

Education and Leadership in 21st Century Africa: A Platonian and Yoruba Perspective

Adeolu Oluwaseyi Oyekan

Department of Philosophy
Lagos State University
Ojo, Lagos State, Nigeria
email: successcomet@yahoo.com

Abstract

The problem of underdevelopment in Africa has given birth to much literature over the years in an attempt to rescue the continent from its seemingly helpless dilemma. While certain scholars feel that Africa's problems are due to unpalatable colonial and neo-colonial experiences (Rodney, 1972; Onigbinde, 2003), other intellectuals (Chuka, 2006) point to Africa's internal problems such as corruption, ethnicity, strife and wars as the basic cause of its underdevelopment. In this paper we consider both positions to be two sides of the same coin. We are equally persuaded that central to the resolution of underdevelopment is the question of leadership, which has left much to be desired. To achieve high standards of leadership there is a need for a philosophy of education that instils the desired standards. To this end, we present a comparative analysis of Plato's concept of education and the Yoruba notion of education as championed by some African scholars (Akinpelu, 1987; Balogun, 2008; among others). While examining some western definitions of education and their underlying assumptions, the paper highlights their inadequacy in the current search for leadership in 21st century Africa. The paper concludes that only leadership based on competence and character, two vital features of the Yoruba conception of education, can facilitate development in Africa.

Keywords: Education; Leadership; Africa; Development; Yoruba

1. Introduction

It is generally agreed that the quality of education in any society determines strongly its level of development, and this is not disputed by those responsible for administering education in African states, even with their largely indifferent perspective. In Africa today, the state of the education sector mirrors correctly the general state of things on the continent. In spite of abundant natural resources, and human population needed to drive the process of development, the situation seems to be deteriorating. We intend to appraise the developmental problem of the continent from the point of view of leadership through an examination of the concept of education. This stems from our conviction that good leadership is central to the resolution of the myriad of crises that reflect 21st century Africa. The quality of leadership, on the other hand, is largely determined by the level of education and the philosophical underpinning of its training. We shall therefore examine what it means from the traditional Yoruba and Platonic points of view to be educated, what it means in contemporary Africa to be an educated person, and their implications for producing required leadership in 21st century Africa. We first proceed with our definitions of education and leadership.

2. A definition of education

Opinions differ widely on the definition properly befitting of education. From the philosopher to the historian, the psychologist and even the teacher, varied notions exist as to how education can be conceptualised. This divergence is such that even etymological definitions are not devoid of polarity. Education comes from the Latin word 'educere' which means to 'lead out' or 'bring out'. Education has been described as an activity and a process that results in both personal advancement and societal development. It is designed in totality to guide a person in learning, behavioural moulding and the resultant progress of society (Ezewu, 1981, p. 176). This conception of education describes intrinsic and instrumental values that bring about qualitative change in the individual and then impact on society. Peters (1973, p. 1) sees education as 'systematic training and instruction geared towards the development of ability, character, physical powers of the individual through the careful dissemination of knowledge'. His view describes knowledge as a tool of comprehensive moulding of the individual in a way that enhances his capacities in every aspect of life. What can be observed in this definition is its presentation of education as a systematic process. This has been responsible for Kneller's position that 'Education is the process by which any society, through schools, colleges, and other institutions, deliberately transmits its cultural heritage' (1964, p. 20). We could infer two points from this view. One, that education must necessarily be organised in a formal manner with clearly identified structures. Two, education is for the transmission of cultural heritage. In other words, there are informal ways of acquiring education, regardless of the necessity of structures both physical and procedural. This conception of education reduces greatly the need for (or the possibility of) new knowledge because it views education as the transmission of what is already known.

In addition, education is not a mere documentation and transfer of culture. If this were so, it would be reduced to information rather than knowledge. Castle's description is somewhat different: 'Education is what happens to us from the day we were born to the day we die' (cited in Ezewu, 1981, pp. 170-171). He found an ally in Bowan (1994), who asserted that education is the earned virtue, the direct logic, and the resultant effect of individual encounters with a given experience. However, the problem with this position is that it is too general in scope, thereby permitting all experience to be called education. The assumption is that man should learn from every single event or experience. But then one may ask, what did I learn from my sleep last night? I cannot deny the experience of sleeping last night; however I cannot remember learning anything. The need to

improve on this definition informed Balogun's (2008) view of education as an act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character and physical ability of the individual (2008, p. 121). The key words here for us are *formative effect*, for it is only when the individual has been influenced, such that the experience brings about knowledge, that we can talk of education taking place. Thus, we agree with Balogun's opinion that education can be acquired beyond the four walls of the school, covering other areas of life experience and having a formative effect. In sum, we describe education as the process by which an individual learns the way of life through the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values of the society within and beyond the school, for effective functioning in society.

