

# Citizenship Education in the Context of Traditional Nigerian Society and Culture

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## Abstract

It is only in the past few decades that European writers have admitted the possibility of African contributions to world culture and civilization. Many years ago, L.L. Conant in the number concept, called Africans “savages”. More often than not, many authors have attributed every African accomplishment to the Europeans, Arabs and even to Indians. (Claudia, 1979). Now, it is recognized that traditional Africa made contributions to the world, yet not much have been found to indicate such worthy contributions especially in the area of traditional citizenship education. This paper is therefore an attempt to interrogate the nature of the contribution of traditional Nigeria Societies in the area of citizenship education. The paper submits that even before colonial influences, Nigerian societies had involved strong institutions, mechanisms, and structures for effective “teaching and learning” of citizenship education. This system of education, most appropriately, is an aspect of Nigerian history and cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** citizenship, education, culture, traditional, history, colonial.

## 1. Introduction

*“In Old Africa, the warrior, the hunter, the noble man, the character or anyone who combined the latter feature with a specific skill was adjudged to be a well-educated and well integrated citizen of his community” Fafunwa.*

### 1.1 Conceptualizing Citizenship Education

The expression “citizenship education” combines two terms namely: “citizenship” and “education”, it is necessary to know the respective meaning of the terms “citizen”, “citizenship” and “education”. In the western perspective, the term citizen is used to refer to a person who has full rights as a member of a society, nation or country, either by birth or by being granted such rights. In the traditional setting, the term simply means a free-born person of any community; while “citizenship” refers to the status of being a citizen especially of a particular society or community with all the rights.

On the other hand, education is a gradual process of learning and development (Ukaegbu 2005:119). The term “education” could be used in four main senses in which it is seen to connote a process, a product, a discipline and an institution (Obasi et al. 2004:6-7). Seen as a process, education represents the conscious activity is either imparting and/or acquiring knowledge or skill or information whether in organized or not so organized way with the intention of bringing about some desired behavioural outcomes in the participant. It encompasses teaching and learning specific knowledge, beliefs and skills (Singh, 2010:50-52). In this connection, education here is a social science discipline.

There are three forms of the process of education. We have the formal and non-formal forms of education. Formal education refers to the systematized educational experiences provided in a prescribed way by a cult of professional teachers in specially designated teaching and learning environment called schools or colleges or institutes. In most cases, in the formal educational institutions, licensed and practicing teachers in the field use a variety of methods and materials in order to impart a curriculum. Non-formal education on the other hand, refers to the organized education which is usually provided outside the formal education system. It is intended among others to offer opportunity of acquiring skills literacy and numeracy by adults who missed totally, the chance of formal education at an earlier time as a result of lack of access (Obasi, 8). Informal education refers to the spectrum of teaching and learning activities that are not governed by any laid down rules, methods, content and standards. Learners usually acquire knowledge, skill or information in less systematized ways such as through act of learning by doing, observation, participation, imitation and practice. The discussions in this paper focus more on this type of education.

## 2. The Nature, Objectives and Significance of Traditional Citizenship Education

The purpose of citizenship education in the traditional Nigerian setting was to set afoot a man with functional skills that will help him live peaceful among others and contribute his quota to the overall development of himself and his community. Fafunwa (1974) had opined that: “society used to accord priority to the inculcation of values of social responsibility, political participation, job orientation and spiritual and moral uprightness in the citizens”. The achievement of individuals was largely determined by how well he put into practical application

the value systems mentioned above. The words of Ozigi (1981) gave credence to the above viewpoint:

There was a traditional form of education which had existed in our own societies, as in other societies, for centuries. This type of education, formally and informally imbibed a lot of cultural values, norms, traditions and beliefs system of societies on our children and these had helped them to know how to produce things needed for the well being of the society

The traditional education system in Nigeria is life-long in nature as it aims at equipping individuals with the necessary skills and attitudes that would help them function effectively in the society. The system has been and is still effective in providing functional training and experiences in artistry, farming, fishing and other vocational skills, which are needed for the survival of the society. The realist nature of the traditional system of education is contained in its advocacy for the acquisition of the right types of values, attitudes and morals in order for the society to be tranquil and peaceful for all to enjoy living in. Every responsible member of the community serves as a transmitter-teacher and trainer of the societal norms and skills to the younger generations. They are looked upon as models of good virtues to be emulated by the young ones.

