

Education for the Revival of Traditional African Values

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Abstract

Traditional African values such as respect for elders, community solidarity, and hospitality are essential to the cultural identity and heritage of African communities. However, the impact of colonization, westernization, and modernization has led to the erosion of these values. The paper explores the role of education in reviving traditional African values in modern society. The paper argues that education can play a crucial role in promoting the revival of traditional African values. It examines the challenges to traditional African values, the importance of education in promoting cultural heritage, and strategies for incorporating traditional African values into formal education. Employing the methods of critical analysis, prescription and evaluation the paper discovers that western education have exerted a lot of influence on African culture. The imposition of western culture and values through colonization and globalization has led to the suppression of traditional African customs, morals and practices. It then concludes that education can be a powerful tool for promoting the revival of traditional African values. It recommends curriculum integration, holistic education approaches, cultural immersion programs, utilization of technology, teacher training and policy support as strategies for the educational revival of traditional African values. The paper enjoins educators, community leaders and individuals to work together to promote these values and to develop educational programs that are grounded in African culture and philosophy.

Key words: African, Education, Modernization, Values, Westernization.

Introduction

Africa is rich in cultural heritage and diversity, with a long history of traditional values that have shaped the lives of her people. From the 'Ubuntu' philosophy of Southern Africa to the concept of "ujamaa" in East Africa, traditional African values have emphasized the importance of community, respect for elders and hospitality to others. However, the impact of colonialism, westernization, and modernization has deeply disrupted the continuity of traditional African values. Colonial education and governance systems imposed foreign cultural models that undermined indigenous moral structures and social institutions. Westernization further entrenched these influences by redefining progress in material and individualistic terms, often dismissing African communal ethics as primitive or outdated. Modernization, through urbanization, globalization, and technological advancement, has accelerated this process by shifting attention from collective responsibility to personal ambition. Consequently, the younger generation grows increasingly detached from ancestral traditions, resulting in a loss of cultural identity, weakening of moral cohesion, and a sense of

alienation from African heritage that once served as the foundation of social harmony and communal life.

The problem, therefore, lies in the growing disconnect between modern education and the philosophical essence of African traditional values. Rather than nurturing a sense of communal identity and moral consciousness, the current educational framework tends to alienate the African learner from their cultural roots by promoting Western epistemologies, curricula, languages, and value systems that prioritize individualism and material success over the communal ethics, indigenous knowledge, and moral traditions central to African identity. This disjunction raises important philosophical questions about the purpose of education and its role in shaping moral agents within their socio-cultural contexts. Thus, the central issue this paper addresses is how education can be re-envisioned as a philosophical instrument for cultural revival. That is, as a system capable of harmonizing intellectual development with the moral and communal ideals embedded in traditional African thought. The nexus between the two variables; education and the revival of traditional African values, rests on the premise that authentic development and moral regeneration in Africa depend on an educational process that reclaims, reinterprets, and transmits these indigenous values in contemporary contexts.

The thrust of the paper is to examine the challenges to traditional African values, the importance of education in promoting cultural heritage and to explore the role of education in promoting the revival of traditional African values. It shall also suggest strategies for incorporating traditional African values into formal education. This paper therefore discusses how educational practices (formal and informal) can be leveraged to revive traditional African values and empower younger generations to reconnect with their cultural roots.

Clarification of Key Concepts

African: The word "African" refers to anything or anyone relating to the continent of Africa, its people or countries. The term can be used as an adjective to describe things from Africa (for example, "African art") or as a noun to refer to a person from Africa. Ogungbemi opines that to know Africa is to have some knowledge of its geography and to interact with its people and the environment (Ogungbemi 28). Ukanah reports that Africa is the second largest of the world's seven continents, covering 23 percent of the world's total land mass and containing about 18 per cent of the world's population with nearly 1.5 billion people as of 2024. It is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean on the west, the Indian Ocean and the red Sea on the east and the Mediterranean Sea on the north. In the northeastern corner of the continent is connected with Asia by the Sinai Peninsula. Presently, there are about 53 countries comprising 47 on the mainland and six island nations closely surrounding it and which are part of the continent (Ukanah 2-3).

Education: Is the process of teaching, training and learning, especially in schools or colleges, to improve knowledge and develop skills. It is the transmission of knowledge worth-while, skills values, beliefs *etcetera*, of a culture (Ette, 20). Education can be formal or informal.

