

AFROCENTRIC EDUCATION FOR AN AFRICAN RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

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Afrocentricity, “a quality of thought and practice rooted in the cultural image and human interests of African people”, is central to what should constitute education in Africa.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

When African governments fail to deliver services to the expectant masses, blame is often heaped on African leaders, with the media projecting them as corrupt. Eurocentric media fail to reveal the crucial Western role in corrupting African leaders by offering them material wealth in return for allowing capitalists to run African economies to their advantage and the detriment of African masses. Pointing this out is not the same as exonerating corrupt African leaders’ betrayal of Africans. Rarely is it revealed that colonialism deliberately replaced enabling and empowering African traditional education with disabling and disempowering Eurocentric education. In 2015, in recognition of these manoeuvres, African students in the Rhodes Must Fall movement called for an “Afrocentric” education in South Africa. This call, however, received a lukewarm reception in the academic community. Here, I interrogate the philosophical underpinnings of an Afrocentric education.

A decade after Kenya won its independence from British colonialism in 1963, a conference of Kenyan teachers met to discuss “the place

and the teaching of African literature in schools”. Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1981, 4) wondered why it had taken “ten whole years after constitutional independence ... [for] ... native sons and daughters to meet and to debate for the first time on the subject”, considering that a “Russian child grows under the influence of his native imaginative literature: a Chinese, a Frenchman, a German or an Englishman first imbibes his national literature before attempting to take on other worlds”. Wutawunashe (2013, 34), “alarm[ed] that in most emerging Black Nations, only cosmetic changes, if any, have been made to syllabuses”, argues that “[g]overnments of Black-ruled nations must, as a matter of urgency, direct the Education Departments to completely overhaul their Education and Training syllabuses from Kindergarten to Higher Education”. Wutawunashe (2013, 35) is “persuaded that African culture contains the richest deposits of what should be taught in sociology, psychology and other related disciplines”.

This state of affairs is in stark contrast to a series of actions dating back to 1965, when the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), two years after its formation, established a department of scientific and cultural affairs, indicating

its recognition of culture as central to education (Kodjo and Chanaiwa 1999, 759). At the first Pan-African Festival, held in Algiers in 1969, a symposium discussed “African culture, its role in the liberation struggle, the consolidation of African unity and the economic and social development of Africa” and “drew up the African cultural manifesto” (ibid.). In 1976, the OAU set up the “African Cultural Charter, which formed a complement to the political charter of 1963” (ibid.). In 1977, the second Pan-African Festival, held in Nigeria, discussed “Black Civilization and education” (ibid.).

Reference to African culture as central to what should constitute education in Africa is at the core of Afrocentricity: “a philosophical perspective associated with the discovery, location, and actualizing of African agency within the context of history and culture” (Asante 2003, 3). It is “a quality of thought and practice rooted in the cultural image and human interests of African people” (Karenga 2003, 77). Eurocentrism, on the other hand, is the “metaphysical belief or Idea ... that European existence is qualitatively superior to other forms of human life” (Serequeberhan 2003, 64).

Any serious discussion of Afrocentricity must be placed in the context of Africana or Black Studies in the USA in the 1960s (Karenga 2003, 75), when diasporic Africans demanded an education that was responsive and not alienating to people of African descent. For African-Americans, the “university became in the struggles of the ’60s not simply a place to transmit authoritative views and values but a ground of contestation; contestation over intellectual issues, but also over the structure and meaning of the university itself and the society for which it served as brain and apologists” (ibid., 83). They rejected a situation where “the university is reduced to a warehouse of Eurocentric goods to be authoritatively transmitted

and imposed as a sacrosanct canon or unproblematic body of deference-deserving knowledge” (ibid., 74). They challenged the meanings of terms and concepts that were until then taken for granted, such as “classics” as an “exclusive category of European achievement” rather than “a category of achievement for humans in general” (ibid., 83). In political science studies, it would no longer be acceptable only to study European thinkers such as Plato: ancient Egyptian texts such as *The Book of Ptahotep* and *The Book of Khun-Anup* would also be prescribed (ibid., 84).



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The African-American struggle for the redefinition of education was often “fragmentary, ideologically immature, and philosophically ill-defined” (Asante 2003, 75). One sobering realisation was that the demand for black professors did not necessarily address the quest for an African-sensitive curriculum because such appointments “made little difference to the conventional education process” (ibid., 82). Thus, when Afrocentricity – a term for Black Studies/African Studies/

African-American Studies – was established, it emphasised that this was “not merely the study of black people” (ibid., 75), since studying black people was nothing new. What distinguished Afrocentricity was its Afrocentric approach, methodology and perspective (ibid., 77–78). As Asante (2003, 76) argues, Afrocentricity “becomes indispensable to our understanding of Black Studies; otherwise, we have a series of intellectual adventures in Eurocentric perspectives about Africans and African-Americans”.

