

The Idea of an 'Educated Person' in Contemporary African Thought

by

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Abstract

This paper is a philosophical appraisal of the idea of an educated person in contemporary African thought. It attempts to show that contemporary Africans are palpably ignorant of who truly is an educated person, and argues that: (1) the contemporary African conception of an educated person as one who is only lettered and literate is philosophically inadequate; (2) the idea of an educated person in traditional Africa is holistic; inclusive of evidence of a well integrated personality with positive moral dispositions and observance of the ethical norms and values of the society; and (3) only those who are educated in the holistic sense can make significant and meaningful contributions to their societies. Thus, the paper concludes that there is an urgent need for contemporary African nations to adopt and utilize a holistic conception of an educated person, which emphasizes the ethical dimensions of education, in their effort to integrated development in 21st century Africa.

Introduction

Education is a major instrument of development and modernization. In fact, the view that education is the key that unlocks the door of development and modernization is held perhaps, more fervently in contemporary times. Africa, like other parts of the world, strongly believes in the axiom of education per excellence. That is, African nations share the vision of education as a pivot for social change and integrated development. They believe that an increase in the number of educated personnel in the continent is ipso facto an increase in her level of human development.

Therefore, it is important to know that unless there is clarity regarding the genuine conception of education on the continent and the nature of educated personnel that would evolve from such conception, no effective use can be made of education in development efforts. Constructively, the issue becomes more pertinent when one realizes that in some intellectual parlance, the opinion is held that education is nothing but literacy and that only those who have the opportunity to experience Western education can be regarded as ‘the educated’.

Many scholars are in consonance with the above view; since in their perception, the notion of an educated person is a culturally neutral one, devoid of any relativistic colouration. Being wary of this position, Anyanwu (1983:4) warned that “scholars have been making a profound mistake by supposing that the identity of words in different cultural philosophies implies an identity of meaning”. In specific terms, Anyanwu is saying that while the concept of “education” and the “educated person” are both common in all cultures, they nevertheless, have respective different connotations in different cultures. Understood in this sense, stakeholders in African educational systems are busy borrowing Western conceptual models of “education” and the “educated person” as the principles of enlightenment and conditions for human progress in Africa. While not at dispute with Africa’s educational philosophy (of education being instrumental to development), our concern bothers on the misconceptions and misrepresentation of “education” and the idea of an “educated person” in contemporary Africa (and while both are fundamental to this paper, the thrust of this paper will centre more on the latter).

Our notion of an educated person has been largely patterned after the Western conception. Thus, it is no surprise that such conceptual model fails to achieve its purpose in African societies, and second this increase on the emphasis of education has failed to bring about a commensurate increase in human development, sine qua non to national development, although today in Africa, there are more enrolment of pupils in educational institutions at different levels, more funds disbursed into that sector by government and private initiatives, but still they have resulted into a low evolution of educated personnel in Africa. Enmeshed in this predicament, scholars and those who care about the future of education in Africa have written volumes; indicating and attributing the failure to personnel factors. However, unknowingly to them, they do not suspect that the Western model of education, which they have uncritically assimilated, cannot facilitate the development and evolution of educated personnel in Africa.

It is against this background that Kwasi Wiredu (1995: 33) describes the African today living Africa as one who lives in a cultural flux characterised by a confused interplay between indigenous cultural heritage and a foreign cultural legacy of colonial origin, with one of the consequences of this cultural situation, a historical superimposition of foreign categories of thought on African systems of thought. This superimposition as Wiredu argues does not only generate distortions of African worldviews, but it also “could be responsible for many of the instabilities in contemporary African society” (ibid.). The idea of an educated person in the light of the African experience is quite indicative of the truism in Wiredu’s observation. The concepts of education and the educated person has not only been distorted by unexamined assimilation of their supposed meanings in alien cultures, but also by indigenous Africans, and thus such conceptions have been responsible for why education has not been *sine qua non* for development. Hence, we need to confront the task of conceptually analysing the idea of an educated person within an African context so that one can afford a clear understanding of the idea of an educated person in traditional African culture. Consequent upon this analysis, it is hoped that an African traditional appraisal of education par excellence will culminate into a pool of educated personnel in Africa, and in the long run, the continent’s development will have a better chance to be catalysed, sustained and consolidated.

