

Learning inspired education

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Abstract

The meaning of experience, knowledge and truth in Africa¹ is dominated by the successive refinement of the colonial conception of education. This dominant conception of education does in practice suppress and distort the African experience in general and, consequently constructs knowledge and truth at variance with the African experience. This condition necessitates the rethinking of education in Africa. The present essay is a contribution to this endeavor. It will emphasize the distinction between learning and education and argue for an appropriate educational paradigm suited to the African condition.

Introduction

It is not the purpose here to traverse in elaborate detail the meaning of education propounded by philosophers such as Plato, Locke or Dewey. A disquisition of this kind designed to clarify or enrich theory for its own sake is not part of the intention of the present writer. Consonant with this intention, we will proceed by way of providing a

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¹ The meaning of the term Africa is indeed contestable on at least two grounds. One is that the name Africa is not conferred by the indigenous peoples – conquered in the unjust wars of colonization – upon themselves. Another is that it does not by definition refer to the particular histories of the indigenous peoples – conquered in the unjust wars of colonization – inhabiting various parts of the continent from time immemorial. In his reflections upon the origin and meaning of the term Africa, Mazrui notes that it may be traced to the Berber or the Greco-Roman ancestry. “But although the name Africa may have originally been either Semitic or Greco-Roman, the application of the name in more recent centuries has been due almost entirely to western Europe. ... We should question Europe’s decisions about boundaries of Africa and the identity of Africans ... We have to accept the continental definition as presently defined internationally. But I personally regard the present boundaries of Africa as not only arbitrary but artificially conceived by European geographers in a former era of European dominance. For the purpose of this book I accept the Red Sea as one of Africa’s boundaries – but I do so decidedly under protest”. Mazrui, A.A., (1986) *The Africans*, London: BBC Publications p. 25, 29 and 38 And so does the present author accept the term Africa decidedly under protest for the purpose of this essay.

stipulative definition of education. This will be contrasted with the meaning of learning. The contrasting shall assume a deliberately philosophical perspective. The philosophical perspective shall remain the underlying thread weaving together the various aspects of our unfolding argument. Our core argument is that the prevailing theory and practice of education in Africa is dominated by successive and subtle refinements of the colonial conception of education. The effect of this domination is to distort and suppress indigenous African ways of knowing and doing, thereby establishing and sustaining epistemological tension between the former and the dominant refined concept of education.

One of the means to resolve this tension is to distinguish between learning and formal education. The purpose of the distinction is to underline the irreducibility of experience as the source of learning as distinct from formal education. The epistemology that arises from learning does not lend itself to an ineluctable construction of knowledge and formal education identical for all human beings, regardless of their embeddedness in a particular existential situation. The disregard for embeddedness in a particular existential situation has enabled the colonial meaning of formal education to assume dominance and it is this dominance that is being questioned in this essay. This questioning is in memory of the Resolution of the Pan African Congress held in Manchester, United Kingdom in 1945.

The Resolution, being a “Declaration to the Colonial Powers” reads as follows:

We are not ashamed to have been an age-long patient people. We continue willingly to sacrifice and strive. But we are unwilling to starve any longer while doing the world’s drudgery, in order to support by our poverty and ignorance a false aristocracy and a discarded imperialism” (Mutiso & Rohio, 1975: 355).

Sixty four years after this Resolution the poverty in Africa is deepening. Though preventable in our time, poverty in Africa is quantitatively more deadly than it was in 1945. Poverty is now the wealth of many African nations (Landes 1999) attracting many expert

solutions on how to end it. (Hertz Stiglitz: 2002; Sachs 2005; Easterly: 2006). Some increase in the number of educated Africans continues to be challenged by the disproportionately large number of uneducated Africans. It would seem that the attainment of independence in Africa failed to kill and bury the “false aristocracy and a discarded imperialism” referred to in the Manchester Resolution. The difference between colonial and post-colonial Africa appears to be primarily a change of name clothing Africa in borrowed robes (Fanon, 1968) while leaving intact the basic mechanisms that continue to assure the structural, systemic and systematic impoverishment of Africa today. The slide of Africa into this condition of deadly but preventable poverty calls into question the meaning of education in colonial and post-colonial Africa. The examination of these issues shall proceed from the point of view of African philosophy.

