

Education for Life: The Nigerian Perspective

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I bring you greetings from Nigeria, the land in the heart of Africa where some have too much, and far far too many too little. Nigeria, the largest black nation in the world, the home of two out of every five black persons on earth, a land of vast human and material resources, but alas a land where schools for death entrenched by imperialists with our support are consistently emasculating the lives of the people.

But I bring good news. In the Grundtvig Institute, Onitsha, the fire of enlightenment and folkelighed has begun to glow. And slowly but surely we are taking the steps to establish that richness in which few will have too much and even fewer too little. We are working to achieve for our people. Et yeunt Omontort vieksomt lien po you - o. A plain and active joyful life on earth. You wonder, don't you? How is it possible for our Grundtvig to speak from Africa?

Education for Life: An Indigenous African Concept

About the time Grundtvig was developing his concept of »Education for Life« and was preaching its viability to his countrymen, it had been the philosophy guiding the education of many peoples in the so-called dark continent of Africa. Many studies of indigenous education reveal ideas and practices that are similar to what Grundtvig later described as »Education for Life«.

By the time the »Schools for Death« were flourishing in Denmark, the indigenous system was providing some form of »Education for Life« in Africa. And by the time the slave trade, colonialists and missionaries (including Grundtvig's brothers in the area known as the white man's grave) bombarded our culture enthroned the »Schools for Death«, Grundtvig was just finding his feet in Denmark.

All this was in pre-Nigeria, for Nigeria came into being in 1914. Yet a view of the principles and practices of »Education for Life« in pre-Nigeria is necessary to appreciate the practice of the concept in present day Nigeria. It must however be admitted that in the absence of proper documentation, it is not possible to recapture the educational scene in pre-Nigeria accurately and completely. We shall therefore talk about those fragments, bits and pieces which survived the onslaught of the slave trade and were operating at the time of penetration by the white man at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Education for Life in Indigenous Nigeria

Education for Life in pre-Nigeria Igboland was a life long affair, from infancy to death. It is both formal and informal. Formal institutions include the age sets, into which everybody is classified according to age. Each age set has a meeting place and has a distinct curriculum. For example, from the age of ten upwards, education of boys of various age sets centre around such activities as cleaning the springs, village squares, market places. They organize dance groups and drumming. As members of the masquerade societies they serve as night guards, collectors of fines, prosecutors of all forms of offenders and protectors of public morality. There is also vocational training in farming, fishing, palmwine tapping, building, sculpture, trading, blacksmithry, etc. Above the age of 21 they constitute the army of the village and learn how to shoot guns, stage mock battles especially at funeral ceremonies of dead members, organize dances and chivalry displays. Both the younger sets and the over twenty-one play special parts at public worship with the later producing the sacrificial animal in certain village groups.

Every aspect of education has emotional, spiritual and functional relevance to the student. For example, the architecture and layout of the Umunna (collective home) to which every group belongs, and where they spend their entire life is designed to inculcate the cherished values of the community, social responsibility, cultural pride and identification. This type of curriculum is what Grundtvig later described as »taking the present-

day life and moment into consideration«, and »setting the students' own powers and knowledge in activity, keeping students in close contact with the activities of practical life«. Among pre-Nigeria Igbo, »the school was the society and the society was the school«. The same can be said of Grundtvig's School for Life.

Indigenous pedagogy concerned itself with the acquisition of all aspects of the culture. This includes skills, attitudes, values, awareness, cooperation, discipline, self-confidence, initiatives, etc. And these are imbibed through participation in meaningful community activities, as shown above. In pre-Nigeria Igbo »to learn was to become an active participant, and a successful one at that, in everyday activities of one's family, lineage, clan or society«.

There were of course no books. Pedagogy was by the »living word«, myths, legends, songs and dances, games and toys, proverbs, riddles, music role playing, rites de passage, etc. By these means human traits, moral, social, political and cultural are acquired. Except in special cases, every person played the double role of learner and teacher. Each individual is expected to learn from those older than himself, while at the same time he is expected to promote the learning for those younger than himself. Evaluation was made on the basis of what the individual can perform and not what he can recall and articulate. The ultimate purpose of indigenous Igbo education is to help each individual live and function positively, usefully and happily in the society.