The belief among a cross section of the elite community that the traditional system of education is rigidly rooted in an informal ways of training is to say the least very unfair. The system has a clearly demarcated learning experience for each age grade, which culminates into the acquisition of desired values and attitudes, and the specialization of individuals in some specific crafts and/or vocations. There were farmers, medicine men, fishermen, warriors, carpenters, orators, spiritualist, weavers, carvers and many more that are tested to be highly skilled in their different callings.

In the traditional Nigerian Societies, the ultimate purpose of citizenship education was tied to the fact that the child is of supreme value: for the settlement, he is the perpetuation of the group; for the family, he is wealth; and for the woman, he is the means of social recognition. In such societies, from the birth, series of rites aimed at integrating the child are performed. The Igbo for example, conceive of education as a process of weaning the newborn child away from his animal nature and making a human being of him. Every human being is usually conceived of as destined for communal life. Education is completed when he acquires sociability, self awareness in relation to himself, his follows, to the family, to the community; his duties to self, others, family and entire community. Education in such societies usually comprises instructions in technique and knowledge to be acquired; education of the individual in perception, intelligence (Social and moral ethics); memory; and thirdly social education; especially, internalization of the law (i.e the need for the maintenance of a status quo: elder-junior relationship for stability of the social system (Mbakwe, 2007: 7).

In many Nigerian societies, there are no distinct institutions with the specific duty of imparting education. Rather, the institution is congruent. For example, the family is at the same time an economic, political, religious and educational unit. Similarly, they may not have specific places of education or technique (i.e. peoples whose function is exclusively that of teaching), but the non-specialist nature is only relative and should not be exaggerated. However, there are many Nigerian societies that did, in fact develop formal educational institution. For example, the fattening room among the Efik and the Igbo; with specific locals such as separate house, under a tree - for shade; with particular people serving as teachers; that is those who came to be regarded as more teachers than anything else in and by the community.

Within these societies, mothers, fathers and senior siblings, age group associations, and secret societies had precise and distinct roles which were not necessarily the same between societies. Children learn by imitating (doing), and often in groups rather than individually. An important aspect of some traditional African education systems is that the child learns to explore and discover things by himself, (Andah, 1988:172).

Traditional citizenship education was a potent social institution through which norms, values, morals and even crafts of society were transmitted from one generation to another. As an informal education system, it was embedded in the people's tradition and culture. By not being formal, the system did not lose its essence as education generally constitutes a social institution created and maintained by a society, in order to perpetuate or transmit certain aspects of its culture through purposeful teaching and learning (Solti, 1969:8). In the case of the Igbo, the integration of the Igbo customs, traditions, proverbs, folklores and the natural practical demands of these from the daily life shows the kind of education that kept the Igbo together and well until the arrival of the European method. Evidently, it is reasonable to argue that the Igbo maintained the high standard of education before the introduction of the western type.

The pre-colonial Nigerian man believed in action but European method incorporates theory and practice, so that stage by stage a procedure exists for re-visit. The mere fact that everyone was educated to fend for himself eradicated unemployment and offenders knew their un-alterable punishment in advance. The western education system however, is basically to enhance people's capacity through skill development but the executors of it concentrated on paper qualifications more than the skills. The consequences include the production of ill-equipped and yet de-skilled generations that could hardly defend their paper qualifications.

The present level of unemployment in Nigeria that is prevalent among the educated class, when there

was none prior to the emergence of the western system, is an eloquent testimony to this development; and this no doubt, shows the gap in the learning and adjustment processes. This means that the western system of education was rushed thereby missing some local factors it would have taken on board to nurture people to their environments and circumstances. It therefore requires evaluation and re-evaluation to pick up the relevant local factors for an appropriate synergy with the essential elements in the modern system.

