black skin have simply thrived in and perpetrated western impoverishment and underdevelopment schemata designed to keep Africa down. Onwuejeogwu (2007) put it succinctly thus:

> The third-world peoples in Africa and Asia have been subjected for centuries to the material and intellectual attitudes of life of the first-world and second-world peoples. They recite the philosophy and ideologies of these peoples as if they are infallible. Above all, they have learnt to use most of their technological products without knowing how to make them (p. xix)

The point that must be driven home is that this scheme is ideological and mental. Ideas, conditions, and cultural realities in Africa which have been developed through time were not just flawed but castigated and destroyed. For instance, in Africa there are various tribes distinguished by language, culture, world view and so forth. In most places, each tribe exists as a nation while in some others many independent nation states could be make-up a tribe. Africa existed this way for God-knows-how-many years. In the colonial scheme, the tribal arrangement became an obstacle for the 'Masters' to drive home their program. Presuming that the socio-cultural formation of Africa can be scuttled, they dubbed tribalism negative and retrogressive. Today the average minds in Africa may not even bother about their tribal descent yet the demands of that affiliation keep ogling them in the face. There are other realities in Africa that have been so abstracted and conceptualized away. This western equation does not just square-up because the values of these realities totally escaped their grasp. There is an urgent need to redefine these realities so as to bring out their real values. Once the African is able to offer new meaning to ideas like tribe, primitive, pagan, fetish, black and the likes, he is set to embark on a complete reversal of this western equation. Same goes with all other ideas that have been offered very negative connotations, made exclusively African and in no way associated with the west. It was this kind of new meaning which Onyewuenyi's white student E. J. McAdams stumbled upon which made him realize that "…Africans are only primitive … in the sense that pre-Socratics, like Heraclitus, are primitive natural philosophers". With this realization, his whole idea of 'primitive' as exclusively African has changed. In line with this idea, Onwubiko (1991) wrote: "A re-evaluation of tribalism is urgently called for to avoid the more dangerous consequences of the now powerful political tribes which are everywhere but not located anywhere – tribes in which there are neither permanent friends nor enemies (p. 21)". Although Onwubiko's analysis was set upon the backdrop of the evolving Nigerian politics structured along tribal lines, his position is more relevant in this age of globalization. It is his opinion that tribe and tribalism must be shed in positive light and understood as the pillar of African politics instead of a sign of savagery and continuity of the old tribal boundary clashes, while it is forgotten that it is the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon tribes that have evolved into Germany and Britain. Invariably, the description "Tribal people" is not exclusively African. In summary, colonial culture is the fundamental bias that Africa is underdeveloped, backward, dark, non-technological and unscientific; inferior to the superior west. Onwuejeogwu (2007) understood this culture as the "failures of western civilization" (p. 7)

The Idea of African Education

If we accept the definition of Berg for education, it remains to be said what the character of African Education is as opposed to Western Education. Firstly, the western society is composed by a collection of individuals bonded by a common law and objective while African society is a web of people bonded by the blood of ancestral descent. In Africa, social dynamics and connections are defined by sanguinal relationships not legal contracts. In other words while the smallest unit of the western society is an individual, the smallest unit of the African society is a family. In order to underscore this African unit and the de-emphasis on the individual Okolo (1993) wrote:

> As a matter of fact, individuals become real only in relationship with others, in a community or group. It is the community which makes the individuals, to the extent that without the community, the individual has no existence. Consequently the African is not just a being but a being-with, a being-with-others or as I said elsewhere the African self is "defined in terms of we-existence … through social interactions" (p. 6).

In as much as Okolo was concerned about African ontology, he at the same time is stating the core of Africanity as participatory and convivial. This should constitute the core value for being and existing in Africa and as African. African Education in contrast to Western Education should foster this value and be community-oriented. To buttress this African value, Nze (1994) averred:

> Everyone is related to everyone else as father, mother, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, etc. Members of a village are descendants of the same ancestors, so also are members of the same town and so on. Of course since we are fathers or mothers, sons or daughters in a vertical or horizontal movement, backwards into the past ancestors or forwards into the future generations, we are all related in a sort of way. We are all people, human beings – a collection of humans – 'ma-du' or 'mu-du' that exists (p. 29).

Descriptively, African Education is a process of total involvement of the individual in the development of the community as if the individual does not exist, or exits for the benefit of others. As Umeogu (2007) puts it in his philosophy of Ohazurume:

> It is the total involvement of realities in reality, the total involvement of peoples in people, the total involvement of places in place, the total involvement of thoughts in thought, the total involvement of languages in language, the total involvement of actions in action (p. 108).

