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Understanding African Ontology in the Context of Philosophy of Education

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Abstract

This paper explores African ontology in the context of philosophy of education. African ontology lays emphasis on communality, interconnectedness and relational interaction among human beings, spiritual realm and the entire nature. This is in sharp contrast with the more individualistic Western metaphysical world-view. Considered from the perspective of philosophy of education, African ontology can be seen to offer a holistic approach to teaching and learning, with strong emphasis on intellectual development as well as moral, spiritual and social growth. The paper digs into key African ontological principles and how they inform educational theories and practices, and discusses the integration of traditional/indigenous African knowledge system into the contemporary curricula of education. Also, the paper highlights the importance of community and personhood in African thought, the challenges posed by globalization and Western education models, and the need for decolonized educational frameworks. The paper further argues that education in Africa should reflect African world-views, which foster holistic development and greater cultural relevance in modern educational systems. The conclusion drawn by the paper is that African ontology provides a unique and desirable perspective on philosophy of education, with great emphasis on the interconnectedness of individual human beings with their communities and the world around them, and even beyond the physical to the spiritual realm. Thus African ontology favours an education system that fosters not only intellectual development, but also moral, social, spiritual and emotional development. Based on the conclusion, the paper recommends, among others, that the governments of various African countries should pursue an aggressive decolonization of African education through policy mandates and implementations that promote African ontological principles and world-views, and that curriculum designers should be drawn from tested and proven scholars and experts in African cultural values, as well as African philosophers of education.

Keywords: Ontology, Africa, Education, Philosophy of Education, Personhood

Introduction

African ontology is centered on the nature of existence as understood in African thought system, which are deeply rooted in the social, metaphysical and ethical frameworks of African societies. These philosophical perspectives, collectively referred to as African philosophy, shed light on how African people conceptualize reality, human existence and their relationship with the world at large. In relation to the philosophy of education, African ontology provides a comprehensive understanding of education that goes beyond intellectual development and maturity to a holistic formation that embraces both the personal and communal development.

This paper is an attempt at an exposé of African ontology within the context of philosophy of education. In doing this, efforts are made to explore African ontology as a communal perspective on being, African ontology in the context of education, Community, personhood and education, challenges of globalization and Western education models, and implications for educational theories and practices.

The paper employs the methodology of conceptual and content analysis, literature review and critical discourse. The aim of the paper is to enhance a better understanding of African ontology and the need to integrate its tenets into the modern education systems in Africa.

African Ontology as a Communal Perspective on Being

African ontology is fundamentally communal, with emphasis on the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings – human, ancestor, spiritual entities, and nature (Mbiti, 1990) [5]. In Western metaphysics, humanity is separated from the natural world. African ontology, in contrast, sees humanity as embedded in a network of relationships, where the existence of the individual is validated through collective belonging. This is beautifully expressed in the concept of *ubuntu*. Literally *ubuntu* means “I am because we are” (Ramose, 2002) [9]. This underscores the indispensability of the spirit and practice of communalism in the African traditional setting. One’s being is a meaning and value because of the being of others.

In African ontology, one can discern the relational nature of beings. In this ontological view, an individual’s identity and existence are intertwined with that of other human beings, the entire universe and the spiritual realm. In African ontology, therefore, reality is a unity of diverse beings, visible and invisible. According to Gyekye (2013) [2], a notable feature of African ontology is the integration of the spiritual and material worlds, as well as the cyclical notion of time, where past, present, and future coexist and influence one another. The cyclical understanding of time in African ontology is widely different from the linear concept of time that is typical of Western thought. That of African ontology offers a broader and more dynamic and inclusive framework for a better understanding of reality and existence. This broader view makes it easier for human beings to appreciate and value themselves, take a better care of their environment, respect nature, consider the future and live in harmony with one another and have deference to the spiritual realm.

African Ontology in the Context of Philosophy of Education

Philosophy of education is the application of philosophical principles, methods and perspectives to the understanding of educational theories and practices. It investigates the aims, methods and content of education. In this way it endeavours to provide the underlying philosophical principles that guide educational processes, both in the clarification of theories and their applications to real life situations. From the perspective of African ontology, education means much more than acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies for individual empowerment and their contributions to the society. In African ontological setting, education encompasses the development of the individuals in their social, moral and spiritual dimensions. In this context, Higgs (2003) [3] argues that African education has been historically holistic and integrative, in contrast to Western education which gives priority to intellectual development over other dimensions of growth.