Informal education is by which a community preserves and transmits its physical and intellectual character given the fact that the individual passes away but their type remains, while education in its formal meaning is something more serious, consciously planned and deliberately executed to achieve ends or perpetuate values in a society. In this sense, we usually think of education and educative process in terms of schools and institutions devoted to learning and acquiring worthwhile skills and technique for life (Ette 22). This paper adopts both forms of education; however, it focuses more on formal education.

Modernisation: This is a process of change whereby less developed societies acquire the characteristics of more developed societies including their ways of life and values.

Values: According to Longman Dictionary, the word value is defined, ‘as the degree of usefulness of something, quality in something which makes it helpful, useful or desirable, a standard or idea which most people have about the worth of good qualities’. This notwithstanding, the meaning is not explanatory enough. The word values as it applies to this research, refers to the attitude, beliefs, behaviours and actions that are cherished, acceptable, and expected standard of behaviours.

Westernization: The adoption of the practices and culture of western Europe by societies and countries in other parts of the world, whether through compulsion or influence.

Some Key Aspects of Traditional African Values

i. Respect for Elders: Conventional wisdom presents the elder in African society as a wise, dignified and powerful figure. Hence, in traditional African societies, elders are highly respected for their wisdom, experience, and knowledge. Children are taught to show respect and deference to their elders, who are seen as custodians of cultural heritage. The very notion of the elder in African Society conjures up an image of dignified, solemn and serious old men or women who wield unchallenged authority in the community and are wise counselors of the young. The elders make decisions for the society, either on their own or as council of elders. This has been the case since time immemorial. About pre-colonial Igbo society, Ohadike writes:

Each town and lineage was headed by a headman, Onyisi, who acquired the position by virtue of his age. Town meeting were usually held, but the most important lineage and house meetings were held in the Obi (meeting shed) of the most senior elders (Ohadike, 23).

Even where monarchs ruled, they were assisted by and responsive to such council of elders. African folklore expresses the complexity of the subject of the elder in African society. While affirming the conventional view of elders as the custodians and sources of the collective wisdom of a society, folklore brings up many other perspectives. Let us examine some examples: The conventional view is stated in the Swahili proverb: “Kuishi kwingi ni kuona mengi,” which translates ‘living a long life is witnessing many things’. Another proverb states, “Penye wazee haliharibiki neno,” where there are elders, nothing can go wrong.

Another proverb restates this proverb with a warning: “Asiyesikia la mkuu huvunjika guu.” the one who does not listen to an elder will end up breaking his leg. These proverbs accurately express and reinforce the reverence Africans hold for elders. Only the most reckless african will dare defy the will of the elders. Elders are considered wise because mostly because they have lived longer and have seen more than anyone else.

ii. Community and Collectivism: This is an Afro-cultural dimension that highlights the fundamental interdependence of people. In many African cultures, the community is seen as more important than the individual, and people are encouraged to work together for the common good. Community and collectivism are central pillars of traditional African values, deeply rooted in the continent's cultural, social, and spiritual practices. There is a strong emphasis on mutual support and social responsibility within these communities. Members are expected to care for one another, sharing resources and responsibilities, especially during times of need. This collective approach fosters a sense of unity and strengthens social bonds among individuals.

In some African societies, individual identity is often intertwined with community identity. People see themselves as part of a larger group, such as a clan or tribe, which shapes their sense of belonging and purpose. An Individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately in traditional Africa. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generation and his contemporaries. Whatever happens to any one individual is believed to have happened to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individuals. Carolyn notes that this networking of value makes it possible that when an individual has a problem, not only the family but also the whole community often gets involved in finding the necessary solution. This idea is prevalence in Southern Nigerian principle of communal responsibility in socialization of the young where it is said that “it takes a whole village to raise a child”. From the perspective above, our cumulative value could be said to be collective (Carolyn, 31).

iii. Hospitality and Generosity: In many African societies, hospitality is not just a social nicety but a deeply ingrained value passed down through generations. It reflects the spirit of ‘ubuntu’, the belief in the interconnectedness of humanity and the importance of compassion and empathy towards others. Guests are treated with great respect and kindness, and sharing resources, is seen as a sign of generosity and goodwill. Among African societies, hospitality is often viewed as a moral obligation. Guests are treated with great respect and offered the best resources available, regardless of the host's circumstances. This practice strengthens social ties and reinforces community bonds, with hosts typically providing food and shelter to demonstrate their generosity. Generosity extends beyond hospitality; it is a way of life in many communities; sharing resources, whether food, knowledge, or support is integral to social dynamics. The acts of giving are not only appreciated but expected, fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring that no one is left in need. This culture of generosity enhances

social cohesion and mutual aid. Okafor summarized the Igbo and indeed African sense of hospitality in these words.