It is an involvement of the individual that translates into the dissolution of the self into the emergence of a better community. This involvement is an integration of oneself into the life and environment of Africa and allowing oneself to melt into it; not just blend to it.

On the other hand, Mbiti (1969), Ekwunife (2003), Okpalike (2008) emphasized the African environment as religious. As such religion is part and parcel of African life. Whereas Western Education adopts a phenomenological/empirical method, African Education threads the route of tested tradition and belief-system rife with traditional morality. This might sound like science and technology are entirely out of the scheme of such education. Traditional African science and technology is shrouded in a lot of religious secrecy; not because of greed or wickedness as many would want to conclude but because of the sense of community and sacredness of life in general and human life in particular. According to Okpalike (2011):

> Most times real history is couched in legendary tales, totems and pithy-sayings. The simple effect of this practice is that stories become both compelling and sacred; making the objects that constitute it divine and venerable; they can be anything, trees, animals, rivers and so forth. The resultant community is such that believe together, live together surmount various challenges of life together (p. 416).

Tactically, average minds that can easily sell-off and endanger the whole community are put in check because they may not understand deeply the encoded knowledge in these. In Igbo language of South-Eastern Nigeria such average mind is referred to as '*Ofeke*'. They usually do not grasp the far-reaching implications and the significance of such stories; they simply get entertained by them, but these stories are filled with cultural symbols and deposits edifying and preserving. Like the Igbo adage goes: "*Ofeke mara ọgwụ, mgbọrọgwụ agwụ n'ọhịa*" (if the weak minded [in this context] is furnished with the secrets of medicine the bushes will be emptied of its stock of roots and herbs). This saying goes a long way to emphasize the danger of ignorance and being weak in mind. Sometimes religion could demand stringent and draconic measures to check violation or enforce its values; it rather highlights how much emphasis is laid on right conduct and faithfulness to that tradition for the good of the community. Religion is not just an African attitude, it is the essence of being African and there is no functional African education that can be schemed outside religion. Such education must not exclude God, the spirits of the environment and ancestors. African Education is involving and encompassing; essentially and directly for the growth and development of the community whereas Western Education primarily makes for the improvement of the individual capacity which could also translate to the development of the society but in accordance to individual discretion, in respect of the good and happiness of the individual.

Education and Re-Definition of Development and Poverty

Underdevelopment and poverty are the two principal relational terms between Africa and the West. Within the consciousness created by western education, Africa is poor and underdeveloped. It is important to understand that the criterion for this judgment was set by the west and constitutes the basis of the scheme in western education. For instance, why is it that in the process of evolution, whether of human beings or of human society, the African is always down the ladder? How can the educated African create a consciousness that development is not the extent to which he transforms his society into something western or that poverty is not a matter of being judged so by the West? Meanwhile what is this western idea of wealth?

In his inaugural address to US congress in 1949 President Harry Truman propounded the philosophy that "a greater production was the key to welfare and peace". This position seems to fall in line with the thoughts of Karl Marx that history and evolution revolves around the conflictual dynamics in the control of the means of production. For Marx, it is this conflictual strife that brings about social change onto the eventual dictatorship of the proletariat. The fulcrum of the Marxist argument is economy; so is Truman's.

In as much as it is clear that these men are inclined to economy as if human life has no further dimensions, it is also true that their stand on the issue of development is au courant with the status quo in recent global developmental mentality. The insight to the implications of the western-dominated manner of perceiving development through the prism of economics was given by Dalfovo (1999):

> … (development) has differentiated countries not only over monetary wealth, industrial technology and other material conditions, but also over motivations, objectives and ideals. At a deeper level, it has established a disparity of have and have-not that applied to models and values in the sense that developed countries were assumed to be such also in their general way of life, thus establishing behavior paradigms that developing countries were to imitate.