Conceptualizing Education

The term education has been given various definitions by different scholars and philosophers. Hence, there is no univocal definition of education as the concept has been exposed to different and often contradictory interpretations. In its etymological derivation, Ducasse (1958: 1) noted that it comes from the Latin word “educere” meaning to ‘lead out’ or to ‘bring out’. Unfortunately, this particular definition is sterile, as another school of thought which denied that education comes from ‘educere’, to ‘lead out’, but rather from “educare”, which means to ‘form’ or ‘train’ (Schofield, 1982: 32). Notably, while these views/definitions both claim that they are right in terms of etymological meaning; they of course, establish very little on the idea of education, and at best, they provide clues which may be worthwhile to follow up.

Thus, it must be noted that with the coming of industrialism, and the increasing demand for knowledge and skills, ‘education’ became increasingly associated with ‘schooling’ and with the sort of training and instruction that went on in special institutions.

This large scale change culminating in the development of compulsory schooling for all, and may well have brought about such a radical conceptual tightening up that we now only tend to use the word in connection with the development of knowledge and understanding (Hirst and Peters, 1990: 23). Within this purview, the UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education (1995: 2) defines education as comprising organised and sustained communication designed to bring about learning.

Implicit in this definition are some words (communication organised, sustained and learning) that perhaps, deserve further explication. Communication in the sense implied in the definition requires a relationship between two or more people involving the transfer of information, 'organised' means planned in a sequence with established aims and curricular and 'sustained' means that the learning experience has to mean any change in behaviour, knowledge, understanding, skills or capabilities which the learner retains and which cannot be ascribed simply to physical growth or to the development of inherited behaviour patterns (Thompson,1981: 23). This kind of definition associates 'education' with 'schooling' or 'literacy'.

In fact, the identification of education with schooling itself raises further problems as education may be carried on outside formal schools. In other words, schooling is not the only avenue of the process of education. Education can also take place outside the school and because of the problem of over institutionalized education through schooling; there is strong feeling among modern educational thinkers that education should be de-schooled (Ashinze, etal, 1998: 1). Thus, some definitions of formal education deliberately avoid this issue. For example, Malinowsk (1994: 415) defines schooling as that somewhat restricted part of education which is given by professional educators to those who come under their tutelage in an organised institution of learning. He distinguishes formal from informal education in terms of its outward characteristics rather than basic function. Hence, to Malinowsk, informal education connotes processes by which an individual learn the culture of his or her group. He further points out that there is non-formal education, which entails processes of more highly specific learning, which may not take place in such designed environments, which are nevertheless thought of as fundamentally different from normal socialisation patterns.

Second, Fafunwa (1982: 17) defines education as "the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or young adult develops abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which he lives". Explicit in this definition is the fact that it recognises the development of individuals and concerns itself which provide total-mental, physical and vocational development of human beings, especially, as they are beneficial to society.

Third, Aggarwal (1995: 5) argues that education is the development of all those capacities in the individuals which will enable him to control his environment and fulfil his responsibilities, hence a functional definition that depicts education as an instrument of personal change and challenging to the threat of the environment to show that education is a developmental process in a person that enables him or her to make an original contribution to human life in his or her best capacity. And in this view, it is very essential to note that this definition captures the point that education is a lifelong process; neither is it terminal nor is there age limit to education; hence it is a life long process, from the womb to the tomb.

And last, Bowan (1974: 12) informs us that “education is the earned virtue, the direct logic, and the resultant effect of individual encounter with a given experience” This definition is wider and imprecise as it portrays all experience to be educative wherein experience may be of skills, elements of knowledge, the influence of others, the total atmosphere of a social environment, or any experiential encounter of human daily living. Consequently to Bowan, whatever the experience, it should be sufficiently deep and dynamic so as to evoke educating effects (ibid.).

Ideally, in my assessment, education refers to any act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character or physical ability of the individual. In this sense, education is a life-long process in what we continue to learn from experience throughout our lives. Hence all kinds of experiences can be education, starting from the ones we learn at home, school, from the radio, television, in newspapers and even the ones learnt from society through a process of imbibing cultural norms.

