

Chapter 15

**OMOLUWABI'S APPROACH TO EDUCATING  
THE AFRICAN CHILD**

**Esther F. Akinsola**



## CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, the student-learner should be able to: 1) Explain African epistemology, 2) Gain insight into the centrality of oral traditions as the driving force in African theory of knowledge, 3) Master the role played by oral traditions in Yoruba traditional education, as exemplifying a holistic approach to education in African cultures, 4) Understand the comprehensive and holistic approach (the *Omolunabi Way*) to African education as represented by Yoruba traditional education, 5) Gain insight on how African epistemology should drive education in Nigeria/Africa, and 6) Comprehend how the positive elements of African education can be integrated into Africa's school curricula.

## WHAT IS AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY?

Globally, there are many societies and every society has a set of peculiar ideas, beliefs, customs and values (aspects of culture) that guide the behaviour and practices of members of that society. Members of every society are also guided by sets of principles which they use to explain what they know and how they know it, what they do, how they do it and why they do it. These principles are called epistemology or theory of knowledge. The societies also have ways and methods by which they teach and pass on to their children their way of life and cultural knowledge in terms of ideas, beliefs, customs and values. This cultural knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation, albeit with some modifications. Africa is a continent of many societies and as such harbours many cultures. However, these societies although distinct, they share some similarities in their traditions, the way they see the world, describe the world and relate to the world in general: these are philosophies, worldviews or theories of world.

From this perspective and in this chapter, while epistemology in general is defined as dealing with the nature, origin, scope and limits of human knowledge (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1990), African Epistemology in particular is defined in terms of African traditions, cultures, philosophies, and theories of the world. Understanding African epistemology therefore would require knowing about how African people derive and make meaning out of what they experience in their cultural environments, and the approaches or methods they use in sharing such experiences with their children and teaching them the benefits and gains from such experiences. It would also require knowing how the African mind thinks about and gives meaning to environmental experiences and how these experiences are fitted into a general worldview.

Africans combine the physical, the natural, and the spiritual aspects of the universe as well as moral principles to inform and explain what they know, how they know and why they know. This is what is called African theory of knowledge (Anyanwu, 1984) or African epistemology. Nasseem (2009) supported this view by stating that the classical African philosophy postulates that "man and nature" are

two entities but cannot be separated, and the united entities from which African epistemology is derived embraces the rational, the empirical and the mystical components of knowledge. African epistemology therefore views knowledge as the understanding of the hierarchical nature of forces and their cosmic interactions with possibly a supreme being at the helm of affairs. It might be of interest for the reader or student to compare and contrast this epistemological position with the existing theories of evolution and the religious accounts of human origin, existence and knowledge.

Another source of knowledge for Africans comes from the combination of experiences from all their senses and reasoning and this makes self experience to be central to and self development to be dominant in African epistemology. Due to the fact that African culture is creative and very rich in oral traditions Africans use oral literature as a means of gaining knowledge and as a tool that propels their theory of knowledge. African oral literature in which the oral traditions are explicitly expressed constitutes the most authentic expression of the creative intelligence and the worldview of African peoples (Akporobaro, 2001).

Oral traditions have been identified as an important source of knowledge acquisition in African societies. Oral tradition involves the transmission of facts, values and fiction through oral means. It is a tradition because it persists, it endures and is stable. When used adequately oral literature provides reliable and dependable knowledge about the history and culture of a people, and serves as a medium for cultural continuity (Gbadegesin, 2009). The reader or student might be interested in exploring the similarities, if any, between the Western forms of poems, proverbs, and metaphors and indigenous poems, proverbs and wise sayings in his/her local cultural community.

The focus of this chapter is to present the holistic, well-rounded and all-embracing view of African indigenous approach to educating the child and showcase its rich and complimentary potentials if incorporated into the present western form of teacher education in Africa. The inclusion of its methods and precepts in teacher education curriculum would place education in Africa within cultural and environmental contexts and render the education of African children relevant within and outside their cultural spheres.