Afrocentricity is interested in what Africans traditionally regarded as best in education before colonial invasion. This emphasis on reclaiming the “best” of African tradition for the future is informed by Asante’s (2003, 52) observation that “Afrocentricity does not champion reactionary postures” but “seeks to modify even African traditions where necessary to meet the demands of modern society”. Modernity must not be confused with westernisation, but understood as progress as defined and determined by Africans for themselves. This reclamation is “African Renaissance”.

In the next section, I examine the meaning of African traditional education, followed by a discussion on Eurocentric education. Then follows an examination of how Eurocentric education crippled Africans during colonialism and beyond. I then give concluding remarks.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

Reference to education as “African” and “traditional” reclaims “Africa’s heritage in education ... the education of the African before the coming of the European” (Boateng 1996, 110). African traditional education entails both formal and informal aspects (Rodney 2012, 239): a university existed in ancient Egypt as early as 3000 BCE (Hilliard 2003, 272). >>

According to Rodney (2012, 239), what distinguishes African traditional education, “in sharp contrast with what was later introduced [by Europe]”, was its *relevance* to Africans as it “directly connected with the purposes of society”. At the primary level, African traditional education included “storytelling, mental arithmetic, community songs and dances, learning the names of various birds and animals, the identification of poisonous snakes, local plants and trees, and how to run and climb swiftly when pursued by dangerous animals” (Williams 1987, 166). For example, “among the Bemba of what was then Northern Rhodesia, children by the age of six could name fifty to sixty species of tree plants without hesitation” (Rodney 2012, 239).

The objective was to produce “well-rounded personalities to fit into that society” (Rodney 2012, 239). Hilliard (2003, 272) notes that the “ultimate aim of education in Egypt was for a person to become ‘one with God’ or to ‘become like God’”. This approach reflected a pan-African philosophy that is captured in a maxim in seSotho, one of southern Africa’s languages. *Feta kgomo o tshware motho* (literally, “go past the cow and hold a human being”) teaches that, “if and when a choice must be made between the preservation of human life and the possession of wealth that may be dispensed with, then it is imperative to choose for the preservation of human life” (Ramose 2002, 7). This in turn is informed by the rationale that “[b]eing, in African tradition, is more important than having. To be is to possess power and vitality. Being has force and direction” (Mphahlele 2002, 147).

The traditional African precept of *feta kgomo o tshwaremotho* informed Africans’ approach to economics. Before being dispossessed of their land, Africans had an economic system known in Nguni languages as

ukusisa or *ukunqoma*. In this system, a prosperous person asks a poor person to look after his cow. While looking after the cow, the recipient will milk it and feed his family. In due course, he returns it, with the understanding that he will be

entitled to one or two calves that have since been born to the cow. Through this, he will have acquired his own seed capital to develop a herd. This is a concept of sharing wealth that is positive, affirming and fully characterized by *Ubuntu*. It is dignified and embedded in African culture. (Dandala 1996, 83)

African traditional education, based on *ubuntu* (being human) philosophy, emphasised that “[w]hen an African encounters a poor person in the community, he must protect the dignity of that person” (Dandala 1996, 83). The act of *ukusisa* or *ukunqoma* endorsed the view that “[t]here are many more returns for the giving of

compassion, such as elimination of poverty, criminality and greed. This becomes one of the best methods for creating sustainability and social security” (Mthembu 1996, 223).

African traditional education, as Williams (1987, 171) observes, taught that “[t]he land belongs to no one ... Each family, therefore, has a right to land, free of charge, sufficient in acreage for its economic well-being ... The land, accordingly, cannot be sold or given away.” Africans had observed that “[w]here a few people owned the land and the majority were tenants, this injustice at a particular stage of history allowed the few to concentrate on improving their land. In contrast, under communalism every African was assured of sufficient land to meet his own needs by virtue of being a member of a family or community” (Rodney 2012, 41). Africans recognised that land is “a major economic resource” (Amadiume 2015, 31). The history of ancient Egypt, famed for great achievements in medicine and philosophy, and the invention of writing, reveals that “[a]griculture was the foundation on which the wealth of Egypt developed” (Price 2007, 13). With economic power, they could afford to invest what they had in more research and inventions.