This means that the world has been categorized into developed and developing nations based on economic considerations. Onwuejeogwu (2007) however understood economy in terms of technology: "Technological development, however, has a different influence on economic, social and political behavior…. Thus if one refers to Igbo economy as 'primitive', one is thinking of the state of its technology and its economic consequences" (p. 8). As such, development for the developing nation counterparts is measured by the extent to which they are catching-up technologically with the developed ones. Economic height is in turn measured by the volume and quality of social amenities and infrastructure afforded by technology. To this extent and standard, Afolayan (2007) judges African development as ensconced by a perennial oppression; and liberation from that oppression is epistemic and mental. Nmah (2011) re-echoed the position of Ukpong (1990) on the miscarriage of the nature of national development. Both writers are of the opinion that national development should go beyond 'mimicking' or 'over-emphasis' on westernization as a paradigm. Westernization here simply means building a society and environment like the West (Europe and America) has; in the words of Khubchandani (1983): "what the self-designated First world has already achieved … which was not yet available to the rest of the world." Meanwhile the economic dimension is downright capitalist which according to Anyaehie (2007), is an unhealthy incursion into and imposition on African communalist society and partly accounts for the ravaging poverty that Africa suffers, since it broke down the social order and internal connections which sustained and improved the lives of the members of the African society whatever socio-economic class they may belong. Nmah (2011) was clear on his opinion that "development directed at such goals really fails to identify its primary beneficiaries, hence the misplacement of objectives" (p. 442). Rather, development should have the "capacity to enhance the realization of the full potential of human personality." This opinion seems to understand that the building of human capital is paramount to development. Yet that is not enough, in building this human capital, the far-reaching implications and capacity of human personality must be incorporated into the process. Even at that, Odimegwu (2007) went beyond personality into personhood and understood this personhood as a quest; a necessary quest because the person is the ground for building the human capital. He emphasized on this search thus: "The search for African personhood becomes then a quest for the recovery of the disintegrating traditional concept and the mode of living of the African person and world" (p. 215). Without elaborating on the components of the building of this African personhood, it needs to be emphasized that development in Africa should be fundamentally the development of the person. Without the development of the person, development is still a far cry for those who trumpet it. This person is fundamentally a mind. In other words, development is fundamentally mental.

On the other hand, Dorr (1992) understood poverty as being subjected under a repressive and unjust social, economic and political system. Writing within the context of Latin America, it could be understood why Dorr had to emphasize this dimension of poverty. The other extent to this position of Dorr is the cause of the incapacitation of those who fall into this category and why their situation needed a kind of external intervention to be dealt with. Development and poverty go hand in hand. Like development, poverty is determined by socio-economic factors. Most times when poverty is mentioned especially in terms of Africa and the rest and the developing nations in comparison with their developed counterparts, it is economy which is principally considered. It is not in doubt that Europe's war against Africa right from inception is an economic war in which mental weapons are extensively deployed. First, Europe exploited the human capacity of the African continent through slavery whose sole purpose was to improve productivity in their farms for economic gains. Second, Europe pitched its tent in Africa to overpower and subdue its people for the purpose of gaining access to and controlling the vast natural resources for which Africa was known for economic gains. Third, Europe instituted the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to make Africa and the other developing nations perpetual debtors.

Fourth, Europe in partnership with America schemes globalization in order to wipe away any remaining trace of Africanity that might engender a possible resurgence of the African mind. In these four levels of West – African interaction, it is the African mind that is being joggled. Europe and America, in recent times present themselves as a kind of 'Big brother' living a self-imposed mandate of supporting their ailing and weak 'third-world' siblings. The paradox is the unspoken agenda that this support will be on-going and perpetual; this globalization is a scheme to rope Africa and other developing nations into the quagmire of irredeemable dependence. Most importantly, Europe and America know that the greatest poverty is the poverty of the mind. In the first quarter of their scheme (Slavery), they presumed Africa have no minds so they were treated like inconvertible savages. In the second quarter (Colonization), they offered Africa a mind; the kind of mind they would want them to have. This second quarter was largely characterized by education which we shall later describe as 'the retooling' of the African mind. In the third quarter (Neo-Colonization), they put the minds they have created to use through auto-suggestion and brain-washing. In the fourth quarter (Globalization), they are scheming to dissolve the mind they have used-out into their own super-minds like a drop of water dissolves in an ocean. At the end of that scheme, there will be no Africa because it has dissolved into a global identity. This is the height of impoverishment. In the mind of these schemers, Africa is not just poor but is synonymous with poverty. It is a kind of poverty that is programmed and infused in the African mind through education. The poverty of Africa, therefore, exists in the mind of those who conjectured it; it is in the Africa mind, not in the African environment. The African environment is rich by all standards; the poverty attributed to it is ideological, conceptual, mental and chimerical. The re-assertion of this richness in the African mind will mark the beginning of the rich Africa in the consciousness of the world.