“The idea of ‘African philosophy’ as a field of inquiry thus has its contemporary roots in the effort of African thinkers to combat political and economic exploitations, and to examine, question, and contest identities imposed upon them by Europeans. The claims and counter-claims, justifications, and alienations that characterize such historical and conceptual protests and contestations indelibly mark the discipline of African philosophy. ... African philosophy labors under this yet-to-end exploitation and denigration of African humanity. ... Scribing the ‘post’ of the postcolonial under erasure or brackets serves as a signal and pointer to the (in many parts of Africa) unfulfilled dreams of the independence achievements of the 1960s”. (Eze, 1997: 11-12 and 14).

Critics of African philosophy understood in terms of the above citation claim that it is futile to look to the past and then apportion blame on the successors in title to the benefits of the injustice of colonialism. The critics must be reminded that the injustice of colonialism resides distinctively in the fact that it was the unprovoked use of violence infringing and undermining all the principles of the just war doctrine (Russell, 1975). In terms of this doctrine, colonialism – despite its hallowed claim to proselytisation

(Mudimbe, 1988: 45) and “civilization” – was an act of unjustified use of violence. It was fundamentally an injustice to the colonized and so are its ensuing consequences.

Furthermore, the same critics of African philosophy are silent on the abolition of history as an academic discipline in their own countries on the ground that its focus is upon the past. Neither do they urge for the permanent erasure from memory of dates that are regarded as landmarks in their rise to nation-statehood. Nor do they campaign for the total oblivion and removal from their calendar of Easter and Christmas dates. Among those of them who have children, few would care to rebuke their children for wishing them a happy birthday.

Could christianity (Soyinka, 1999: 32) survive if it dared to forget that Jesus was ever born and that he left the message, “do this in memory of me”? In the christian liturgy this message is recalled at the highest point of the Holy Mass, namely, the consecration of the unleavened bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.² A Christian theological understanding of this consecration the living Christ is once again present in an absent way to community of faith constituting his church. The church understood in this way is thus the mystical body of Christ. “Because of the bond which unites us to one another in the Mystical Body, all of us, though not personally responsible and without encroaching on the judgement of God who alone knows every heart, bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us” (John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium*, 11). And so it is

² We take the view, like Wole Soyinka, that the “convention that capitalizes this [christianity, christian] and other so-called world religions is justified only when the same principle is applied to other religions, among them, the Orisa”. (page 32) Accordingly, we will in the main use the small letter “c” for christianity/christian including reference to the “God” of this religion. Where capitalization is used it will be in inverted commas. The use of capital or small letters with reference to all religions and their respective gods is intended to eliminate the implicit hierarchy and, thus the putative superiority of some religions and their “gods” over all the other religions of the world. Soyinka, W., (1999) *The burden of memory, the muse of forgiveness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

that even christians may not escape personal responsibility for the injustice of colonialism on the plea that the injustice occurred in the past long before they were born. It is this particular insight of the christian faith and doctrine which elevates the moral sensitivity of the Germany of Konrad Adenauer to the status of the sublime and the noble. It was Konrad Adenauer who agreed to commit even the unborn German to pay reparations to Israel because of the Holocaust (Honig, 1954).

Memory then can play a vital role in the expiation of guilt and the attainment of genuine reconciliation. Memory that aims to reveal the truth is a reliable means towards the liberation of the wrongdoer and the wronged. “In order to be able to entrust the full truth about the past to God’s mercy we must acknowledge our guilt and ask for forgiveness. This way, exoneration becomes liberation. ... The memory of a committed wrong subsequently confessed in an act of repentance stops being a paralyzing, traumatic burden” (Czajkowski, 2001: 48-49). No wonder then that Jesus attached crucial importance to memory as so many philosophers have done and continue to do. (Ricoeur: 2004).