The European colonial powers also found a major economic resource in the exploitation of Africa’s natural resources. As Rodney (2012, 174) observes, “[p]rofits from African colonialism mingled with profits from every other source to finance research. This was true in the general sense that the affluence of capitalist society in the present century allowed more money and leisure for research”. Copper taken from what were then Northern Rhodesia and the Congo helped Europe to take a lead in developing technology, as “an essential component of generators, motors, electronic locomotives, telephones, telegraphs, lights and power lines,



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motor cars, buildings, ammunition, radios, refrigerators, and a host of other things” (Rodney 2012, 178–179). African minerals from African soil also gave the Western Allies a decisive victory in the Second World War, as “80 percent of the uranium in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs came from the heavily guarded Congo mine of Shinkolobwe” (Hochschild 2012, 279). Some of the rubber used for military trucks, jeeps and warplanes also came from the Congo (ibid.).

Eloquently outlining the “most devastating of setbacks to Africa” that resulted from land dispossession, Kamalu (1990, 147) notes that European industrialisation “led to the severance of the sacred bond which existed between the African and his land, the traditional source of his livelihood”. The African was now compelled to “leave the rural areas to go and eke out a leaving for himself and his family in the urban centres”, with the consequence that “the family, the nucleus of African social structure, began to disintegrate, as did the social structure itself” (ibid.). Now “severed from his land and his past, [the African] was flung into the contradictions of the townships, where two cultures fought” (ibid., 148). This new environment, which saw the

breaking of the tie with the land, marked the beginning of a period in which Europe was to mould the African economy to its liking ... Whereas before Africans farmed their land for their own sustenance; now they were creating wealth for the European through the extraction of raw materials and the farming cash crops. (ibid.)

EUROCENTRIC EDUCATION

Not only did Europeans usurp Africans’ land, they also displaced African traditional education, replacing it with Eurocentric education.

In South Africa, more than 90 percent of African education was in the hands of missionaries up to 1948,



when the National Party (NP) became the ruling party and instituted its apartheid policies (Giliomee 2003, 507). The mission schools’ provision of good education was incompatible with the goal of apartheid’s architects to keep black people’s standards of living at the lowest level. The Transvaal NP leader, JG Strijdom, warned his colleague DF Malan that “it would be impossible to maintain racial discrimination if the quality of education of the subordinate people was steadily improved” (ibid.). Strijdom reasoned that the missionaries were “too eager to compete with other church societies in trying to provide on annual basis the most education to *kleinkaffertjies* (small black children)” (ibid.). This would create problems for the apartheid government in the future, because trying to withhold equal rights from educated people would lead to “bloody clashes and revolutions” (ibid.).

These concerns gave birth to the Bantu Education Act of 1953. The rationale for Bantu Education, as articulated by the minister of education, Hendrik Verwoerd, was that it was “in the interest of the Bantu that he be educated in his own circle. He must not become a black Englishman in order to be used against the Afrikaner” (cited in Welsh 2009, 64). Verwoerd claimed that the African child “has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his own community and partially misled him by showing him the green pastures of the European but still did not allow him to graze there” (ibid., 64–65). Further, according to Verwoerd, “it is of no avail for him [the African child] to receive a training which has as its aim absorption in the European community while he cannot and will not be absorbed there” (ibid., 64). As Verwoerd believed that “[t]here is no place for him [the African child] in >>

the European community above the level of certain forms of labour” (ibid.), “it did not serve any purpose to teach a black child mathematics if he or she could not use it” (cited in Giliomee 2003, 508). This clearly demonstrates that Bantu Education was meant to cripple Africans.

This objective was not limited to South Africa: it was the colonialist project throughout the African continent. As Rodney (2012, 240) observes, the “main purpose of the colonial school system was to train Africans to help man the local administration at the lowest ranks and to staff the private capitalist firms owned by Europeans. In effect, that meant selecting a few Africans to participate in the domination and exploitation of the continent as a whole” (ibid.). This was “not an educational system designed to give young people confidence and pride as members of African societies, but one which sought to instil a sense of deference towards all that was European and capitalist. Education in Europe was dominated by the capitalist class.” (ibid., 240–241)

The promotion of capitalism through Eurocentric education was in direct conflict with African tradition, in which, as Amadiume (1997, 102) points out:

[m]arkets and marketing were not governed by pure profit values, but the basic need to exchange, redistribute and socialize. That is why traditional African systems were not capitalist economies. They have been variously described as subsistence, communal, and redistribution economies.