In traditional African culture, wherever there is food to be taken, everyone present is invited to participate even if the food was prepared for far less number of people without anticipating the arrival of visitors. It would be a height of incredible bad manners for one to eat anything however small, without sharing it with any one else present, or at least expressing the intention to do so (Okafor, 21).

iv. Spirituality and Ancestors: Many traditional African cultures believe in a spiritual realm that is connected to the physical world. Spirituality encompasses a holistic worldview, connecting the physical and spiritual realms, and guiding ethical behaviour through communal worship and rituals. Ancestor veneration involves honouring those who came before, as they are seen as guardians providing wisdom and protection. This connection is maintained through rituals and storytelling, reinforcing a sense of continuity and belonging across generations. Together, these values offer moral guidance and link individuals to their heritage, promoting community harmony and a shared sense of purpose. Ancestors are revered and honoured, and are often believed to play an active role in the lives of their descendants. Both spirituality and ancestor reverence provide moral and ethical frameworks within communities. They guide individuals in making decisions that align with communal values and promote harmony. The teachings and experiences of ancestors serve as lessons for navigating contemporary challenges, thereby ensuring that cultural wisdom is passed down.

Philosophical Dimensions of Some Traditional African Values

- i. Ubuntu** (Southern Africa) Ubuntu is a philosophy that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all people. It is a form of humanism which can be expressed in the phrase "I am because we are" (ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu) in Zulu language. Essentially, ubuntu refers to the interdependency of human beings, the idea that a human being is a complete person to the extent that the society gives him. Ubuntu is founded on a set of core principles and values that emphasize communalism, empathy and interconnectedness. Ubuntu's core tenet is that every person has intrinsic worth and dignity. This principle encourages acts of kindness, empathy, and compassion towards others, reflecting the idea that one's humanity is affirmed through relationships with others (Lefa, 15). Also, Ubuntu stresses that individuals are inextricably linked to their communities. The well-being of one person is seen as directly affecting the well-being of others, promoting a sense of solidarity and mutual responsibility. Respect for one-self and others is also a fundamental value of Ubuntu. This includes honouring elders, valuing diverse perspectives, and treating everyone with dignity, regardless of their status or background (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 86). Ubuntu also encourages collective responsibility and cooperation. It underscores the importance of working together

for the common good, whether in familial, social, or economic contexts. Furthermore, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the restoration of harmony are vital aspects of Ubuntu. It promotes the resolution of conflicts through dialogue and understanding, aiming to restore broken relationships and achieve social harmony (Lefa, 15). Furthermore, Ubuntu is deeply embedded in various cultural practices and traditions across African societies, reflecting its significance as a guiding principle for communal life.

- ii. **Ujamaa** (East Africa) *Ujamaa* is a concept that emphasizes the importance of community and cooperation. African socialism was characterized by an emphasis on communitarian values (as opposed to a class-based characteristic of European socialism), a strong emphasis on social development, and on the importance of creating egalitarian societies. It is often translated as "familyhood" or "brotherhood." Ujamaa was a socialist ideology that formed the basis of Julius Nyerere's social and economic development policies in Tanzania after it gained independence from Britain in 1961 (Delehanty, 44). Ujamaa emphasizes communal living and cooperation, aiming to strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of unity among people. The philosophy encourages self-reliance, where communities work together to produce goods and services, reducing dependence on external aid. It promotes agricultural collectivization and the establishment of cooperatives to enhance productivity and share resources.
- iii. **Harambee** (East Africa) Harambee is a Swahili word that means "let's pull together" or "let's unite." It is a concept that emphasizes the importance of community and mutual support. It invokes the spirit of self-help and it can be claimed, particularly in the rural areas, that the present development status was achieved partly through harambee. Harambee promotes the idea that individuals should work together towards common goals, particularly in social, economic, and development initiatives. It encourages community members to contribute their time, resources, and skills for the benefit of all, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual support. The Harambee philosophy has been instrumental in grassroots development projects. It often manifests in fundraising events and communal labour for building schools, health facilities, and infrastructure. This collective approach empowers communities to take charge of their development, reducing reliance on external aid. Mwendu Mutuli Musau) writes, broadly speaking, a harambee can be anything from a fundraising event to emotional support to a simple favour (2). Whenever an individual is facing a significant rite of passage or life event – such as a wedding, educational opportunity, serious illness or a relative's funeral – and needs help, they will contact an elder family member or tribal leader. This leader will then call a meeting with other elders, and if the issue is deemed significant enough to warrant the strength of the community, they will share the issue with the individual's family, friends and co-workers and organise a harambee. Those in

attendance often contribute money, services or emotional and physical support, and expect nothing in return.