To argue that Africa should forget about her colonial past is to uphold the biological impossibility that a child can be older than its parent. It is prevarication designed to postpone into the indefinite future the exigencies of natural and historical justice that is due to the indigenous conquered peoples at the dawn of the unjust wars of colonization. The fact that the effects of colonization are alive and vibrant in contemporary postcolonial Africa is a living indictment against the advocates of “forget about the past”.

In the beginning there was experience

For philosophy of perception, the human body is the medium of insertion into the world and it is simultaneously the means of interaction with the world. (Ponty, 1962;

Zaner, 1964; Dewey, 1958). Language, including body language, is the manifestation of the interaction of the body with the world. This in a nutshell is the definition of experience from which springs ordinary knowledge (commonsense) of why things happen or are done and how they should be done. It is in this sense that experience is the source of knowledge. The next level in the architecture of knowledge is to change ordinary knowledge into scientific knowledge. This is the reconstruction of commonsense according to conventionally accepted specific criteria for the construction of scientific knowledge. “The conclusions of science are the fruits of an institutionalized system of inquiry which plays an increasingly important role in the lives of men” (Nagel, 1961: 14)

In the construction of scientific knowledge the inclusion or exclusion of certain elements of commonsense takes place. It is precisely this principle of inclusion or exclusion which gives rise to the challenge of the three pillars of scientific knowledge, namely, neutrality, objectivity and universal applicability. Examples to this challenge are indigenous knowledge systems, theology of liberation, philosophy of liberation (Bondy, 1986; Dussel, 1985; Roig, 1986) and feminist epistemology.

From this perspective the construction of scientific knowledge is a veritable instance of learning from experience. It is an instance of learning something but not everything acquired from experience. Accordingly, there is an in-built element of fallibility in scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge that denies fallibility is not true science but dogma. As such it precludes the search for truth since it claims to already possess the truth. The challenges emanating from indigenous knowledge systems, theology of liberation, philosophy of liberation and feminist epistemology are directed at this dogmatic claim to truth.

On this reasoning, learning from experience comprises of two levels. The levels of commonsense knowledge and scientific knowledge. The former is informal and the latter formal. Experience is the source of both levels of knowledge. These levels share in common the fact that the insights and knowledge drawn from experience are used to understand and cope with life. Use here also means being inspired to make continual improvement and amelioration of the living conditions. Understanding speaks to the grasp and appreciation of values, spirituality, culture and aesthetics. Understanding and insightful use of knowledge acquired from experience complement each other. This is what we mean by inspired learning. It is learning which commonsense and scientific knowledge have in common.

And then there was conquest

Colonialism claimed the questionable (Ramose, 2003: 463-64) “right of conquest” over the indigenous conquered peoples. By virtue of this questionable right colonialism imposed unilaterally and by force upon the indigenous conquered peoples its own meaning of experience, knowledge and truth. In this way, indigenous ways of knowing and doing were either forbidden, suppressed or eliminated. Thus colonialism committed epistemicide, the killing of the epistemology and praxis of the indigenous conquered peoples. It did so in the name of the christianisation and “civilization” of the indigenous conquered peoples. It introduced “education” to pursue the aim of “civilization”. And so the colonized were forced to aspire for “education” objectively designed to denigrate their own understanding of the meaning of experience, knowledge and truth. Chinua Achebe’s celebrated novel, *Things Fall Apart*, captures the essence of this epistemicide which failed to kill totally and completely the indigenous ways of knowing and doing. Cognitive

dissonance and inferiority complex were implanted in the consciousness of the indigenous conquered peoples through “education”. It was “education” for servitude containing within itself the seeds of resistance by the indigenous conquered peoples.

For the British conquered territories and, to a large extent the territories conquered by France, Spain and Portugal the kind of “education” imposed upon the indigenous conquered peoples may aptly be described as liberal education.

