Investigating the World of Adult Education in Africa

Mejai B.M. Avoseh
Brooklyn, NY, USA

Recommended Citation

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Abstract: Adult education in contemporary Africa is faced with a range of problems. This paper tries to stimulate some level of debate around these problems and hopes to include adult education in Africa in the global investigation of the world of adult education.

Introduction

Adult Education in Africa dates back to traditional African society where it was used to secure the survival of the community. Enveloped in the survival drive were the community's values, morality, skill acquisition and various forms of training. More importantly, adult education then was a life long process that was used by traditional institutions of Higher Education to ensure that each community always created and preserved its class of 'philosopher kings'. Like the rest of traditional education, adult education was essentially culture-propelled and community based. It was an important bridge between the past and the present with a shuttle to the future. It is in this sense that one can describe it as being traditional.

The voyages of discovery of the likes of Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama eventually led to opening up different parts of the globe for the mutual benefit of humanity. This was the genesis of what we now know as globalization. For Africa the bye-product of the initial globalization was colonialism and then slavery. In its attempt to refine the natives and to make them better individuals, colonialism also came with some form of adult education programs. The initial programs were based on literacy education. These initial levels of adult education were later expanded to include correspondence colleges, extra-murals and in-service training. The effect of these new and specialists agenda of adult education was that, among others, it debased the cultural foundations of traditional adult education and replaced it with a foundation laced in colonial values.

These 'foreign' values are now what dictate the pace of development and 'modernity' in contemporary times. The truth of this has been boldly underlined by the realities of science and technology that subsist in globalization and have become ubiquitous. Part of the very essential and attractive features of science and technology are the absence of authoritarianism, freedom of expression and enquiry, and the almost inestimable values of democracy. Consequently, for any nation to be able to keep pace with the demands of the modern world as dictated by globalization; embracing the values, languages and intellectual mannerisms of some acknowledged superior cultures becomes an imperative. Yet no adult education program aimed at social justice and empowerment can take root outside the immediate beneficiaries' language and culture. The elements of culture and language are to human beings what natural water is to fish.

No doubt there is a crisis of identity almost at every level of human endeavor in Africa. The main issues revolve around culture and language and are essential for investigating and defining adult education. The question then is, should traditional cultures whose features appear to be at variance with the benefits of science and technology forget the past and forge ahead with globalization? Or should they be limping behind, very far behind, with pride in their tradition? This paper explores the possibility of two likely trends of argument. The first argument is advanced around a 'traditionalist' perspective that may want to define adult education in Africa today in relation to the past. The other line of argument is from the modernization angle that posits that the present of adult education in Africa must be emphasized in relation to the future.

Adult Education in Traditional Africa

The problems of Africa are so down to earth that even defining what is 'traditional Africa' becomes a problematic. However, there is a sense in which sub-Saharan Africa has been and can generally be defined as traditional Africa. The common thread of culture and history forms the basis for this definition. Traditional Africa is used in this paper within the framework of sub-Saharan Africa seen as one because of a common root of history and culture (Avoseh: 2000A). It covers the culture and tradition of Africa in its pure pre-colonial state. Locating adult education within this context is not as easy as using different epochs of history- Age of Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution etc- to identify and define it. Many things contribute to the difficulty of sorting adult education out of the traditional system. Suffice to briefly mention two of the reasons why I find it difficult to identify and define adult education in traditional African society.

First, and most important, is the fact that in almost all of traditional Africa education was a continuum that does have the type of compartments that post-colonial education introduced. This continuum extends from the unborn to the ancestors. This continuum was socially structured and controlled and was synonymous with life. It was a process of learning for life that prepared the individual for the revered status of an ancestor. This makes it very different from what we now know as adult education whose features are easily discernible from other forms of education. What I have used in determining adult education in traditional Africa was the type of 'education' that individuals received, as they became adults. The second major difficulty in trying to sort out what constitutes adult education within the traditional African setting has to do with its principal objectives. The history of adult education in Europe and North America is generally woven around a social movement aimed at social justice and equity, a force for addressing social injustice, gender inequality, economic domination and general marginalization (Jarvis 2001, Korsgaard 2000, Stubblefield & Keane 1989). Thus adult education in these societies-from its past to the present- has been a way of rescuing the individual from the ravages and limitations imposed by society.