Grundtvig's School for Life

This description of traditional education is far from exhaustive. Yet it is sufficient to highlight concepts, ideas and practices which later appeared in Grundtvig's formulation of the »School for Life«. The chief goal of Grundtvig's school is the task of helping to solve life's problems. This is to be done by sourcing the subject matter from present-day life and moment. The school therefore is to be rooted in the people, using the mother tongue to capture and inflame the spirit of the people for the purposes of »enlightenment about life«. Thus people will be conscious of

what they are, what they have to do and what it all means, through activity-oriented interaction in the mother tongue, based on equality. Grundtvig also talks about freedom, responsibility and cultural identity. The overall objective is, quote »that all young men who attend and who already have found a vocation of their choice and competence could return to their task with increased desire, with clearer views of human and civic conditions particularly in their own country and with an increased joy in the community of the people.

This would encourage participation in all great and good things that have been achieved by their people and would continually be achieved«.

It is not difficult to see the similarity of Grundtvig's School for Life to the indigenous system described above. The suggestion is that the »School for Life« existed in indigenous Africa before Grundtvig discovered it in Denmark. Perhaps this is because the environment in pre-Grundtvig Denmark was not ripe for it, which is not the case in indigenous Africa.

In about the 17th century, indigenous Africa was an inward looking society, whose very survival depended on strong bonds of group identification and group efficiency. Thus it looked inward for its strength, its economic well-being, its growth and development. Indigenous African communities, like Denmark, were monolingual groups with common ancestries. The communities were always under threat of the physical and non-physical environment. To survive therefore they had to look inwards - to a system of education which was life-long, spontaneous, relevant and efficient. The happiness and effectiveness of the individual became the happiness and effectiveness of the society and vice versa. Even though the time and place are different, it is basically similar factors that motivated Grundtvig to search for the school for life in mid-19th century.

The School for Death in Nigeria

While pre-Nigeria had »School for Life« at the time when »Schools for Death« were flourishing in Denmark, the reverse is the case in contemporary Nigeria. Western education with its

deadly tendencies is perhaps the most influential and pervasive export from Europe to Nigeria. Nigerians tasted it, savoured its superficial/materialistic rewards, and have since become mindless addicts. For the colonialists, it worked very well! A most efficient and effective means of psychological conditioning, material exploitation and domination. We all know these »Schools for Death« only too well, and so I shall not discuss it in detail, but only highlight aspects of it in relevant parts of this paper. However, at this point some background information about contemporary Nigeria is called for.

Nigeria has an area of 923.768,00sq. kilometres and is between latitudes 4° and 14° North of the equator and longitudes 3° and 14° east of the Greenwich Meridians. Thus it is entirely within the tropical zone. Nigeria takes its water from the River Niger, its most prominent feature. As a political entity, Nigeria came into formal existence in 1914 with the amalgamation of the northern and southern British protectorates. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria had been going through painful experiments with democratic government. Even though the Nigerian federation is currently under a military regime, it is generally believed that it has the freest press in Africa and that its dynamic population is one of the freest in Africa. Currently, all the thirty states in the federation are under civil rule, with their civilian governors and legislators. Members of the Federal House of Representatives and of the Senate have been elected, while the civilian President will be elected in December 5, 1992. In January, 1993, the last military authority will voluntarily hand over to an elected civilian president.

With a population of about 89 million (1991), Nigeria is the largest black nation in the world. It was also the largest and leading economy in Africa, until 1981 when it was overtaken by South Africa. Nigeria is very rich in both natural and mineral resources. It has 3% of the known world reserves of oil. It is the largest oil producer in Africa, its crude being of the finest quality which commands the highest prices. However, since the 1978 world oil glut, and because of dependence on a single raw material commodity (oil), Nigerian economy has continued to suffer serious recession. As a result the government introduced the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1983, in which it re-

negotiated large current trading account debts with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), deregulated the economy, and embarked on development of other raw material commodities.