Eurocentric education, by confining Africans to a capitalist-oriented economy and denying them an enabling education and skills, succeeded in shackling Africans and hobbling their ability to chart an independent path after gaining independence.

A STRANGLEHOLD ON AFRICA’S FUTURE

According to Adedeji (1999, 393), “it should have been clear to all, even in the early days of independence, that Africa marching toward the future hand-in-hand with its colonial economic inheritance has no dignified future at all”. Yet, he continues,

if the truth be told, the economic crisis that has engulfed the continent since the second half of the 1970s has been largely the cumulative result of the continued operation of the African economies within the framework of the inherited colonial economic legacy. (ibid.)

While appreciating that “African governments were genuinely desirous of improving the standard of living of their people by increasing their incomes and providing essential social services and infrastructural facilities” and that they were all “virtually convinced that the most rational way to bring about these changes was through economic planning”, Adedeji notes that “these plans ... were more often than not prepared by foreigners with relatively little experience of the countries concerned” (ibid.).

In 1957, Ghana was with the first country to gain political independence. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first democratically elected head of state, held the view that with the gaining of the political kingdom, the rest would be added (Davidson 1973, 104). The failure of Ghana’s liberation project has to be located in a historical context. Davidson (ibid.) observes that Nkrumah himself “started with small knowledge of the country’s economic position, and even smaller means of changing it ... Even after assuming office [as prime minister] in 1951, when at least some of the necessary administrative files became available, his knowledge remained full of holes”. Thus, Nkrumah “was the captive of his circumstances. Nobody else knew

much more.” Because Nkrumah “was not an economist ... and nor were any of his leading colleagues ... [m]any of their major mistakes were made in the field of economic policy” (ibid., 103).

Because of this incapacity in economics, Nkrumah and his comrades “followed the advice of foreign consultants who, however well-intentioned, wished above all to keep Nkrumah and his government loyal to the general economic structure of the capitalist world” (Davidson 1973, 103). When Nkrumah followed their advice, “[f]oreign interests, if not Ghana’s opposition, said that he was pursuing policies of sound expansion and development” (ibid.). Davidson argues, on the contrary, that the recommended policies were “sound neither in expansion nor in development”, and “little more than a meek and often muddled acceptance of the economic dispositions of the colonial system” (ibid.). These policies, “imposed on the CPP [Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party] government by the British, or accepted by the CPP on the advice of their advisers, were all designed to maintain the existing economic system, and make it grow” (ibid., 107).

For the new Ghanaian nation, the hoped-for “policies of change” became policies of “no-change, not policies of development but merely of growth” (Davidson 1973, 107). This growth did not “guarantee a genuine and overall development. What it really guaranteed was another instalment of ‘under-development’, together with all the added political strains that go along with that” (ibid.). This led to the poverty of the masses and corruption of the political elite, who “acquired large houses which they filled with expensive furniture” and “were not in the least ashamed of their wealth, nor of the dubious ways, or even the downright dishonest ways, in which they got hold of it” (Davidson 1973, 179–180).

An examination of the history of the Congo, which gained its independence from Belgian imperialism in 1960, three years after Ghana's independence, reveals a similar pattern. One of the factors that led to the "Congo crisis" was "in fact a crisis of decolonization, due to the manner in which the Belgians managed the transfer of power with a view to retaining as much control over the Congolese state and economy as they could, and the unpreparedness of Lumumba and the radical nationalist leaders to grasp fully the reigns of power" (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2014, 85).

Nzongola-Ntalaja (2014, 82) points out that, after

dancing to "*Indépendance Cha Cha*" in Brussels and returning home to adoring crowds that treated them like heroes, Lumumba and his Round Table colleagues had no clear understanding of the economic aspects of the transfer of power, which had a lot to do with the limits of national sovereignty and the expectations of ordinary people for material prosperity.

Nzongola-Ntalaja (ibid.) further points out that Lumumba and his colleagues' "ignorance of political economy and their inexperience in managing a modern economy led them to neglect crucial issues of assets ownership, the public debt, and economic policy".

During the negotiations for the independence of Congo, significantly while all major leaders attended the Political Round Table Conference in January–February 1960, only Moïse Tshombe, who was to turn against Lumumba later, attended the entire Economic Round Table Conference. Lumumba sent from his party a teaching assistant in psychology and education. Other parties

relied on university students and recent graduates, who were asked to negotiate with prominent Belgian experts, some of whom were their economics professors. Negotiating with such young, inexperienced, and politically



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insignificant delegates who needed Belgian expertise to make sense of the complex issues at stake, the Belgians laid the groundwork for their third rape of the Congo, economically speaking. (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2014, 82–83)

This state of affairs resulted in members of the new ruling elite neglecting to "protect the country's assets from Belgian looting, seemingly more concerned with enjoying the material benefits that colonialism had denied them than with a radical transformation of the inherited state and economy to meet the people's expectations of independence" (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2014, 89).

