

African Contextual Methodologies for the Facilitation of the Process of Character Development

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Introduction

“Cause and effect” is a law largely spoken and used by anonymous authors. It is a law which tends to assume that for everything to happen there must be a cause. Well, others may put it this way, that nothing happens, whether good or bad, without a cause. Given time, living creatures change. People’s behavior changes depending on the nature of the existing surrounding. Climate has also experienced a drastic and shocking temperature raise living the lives of people and other animals in a terrifying insecurity. These are changes.

In actual sense nothing seems static so to speak. In any given group that constitutes people, its structural pattern matters significantly depending on the set objectives. Groups could be of an industry, family, administration, an orchestra, club, or any organization. As far as people are concerned, proper environment has to be accessed so that an opportunity is provided for them to develop their carrier as persons as well as professionals. In an African context, therefore, it should be held evident that character development is achieved through the expanding experience in a given social order. Man as a social being need a higher level of mental hygiene that is incredibly influenced by what the person can offer to himself as well as from the organization around him.

This short review of paper is a presentation of what I personally consider the African most significant agents of personal and organizational influences that impact character development. It is the argument that the disrupted African approaches via acculturation should bear the responsibility for the current irregularity of African methodologies for character building.

Background

In his address, Dr. Laurence Konamala Bropaleh, Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism, who represented President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of the Republic of Liberia during the 9th General Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches in Maputo, Mozambique in 2008 made catchy statements. He said, “The continent of Africa is richly blessed with natural resources: gold, diamonds, oil, timber, copper, fertile soil, plus much more. Yet the irony is that Africa, one of the richest continents, has most of its wealth concentrated in countries with histories of bad governance. It is an intriguing observation that a continent so endowed with mineral resources is unable to turn those

resources into benefits that provide a bulwark against negative influences coming from globalization and industrialization” [1].

The presenter sought to register the problem that if leadership and good governance is well taken care there would be a better balance between local economic assets and the life of the people. However, what we aspire at the moment is a changed mind set. The process should begin way back from childhood so that African countries are supplied with patriotic citizens who love their countries. The question remains, “but how?” Then, here comes the issue of cultural movements within the continent of Africa.

We must recognize that human beings are not born with a particular culture (the webs of significance) but that culture develops through a process of conscious socialization and acculturation (human interactions) within the particular situation into which an individual is born [2]. It is believed in the African context that it is within the phenomenology of human interactions, a favorable opportunity that allows for one’s personal character construction. A process must be allowed, as reported by Mpehongwa, who also further looked at an idea of ‘conscientization’ by Freire, in which individuals not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and their capacity to transform that reality [3].

The Role of Suggestion

“Suggestion” for this context, may be regarded as an incitement to action or to consideration. The stimuli that attract attention are

likely to receive appropriate response. In normal circumstances we tend to select from resources of which an experience may have placed at human disposal the possibilities deemed significant and desirable. It should be argued here that two people, for instance, may grow up together but develop quite different tastes and standards of conduct. A study conducted by Rifman and Reuel strongly stresses that "In order that any society function well, its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them want to act in the way they have to act as members of the society or of a special class within it. They have to desire what objectively is necessary for them to do" [4]. They definitely do not respond in the same way even if they may be given the same sets of stimuli though deriving from a common environment. Exposure to social stimuli, invites responses to which further construction of character as the expected outcome is possible.

We can look at the same argument but in another dimension, for example, adolescents' dominant ambition is for one day to fully enter into the world of adult. Adults, in the same like, for instance, do more than just admiring the hero, who to them is a person of value. They all can imagine, and imitate so that they identify themselves with and assume the role of that hero. As a person sees the values he or she favors most in someone else that becomes a motivating factor for a desired character. It is from this notion that traditionally, the central objective of education in African context was understood to be the urge of maintaining the sustainability of cultural leadership and governance by transmitting to successive generation, established knowledge, internalized values, and desired life conduct.

In a penetrative, insightful, and now classic book, Wlodkowski stresses on being culturally responsive with reference to power of respect and social responsibility. In addressing it he says, "Think of someone who respects you, someone who easily comes to mind and about whose respect you have little doubt. I have two notions about this person. The first is that he or she very seldom, if ever, threatens you in order to make you do something. The second is that your opinion matters to this person. Your way of understanding things can influence this person, especially in the way you are treated" [5]. This exactly is what has been done in the African approach to constructing desired character believing that social character is the product of social forms; in that sense, man is made by his society [4].