- iv. Knowledge and Wisdom** In the traditional African culture, knowledge is highly valued especially practical or empirical knowledge. This type of knowledge is based on observation and experience. Practical wisdom is most relevant in the reconstruction of the African society and the promotion of human well-being. In many African cultures, knowledge and wisdom are highly valued and considered integral to societal well-being. They are not just about acquiring information but also about understanding the world, navigating relationships, and living a meaningful life within one's community. This system emphasizes the importance of oral traditions, storytelling, and experiential learning in transmitting and preserving knowledge.
- v. Aesthetics** Art in traditional African cultures has both functional and aesthetical dimension. Beauty is seen not only in works of art and in the human figure but also in human conduct, in humanity itself and in a person's character. Among the 10 criteria of aesthetic value and judgment are appropriateness and fittingness. For instance, music, dancing and even clothing must be appropriate to the occasion. (Gyekye 171-178). In many African societies, aesthetics are deeply intertwined with cultural identity and heritage. Art forms such as sculpture, painting, music, dance, and textiles, serve not only as expressions of beauty but also as tools for storytelling and the preservation of history. These artistic expressions often convey spiritual beliefs, social values, and communal experiences, reinforcing cultural continuity. Additionally, in African aesthetics, art is often imbued with spiritual significance. Many artworks serve as symbols of cultural beliefs, rituals, and ancestral connections, highlighting the belief that beauty and creativity can facilitate deeper connections with the divine and the ancestors.

The Historical Context of African Education

Before colonialism, education in Africa was holistic, deeply embedded in the community, and aimed at transmitting values, knowledge, and customs. The main purpose of education in the African traditional societies was to inculcate into young children moral values and norms that were acceptable within the given society. The education system was also geared towards promoting of her values like respect for self and others, peaceful coexistence, love for another, integrity, tolerance and social cohesion. As observed by Fafunwa (86), society used to accord priority to the inculcation of values of social responsibility, political participation, job orientation and spiritual and moral uprightness of the citizens. The achievements of individuals were largely determined by how well they put into practical application the value systems mentioned above. Additionally, the African traditional education advocated for a communal spirit of both work and life; hence the community at large owned all the possessions. Not only the material possessions but also children belong to all members of the community who had a role to play in their upbringing (Ngezu, 576). African education systems were designed to teach moral lessons, social

responsibility, and spiritual beliefs. Learning was experiential, often conducted through oral traditions such as storytelling, rituals, and apprenticeships, with elders and spiritual leaders playing key roles in imparting wisdom. This was the case until the colonial masters came to Africa.

Challenges to Traditional African Values

The impact of colonization on African traditions was significant. Colonization led to the introduction of new technologies, religions, political and educational systems that disrupted traditional African ways of life. The introduction of western-style education systems by colonial masters led to a shift away from traditional methods of learning, such as apprenticeships and oral tradition. Western education systems, were designed to serve colonial interests. Western education replaced indigenous knowledge with European models, prioritizing literacy in foreign languages and the values of western civilization. As a result, many African cultures and their traditional systems of education were deemed inferior, contributing to the decline of indigenous practices and values. The adoption of modern technologies and western values and practices has led to a loss of cultural identity and a sense of disconnection from African heritage. This historical disruption has had a long-lasting impact on African societies, leading to a disconnection from traditional knowledge and values.

Education as a Tool for Revival of Traditional African Values

As African societies evolve, the risk of losing cultural heritage becomes more pronounced, making it essential to explore how education can effectively transmit and reinforce these values to younger generations. At the heart of this endeavour is the recognition of cultural heritage. Traditional African values encompass a rich tapestry of languages, customs, and practices that are integral to community identity. By incorporating these elements into educational curricula, young people can develop a deep appreciation for their heritage. This process not only fosters a sense of belonging but also instills pride in their cultural identity. When students learn about their history and traditions, they are more likely to carry these values into adulthood, ensuring their continuity.