The objectives of education in traditional Africa point to a direction different from being equipped to fight for justice and equity. The main objective of education (including adult education) in traditional Africa subsisted in what the Gu call **Wa D'agbe** and which the Yoruba refer to as **Iwa** 'good character'. The essence of **Wa D'agbe** is to equip **M'edagbe** 'the ideal individual' with the intellectual and physical ability as well as the moral ingredients necessary for protecting the values of the family that subsisted in those of the community. The drive towards building good character in individuals was a participatory community affair where the family was responsible for ensuring that all 'homework' was done. Religious education, vocational training, physical education and community activities all form the content of the lifelong educational process. At the level that can be referred to as 'adult education' there were both the formal and the informal avenues (Ocitti: 1994). The informal aspect consisted of individuals making deliberate efforts to learn certain things. It also included the 'unconscious' and 'incidental' involvement in the every day life of one's community. Although it was unconscious, it was by no means aimless. Indeed, "it is not bound by time and place and it is open to all members of society…and it presents a truly lifelong process of learning...'"(Ocitti 1994, p.19). The formal aspect was age-specific and focused on learning groups based on skills, initiation rites, vocational and allied training. The most formal aspect of it all was manifested in the apprenticeship training programs that blended the intellectual and practical elements of education so well by putting learning into action and putting action into learning. It was along this line that select individuals and 'secret cults' served as 'Institutions of Higher Learning'. The members of these cults were the philosopher-kings of their different communities who took charge of the education of young adults and adults. I often recall my initiation into the cult of the spirit of ancestors- the **Zangbeto** cult of

the Gu. It was about a three months' training and learning. Everyday of the period, my father took me when the whole village was asleep. We would go into the forest where some elders and young boys of my age were assembled. We learnt different things at every meeting. At the end of it all we were given new names. The day of our naming was the 'graduation' and our new names were the 'certificates' acquired. The essence of it all was life and how to live it in society (Avoseh 2000B). It was all about sustaining and expanding the cherished values of the community that had served as insulators for individuals over the ages. The thrust of adult education in traditional Africa was the individual-in-the-community. African traditional adult education was part of mainstream education with the highest status and esteem.

Adult Education in Post-Colonial Africa

Almost all references to the history of adult education in pre-literate Africa link it with some foreign context. Colonialism and/or apartheid introduced some type of adult education into Africa that was strongly and essentially paternalistic. Omolewa (200:12) observed that "colonialism brought adult education programmes" to Africa through Christianity and Islam. Within the specific context of Southern Africa, Walters (1997:18) admits that "adult education in South Africa have been shaped very directly by colonialism, capitalism and apartheid". Similarly Fordham (2000), Oduaran (2000), Nabudele (1997) and Okeem (1981) all point to the influence of the outsider that have remained the bane of adult education in today's Africa. Oduaran (2000:4) calls it "cultural imperialism" that lingers on in the knowledge base and Fordham (2000:197) insists it "is dominated by thinking which stems from Western Europe and North America".

The type of adult education that was introduced on the wings of colonialism and apartheid was allowed to 'develop' along the lines of the needs of the sponsors and organizers at the detriment of the ordinary people. Even after political independence was achieved in most African countries, adult education programs-even at the University levels- were still designed and executed mostly along the lines of the needs of the master by simply allowing the one playing the piper to dictate the tune. Consequently, adult education since it began in colonial and postcolonial Africa has remained mostly at the level where its language, structure and mode of operation have remained alien to the people whose mindsets are essentially traditional. Thus in spite of the 'advancement' in research and scholarship and in spite of the high level of generous external support and involvement, the idea of adult education for social justice and equity in Africa remains a mirage.