The Yoruba people of Nigeria occupy the south western part of the country. They are bounded in the south by the Bight of Benin, in the west by Benin republic, in the east by the western territory of Benin Kingdom and in the north by the river Niger. Socially, the Yoruba people are gregarious in that they live together in family groups and are sociable. Wherever they live, whether in villages or towns, they form family compounds (*Agbo Ile* or flock of houses). These compounds are made up of apartments where individual families live. The apartments are surrounded by a general wall and common walls separate one apartment from another with a square in the middle of the compound. The families are guided by elaborate code of manners and etiquette that serve to reduce the strains and frustrations of interpersonal

relationships. Each compound is headed by a *Baale* (father of the house) who usually is the eldest male in the compound and the founder or his descendant. Greetings form an important part of Yoruba daily life and they have different greetings for different occasions, for juniors and for seniors. They use proverbs and adages everyday and extensively in all forms of communication either to bring out clearly the meaning of obscure points in arguments or as the driving force in a discussion.

The education of the young Yoruba in the codes of manners, conventions, customs, morals, superstitions and laws of the society is achieved through various members of the family usually living in the same compound as well as the neighbours. In this regard the seniors teach the juniors, the child observes and learns from the behaviours of age group peers, and those that are older. The child also learns from continuous exposure to lessons on morality and good manners consistently taught through the daily and frequent use of Yoruba proverbs employed to drive home some practical truths.

Due to their gregarious nature, the Yoruba people form associations and corporations which derive from the concept of organisation of people into family compounds. Associations such as Ogboni, league of traders, hunters' guild, *agbekoya* (farmer's club), and others are formed to promote and protect common interests in areas such as politics, economy, religion, recreation and enjoyment. Sometimes these associations dovetail into political parties, church societies and sport clubs. In a town that consists of a number of family compounds, there is usually an *Oba* (a king), and an *Ogboni* which is a council of notable elders in whom reside judicial, political, and legislative powers.

The Yoruba had their own religion before the advent of Islam and Christianity. They believed in their own deities which include god of iron (*Ogun*), god of thunder (*Sopona*) and which are regarded as intermediaries between an almighty God (*Olodumare*) and humans.

### **YORUBA TRADITIONAL EDUCATION: EXAMPLE OF AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY**

The Yoruba system of child training is presented in this chapter, not as African epistemology, but as one example of it. This system of child training is driven by Yoruba oral traditions and philosophy. The oral traditions of Yoruba people consist of proverbs, poems, wise sayings, songs folktales and riddles. The Yoruba people use these oral literatures to teach and train their children how to grow up and become *omoluwabi*, which is the concept of a "person" that forms the central focus and the ultimate goal of Yoruba traditional education. The concept of *omoluwabi* is comprehensive, total, complete, and all embracing. To be an *omoluwabi* is to be a complete, total and well rounded person in all its ramifications. An *omoluwabi* is someone who has good character which in Yoruba language is called *iva*. A person of good character would show respect for old age and seniority by respecting those

that are older and those in higher classes or positions. A person of good character would be loyal to his/her parents and local traditions, would be honest in all public and private dealings, be devoted to duty, be ready to help the needy and the infirm, would be sympathetic, sociable, courageous, intelligent, energetic, and with burning desire for hard work, as well as possessing other desirable attributes.

Literarily, *omoluwabi* means *Omo ti o ni iwa' bi eni ti a ko ti o si gba eko*, meaning a person who behaves like someone who is properly and well nurtured and who lives by the precepts of the education s/he has received. Sayings such as *Iwa rere l'eso eniyan*, which means good character is an ornament for a person; *Oruko rere san ju wura ati jadaka lo* which means good name is more precious than gold and silver, and *Ise ni ogun ise* which means hard work is the antidote to poverty are part of the oral traditions that are used to train Yoruba children. These sayings reflect the importance attached to character building through the concept of *omoluwabi* by Yoruba people. At this point the reader might want to compare the concept of *omoluwabi* with self-actualization theories of Maslow (1967), and others, and compare its attributes as described in this chapter with the Western theories of social and technological intelligence.