Community and communalism are significant factors in the Africa world. No individual can do without them. The traditional African education was based on these facts. Thus in traditional African education, efforts were geared towards preparing individuals to be effective and positive contributors to the society of which they were members. This was done by

teaching them social norms and values, moral responsibilities, and cultural knowledge and values in their various dimensions. The elders and other members of the community played leading roles in the education of the young members of the community by transmitting to them wisdom, skills and other values cherished in the community. In that process of education, emphasis was on active participation and every-day life practicing of what is taught and learned. In this regard, points out that African educational philosophy is internally integrative, designed to harmonize the learner with society, nature, and the spiritual realm.

Community, Personhood, and Education in African Ontology

Emphasis on community and personhood has been an outstanding characteristic feature of African ontology. It is this that shapes African philosophy of education. Hence in the typical African traditional society, education was never an individual thing, but a communal effort, where knowledge was transmitted through social interactions, oral traditions, collective activities, and regular meetings at the various levels group peers and age grade systems.

Educational tools used in this system included rituals, storytelling, and community ceremonies. According to Fafunwa (2018) [1], these tools embedded cultural values, ethical norms, and communal responsibilities into the learning process. Traditional African education had the goal of not only developing the cognitive power of the individuals, but also to nurture personhood. In African ontology, personhood is a concept that includes moral integrity, wisdom, and the capacity to contribute to the good of the community. In this sense, personhood is an embodiment of sound character, moral probity, wisdom and positive attitude towards the community to which the individual belongs and in which their identity is rooted and has a meaning.

It should be understood that in African ontology and thought, personhood is not an innate quality but something that individuals must attain through relationships and fulfilling communal roles (Metz, 2011) [6]. It is within the community setting that the individual has value and identity, acceptance and recognition. This is unlike the individualistic notion of the person which characterizes most of the Western educational systems. Education, in the Western thought, is primarily viewed as a means of personal advancement. In the African world, personhood is achieved through social integration, strength of character, and positive contributions to the well-being of the community. In the African context, therefore, the success of education is measured by the individuals’ ability to promote social harmony, peaceful co-existence, fraternity and moral development within the community, not just by individual achievements and personal emancipation.

This is not to say that personal achievements and successes were not valued by the people. What is meant is that personal achievements and successes were not simply for the benefit of the individual achievers, but rather for the good of the entire community. For this reason, any individual achievers who did not deploy their achievements to the good of the community were invariably isolated and looked upon as social misfits. No matter how wealthy or successful such people were, they were on their own. They were viewed as callous and sadistic members of the community, with empathy deficits.

Challenges of Globalization and Western Education Models to African Ontology

In this modern era, the effective transmission of African ontological principles has become complicated due to the impact of globalization and Western education paradigms. These Western models or paradigms are gaining dominance in most of the modern education systems, especially in Africa. Across many African countries, formal education systems have been substantially influenced and shaped by the legacies of the colonial masters and their agents. These legacies, which no doubt favour Western manners of thinking, knowledge and production (Mungwini, 2012) ^[7], rather than promoting African values, unfortunately persist till this day, even long after the so-called attainment of independence by these African countries. The ugly situation has resulted in the marginalization of traditional African knowledge systems and world-views, thus alienating and disconnecting African students from their cultural roots, local realities and sense of African communalism.

In the midst of the identified challenges, however, there have been increasing efforts and movements, championed by African scholars, towards incorporating African ontological principles and perspectives into the contemporary African education systems. For instance, Wiredu (1996) ^[10] advocates the decolonization of African education systems, and encourages a critical reassessment of the conceptual frameworks used in education. This calls for the integration of African knowledge systems and values into the curricula of African education so as to make education more relevant to the lived and daily experiences of African students. In a similar vein, Mbembe (2016) ^[4] argues that decolonization is not merely about rejecting Western education but about creating space for African ontological perspectives within educational frameworks. There are many other African scholars in this frame of thought and expression, with genuine concern about African values and authentic education. The arguments of these scholars do not, however, imply the outright exclusion or negation of global perspectives. Rather the emphasis is on the need to have African education systems that respect and reflect African ontologies, foster a sense of identity and belonging among African students while maintaining relevant global perspectives.