It is now obvious from the discussions so far that the understanding of indigenous educational systems of Africa has been hindered because many writers have tended to make generalizations based on the false assumption that these societies were, and have always been non-literate and as such, tradition was always everywhere much the same. Another popular misconception is that within one particular society, all young people learn the same skills. This may have been so when and where ethnic groups contained families following roughly the same economic pursuits and where political and social roles were relatively undifferentiated or, in the word of Okon Uya, di-unital (Uya, 2001:9). Definitely, this cannot be so when societies had marked specialization in occupations, as well as pronounced political and social hierarchies (Callaway, 1975:20). By and large, traditional citizenship education system was very functional as it was a daily occurrence and largely predicated on environmental challenges and societal needs which was geared towards productivity, self reliance and productivity. (See Onor, 1994:93).

### **3. Modus Operandi and Agents of Traditional Citizenship Education**

These were professionals in different fields of human endeavour, parents and other elderly members of the society who transmitted such knowledge as medicine, agriculture, trade, crafts, history, folklore, geography, religion and societal values, norms and obligations and rights of freeborn citizens. Its modus operandi was in stages: infancy, childhood, peer-group and puberty. During infancy, parents took charge of the educational requirements of the child in consideration of the fact that the child's activities were restricted to the home as immediate environment. Within this period, the child was made to know the rudiments of life at home. These included simple and polite words, good eating habits, manner of greeting, expressing appreciation and their significance. This was followed by the childhood stage during which the child was taught simple aspect of domestic chores. These included fetching firewood and water, cleaning the compound and the delivery of less important messages.

The peer group stage was associated with adolescence and it was at this stage that transmission of education became the responsibility of both the parents and the society at large. This was so because tremendous amount of knowledge would be acquired by the child as he or she mingled with peers. During this period, differences in sex roles were expected to emerge among other responsibilities. The last stage was that of puberty during which young men and women were considered ripe for marriage. As a matter of fact, parents were not oblivious of their onus of teaching their children all about the institution of marriage. Mothers taught their daughters the art of cooking and domestic hygiene, respect for husband, and family and all other virtues considered necessary for a good wife and mother. Similarly, fathers taught their sons on the need to maintain a family through self-reliance. They were therefore taught various disciplinary, protective and administrative roles among others which befitted a husband and father (Ajaebili, 2003:56-58).

In the course of traditional education, a child learns the cultural norms and activities of the society from the adults, peer group or age grade, or secret societies, craft guilds or associations such as those of hunters, fishermen, or medicine men, or communal cooperative activity such as happened during the building of a new mud house or harvesting of yams (Anyanwu, 2009:29). She argues further that very society whether simple or complex has its institution for the training or improving of the young or the youth. Education can be seen as the art of inculcating worthwhile values in the form of arts, skills, morals, by which a person is enabled to contribute to the development of one's society. In traditional society, education emphasized social responsibility, Job orientation, political participation, moral values and environmental cleanliness. Parents also taught their children the relevance of personal cleanliness, family affection and hospitality towards strangers was clearly emphasized in the pre-literate era in contrast to the self-centeredness following the adoption of European cultures and ideas.

Youthful age is a crucial period in life and come with overwhelming challenges which require careful and proper direction to assist the youth make proper decisions that will affect both the society and their personal lives. In the past, Nigerian children, passing through life needed to be rugged to successfully perform their obligatory rites as citizens. Children were allowed to play games, joke and interact provided they did not engage in immoral acts. It was from the folktales told at such sessions that the children learnt so much about life (Nwachukwu Agbada, 1999:142-156). The abundant recreational activities in pre-colonial Nigerian societies give physical and social advantage to the citizens and other participants. These activities helped to prepare the individual for more complex games as well as helped him to acquire physical skills and moral code of conduct that would guide him in the future. Some of these moonlight traditional recreational activities such as rope skipping, Itu Okwe, Itu Uga, onye aghala anya nazu, folklores and other stories performed with the assistance of adults whereby community heroes were glamorized. These moonlight activities taught the citizens some vital

lessons: They would learn from the attribute of the tortoise always depicted as a very wise animal that never failed in any venture and the sheep depicted as an intelligent animal. The “torotoro” and the he-goat usually associated with incest and promiscuity, would never be emulated (Amuchie, 1999:227-235).