In line with the 'life affirming' philosophy of the Yoruba, Yoruba traditional education is a lifetime process that starts with the unborn foetus in the womb and continues after birth until death. The Yoruba people believe that life begins from the womb and character building and grooming is a lifelong process. In pregnancy, the mothers are given guidelines about what to do, eat, and drink for the sake of their children, and are encouraged to talk, sing, and recite the family's praise names and sayings (called *oruko ati oriki idile*) to their unborn babies, with the hope that these practices would help to build and nurture good character in their children after birth. This aspect of Yoruba child training is comparable to some Western developmental theories especially those that address the pre-natal factors that affect the unborn child and can have lasting effect on the child after birth. In addition, some studies (e.g. Hepper, 2003) have established that foetuses are capable of learning through exposure by demonstrating preferences for their mothers' voices as opposed to unfamiliar female voices at birth. The reader might be interested in comparing these developmental theories with the prenatal aspect of Yoruba child training and explore similar practices in his/her cultural community. The reader/student might want to carry out studies to confirm or refute Hepper's findings in his/her community.

At birth the newborn baby is showered with love and affection by the child's entire extended family and community. The baby is given names on the eighth day according to the tradition of his/her household and as the baby grows the mother continues to talk to the baby and reminds her about the meaning of her name constantly instructs the child on how to live according to the meaning of her name and the precepts of the family, the community and the society. As part of the mother's instructions to the child, she recites the praise names and sayings of the child's family *oruko ati oriki idile* to the child regularly with the expectations that hearing

such sayings frequently would help in moulding the child's character and enhance his/her self esteem. This is an obvious example of "imprinting" impressions on the baby's brain.

As part of the family's training, the mother instructs the older siblings on how to look after the younger ones in her absence or when busy and also how to perform household chores. The reader might at this point reflect on the building blocks of self-esteem in Western theories of 'self' vis-à-vis the traditional building blocks as described here and explore what they are in the reader's culture.

As the child grows informal training in numbering and language usage is carried out by the grown-ups in the community. The child goes to the farm, as well as the play ground with the older people in the community. The child is taught how to work hard on the farm and how to play local games in the compound after retiring from work. In this way the productive capacity and the talents of the child are developed. Through the examples of elders in the community the child learns the virtues of endurance and courage, and through proverbs, wise sayings, and folktales, s/he learns the use of language and the art of responsible living. When the child is old enough to learn a trade such as tailoring or carpentry, or a craft such as sculpture making, cloth dyeing (tie and dye) or cloth weaving (called *aso oke*), the parents would guide and send the child to an apprentice for a period of time and get the child started in the new trade after graduation by equipping the graduate with the tools of the trade or the craft learnt. The Yoruba people cherish skill acquisition because they believe that it is a surety or insurance for the raining day and remedy for poverty. As such, they combine skill acquisition with formal schooling for their children by sending them to acquire one skill or another when the schooling systems are on holidays.

The *omoluwabi's* way of educating the Yoruba child engages parents, siblings, peers and communal components. Yoruba sayings such as: *Ile ni a ti nko eso lo si ode* (meaning "charity begins at home"); *Ile ni a n wo ki a to so omo ni oruko* (meaning the name you give to a child must reflect his/her family tradition); *Ranti omo eni ti iwo nse* (meaning remember the son of who you are) reflect the parental component in child training. Other sayings such as: *Egbe eiyi ni eye ntele* (meaning the bird follows its mates), which instructively inform the child to follow and learn from peers, is a reflection of peer input, and *Enikan ni o n bimo igba eniyan ni o nto o* (meaning it's one person that gives birth to a child but two hundred people train the child) reflects the communal input in child training. The essence and the goal of Yoruba traditional education therefore is the total actualization of the person which is reflected in the positive use of salient characteristic features of the person, namely, the mental, the social, the physical, the psychological and moral uprightness. It is the aggregate of these features that makes a being a person and hence an *omoluwabi* in the Yoruba cultural context. It is this "self-actualization" or the production of the "total person" in terms of "social competence" that is the ultimate goal of Yoruba traditional education. It is equally recognized that *omoluwabi* as an epistemological concept is