In this context, perhaps to further enhance our cognition of the concept of education, we can critically examine the idea of an educated person to engage a philosophical exercise based on an African understanding to clear misconceptions binding on the concept. And in doing so, we can attempt to identify and discuss those qualities, skills attitudes, depositions and other characteristic traits that will qualify a person as being an educated person.

Identifying the Educated Person

The question, who is an educated person, has remained dominant and recurrent in intellectual parlance. Various answers have been given by scholars of different traditions. In an attempt to resolve the issue of who is an educated person, other questions must be raised. Some of them are: is being educated purely a function of one’s ability to memorise, speak as well as exhibit grammatical prowess? What are the criteria for fashioning out an idea of an authentic educated person?

In our quest to provide answer to these fundamental questions, it must be noted that the concept of an educated person has cultural colourations, and as a result of this, the Western conception of an educated person should neither be a paradigm for Africa, nor can an African paradigm be a yardstick for the West. Education is as varied in its content and method, as there are different societies in the world. Thus, the superimposition of a Western conceptual model on the African notion of an educated person is bound to be futile; and one of the major avenues for this superimposition has been our pattern of education tailored towards the Western model. In view of this, an educated person has supposedly been thought of as someone who is literate or lettered. However, while this remains a Western understanding, different societies of the world have their unique conceptions of who an educated person.

Schofield (1972: 70) underscores this point when he argues that “to the ancient Greeks, an educated man was the man who was mentally and physically balanced. In Rome, an educated person was a person who was a good orator and also one who excelled in the military training, while in the Middle Ages, educated man in England was either a lord or a priest”. The thrust of Schofield remarks is that not only is the idea of an educated person culturally different, it also differs according to the period under review. In agreement with Schofield, Fafunwa argues that Africans had their conceptions of education and what it is to be educated as distinct from the Western conception. According to him, “educational goals and methods may differ from place to place but in old Africa, the warriors, the hunters, the noble person, the man of character or anyone who combines the latter feature with specific skills was adjudged to be well educated” (op. cit., 17). However, such a notion has been largely distorted in contemporary Africa because of cross-cultural interactions and influences. Today’s Africa is a product of cultural flux characterised by a confused interplay between an indigenous cultural heritage, and alien influences. Thus the perversity of a foreign legacy of colonial origin has made contemporary Africa shrewdly aware of the African conception of education; and their idea of an educated person has been terribly distorted: they are confused on who truly is an educated person. Sithole (1999: 68) rightly observes this when he opines that “to us, education meant reading books, writing and talking English, and doing Arithmetic The ability to exhibit all these characteristic traits, we believe, is to be educated. What we knew was not education; education was what we did not know. What it takes to be fully educated, we perhaps are palpably ignorant of”.

In the African culture, the concept of an ‘educated person’ is broader since there is no such distinction between the ‘educated person’ and the ‘ideal citizen’, as we have in Western culture. The reason for this is that there is no system of education separate and distinct from the system of socialization and of living in an indigenous African society. In traditional Africa, education is thought of as a lifelong process embracing the whole of living, hence the ideal person in the culture is an educated person. To be ideal, cultured or educated is thus a function of an aggregate of processes in which a person acquires community cultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, norms and habits for the survival of society. In his scholarly conception, J.A. Akinpelu (1987: 178-179) gives a vivid picture of an African understanding of an educated person. He argues:

The educated man can be described as one who combines expertise in some specific economic skills with soundness of character and wisdom in judgement. 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 skill to handle some minor health problems and 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 judgement; who expresses himself not in too many words but rather in proverbs and analogies leaving his hearers to unravel his thoughts; who is self controlled under provocation, dignified in sorrow and restrained in success; and finally and most importantly, who is of excellent character”.

The above excerpt is indeed a detailed one which shows a chain of integrated experiences that must be observed to qualify as an educated person. Such a conception as explicated above is characterised by functionalism, social responsibility, job orientation, political participation and awareness, spiritual and moral values. The excerpt equally emphasized that one is in no sense an educated person if he or she has all other qualities and dispositions but lacks good character. While it is evident in the excerpt that an African conception of an educated person satisfies the social and functional aspect of education, the individualistic aspect, which is dominant in the Euro-American tradition, is mostly submerged by the type of conception. Besides, we also find in the excerpt most of the criteria of education such as knowledge, breath of understanding, environmental awareness among others; and fundamental to all these, is the use to which these qualities are put. Furthermore, Akinpelu emphasises that “it is his demonstration of them in the process of living in his community that qualifies him to be described as an educated person, not merely the possession of the qualities” (ibid.). The implication of this is that after an educational experience (whether formal, informal or non-formal), it is expected that the educated should be able to turn his or her acquired skill and knowledge into a citizenship service, and if after a contact with the University or educational institutions, the recipient still displays a wanton sense of retrogression, primitive accumulations, he or she still remains gullible and probably lacks a focus for self and society (Asolo, 2001: 157). It is almost certain that the recipient has only scratched the educational experience in the face. Hence, such people are paradoxically regarded as “educated illiterates”.