As a matter of fact, the idea of 'African adult education' does not arise even though adult education has been in Africa for centuries. Without delving into the debate as to what is African and what is not it can be affirmed that adult education in today's Africa is still trying to improve on what it was during colonialism and apartheid. Citing a recent study on adult education for Africa, Fordham (2000:198) agrees that "the stories of African adult education have barely begun to be told". For most countries in Africa, adult education remains almost exclusively, adult literacy education. That was what it was when it was introduced within the context of 'civilization'. It was meant to provide a little light to majority of Africans who were assumed to be in intellectual and cultural darkness. Adult education in colonial Africa belonged to the periphery. And most postcolonial leaders in Africa have tried to keep it there.

Julius Nyerere[1] was one African leader who tried to make adult education a weapon that the ordinary people of his native Tanzania could use to tap the benefits of a civil society (Nyerere 1979). Apart from Nyerere's outstanding efforts, most African leaders have made adult education important only on paper. They create Directorates and presidential task forces and projects on adult education without the necessary support. Walters and Watters (2000) and other 'Country reports' in Indabawa et al (2000) point

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[1] Nyerere tried to 'Africanize' adult education by linking adult education to traditional African values especially the extended family system put through his **ujamaa**.

to the fact that adult education in contemporary Africa is far, very far away from being the people's ally in the battle for social justice. It still wears the identity of the master-induced program.

The picture of the status of adult education in Africa sketched is pathetic and true. It may be true that a lot of 'progress' has been made in recent years in terms of adult education programs in some African countries. The fact remains however that the need for adult education in today's Africa is much more than that of the cosmetic approach. The challenges and demands of modern African society make the need for adult and allied education in Africa now and possibly in the next two or so decades go much more beyond the issues of equity and social justice. Most Africans are faced with a desperate situation of 'life and death'. There is a catalog of misrule, excruciating poverty, life-consuming diseases, and inhuman treatment of women and children, wars, violence, refugees, natural disasters and the dearth of true democracy. In this situation, adult education is needed first to hold on to life-to survive- and second, to fight for social justice and equity. Whereas the world of adult education in the advanced countries is being investigated in order to sharpen its tools for aiding social justice, equity, 'cultural reproduction' and the expansion of the individual's powers within society, the same cannot be said of the world of adult education in Africa. The fact is that the world of Africa is very different from the world of the developed societies yet adult education in Africa has not tried to be different. The over all result is a long history of colonial and post colonial efforts of adult education in Africa that has not made any significant impact on the ordinary people. Finher's and Asun's (2001) reference to adult education being at the crossroads is therefore more appropriate to adult education in Africa. The crossroads include making adult education a process of survival and of life that makes use of African traditional values without disconnecting from the benefits of a global community.

A Jigsaw Puzzle

Investigating the world of adult education or any education at that involves taking a deeper critical look at it within the context of the realities of a given society. The realities of Africa vis-à-vis adult education are open to a number of interpretations. The optimists may contend, for instance, that the strides made by adult education in Africa especially after colonialism and apartheid are noteworthy and commendable. What is needed is for adult educators in Africa to improve upon these 'achievements'. This trend of argument sounds all the more plausible when the present status of adult education in Africa is compared with what it was during colonialism. This is especially true in the area of research and scholarship including some development-oriented programs.

The other trend of argument is to put these achievements in and of adult education in Africa alongside the socio-political realities of the continent. In almost all facets, the realities of the African social landscape are unique to the continent. On the other hand, the bulk of the adult education programs and scholarship are prototypes of the advance societies. It is like adopting the strategies of a very successful coach of the New York Knicks to coach Manchester United. The fact is simply that adult education programs in Africa are not resulting in propelling the wheel of social justice and equity. It has remained outside the social context of Africa because it has not been able to confront in any significant way the entrenched anti-people governments, policies and issues in Africa. This line of argument may conclude that adult education has 'failed' in Africa because its root is in the sky. For it to take root and be an effective source of empowerment; it must be re-rooted in the people's traditional.