There is a similar pattern in South Africa, the last African country to "free" itself from settler white domination. Matisonn (2015, 299) notes that the "understanding of economics in

the ANC [African National Congress, the ruling party in South Africa] and Communist Party [the ANC's ally] were almost restricted to broad macro-economic sweeps: how dangerous and unequal was capitalism, the need for the state to take control". Matisonn (ibid.) further points out that the ANC

conducted no systematic, detailed, sector-by-sector, or government-department-by-government-department, analysis of what they were about to inherit. Even now, two decades into ANC rule, much of the economic debate is broadly theoretical, not steeped in actual experience-based assessments of the reasons for success and failures in the real economy.

In the same way that Davidson remarked that Ghana's first president was no economist, Matisonn (2015, 300) observes that Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected South African president, "[a]fter 27 years in prison ... was no expert on the economy". Exposed to such vulnerabilities, Terreblanche (2012, 3–4) notes that, in the

secret negotiations that took place in the early 1990s on the future economic system of South Africa, the MEC [minerals energy complex] and the American pressure groups – which also participated in the secret negotiations – jointly played a dominant role in outwitting the leadership core of the ANC to agree to the elite compromise of 1993. This compromise spelled out the conditionalities that would be applicable to the ANC government. Before the elite compromise was agreed upon, the MEC and the American pressure groups made hyper-optimistic promises of how economically advantageous it would be for South Africa if it were to become integrated into the structure of global capitalism/corporatism and if the ANC (an erstwhile socialist organisation) should accept the ideologies of neoliberalism and market fundamentalism.

Writing that there can be "little doubt that the secret negotiations between >>

the MEC and a leadership core of the ANC were mainly responsible for the ideological 'somersault' of the ANC", Terreblanche (2012, 64–65) also notes that the "role of the American pressure group was, however, not restricted to exaggerated promises, but also included subtle threats that the US had the ability (and the inclination) to disrupt the South African economy if the ANC should be recalcitrant and not prepared to cooperate." History shows that where US economic interests are concerned, it makes no empty threats. In 1966, Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown and there is evidence that "foreign intelligence services, and most of all the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), had played a notable role in promoting the coup" (Davidson 1973, 207).

In Zimbabwe, which gained independence in 1980 through what came to be known as the Lancaster House Agreement – a deal made between the freedom fighters and the Rhodesian government – it was decided that the Zimbabweans would not retake the land, except on a willing buyer, willing seller agreement, an agreement that favoured Rhodesian whites, and weakened black Zimbabweans (Hanlon, Manjengwa and Smart 2013, 55–56). The result was that, even though Robert Mugabe performed well in paying attention to the Zimbabweans' education, to the extent that Hanlon et al (2013, 4) observed that "Zimbabwe has the highest literacy rate in Africa" and that "Zimbabwe is one of the most-educated countries in Africa" (ibid., 6), this lack of access to land crippled their progress.

TOWARDS AN AFROCENTRIC EDUCATION

Asante (2003, 9) notes that "the enemies of Africa are plotting every conceivable way to derail our consciousness" and that "[i]f it is not through drugs, then it is through the

media where our children become confused, or in the educational system where they are marginalized and denied the opportunity to be owners of information". Echoing this, Wutawunashe (2013, 28–29) notes that the "media was also used very effectively to put down Black people and to elevate whiteness. Any countries which happen to have fallen under the rule of Black people was stereotyped as being destroyed by the incompetence of Black people."

Against this Eurocentric trajectory, Afrocentric education seeks to rediscover the true history of Africans – the good and the bad, successes and failures – so as to inspire and also to warn Africans against pitfalls. More specifically it seeks to reclaim those values, discussed above, to sensitise Africans about the importance of not only reclaiming economic power, without which they cannot do much, but also reclaim their ancestral values for educational purposes so as to build not only a humane Africa, but a humane world. Afrocentricity advances the view that "[e]conomic freedom must always be connected to political and cultural freedom else freedom does not truly exist" (Asante 2003, 15). Without consciously inculcating values that emphasise solidarity, Africans are not immune to corrupt tendencies, as evidenced by a history of corrupt African leaders. [NA](#)

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