A comparative consideration of the concept of an educated person in Western European thought system may perhaps enhance and strengthen further, an African understanding of the idea of an educated person. Commenting on this, E. Aubery (1999: 20) posits:

The educated man to be discovered by his point of view, by the temper of his mind, by his attitude towards life and his fair way of thinking. He can see he can discriminate, he can combine ideas and see whether they lead; he has insight and comprehension. He is more apt to contribute light than heat to a discussion and will oftener than not showing the power of uniting the elements of a difficult subject in a whole view...

Working in the same western tradition, R.S. Peters (1973: 240) writes of an educated person as: *He [who] possesses a considerable body of knowledge together with understanding. He has a developed capacity to reason to justify his beliefs and conduct.... The educated man is one who is capable, to a certain extent, of doing and knowing things for their own sake.*

From the above Western views of an educated person which are expressed in different forms by Wilson and Peters respectively, we can make a number of observations which tend to be in contrast with traditional African conceptions of an educated person. Evidently, all the qualities and aptitudes are individual-centred; the virtues rotate around the person; the emphasis is on the self, mind and an approach to life.

Finally, such conception is mostly in terms of what we can call a person of culture. Such views take education to be a personal rather than a social experience, whereas the Western idea of an educated person as explicated by these scholars, laid emphasis on the cognitive aspect of the person, based on knowledge and understanding to the neglect of the emotional, spiritual and other capabilities. Peters' emphasis on the intrinsic value of knowledge and other related experiences shows again, the point of divergence between the African understanding of an educated person and the Western conceptual model.

To the Africans, an educated person is one who shows evidence of a well integrated personality, meaning being economically prudent, socially and politically competent, morally acceptable and intellectually and culturally sophisticated. By economical prudence, we mean being economically efficient in the sense of possessing skills and knowledge that earns a mean of survival as well as making a contribution to the common good. Hence a socially and politically competent person is one who has the ability to participate and does participate in decisions as affecting his or her life and that of others in his or her community. And being ethical, is a function of behavioural dispositions in which makes a person act morally in line with the cultural values and norms of society, thus intellectual and cultural sophistication are meant to make the person socially aware of not only the developments in the environment, but also to observe the cultural norms of society. And thus, a synthesis of all these qualities makes for a true African understanding of the idea of an educated person; while the supposed claims of literacy as emphasised in Western conceptual models rest only on the concentration of its efforts in developing them and does not mean that it is those and only those who have been to school that can be educated, or that those who have never been there cannot be educated (Akinpelu, Op.cit.:183).

The above point becomes clearer when one realises that there are some people in both Western and African cultures who have never seen the four-walls of a school, to receive formal education, yet they are educated in the sense that they have the full grasp of what is going on in their environment; they fully know that the electric wires that pass through the front of their offices or homes should not be suddenly touched as this can lead to electrocution, and in fact, they are fully and well integrated in relation to other persons in their society (Balogun, 2002:308). Therefore, some of them approach issues wisely and diplomatically, and even participate in making decisions that affect their lives and the interest of others in their community, and know the immediate steps to take in terms of discretion when there is dissension. The Yoruba in their rich cultural-proverbial heritage recognises this with the saying- "Ìwé kì í ẹ̀ ogbón, àlejò ikùn nì" meaning, "literacy is not wisdom, but an addendum to already acquired knowledge". It must be noted that "ikùn" which literarily means 'belly' in Yoruba is standing for the knowledge already acquired, hence what is already taken in. And although this is not to undermine literacy education, as it is the pivot on which all other forms of education revolve; it is not an end in itself; but only a vehicle for obtaining further information, for modifying attitudes and behaviour, and for achieving a better quality of the educated person.