Educational Implications of African Ontology in the Context of Philosophy of Education

With its emphasis on community and communalism, connectedness of beings, holistic development of the individual development, and core cultural values, African ontology has significant implications for education in the context of philosophy of education, especially pertaining to educational practices in African context. One of such implications is the need for creating educational environments that promote cooperation, moral responsibility, empathy, sense of respect, and desire for the common good. Such environments, would engender a balance between intellectual development and socio-cultural and ethical growth.

Heavily influenced by the Western thoughts and models, education is becoming increasingly seen as a means of individualistic economic emancipation and financial role playing. With the integration of African ontological views, however, while economic equation is not discounted, education should also emphatically cultivate in the learners

the ability to foster moral probity, social well-being, fraternity, community cohesion and values for human life.

Another of such implications is the need for the curricula of African education to reflect the realities and world-views that surround the African students. To achieve this, efforts should be made by the governments and other stakeholders in the education systems to integrate African culture, history, literature, indigenous knowledge, and philosophy into their respective formal education systems. It is not enough to teach these in schools, but also to create conducive environments, infrastructure and other empowerments, including adequate research funding that would facilitate their application to daily lives and activities in African communities.

The integration of African ontological views into the African education systems is another terminology for decolonized curricula. This would produce a more balanced interaction, exchange and growth between African and Western world-views on all the arenas of human existence and endeavours. In such a situation, students would be provided with a deeper, more contextualized and realistic approach to, and understanding of, the world – theirs and others', with mutual respect, collaboration and growth.

In the traditional African education, talents skills were recognized and encouraged. Thus there were expert blacksmiths, sculptors, cloth weavers, and a host of others. It was an accepted truism that not everybody is destined for formal education in the full sense of the term. This understanding and encouragement of talents and gifted skills helped in the provision of varied services needed in African communities. Integrating these talents into formal education in terms of technical and vocational education should be very much encouraged in the African education systems, even if such talented learners do not go full length in the process of formal education.

There is also the implication of the use of African languages as media of instruction at all levels of education systems. According to Ngũgĩ (2018) ^[8], by promoting African languages in education, students can engage more deeply with their cultural heritage and develop sense of identity and belonging. This is a great challenge to African educators and curriculum designers and implementers. And there is need for educational policy mandate to direct and achieve it.

In African ontology, there is a strong focus on the need for a holistic education which takes cognizance of the moral, spiritual, emotional and relational aspects of human development. This implies that African education should face the challenge of nurturing the full potentials of students. In this way, students will be helped not only to grow intellectually, but morally, socially, responsibly, fraternally and communally as well, thus producing integrated individuals who are well balanced in the society.

Conclusion

With the exploration carried out, it can be convincingly stated that African ontology provides a unique and desirable perspective on philosophy of education, with great emphasis on the interconnectedness of individual human beings with their communities and the world around them, and even beyond the physical to the spiritual realm. African ontology favours an education system that fosters not only intellectual development, but also moral, social, spiritual and emotional development.

By integrating the principles and insights gained from African ontology into the contemporary education

frameworks, African societies are sure to have educational systems that are holistic, culturally relevant and responsive to both local and global needs in the face of the changing tides of events and the reality of inter-culturalism now rapidly gaining global attention.

Recommendations

On the basis of the conclusion arrived at, the following recommendations are put forth:

1. The governments of various African countries should pursue and aggressive decolonization of African education through policy mandates and implementations that promote African ontological principles and world-views.
2. Curriculum designers should be drawn from tested and proven scholars and experts in African cultural values.
3. The use of African languages in the teaching and learning process should be encouraged at all levels of education in Africa. Moral education and ethical concerns should be given prominence in African curricula of education.
4. African philosophers of education should pay greater attention to the clarification and concretization of African philosophies as they pertain to education, applying local wisdom and truth values to all aspects of African education.

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