the ideal goal for Yoruba people which they believe is achievable but which may not be achieved if there are flaws in the realization process. This may be the reasons behind the questions usually asked when a child misbehaves. An example of such questions is: *a bi i ko ni tabi a ko o gba* (meaning was she not trained? or was she trained but did not imbibe the training?). The implication of this is that sometimes the trainers (parents, peers, community, etc.) may not perform their duties properly or the trainee has not imbibed the learning. In spite of these flaws it is still believed that many Yoruba children through this procedure develop to the *omoluwabi's* level and hence the goal is worth pursuing.

African education exemplified by Yoruba traditional education addresses all the developmental domains of the child ranging from physical to cognitive to social to emotional to psychological, to moral and productive capacity domains. In addition and with regards to developmental stages, African education as presented in this chapter addresses the prenatal, postnatal, childhood, school age level, and career developmental stages. This approach to the development of the child in my view is comprehensive, total, complete well rounded and holistic. This is the approach to the development of the child as a whole “person” which should be the ultimate goal of African education.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS**

The knowledge derivable from the above illustration of Yoruba epistemology is that:

1. African education is holistic because it is centred on the development of the total person. It focuses on the training of all the faculties: physical, cognitive, social, emotional, psychological, moral, spiritual, and talent potentials and capacities within the child's cultural context, but with an outlook on to a common global village.

African education is developmental in orientation and implementation because it starts from conception, when human life begins and continues throughout life.

2. African education uses oral literature as a driving force in knowledge acquisition.
3. African education involves hearing, listening to, looking at, observing, doing and imitating cultural precepts in one's cultural community.
4. It is participatory and has parental, sibling, peer and community components. The teaching method is a collectivistic approach through demonstration, communal participation and cooperation.
5. African theories of knowledge acquisition are comparable to contemporary theories of knowledge acquisition developed in other cultures that currently feature in education curriculum in Africa.



6. African education can be integrated into teacher education by developing curricula on courses such as 'Child Development in African Contexts'; 'Comparative Developmental Psychology: a Worldview Perspective'; 'Comparative Education in Africa' and integrating them into African teacher education curricula.
7. Since oral literature is central in African education, curricula can be developed for courses on Language Studies. Under this title we can have course titles such as: African Oral literatures, African Poems and Metaphors and these can be integrated into teacher education curricula. The courses can be localized by having say: 'Nigerian Oral literatures' or globalized to the African continent by having: 'Comparative Oral Literatures in Africa'. All these titles including the developmental ones can come under an umbrella course name such as African studies. Concerning language studies African children are bilingual and bilingualism has been found to aid understanding and comprehension of tasks presented in English language (Akinsola, 1993). If African children are exposed to languages other than their own it will be beneficial to them.
8. For learners to benefit maximally from school learning, it is needful for such learning to be presented on a familiar platform. Such approach is like working from the known to the unknown, making learning interesting and easier for both the learner and the teacher. African children are exposed to traditional education and traditional ways of learning from the womb until when they are old enough to start formal schooling when they are now exposed to the Western education.