Lessons and Thoughts for Contemporary Africa

We have noted earlier the problem associated with the superimposition of foreign category on our indigenous conceptual schemes, which is the case of the contemporary African concept of an educated person, it must be told that this uncritical assimilation and patterning of our educational system after the Western model has the consequence of leading us to conceptual colonization. In fact, such conceptual colonization could be responsible for the problems besetting contemporary African societies. We have been conceptually decolonized in believing that it is only formal education that can afford a person to be successful, rather than emphasising being a person of value, as successful. In view of our crass for formal education without due consideration of the ethical dimension, social vices have escalated at a geometric progression rate. Thus, all eyes are on paper qualification without concession for moral probity, intellectual creativity or problem solving capacity, thus the resultant effects of these are obvious: examination malpractices, nepotism; mediocrity at the expense of meritocracy in public, private and corporate corruption, unemployment, and high crime waves with the long-run effects of all these anomalies leading to political instability, social disorder and stunted development.

And in fact, when viewed critically, and if the idea of an educated person is to be taken to its logical conclusion, it would be no surprise to say that only a few people in Africa can claim to be educated. Even person of our seemingly “educated elites” who are on the corridors of power today are in the real sense of the word, uneducated; because if they were truly educated, they would be the embodiments of well integrated personalities, they would not be stooping to the mischief of putting African nations in the economic and political bondage through corrupt practices, and via being an educated person, they would generally be law abiding, patriotic, self-reliant, and morally ingrained. But that is not our current reality.

In short, the values attached to the Western model of education has encouraged Africans to uncritically embrace the idea of an educated person as one who is associated with being bookish, prowess, paper qualification focused and bestowed with academic appellations. Marred in this conceptual distortion, contemporary African emphasis has been on formal education at the total expense of other ethical qualities that make an educated person in traditional African culture. The belief is that the more the numbers of formal educational institutions, the higher the level of educated personnel in the continent. However, an increase in the emphasis on formal education has failed to commensurate with an increase in educated personnel, thus education has always been taken to be a pivot for social change and development. But in a situation, where there is a dearth of ‘truly educated’, as we have in Africa, the pace of development cannot be accelerated but only remain stagnant as it is, and as a result of the super imposition of the Western model of education on Africa, a distorted notion of education and educated personnel has become pervasive in Africa.

It has been forgotten that it is only in the hands of fully integrated as entailed in the traditional African understanding, that literacy can be the most effective means to true development. However, the contemporary neglect of the African notion of an educated person has made literary education a basis for the cultivation of an abysmal of ignorance, greed, individualistic acquisition, and all sorts of social vices. Yet, the products of such an education in African context do not totally qualify as educated personnel, without fulfilling the cultural and ethical dimension of being educated. Thus, the absorption of only the Western model of education without ethical education will continue to be a clog in the wheel of progress and development in contemporary Africa.

Therefore, a truly educated person in the context of African understanding shows an evidence of well-integrated personality; he or she is morally conscious of his or her actions and shows evidence of responsibility in the social welfare of others. He or she is a person of all season, who is cultured and broadminded; socially sensitive of his or her crucial role in developmental process, and embraces socialism rather than individualism stressed by the Western idea of the educated person. Such a person thus relates with society and is an evidential embodiment of societal values with his or her physical body, mind and spirit fully developed to the fullest capacity to ensure the survival of his or her society.

From the above expositions, an African understanding of an educated person is perhaps necessary and important, especially at this point of our history. The praxis of education being a condition for social change and development can only cease to be a mirage in Africa, if the African connotation can be disseminated and made ingrained in our living consciousness. Such an African orientation will bring an attitudinal behaviour change that will aid our developmental drive. In fact, such an understanding will set Africa nations on the pace of catalysing, sustaining and consolidating their developmental efforts in the 21st century. It is our submission that for us to have a better contemporary Africa, the idea of an educated Africa must be decolonized to include the ethical dimension of being educated. Only those who are educated in this holistic sense can make significant and meaningful contributions to the development of their societies, and thus, it is on this background that this paper enjoins government, educational agencies and all other stakeholders in contemporary society, especially in African nations, on the urgent need to fine-tune their educational philosophies and structures in line with this holistic conception of an educated person.

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