In the area of pre-colonial laws and conflict resolution, citizens were meant to understand that conflicts or disputes are part and parcel of people who live and work together and that if they are to continue their relationships, they must be settled in some way. The maintenance of amicable relations is highly valued among traditional cultures in Nigeria, so that the settlement of disputes takes an even greater significance in these societies. In most Nigerian cultures, citizens were taught that if a person commit a serious crime within a group to which he belonged, strong actions was generally taken through the group leaders. This is particularly true in cases of theft or adultery, both of which are almost universally considered extremely serious crimes in Africa (Ottenberg, 1960).

The central concern of traditional citizenship education especially among the Igbo first and foremost, is that it concerned the community. The great amount of vigilance exercised by all members of the community in helping to educate everybody to know the contents of its moral code and observe them accordingly is the hallmark of traditional citizenship education. There were lots of prohibitions and the ability to keep away from falling victim of these prohibitions is what makes one a good citizen of a traditional Igbo society. For instance, stealing, incest, suicide, poisoning someone else are serious offences, and a good citizens must endeavour to refrain from committing them. Any culprit may be fined, ostracized or even banished from the group.

However, the process of traditional Nigerian law was concerned with first and foremost, the restoration of the social balance and the agreement of both parties to a compromised judgment and finally the reconciliation of the parties. The most important feature in the context of African law is that the need to reconcile the disputing parties so that they will continue to live together in peace as good citizens of the society. It is not easy to generalize about human rights education in the traditional Nigerian society because of the absence of documented evidence about the period in question. Even though ancient societies in Nigeria had no ideas of human rights that applied to all individuals, inasmuch as the institution of slavery was recognized, and this distinguished between free and un-free persons. Slaves were looked down upon and were mere objects at the disposal or service of their masters or owners. In this connection, traditional Nigeria was hierarchically divided by the caste system but unified by mythical beliefs (Umozurike, 1997:12). According to Umozurike, “the individual was not poised against the group but was indeed part of it”. The conception was that of man in harmony with the environment and with the society which consisted of the living and the ancestors who, though physically dead, were spiritually alive. Rights were inseparable from duties. African society was humanistic, leading to the recognition of the rights of individuals as well as the group.

Pre-colonial Nigeria can be broadly divided into two types of societies. There were those with advanced systems of government, with kings, ruling over large areas such as the Hausa-Fulani emirates, and the Yoruba, Benin and to a less extent, Arochukwu and Aboh kingdoms. The other societies mainly found in the Igbo and Ibibio areas of Eastern Nigeria, consisted of small communities with recognized heads that were elders, title holders and other functionaries. In both types of societies, members were accorded full rights that both the communities and the heads sought to protect. The right to life and to property, for instance, is as old as human society and infractions on these had tortuous or criminal consequences. Aliens had considerable disabilities and were often not entitled to the same rights as citizens. This contrasted significantly from the modern concept of the universality of human rights. There was appreciable commercial intercourse among traditional Nigerian communities as aliens were protected on reciprocal basis. In most communities, mostly patriarchal, the mothers’ family or clan felt morally obliged to give asylum to their daughters fleeing the husband’s home.