“Education, or the part of overall education which counts as liberal education, on the view being considered consists in initiating students into disciplines such as those of mathematics, science, history, literature and the arts. These disciplines exist in their own right, and there are people expert and authoritative in them. Students are to be taught by teachers who have some claim to authority in what they teach. All involved, students and teachers, are to be guided by the standards of excellence inherent in the disciplines concerned, wherever these standards might lead, even into conflict with church or state. It follows from this commitment to excellence that the disciplines are essentially open, and not to be closed to any competent voice by people either inside or outside the discipline. ... Liberal education, then, is not primarily vocational or practical. Finally, it recognizes expertise, and works through the recognition of expertise and strives ultimately for work of exceptional quality in the subjects concerned, which by definition is not generally attainable” (O’Hear, 1981: 4-5).

It is this kind of liberal education that was initially implanted into South Africa at colonial conquest. The evolution of liberal education, embodied in schools and universities in South Africa, is inextricably linked with the history of the colonization of the country. The rise of universities in South Africa was the initiative – and, by virtue of the questionable “right of conquest” – the prerogative of the colonialists. Accordingly, the inspiration, intention as well as the constitution of universities in South Africa derived from the epistemological paradigm of the colonial conqueror. (Phillips, 2003: 123) The dominance and exclusivity of the epistemological paradigm of the conqueror is also evidenced by the fact that the rise of scientific institutions in the country is reported as the sole effort of the colonial conqueror (Naude & Brown, 1977: 60-85). Having thus

established epistemological dominance by virtue of which the colonized were reduced to consumers rather than producers of knowledge, the colonizer moulded the university in Africa into a transmission belt for the import and distribution of colonial values and goods. (Mazrui, 1984: 273-75) By the same token, the university in Africa was moulded into the facilitator of the export of African material and intellectual wealth to the erstwhile colonizing power. (Hountondji, 2003: 502) To date Africa is not relieved of this burden of epistemological oppression and subservience to the interests of the erstwhile colonial power. (Gbegnon, 1998: 27) The university in Africa today is not in a position to pursue African interests above those of anyone else. (Odora-Hoppers, 2000: 7) Despite the enduring burden of epistemological dominance, intellectual oppression and sustained structural and systemic material impoverishment, the university in Africa also produced African leaders of the struggle for independence and liberation. It continues to do so in the postcolonial era. The remarks contained in the preceding paragraph pertain to

... the globalization of African scholarship and the Africanisation of global scholarship. ... Assaulted for centuries by European racial and epistemic violence, it is not surprising that Africans in the diaspora, rather than those on the continent, were the first to launch protracted and passionate struggles for epistemological and political liberation, in which the vindication of Africa, as a human and historical space, was central. To be sure, there were those who reproduced the narratives of derision, who yearned for unconditional assimilation and Africa's erasure from their memories and bodies. And even among those who longed for Africa's redemption many had internalized the civilisational binaries of the Western epistemological order and they believed Africa would only be liberated from its current backwardness by the 'modernised' diaspora returning to the 'backward' motherland. Notwithstanding such ambiguities, or even contradictions, so well-noted by several commentators ..., the vindicationist tradition, ..., sought to emancipate African societies and cultures from the cognitive and colonial apparatuses of European imperialism, a struggle that still continues. It is quite remarkable, indeed, how little the defamations and defences of Africa have changed since the late nineteenth century, a tribute to the enduring power of Eurocentrism, thanks to Western hegemony in the world capitalist system, and a sobering reminder that the struggles to liberate Africans at home and abroad must continue". (Zezeza, 2007: 86 and 94).

These are insightful but no less provocative observations. The strictures of space preclude a detailed critical analysis of the remarks. Suffice it to state that Zeleza's claim that the diaspora were "the first" is more than dubious.

The contemporary context of education

The "individualist turn" in education marks a change of perspective in liberal education. It speaks to the emphasis on the instrumentalist character of education. It is the summer of the marketization of education and the marketization of the learner (Bridges and Jonathan, 2003: 136-44). It is the season of education as a means to make money through finding a job. It is the spirit of willful indifference to the warning in Pope John Paul II's *Laboren Exercens* that in our time there is no automatic connection between an educational qualification and the finding of employment. It manifests the capitulation of 'learning for its own sake' and 'excellence' to the imperatives and directives of money. It is the recognition of the sovereignty of money transforming democracy and ushering in the new age of tymocracy, that is, a money-based system of governance and undermining respect for governmental authority and delegitimizing the government's right to rule. (Singer, 2003: 226) This new age was predicted laconically forty eight years ago by President Eisenhower when on January 17th 1961 he issued the insightful warning that: "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist". Evidence of the persistence is the wanton environmental destruction paying more lip service to the Rio and Kyoto Accords; the irrationality of the ever-present threat of nuclear omnicide (Schell, 1998); the global massive retrenchments of employees and the rising diffidence in the local and