3. Education: A Platonic perspective

Plato's philosophy of education has to do with the ideal state anchored on social justice, and education to him has a pivotal role in the attainment of such (Russell, 1947, pp. 129-131). Plato believed that people are not equally endowed, and that an ideal state is only feasible when people do what they know best. Thus, he divided society into three classes: rulers, guardians and artisans. The ruling class was made up of those who have been trained by virtue of their potential to become philosophers. Guardians were responsible for protecting the state's territorial integrity and maintaining law and order. Artisans were concerned with economic activities that sustain the state.

We must not forget the fact that Plato was a disciple of Socrates, and accordingly he regarded knowledge as virtue and ignorance as vice. While this can be translated to mean that morality is largely a function of education in the platonic sense, he equally added that education is most ideal if it perfects what an individual knows how to do best. It is the virtue of the knife for instance, to cut perfectly. Therefore, it must be in the best position to perform the task of cutting. The analogy of the knife suggests that Plato could also be hinting at the perfection of one's professional skill. Given that the platonic state as envisaged is a regulated one, and given the highly important role education was expected to play, it is only natural that education be the priority of the state. As an instrument of moulding the ideal society, the state needs to advance the educational model it considers appropriate, and implement it in such a way that guarantees the achievement of its goals. It is along this line that Plato was thinking when he called for the censorship of theatre and music. He was more concerned with moulding citizens for state duties; a task more important than the protection of rights which could turn out to be licentious, and thus enhance the flourishing of vices.

Plato regarded the teacher as a midwife, whose responsibility was to assist an individual in manifesting his/her potential. Knowledge is therefore innate, though in a crude and transient form. It is the teacher's role to facilitate the rediscovery of previously held knowledge. Plato did not consider education to be the exclusive right of any group, and was therefore not discriminatory in his opinion of who should be educated. For him, it was largely a function of capacity as reflected by birth, or in some cases, re-classification (in a case where an offspring has a capacity that is different from that of his class).

4. Education: A Yoruba perspective

We have said earlier that scholars differ widely in their understanding of what education is. What is also worth adding is that societies too differ in their opinion. In other words, the features that define an educated person may differ from society to society. Thus, it is possible for a society to have a different definition of education compared to what it had two hundred years ago. That is why in today's Britain, the educated man is the literate, urbane and sophisticated person in whose place were men of noble birth and priests a few centuries ago. Similarly, education in ancient Rome amounted to being a good orator and being excellent in military activities (Schofield, 1982, p. 70). In today's Africa, much of what is called education is western by reason of colonisation.

However, old Africa had an idea of what it is to be educated. As such, warriors, hunters, noble persons, men of character, or anyone who combines the latter feature with specific skills, were judged to be well educated (Fafunwa, 1982, p. 17). Akinpelu (1987) agrees with Fafunwa by observing that the educated person in Africa is synonymous with the 'ideal citizen'. The reason for this is that the system of education is not separate from that of socialisation. In traditional Africa, education is seen as a lifelong process in which a person acquires communal and cultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, norms and habits for survival. According to Akinpelu (1987, p. 176):

The educated man can be described as one who combines expertise in some specific economic skills with soundness of character and wisdom in judgment. He is one who is equipped to handle successfully the problems of living in his immediate and extended family; who is well versed in the folklores and genealogies of his ancestors; who has some skills to handle some minor health problems and knows where to obtain advice and help in major ones; who stands well with the ancestral spirits of his family and knows how to observe their worship; who has the ability to discharge his social and political duties; who is wise and shrewd in judgment; who expresses himself not in too many words...; who is self controlled under provocation, dignified in sorrow and restrained in success; and finally and most importantly, of excellent character and being ideal in a typical African society.

Such a conception is characterised by functionalism, social responsibility, job orientation, political participation and awareness, and includes spiritual and moral values (Balogun, 2008, p. 123). We also notice here that literacy becomes inadequate for qualification as an educated person. It is only when demonstrated knowledge has been combined with character that one is considered to be both an educated and an ideal citizen. In addition, the communal nature of African societies makes it necessary for an educated man to utilise his knowledge and character for positive social causes.