Since independence in 1960, there has been massive educational development. Today about 13 million are enrolled in 35.000 primary schools, 3 million in 6.000 secondary schools. There are thirty-five Universities, thirty polytechnics and 52 colleges of Education with total enrolment of about 500.000. About 350 technical and vocational centres have an enrolment of about 120.000, while about 400.000 are enrolled in Teacher Training Colleges. Yet only about 2-25% of the educational needs of the country are being met. In spite of series of reforms, education in Nigeria remains basically colonialist.

Education for Life: The Nigerian Perspective

How do we see the concept of »Education for Life« in Nigeria today? First, as can be seen from earlier discussion in this paper, the concept to us cannot be »another foreign importation«. It is indigenous and was with us even before Grundtvig. What Grundtvig did was to help us rediscover values and practices which we had jettisoned to our peril in our breakneck speed to so-called western civilisation. Grundtvig helps us to find answer from within us to burning problems of our education and national development. Grundtvig, through the success of Denmark shows us what we could become, if only we could find the strength within us. And when we looked and are still looking within us, what is emerging is not, and cannot be a Danish Folkhighschool at Onitsah, but a »Nigerian« Folkhighschool. The principles, ideas and ideals are no less the same with the Danish Folkhighschool than they are with our indigenous »School for Life«.

The Grundtvig Institute, Oba-Onitsha, Nigeria

Let me then briefly tell you the story of the Grundtvig Institute, Onitsha, the first folkhighschool in Nigeria. From the story you can infer for yourselves a perspective of education for life in Nigeria. The havoc visited on the lives of Nigerian youth by the »Schools for Death« became particularly alarming after the Nigeria-Biafra war, 1967-1970. The worst hit by this calamity were the Igbos who live in the Biafra heartland and had borne the brunt of the civil war. They did not only suffer defeat, they lost confidence in themselves. Their homes, schools, churches, roads and economy were in ruins. They had no money, as the Biafran currency had become illegal tender. They were compelled to see themselves as second class citizens in their own country, competing among themselves for crumbs falling from the tables of groups whom at the worst they had regarded as equals before the civil war.

Education seemed to be their hope of recovery. Was it not through rigorous pursuit of education that they catapulted themselves into leading positions in the country, even though they were among the last to make contact with so-called western civilisation? And so they invoked the spirit of the extended family. This is how a Briton saw it:

»It is not unusual to find a situation like this: a village carpenter has five sons. The father works from dawn till dusk, the mother has a stall in the market, and the four junior sons sell matches, newspaper and red pepper so that the senior son can go through college. When he is qualified he is duty bound to pay the way through college for the second brother, after which the pair will pay for the education of the third, fourth and fifth.«

The tragedy however is that at the end of the college education, whether the senior son is successful or not, there is hardly any job for him, or any opportunity for further education or of self-employment. Nor could he go back to his village, as college had given him »loftier« expectations. Therefore the hopes of his siblings, the entire family and the community are dashed. All this

is the result of a bookish, examination infested educational system. If youth from other parts of Nigeria suffered the same fate, for the Igbos, it was a double tragedy. Their hope of recovery through education was going up in smoke before their hungry eyes. A conservative estimate is that about 750.000 youth are so afflicted annually throughout the country.

It was in the course of the search for a solution to this problem that I was introduced to Grundtvig by a former colleague who had attended a seminar on the Folkhighschool organized by the Danish Cultural Institute in Askov in 1980. Going through his seminar papers was revealing and inspiring. I began to formulate ideas about the »School for Life« I sounded out these ideas on colleagues and friends, educationists and administrators, in Nigeria, Africa and Europe. The reactions were without exception highly supportive. An informal working group emerged who brainstormed the idea and how to make it a reality. We tried to involve the Federal Government, but feared the idea would be suffocated by bureaucracy. We had no money to found the school. Yet we could not involve businessmen who would see the project purely in short economic terms.

It occurred to us that if the »School for Life« was a viable idea, the people, the grassroots people, should be willing to support it. We therefore took the idea to several communities where we addressed meetings of cross-sections of the people. In all of the places, the communities not only urged us to set up the »School for Life« among them, but they also pledged financial and material support.