international banking systems. All this points to the absolute sovereignty of money in our time: tynocratic governance demonstrating the powerlessness of the wealthiest of the wealthy to liberate themselves from the grip of voluntary enslavement to money. And so we are reminded of President JF Kennedy timely and wise warning that: “If a free society cannot save the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich”. And so by some irony of history we are back today to the rule of money in ancient Greece:

Even the reciprocity of friendship seems to depend on money. ... Money has become a distinct basic value that is implicitly or explicitly compared to other basic values such as birth or virtue or justice. The basic values of money and justice are obviously distinct, because money is often obtained precisely through injustice. ... But in fact it is money that is honoured most. In choosing a spouse people put money above birth and reputation. For the mass of humankind the only virtue is money, compared to which self-control, knowledge, rhetoric, speed of foot are of no account, for money has the greatest power. ... Solon himself, who was the first to point to the unlimited desire for wealth, also insists that there are limits to its desirability and its power. ... When Socrates is told that he should charge a price for his valuable conversation, as he would if parting with other valuable things, he replies that just as charging for physical beauty is prostitution, so too wisdom should not be exchanged for money” (Seaford, 2004: 161-62).

Through successive and qualitatively different stages of education humanity has certainly discovered and utilized sources and means for the amelioration of its living conditions. Paradoxically, this long march across the centuries seems to be a kind of frozen immobility sustained by reason’s will to self-destruction. On balance it seems that irrational self-destruction in the name of money is the heritage of humanity from education. It is education without learning from experience. We are in the phase of uninspired learning in the age of education.

Our current traditions and institutions of learning, when judged from the standpoint of helping us learn how to become more enlightened, are defective and irrational in a wholesale and structural way, and it is this which, in the long term, sabotages our efforts to create a more civilized world, and prevents us from avoiding the kind of horrors we have been exposed to during the twentieth century – wars, third-world poverty, environmental degradation (Maxwell. 2000: 31).

Feta Kgomo o tshware motho – towards “a more civilized world”

The constitution of the “new” South Africa entrenched the dominance of the colonial paradigm of education. This despite the much acclaimed sensitivity to and human rights provisions in the constitution. The present author has argued this work in some of his works and will not repeat the arguments here. Suffice it to state that the philosophical and ideological link between the former conquerors of South Africa, that is, the successors in title to colonial conquest and its ensuing privileges, readily succumbed to the marketization of education and learning. The effects of this process is the revival and intensification of the need for the ‘globalisation of African scholarship and the Africanisation of global scholarship’ thereby establishing an African epistemic presence in the conduct of human affairs locally and internationally. It is against this background that we suggest the adoption and implementation of one of the principles of *ubuntu* ethics, namely, *feta kgomo o tshware motho*. The present author has written elaborately on the experience and concept of *ubuntu* and its practical implications. (Ramose: 1999)

Accordingly, he will eschew some pertinent details on the subject. The philosophy and practice of *ubuntu* can contribute towards the construction of learning inspired education intended to humanize and human relations and render our common planet “a more civilized world”. This can be done through the invocation of the ethical principle of *feta kgomo o tshware motho*. *Kgomo* is the singular for *dikgomo* which means cattle and *motho* or *umuntu* means a human being. Cattle in many African cultures were the symbol and reality of wealth. The challenge of this ethical principle is that whenever we are confronted with a choice between protecting our wealth and saving and preserving human life then the wise choice is the saving and the preservation of human life. The option for

human life is thus placed priceless above wealth or money. Learning to live this choice in our time is one of the ways through which we can overcome the deadly and irrational sovereignty of money. Learning inspired education is available from and through this ethical principle of *ubuntu* philosophy.

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