When we juxtapose the above with the Western idea of who an educated person is, we are quickly faced with two distinctions. The first is that literacy today is synonymous with being educated. This observation draws attention to Kneller's (1964) definition of education being a process of cultural transmission through schools and colleges, and demonstrates the greater emphasis on form, rather than what the content of education should be. Sithole (1999) recognised the inadequacy of this conception when he said, 'To us, education meant reading books, writing and talking English, and doing arithmetic ... The ability to exhibit all these traits, we believe, is to be educated. What we knew was not education; education is what we did not know. What it takes to be fully educated, we perhaps are palpably ignorant of (1999, p. 68). While we consider form as being important, we are persuaded that nothing confers the need for greater emphasis on it over and above content. Contra Kneller (1964), schools and colleges may be adequate for literacy, but they are not sufficient for education, at least not in the Yoruba sense.

From the Yoruba perspective, it becomes clear that formal training goes a long way in imparting skills, such that tutelage in a learning environment hones one's skills and seeks to make an individual competent in one's chosen field. Beyond that, however, the cultivation of the requisite character goes beyond theoretical moral instructions. What makes for the ideally educated man is a combination of skills and character that makes him capable of performing the functions enumerated above. Whereas formal training by virtue of its emphasis on professionalism focuses on attaining expertise in a given area at a point in time, the informal dimension is concerned with equipping the individual with what core professional training cannot offer. For example, a child undergoing an apprenticeship with a blacksmith or weaver is expected to acquire such skills as to make him capable of holding his own in such a field after a certain period. However, his expertise does not qualify him as being educated if he is found deficient character-wise. This is why the African

family, including elders, organised peer groups, family traditions and rites all contribute to an individual's character. One can say, therefore, that being educated in the Yoruba sense is to a large extent socially determined. This of course is not to relegate the importance of formal skill acquisition, but to emphasise the fact that the competence so acquired is not enough if the role expected of him is not met by society. This idea, an offshoot of the communal setting of traditional Yoruba society, recognises the possibility of skills being deployed towards ends that may be personally satisfying and rewarding, but socially devastating. It is for this reason that society seeks to tailor character towards the maintenance of communal order.

Before finishing here, we must comment on the trend to present ideas of a particular African region as representing the totality of the continent, as shown in Senghor's *Negritude* (1975), Nyerere's *Ujamaa* (1970) and a host of other philosophical ideas. The position, defended by Akinpelu (1987) and Balogun (2008) represents what traditional Yoruba society regards as the ideal features of an educational process. However, it is never in any way *African*, at least in the sense they have suggested. This clarification is essential, given the implications of the fallacy inherent to the argument. Apart from the error of fact, it denies us the benefit of what other conceptions of African origin may offer us. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the different conceptions of education in other African societies, or compare them with a Yoruba perspective. Instead we highlight the generalisation that one African society represents all. This fallacy of division, possibly arising from the similarities in experiences of African societies over the last two centuries, only highlights problems for scholarship on the continent and future directions in education within the region. The paper now moves to discuss the role of leadership and education from an African perspective.

5. The failure of leadership in Africa

Robertson (1985) defines leadership as that desirable quality which signifies the ability of a person or group of persons to persuade others to act by inspiring confidence in them (1985, p. 180). The import of this definition is that leadership is a quality or trait, and must be considered as a relation dependent on a social context, in the sense that those who are leaders cannot exercise such ability in a vacuum. Leadership implies a purposeful direction of affairs towards a definite goal, in which the led are consciously involved and positioned as beneficiaries of such goals (Oluleye, 1985, p. 16). A leader has the capacity to direct, inspire, proffer workable solutions to problems and mould individuals into a team. In the opinion of Mbadinuju (2000, p. 14), there are three basic functions of leadership. The first is to inspire confidence, the second is to set an agenda for development, and the third is to define a moral tone for society based on a regime of sanctions and rewards. A leader, as opposed to a ruler, puts himself at the service of the people. He provides direction, and the people are willing to follow him, even through uncertainty.

At this point, it becomes necessary to investigate the link between education and leadership, the two being the focus of this paper. The answer to the question becomes manifest when we synthesise our previous definitions of education: The acquisition of knowledge and skills needed for human development and societal progress. If we see leadership as being imbued with the requisite skills and knowledge needed for providing direction, we can safely conclude that education is central to leadership. This realisation largely accounts for Plato's submission that those who are leaders must go through rigorous training in order to equip them for the challenges lying ahead. But how does leadership relate to the African continent? There has been a great division of opinion as to the cause of underdevelopment in Africa. While one school of thought believes that the continent's colonial past and neo-colonial experiences are largely responsible for the poor state of affairs, there are others who feel that lack of good leadership has been the bane of the African race. The first school of thought includes the Externalist theorists (e.g. Rodney, 1972; Onigbinde, 2003; Mazrui, 1980). The second school of thought includes scholars such as Chuka (2006) and Oyebola (1976) who

represent the ranks of the Internalists. It should be noted that the kernel of the Internalists' argument is not a total denial of Africa's colonial experience. Rather, their position argues that nations with similar past experiences (e.g. Japan, India and Malaysia) now rank as some of the most developed in the world, and there must be a factor responsible for such recovery.