These two likely lines of thought above take us back to a semblance of the 'modernist' cum 'traditional' perspectives. The modernist perspective is a realization of the deep-rooted power divides between mainstream and periphery individuals and communities. The code name of this is globalization. In the face of globalization, the weak individuals/communities-especially of Africa-cannot expect to have social justice and equity by holding tenaciously to their traditional values. It is too risky to ignore the

overall benefits of science and technology. Yet science and technology are improvements on some other people's traditional values. So, tradition is indeed the foundation for science and technology and, ipso facto, the foundation for development. This makes the investigation of the world of adult education in Africa and a recommendation for the future a 'jigsaw puzzle'.

Conclusion: A Case for Hybridization

In investigating the world of adult education in Africa we have veered into the social, cultural and political environment. The realities on the ground are scary and seem to portend grave dangers for the future. However, gargantuan as these problems are, they are not beyond the normal areas of attack of adult education. Indeed, most of the fundamental problems appear to be fertile grounds for the growth and development of adult education geared towards social justice and equity. The basic problem and puzzle revolve around how best to design and execute programs that will equip the beneficiaries with the intellectual and physical tools to take charge of lives and to fetch their fair share of the benefits of democracy and globalization. Ordinarily it would have been proper to recommend that adult education in Africa should look inwards for a solution. However the realities of globalization present a barrier to this option. When the need to fall back on indigenous traditional values is juxtaposed with the demands of globalization, the best option open to adult education in Africa would be a form of hybridization- a mix of the traditional and the modern.

It may be generally agreed that modernization has not been successful in Africa but it is also true that the core traditional values (where they still exist) have not helped much. Inept and incompetent rulers have exploited the positive traditional values of their people to perpetuate misrule. So, in spite of the 'evil' in modernization and the good in traditional values, adult education in Africa needs a blend of the two worlds. The first, and by all means the most important, is the issue of identity. Identity in this case has to do with confidence building and empowerment. In this respect adult education must exhume, resuscitate and inculcate traditional African values. This is especially essential given the fact that most of Africa's problems are adult problems that need adult solutions. Promoting cultural values will be a way of incorporating adult learners into the search for solutions to Africa's multifarious problems. More importantly, it will help ensure that Africa still keeps its cultural identity in the face of the push for a cultural universe via globalization. Given the fact that adult education is the form of education that is closest to adults and their values adult education in Africa can easily assist people to be themselves in the era of a cultural universe of globalization.

The other and the most potent side of globalization are the economic. In creating an economic universe globalization has signaled its alignment with Darwin's survival of the fittest. The present economic genes of Africa are not the types that can survive the 'might is right' stance of globalization. In the face of such reality adult education in Africa needs to employ the skill acquisition and scientific methods of the advanced world. It is agreed that African religio-cultural values should not be compromised for anything but science and technology are ignored at any society's economic peril. Herein lies the imperative of hybridization as a viable option for adult education in Africa. If it is true to fact that globalization has positive aspects then they should project globalization as an enlarged form of the traditional African family system. The family is the supreme lifelong insurance that never goes bankrupt. It is the most secured social security that is beyond the reach of any prodigal government. If globalization were to project this form of global village and family then adult education and adult educators in African should be protected and assisted by the giant hands and heads from the advanced worlds. This assistance should not be the usual 'development as donation' but mostly in the form intellectual and moral support. This support should be along the lines of the 'art and science of helping adults' and adult educators in Africa to make adult education a truly potent weapon to fight for social justice and equity. The idea of

hybridization may not necessarily be the best but it is the most feasible. And as an African proverb puts it **bi a ko ri adan a fi odide se ebo-** when the real sacrificial animal is not available the gods accept something close to it.

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