Moreover, traditional African values often emphasize moral principles such as respect, responsibility, and community. These values can be woven into educational frameworks, promoting a holistic understanding of what it means to be part of a community. By fostering an environment where such values are celebrated, education becomes a powerful force in shaping character and ethical behaviour. Community involvement is another critical aspect of using education as a means of reviving traditional values. Engaging local communities in the educational process ensures that the teachings resonate with contemporary realities even as it remains rooted in tradition. When community members, particularly elders, participate in the educational journey, they bring their wealth of knowledge and experiences that enriches the learning environment. This collaboration bridges generational gaps, enabling the transmission of wisdom and practices that have stood the test of time. A holistic approach that emphasizes spiritual and emotional development

alongside academic learning enhances students' understanding of their cultural roots. This perspective does not only breed well-rounded individuals but also strengthens cultural pride in an increasingly westernized world.

The African continent is increasingly influenced by Western ideals; reviving traditional values through education could also serve as a form of resistance to cultural homogenization. By prioritizing indigenous knowledge and practices, African communities can assert their unique identities and counteract the negative impacts of globalization. This cultural resilience is crucial in fostering a balanced worldview that honours both tradition and modernity.

Challenges to Reviving Traditional African Values through Education

Reviving traditional African values through education is not without challenges. We shall briefly discuss few of them:

- a. **The Westernization of Educational Systems:** The continuous use of western models of education that prioritize foreign languages, cultures, and ideologies by many African countries has made it difficult for African values and systems to permeate the lives of Africans. This approach often marginalizes indigenous culture and values.
- b. **Loss of Linguistic Diversity:** Language is a key vehicle for transmitting culture and values. The dominance of foreign languages such as English, French, and Portuguese in many African countries has led to the erosion of indigenous languages. Without language, many aspects of traditional African knowledge and values become difficult to communicate and preserve.
- c. **Urbanization and Cultural Disconnection:** Rapid urbanization and migration from rural to urban areas have contributed to a disconnection from traditional ways of life. Many young people growing up in urban centres may be unfamiliar with rural traditions and practices, thereby making it challenging to effectively transmit traditional values.

Strategies for the Educational Revival of Traditional African Values

Curriculum Integration

Incorporating traditional values into the existing curriculum is crucial. This can involve the development of courses that focus on indigenous languages, cultural practices, and history. By including these subjects, students can gain a deeper understanding of their heritage and its relevance in the modern world.

Holistic Education Approaches

Adopting a holistic approach to education that emphasizes academic learning as well as spiritual and emotional growth can help students connect with their cultural roots. Traditional African education often includes teachings about community, respect, and social responsibility, which can be integrated into various subjects.

Cultural Immersion Programmes

Implementing cultural immersion programs, such as workshops, festivals, and field trips, exposes students to firsthand experience of traditional practices. These activities can include traditional crafts, music, dance, and storytelling, providing a practical understanding of their cultural heritage.

Utilization of Technology

Leveraging technology can enhance the dissemination of traditional knowledge. Digital platforms can be used to create online resources, documentaries, and interactive content that showcase traditional values and practices. This approach can reach a broader audience, especially the youth, who are often engaged with technology.

Teacher Training and Development

Training educators on the importance of traditional values and how to effectively teach them is vital. Professional development programs can equip teachers with the necessary tools and resources to incorporate cultural content into their teaching.

Policy Support

Advocating for educational policies that prioritize cultural education and the revitalization of traditional values is essential. Government policies and educational institutions should recognize the importance of traditional knowledge and provide funding and resources to support these initiatives.

Summary

The paper presents a significant argument on the critical role of education in reviving traditional African values within modern society. The focus on values such as respect for elders, community solidarity, and hospitality highlights essential aspects of cultural identity that are often overlooked in contemporary discussions. The exploration of challenges to traditional values is well-articulated, providing a solid foundation for the argument. The integration of various sources, including African philosophy and cultural studies, enriches the analysis and illustrates the complexities of the relationship between education and cultural identity. Additionally, the discussion on the implications of westernization and modernization adds depth and makes a strong case for the necessity of educational reform. The proposal for incorporating traditional values into formal education is particularly noteworthy. The strategies outlined offer practical pathways for educators and community leaders, emphasizing collaboration and community involvement. This approach not only demonstrates the feasibility of the ideas presented but also encourages a collective responsibility towards cultural preservation.

Conclusion

The revival of traditional African values through education is not only possible but essential for the socio-cultural and spiritual rejuvenation of African societies. By reclaiming

indigenous knowledge, promoting cultural heritage, and fostering social cohesion, education can become a powerful tool for strengthening African identities and building resilient communities. While challenges remain, the paper recommend efforts like curriculum integration, holistic education approaches, cultural immersion programs, utilization of technology, teacher training and policy support as strategies that could revive traditional African values. It is vital for policymakers, educators and communities to work together in ensuring that the wisdom of the past is not lost but instead form a foundation for progress.

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