The Oba Women Patriotic Union with above five thousand members is a modernized version of Nzuko Inyom Oba. If they now hold their annual meetings in one of the delapidated schools for death, and make serious efforts to practice British parliamentary system, they are nonetheless one of the few remaining bastions of indigenous values in Oba, a small town of about 20.000 Igbos, located south of the commercial city of Onitsha (pop. about 500.000) east of the river Niger, in Anambra State, on the highway to Port-Harcourt, the second largest seaport in Nigeria. They have cooperatives engaged in goat-rearing, palm kernel cracking, agriculture, etc. They run a grassroot vocational centre, besides literacy classes. They have sub-groups engaged in

traditional dances, folklore and drama, while indigenous fashion is of general concern.

When this union heard about the proposed »School for Life« through one of its members, they invited us for discussions, after which they urged us to establish the new school at Oba. They provided the Oba civic centre and some furniture for its take-off. I resigned my job at the Multinational West African Examinations Council, Lagos to set up the school for life at Oba in November, 1984, with seven female students and four volunteer staff from oba community. Even though the name, The Grundtvig Institute, was disfavoured for being neo-colonialist, we persuaded the government to grant it. This is because we wanted at all times to be reminded of what we stand for. Also, the word »Grundtvig« is as strange as it is difficult for our people to pronounce. So when people ask about the word, as they always do, it gives us an opportunity to talk about the »School for Life«. The new school has been sustained by voluntary donations, in cash and kind by individuals and groups in Oba and beyond.

Target School Population

The target population of the Grundtvig Institute is the victims of the school for death secondary schools, pejoratively known as »dropouts«. To us, dropouts are those who dropped the secondary school because they cannot find meaning in it, or those who were dropped because they could not pass examinations. A rough estimate of dropouts is placed at about 50% of the entire school populations. They feel abandoned, frustrated, disillusioned and confused. They are jobless and without vocations. They suffer from crises of confidence in themselves and in the society. The Grundtvig Institute is to give them a new lease of life, not only by equipping them with vocations, but by imbuing them with self confidence, awareness and resourcefulness to enable them to live useful and satisfactory lives.

Presently, the emphasis is on female dropouts because besides being more in number, they have limited choices and they suffer from discriminations and restrictions imposed upon them by cul-

tural norms and mores, unlike their male opposite members. Yet they bear the great burden of rearing future Nigerians. Besides in our cultural setting, the benefits of female experience would have wider effects than those of the male. »Train a man and train an individual. Train a woman and train a family«.

Objectives of the Grundtvig Institute

The objectives of the Grundtvig Institute therefore are as follows:

1. To equip post secondary female youth with vocational skills.
2. To equip post secondary female youth with initiative, awareness resourcefulness and other support necessary for their self employment and satisfactory life in their communities.
3. To encourage our target population to appreciate and take pride in things »Nigerian« (culture) and to exploit them for benefit of self and of community.
4. To foster a strong sense of community responsibility.
5. To work for cooperation among Nigerian youth in order to foster national unity.
6. To develop awareness of self and of community as a part of a fast developing country searching for purpose and direction.
7. To foster self reliance ethical conduct and discipline.

Formulating the curriculum: Problems and Challenges

The challenges of formulating a curriculum for the school for life in Nigeria stem from the inherent conflict between the concepts of the School for Life and the School for Death,

represented by our colonial experiences. How do we encourage initiative, application and resourcefulness within a parasitic system of certificate-oriented bookish schooling? How do we give a human face to education in an authoritative, coercive and oppressive system? How do we foster responsibility, and accountability to self, to others and to the nation in the prevailing system of management and financial indiscipline? What about learning materials and teachers produced by and for the »Schools for Death«? What use can we make of them? How do we deal with the colonial mental-set of both the people and officialdom?

We have no clear-cut answers to these issues. However, we are experimenting on a continued basis. We know that these issues are critical and will determine the success of the project. Our general approach is to go from »the known to the unknown«, »from the familiar to the not-so-familiar«. Thus initially the Institute strives at establishing a reputation for conventional excellence in other subjects to achieve credibility and gain the confidence of the people. As this is being done, possible aspects of the school for life are being injected as necessary. With the colonial mental set in Nigeria, the project will not survive if it appeared radical to the people.