Virtually all Nigerian societies recognized the institution of domestic slavery. Agriculture, fishing and other occupations were worked on with slave labour. When utilized domestically, the slaves were well treated in order to ensure maximum usefulness. Indeed, in some societies such as the riverine areas of South-south Nigeria, especially the people of Bonny, Okrika and Kalabari, a slave could progress beyond slavery and could buy his freedom and even aspire to rule as did King Jaja of Opobo (Cookey, 1974:60). Some societies such as the central Igbo of Eastern Nigeria recognized a caste whereby some people were treated as inferior to other human beings. There was no intermarriage with them and social interaction was kept to the barest minimum. The Osu in those areas attended to certain idols. Their mediation with the gods was considered necessary for the safety and prosperity of the community. Yet in other areas, the Osu were treated as holy people requiring isolation from human society and proximate to the gods.

One of the most heinous acts committed in some societies was the practice of human sacrifice when the issues for which the gods were invoked were most serious: the atonement or cleansing for serious crimes or to avert major catastrophes required human sacrifice. Primitive belief in the spirit world necessitated that on the death of dignitaries they should be buried along with slaves and servants that would serve them. Such practices were stopped by colonial intervention.

Umozurike has further opined that where as twins were admired among the Yorubas of Western



Nigeria, they were loathed, among the Igbo, Efik and Ibibio of Eastern Nigerian. To the later, they symbolized the wrath and displeasure of the gods and had no right to live. Twins were thus put to death and their helpless mothers, ex-communicated, banished or sent back to their parental homes. This practice was stopped by Mary Slessor, a Christian missionary during her evangelical works toward the end of the 19th century. She is popularly called the mother of twins. The conclusion that should be drawn here, using the words of Osita Eze (1997:16), is that “traditional Nigerian society knew of institutionalized derogations from human rights”. There was the Osu system and the caste system epitomized by the untouchables. There was also human sacrifice as well as the practice of killing twins in the superstitious belief that they will (sic) bring evil”. All these were serious abuses to the rights of citizens of traditional or pre-colonial Nigerian societies. Modern citizenship rights education has put a total stop to these inhuman treatments of persons in line with the biblical injunctions and the human rights law. Another important issue on traditional citizenship education concerns the privileges and duties of citizens. On reaching manhood estate, every freeborn citizen automatically enters upon the privileges and duties of citizenship, and bears his share in all that appertains to the well-being of the village or community. He was called to contribute to the public festivals and sacrificial obligations, and to pay his quota towards any expenses incurred by the village. As required, he must render personal service in war and peace; also he must give support to the head of the house and to the king or paramount chief to assist him in his desire to take up a higher title, or a contribution towards the expenses of building a more dignified dwelling place, or to give his services in fieldwork or farm-work. As a good citizen of a traditional society, custom ruled that he reserves every fourth day for well-being and at the disposal of the head of the family or clan.

#### 4. Summary and Conclusions

We have in this article, highlighted the major issues in citizenship education in the perspective of traditional Nigerian society and culture before the emergence of the modern system. There is no gainsaying the fact that traditional forms of education suffered a great deal of neglect and in many cases, outright hostility. The reason for this apparent neglect has to do partly with the assumption by many writers that traditional African societies were, and have always been non-literate, and as such, tradition was always everywhere much the same; among other assumptions that are no longer worthy of intellectual relevance and attention. It must be stated that since the traditional Nigerian man never lived in isolation, his actions, behaviour and competencies were built in him not only by immediate family members but also by other extended members of the society. Even though this kind of training was considered very rigid and informal, it was unarguably purposeful, comprehensive and really served the purpose it was meant for at that time.

On the whole, the paper concludes that even though traditional citizenship education system was adversely affected by the intrusion of colonialism, Christianity or Islamic cultures, many aspects of its element still remain untouched and relevant in the modern or contemporary methodology of educating the citizenry so that he can be an asset in this fast changing culture and rapid globalization process. This means that a thorough analysis of the goals of traditional citizenship education reveals their relevance both in the past, present and in the future. This is the basis for the recommendation in this paper that a synergy between the modern and traditional perspectives (eclectic approach) is necessary in the teaching and learning of citizenship education for the proper character-molding of the Nigerian citizen.

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