On reflection, we believe the two sides have credible reasons to hold tenaciously to their positions. However, there is also a need to see both sides of the coin. A binary appraisal of the African predicament enables one to understand that imperialism has continued, even though it has undergone changes. By this we mean that although colonisation by physical occupation has ended, African nations are still tied to the apron strings of Western nations. On the other hand, the failure of leadership has allowed for foreign manipulation and the failure of the simplest domestic challenges. For instance, Nigeria, in spite of being the sixth largest producer of oil in the world, with many Western firms involved in exploration, still cannot satisfy the fuel needs of its people. Instead Nigeria sells its crude oil which is then bought back at great cost after being turned into finished products by foreign refineries. One need not mention the perennial inability to provide electricity for both personal and commercial benefits. We can sum up our position in one word: Underdevelopment. The causes are internal and external; the solution is leadership. Ake (1991, p. 36) succinctly captures the nature of the problem when he writes:

Perhaps it is misleading to talk about the failure of development in Africa, for in a sense it has never really been there. When African leaders chose to take over the colonial system instead of transforming it and thus became alienated from their own people, the genuine pursuit of development became all but impossible. Besieged by the hostile force unleashed by their repression, they became totally absorbed in survival, and relegated everything else, including development to a very low priority. What passes for development was largely a crudely fabricated plan that an embattled and distracted leadership put together for the sake of appearances, often with an eye to luring prospective donors.

Evident from the above is the ignorance on the part of African leaders who are not equipped with what it takes to improve the continent's inherited imperial legacy. Coupled with ignorance is the greed for power and state resources, personalised even at the risk of the state. One possible exception is South Africa when Thabo Mbeki threw in the towel rather than rock the boat.¹ However, the activities of rulers such as Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Biya (Cameroon), the late Bongo (Gabon) and Mubarak (Egypt) show how the continent is still trapped in the grip of leaders who have neither the idea or resolve to tackle the problems in their domain, nor the character of admitting failure and exiting quietly.

We can see then, that the leadership problem in Africa manifests itself in two ways. These are the lack of knowledge and skills required to lead; and greed coupled with the need to hold onto power. This hold on power is quite understandable given the fact that it affords the various leaderships the means to achieve their corrupt desires. For meaningful development to take place on the continent we need leadership that can demonstrate intellectual competence. This is necessary for a proper understanding of the multifaceted problems that besiege the average African nation and the character needed to effect change. When some African leaders are not ignorantly signing away the life of their people, by consenting to structural adjustment programmes they know nothing about, they are busy pilfering the meagre resources at home to create a safe haven abroad. That is why knowledge alone will not be enough. A knowledgeable leader can be a traitor, lacking in character and willing to salvage his people only when it suits his own purpose. On the other hand, determined leadership without a proper understanding of the problems at hand (no matter how energetic and

¹ This happened after a rift with his deputy, Jacob Zuma, led to a division within the party and loss of control for Mbeki.

rigorous) will be an onlooker in world affairs. Any educational system wanting to produce quality leadership must not only impart knowledge, but also mould the character of those in whom knowledge is being imparted. Such a system must encourage the use of such skills for intended benefits. As of today, few African leaders have the requisite capacity in terms of skill and character to face the continent's daunting challenges. It is our belief that the Yoruba definition of education bears out this requirement.

6. Implications for good leadership in 21st century Africa

We earlier identified ignorance and greed as a clear manifestation of character deficiency besetting African leadership. We believe the Yoruba definition of an educated person, presented in Section 4, contains elements needed to address the leadership problems facing the African continent. Domiciled in this conception is the emphasis on knowledge and character. The contemporary African leader needs knowledge to understand the vicious circle of poverty plaguing society, the spread of endemic diseases, the central problem of injustice and economic inequality. The emphasis on character education is what prepares him to utilise knowledge for the common good. The comprehensive nature of the Yoruba model of education can be likened to Plato's idea of education. What differentiates the two views, however, is the absence of Plato's stratification within the African model. While Plato believes that the educational system of any society must be structured according to the principle of labour, in which would-be rulers undergo training different from that of guardians and artisans, the Yoruba idea of education allows for the recognition of man's dynamic nature. In other words, it appreciates that man cannot be likened to a tool designed to serve a rigidly determined purpose.