However, right from its inception, the following curricula commitments were made:

- a. The criterion of success will not be the number of students that pass examinations, but the number of graduates that are living lives useful and satisfactory to themselves and to their communities.
- b. **Emphasis on learning through interaction and activity.**
- c. **Self rediscovery through culture and the living word.**
- d. **Propagation and study of the concept of education for life through visits, publications and other means of information.**

The curricula consist of the Core Curriculum and the Awareness Curriculum:

The Core Curriculum

The Core Curriculum consists of the syllabuses prescribed by the various external examination bodies for the various professional/vocational courses being run at the Institute. These courses are:

- i. Fashion/Textile Designs, 3 years.
- ii. Catering and Hotel Management, 2 years.
- iii. Secretarial studies, 2. years.

The Awareness Curriculum

The awareness curriculum is designed to create such awareness of self, environment, values, ethics and ideals in the student that will facilitate her living a life useful and satisfactory to herself and to her community. A highly dynamic curriculum, subject matter is built round specific needs and problems of the students and of the community. They include such topics as: Problems of development, Ethics in a changing society, Peoples of Nigeria, Traditional art, music and dance, Folklore, Great Nigerians, Nigerian languages, Leisure, how to create and manage it, Time management, communications, community leadership, sustainable environment, etc.

Organisation of Curricula

The curricula are designed and organized around three inter-dependent objectives: Skill acquisition, Attitudes and Values, and Self-employment. Skill acquisition involves provision of adequate and suitable environment, equipment and motivation for vocational success of the student.

Self-employment involves exposure of students to commercial practices of their vocations in order to create awareness of business opportunities. Operationally therefore, each programme in the Institute has a commercial arm, not only to provide the

student with real life practices in their vocations, but also as a means of generating revenue to sustain the Institute. Permeating skill acquisition and self-employment are formal and informal programmes, designed to inculcate desirable values and attitudes in the students.

The Grundtvig Institute: Present and the Future

The Institute has come a long way since 1984. It now has about 600 almost fully residential female students, age range 20-35, with 35 full time staff. More than 700 women have been graduated. More than 70% of them are self-employed, many of them employing more than 3 workers.

Even though the implementation of the awareness curriculum has had many problems, there is a definite conviction among staff, students and our publics that the Grundtvig Institute is »different« from the dead schools. Informally, the Grundtvig Hour, a fortnightly period of time when the whole school meets in the square to celebrate our culture, the Wednesday »Study Groups« when the school meets in groups to explore problems/-activities of interest, the culture groups, the pervasiveness of drama, folklore in the daily life of the school, participation of the school family in national events, such as trade fairs, etc. these and more are bringing the school for life to reality. All these are creating awareness, self confidence and enlightenment in our staff and students.

In 1993, we shall move into a new school being built by the cooperation of the Association of Danish Folkhighschools and the Grundtvig Institute Movement (Nigeria) and finance by the Danish Agency for International Development. The new school which is designed as a traditional Igbo village will lend cultural and emotional relevance, and meaningful infrastructural support to the prosecution of the Awareness Curricula. Ama Grundtvig (The Grundtvig Institute) will become the tenth village in Oba town. The years after 1993 will be the high points of realising the Nigerian folkhighschool. However, a number of additional issues have continued to confound us. What should be the language of the living word in a school that is open to students

from all the 395 linguistic groups in Nigeria? Can we arouse consciousness and self confidence in a foreign language of conquest and domination? When we talk of self rediscovery, what self is to be rediscovered? The traditional self, the colonial self, the post colonial self or an amalgam? And if so, what amalgam?

While the search for answer goes on the Grundtvig Institute will continue to plant grundtvigian ideals and values in the country through its student and ex-student activities. As the nursery bed of grundtvigianism in Africa, the Grundtvig Institute hopes to inspire similar institutions in other parts of Nigeria and beyond. This way we hope to make a difference in the lives of our people.