Re-Education of the African Mind

Once the West was able to force development and poverty to be driven by economic factors what it simply needed to do further is to keep Africa in check with the impression that they are poor; a brand of poverty that a closely monitored mental engineering and programmed impoverishment within the scheme of western economic processes achieved. If it is possible for Africa to come out of the doldrums of poverty and underdevelopment, then it must first of all conquer the mind that shapes its current belief-system. To do this, there must be a re-education of the educated African mind. This re-education will include the re-interpretation of poverty to mean a lack in the maximum capacity of community connections one could have whereas maximizing the opportunities that enlarges the base of one's connections to the community is wealth. This is in line with the South-Eastern Nigerian Igbo dictum of "*Onye nwere mmadu ka onye nwere ego*" (Human beings and being connected to them is more valuable than money). It is also important to note that in that part of Africa, wealth is not measured by money and property but by connections and acceptability in the community. This is the mentality behind the craze for title-taking. In title-taking the Igbo-African realizes the whole purpose of acquiring money and property, which is deserving acclaims and accolades from the community. The other side of accumulating money and property is founded on acquired western interpretation of wealth. A re-interpretation which derives from the traditional African understanding of poverty makes it clear why there are no poor persons in the African environment. In terms of possessing property, this is determined by the degree of hard work one is ready to put in. Nevertheless, poverty is not the lack of property, but the lack of a place in the web of human connections. It follows then that every human being for being human and part of the community of human web connections is wealthy. In this web there are degrees of connection defined by blood, as relationship extends so the tie loosens out. Even at that the web of connection interweaves and returns everybody as everybody's folk. In that universe of unbroken chain of connections the end beneficiary of each individual's struggle is the community or everyone together. On the other hand, development means the total involvement of the individual in the community so much so that the latter as a living organism can only grow and develop. Without bothering about the degree of development Africa had before the intrusion of the West, it is important to note that development was on course. What kind of development that was, its direction and destination was entirely defined by the internal mechanism of the African communitarian disposition. The course of that development did not leave anyone behind and did not create a disparity of 'We' and 'Them'. It puts together in one harmonious piece the various aspects of African life; driving the collective good of the community from within the internal cohesive force that bonds the individual persons of the community to a better condition of living which keeps improving. Development is the summation of various individual efforts to keep the community alive; growing and ever regenerating.

This socio-economic consciousness requires a reversal of the ethic upon which western education is founded to build afresh on the foundation of African communalist and religious ethos. This will change the entire Philosophy, Objective and Method of education, giving birth to a more functional and environmental friendly education.

Conclusion

At the heart of Western Education is the isolation of the individual into the conditioned territory of training. The extent of the social gap created between such an individual and the rest of his community is directly proportional to his level of education. Consequent upon this, the educated Africans are worst-off in the scheme of Africa development because they are no longer in touch; they have been caught-up in the quagmire of elitism. Their minds have been re-tooled to interpret African world and reality in western schemes and to see Africa through the prism of the West. It produces an individual who looks at his community like Gulliver at the Lilliputians; feeling too large to meddle with or involve himself in their affairs. Paradoxically the more structures and infrastructures we construct with the background of Western Education, the more problem we create because the farther we go away from our culture. In the beginning, we had opined that education is a cultural evolution. Somewhere Africa lost it in the stages of the evolution of African Education. At that point of derailment we abandoned the link in the chain – the old unlettered folks that are gradually fizzling out. Right inside the corners of our abandoned villages reside the wise men, the custodians and repertoires of the knowledge we need but have failed to seek. Western education makes us research further on the problems that bother the westerner or the African problem to which the westerner is connected or with tools that will interpret it better to the western mind. Western educated Africans should deal properly with the infused idea that abandoning and dislodging themselves from African culture and tradition marks the beginning of the journey to the development we desired and come out with the conviction that in that departure, the point of development was missed in the first place. African Education is the total involvement of the individual with and in the African people and environment for the benefit of the community. Such an involvement will naturally evolve the methods and curriculum of African Education. In practical terms, the values of the supremacy of the community, the sacredness of the environment, the prime place of the ancestors, the reverence of elders, the strength of family ties and so forth should be embraced wherever and whenever the opportunity offers itself. African science, arts, religion, philosophy, architecture, technology must not be understood as the remnant of a backward past but that which were stalled at the point of derailment of the educated Africans and which needed to be fixed in order to set African Education on the wheel of proper evolution.

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