For Plato, children of rulers must continue to rule, while those of guardians and auxiliaries must equally inherit their own jobs (Omogbe, 1990). Plato also advocated the abolition of family, and men only marrying to give birth to their successors. This is perhaps one of the theories that provided a fertile soil for the formal and individualistic nature of western education. In Africa, the family is one of the most important schools, and a microcosm of larger society where children are prepared for integrated communal life. This is not to say that the African idea of education does not recognise individual differences, as did Plato. If anything, it allows such differences and talents to manifest themselves, such that being a hunter, a blacksmith or a weaver does not exclude anyone from the list of potential leaders. Plato's mechanical theory of education has noble goals but ultimately reduces the individual to a robot. The African version prepares him to function appropriately in the event of becoming a leader. This is aptly captured in the Yoruba proverb shown in the example that follows:

Omooba le pada di eru, Iwofa le pada di oba. (Yoruba)
A prince may become a slave, a slave may eventually become a king. (English)

Plato's succession programme, in which only sons of rulers can succeed them (irrespective of a possible leadership trait inherent in artisans, guardians and their offspring), failed to envisage the day a grandchild of an African peasant (Barack Obama) would rule the most powerful nation in the world. This is because it does not consider the possibility of a child manifesting his or her full capacities that warrant transfer to another class.

While recognising the underlying principles behind the Yoruba conceptualisation of education, there are also salient lessons that can be extracted from the Platonic model. The first is that in today's world a formal and well-articulated educational model is no longer a choice open to discussion. Curricula are designed and reviewed to cope with evolving societal challenges as they unfold. This does not, however, foreclose the possibility of such formality being complemented by

non-formal training. To the extent that they are both geared towards having an ideal individual, neither can do without the other. Plato's sense of gender equality is also a lesson for many African societies where gender inequality for women continues to be a serious issue. Female African leaders have yet to emerge on the continent, compared to the developed world. But perhaps of utmost importance is Plato's recognition of education as primarily the responsibility of the state. In many African countries today, developmental aspirations are enunciated without commitment to the education of the citizenry. The point being made, but deliberately being ignored by the ruling class in Africa, is that development does not thrive on the soil of ignorance. It has thus become imperative that any society breaking away from poverty, disease, technological and economic backwardness must see such problems as critical challenges that cannot be resolved without education. The failure to develop human resources cannot be divorced from the paradoxical state of want and squalor that Africa continues to suffer from, in spite of huge natural resources available in countries such as Nigeria, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.²

7. Conclusion

This paper has established the relationship between education and leadership. We have also argued that the understanding of education differs in some key respects when comparing Yoruba and Platonic perspectives, and Yoruba thought is more resonant with the continent's search for solutions to leadership problems. This is because Yoruba has a holistic approach that sees education beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge. It places an equal, if not more important premium on character and the consequent functionality its combination produces for societal growth. There is a need for an educational revolution in Africa so that the goals of education are radically redefined. There is a need for a new philosophy that sees education as central to addressing our problems; economically, socially, technologically and so on. This can only be done with adequate planning and provision. If we truly desire to produce ideal citizens capable of rising to 21st century challenges we need to pay attention to the development of education and leadership. The two go hand in hand, and can lead us into a new age of prosperity.

Future philosophical research must address the issue of how we clearly define not only our priorities, but also the path to attaining them. By this we mean that efforts must be geared by researchers towards developing educational models capable of producing personnel with the needed skills and character required to address the myriads of problems facing the continent. It is often said that Africa's poverty level is paradoxical given the abundant human and material resources at its disposal. While we agree that the continent is blessed materially, it is not true that it enjoys abundance in the area of human resources. At best, such abundance is at the level of potentiality if Africa's population is made the yardstick. But in terms of the capacity for productivity, the continent still lacks the needed human material that can utilise and even look beyond material endowments, just as is being done in many developed societies where emphasis is now on the generation of ideas for development. In sum, the task of philosophers in 21st century Africa is how to fashion out a model for *education of relevance*. For instance, such a model must not only focus on producing people with skills in resource management, it must train them to combat the systemic corruption that now permeates both the public and private sector of various African societies. This holistic approach will no doubt go a long way in producing properly educated Africans capable of taking care of 21st century challenges.

² Nigeria is the world's sixth largest producer of oil. Resources like iron ore and limestone among others are under exploited due to the focus on oil that unfortunately has been largely mismanaged. Liberia is rich in rubber and mineral resources while the Democratic Republic of Congo has diamond and gold in abundance. The control of such resources plays a large role in the unending conflict these countries continue to suffer.

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