For ease of learning and for continuity it may be logical for the teacher to present the new learning material using the methods that are already familiar to the learner and drawing analogies from the materials with which the learner is familiar. For example, if a teacher in Nigeria is teaching hygiene under Health Science and needs to talk about cleaning the mouth using toothpaste, he can start by asking the students prior to class to find out from their parents what old people in those days were using to clean their teeth, and ask them in class to talk about their findings and then inform the students about chewing sticks. If their findings do not include this, show samples of chewing sticks and other teeth cleaning tools prior to the advent of toothpaste to the students and then present the toothpaste as the equivalent or substitute for these tools. The teacher can also teach the consequences of not cleaning the teeth with a traditional song like this: (*Akokoro ma ba eyin mi je, mo ji mo run rin, E yoro ma se ba mi ja mo ji mo yo nu, Ori fifo pelu e e bi ma se ya odo mi ya odo omo ti ko ba run rin*), meaning: (Tooth decay don't spoil my teeth for when I wake up I use chewing stick to clean my teeth! Mouth ulcers don't trouble me for when I wake up I wash my mouth with gaggle! Headache and vomiting don't trouble me; trouble those who don't clean their teeth). A Nigerian teacher who adopts this approach is using participatory method of teaching and oral tradition to drive home the lesson to be learnt from not cleaning the teeth.

For the teacher to be effective in teaching, he has to master the learning material and present it in a way familiar to the students so as to understand and effectively learn the material. This is where the need arises for the inclusion of African education into the teacher education curricula in Africa. The teacher needs to master African education for the following reasons which are not exhaustive. By mastering African education:

1. The teacher is able to know what traditional education is and what type of training is needed at each stage of a child's development.
2. It will give the teacher the opportunity to know how to give the necessary training at every stage of development using the appropriate tools and methods
3. The teacher will be able to understand the child's behaviour in context.
4. The teacher would be able to discover individual differences in the behaviour of children that may relate to developmental context and address them as appropriate.

In the current educational system in Africa the positive elements of African education are grossly lacking or non-existent, and that makes the educational system to be defective or at best incomplete (Akinsola, 2006). It therefore becomes imperative for modified education curricula for Africa to evolve, one that will incorporate these positive elements of African education into the schooling system. Teaching African children the positive elements of African education would complement the current educational knowledge they are receiving which at best helps them to find their feet in the world outside their cultural territory. However, as the saying goes "charity, they say begins at home". If African children cannot find their feet properly in their cultural environment it is doubtful if they will find their feet properly outside it. It is the inclusion of the positive elements of African education into the current education curricula that will provide avenues for them to have a balanced development and equip them to function appropriately within and outside their cultural world.

## **CONCLUSION**

African epistemology as represented by Yoruba traditional education in this chapter is comprehensive, complete, total and holistic. It addresses the development of the total person in all developmental domains that would make the person to become a self actualized individual. The approach to knowledge acquisition in African epistemology also compares favourably with existing theories on human development and self-actualization theories. From the illustrations given in this chapter on African education it will be beneficial if teacher education curricula are packaged within the context of African epistemology.

Education as a process of enculturation is expected to produce a well-rounded individual whose contribution to his/her social environment shows respect for and

demonstration of cultural values, and acquisition of culturally relevant learning and character. In this respect the African traditional education achieves this for the African child. However, a well-rounded educated individual is also expected to acquire those intellectual qualities that would put him/her on a platform relevant to cultures and civilizations other than his/her own. These two expectations (acquisition of culturally relevant and internationally approved education), which can be regarded as primary and secondary expectations for African children are the main goals of education. The current educational system in Africa (Western education system) achieves the secondary goal of education for African children while the traditional education is not emphasized because of the neglect of such knowledge by policy makers and curriculum planners. This makes the education of African children defective or incomplete. It is the inclusion of African education through various traditional practices such as, for example the concept of *omoluwabi* into teacher education and school education curricula that would pave the way for achieving both the primary and secondary goals of education for African children.

### LEARNERS' EXERCISES

1. Identify 3-5 indigenous/cultural learning and how they are transmitted in your (learner's) community
2. From your understanding of African oral traditions described in this chapter, list out and describe your (learner's) community's version of oral traditions
3. Identify the practices and processes in your community that make your own version of African education comprehensive and holistic.
4. Identify possible ways by which your (learner's) version of African education can be incorporated into the school curriculum in your community and country.
5. Through research explore, discover, and compare cultural epistemologies across nations in Africa possibly on collaborative/networking platforms.

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