I also like what Mhando, in his book "Reflective Teacher: Essays on Education" who reiterates that our freedom to choose makes us agree on what we consider to be good or bad. The community, small and large, has unique agreements on these choices. Sometimes what is accepted in one community is rejected by another. This condition defines what is limited to a certain province and what covers the entire human race [6].

The Role of Traditional Instructions

Social problem is a reality. All societies face problems. It is a way of behavior that is regarded by a substantial part of social order as being in violation of one or more generally accepted or approved norms as related to economics, politics, health, morality, etc. Different societies face different social problems.

They have different patterns of organizations, levels of awareness, distributions of power, and standards of living. In an African setting, therefore, dealing with social problems has from time immemorial been a long process initiative that has not just being considered as crisis but as a preventive approach.

In Africa, when an elderly person speaks to a young man, the young man is not expected to make any silly argument because doing that would mean being irrespective. Old men and women on the other hand as well are bound to act wisely, talk sense and behave respectfully because they play a significant role in giving instructions in the traditional construction of the new generation. They serve as educators, administrators, arbitrators, counselors, religious leaders, ritual experts, role model, etc. There is also, as they perform their duties, so much influence of role players in the character development and character building of students. Parents, brothers, sisters, lecturers, teachers, friends, pastors... [7], etc. all make a significant contribution.

Age mates, for instance, apart from health grounds, receiving instructions at the time of initiation is very common in most African traditional cultures. In fact, they are very typical in tribal groups including, but not limited to reverence to all members of circumcision group, guarding one's tongue, not to associate with fools, not to keep company with unruly persons, fear everything bewitched or on which a spell has been laid, etc. All the traits are focused at making them good citizens as may be contrasted to social misfits.

The above inscription can be viewed as equally saying, according to Lang'at, a person who is responsible must think through the issue before saying anything. They were warned not to make friends with irresponsible people. They were also warned not to murder their relatives or one who has not committed criminal acts. Among the Kipsigis in Kenya, the penalty was high for anyone who murdered his relatives. He had to give many cows for compensation. Respect for the elderly and neighbor was firmly stressed. The instructions were similar in other ethnic groups such as Chagga and Maasai of Tanzania [8].

In Setswana traditional cultures, boys and girls were taken to circumcision schools that marked their growth from children to adulthood. In these schools, gender roles were culturally taught. Boys were taught what it means to be a man and girls were equally instructed on what the culture expects from them as women [9].

I am convinced, then, that African human are suggestible. They can imagine things or phenomena imitate and suggest which outlined ways and means for releasing restless energy. They influence the entire experience. Through imagination, one can finally reach a decision, for example, a desire to perpetuate personality and power ending up being a hunter, builder, craftsman, or traditional dancer. Caution should be provided with the fact that life in Africa is regarded as communal apprehension claiming that allowance of movements of people from different parts of the globe has been the cause for culture alteration.

As far as social life is concerned, for instance, it has been observed that African socialism has disintegrated in that the

idea of communalism in some societies has been replaced by individualism especially in urban areas. The family units found it hard to amalgamate because of the invention of foreign culture and their influence through lifestyle and advanced formal education approach. While basic literacy was accepted and encouraged, advanced education brought problems with attitudes of superiority and pride. This affected the central form of governments that have been in existence in Africa.

The concept of socialization and the life course for instance, Schaefer reports that, "Among the Kota people of Congo in Africa, adolescents paint themselves blue. Mexican America girls go on a daylong religious retreat before dancing the night away. Egyptian mothers step over their newborn infants seven times, and students at the Naval Academy throw their hats in the air. These are all ways of celebrating rites of passage, a means of dramatizing and validating changes in a person's status" [10].

The ongoing argument links quite the same way as reported by Mpofu in his research study, "Exploring the Self-Concept in an African Culture [11]" He gives a review by Inkeles (1983) stating that "The modernity trend in Africa, is characterized by an individualistic, rational, and secular view of life as opposed to the traditional collectivist, metaphysical, and moralistic orientation. The Shona word "chitaundi" for example, refers to people whose manner of behavior and speech shows strong evidence of acculturation toward urban, Western influences. The trend leads to the alternative hypothesis that the modern African may to some extent share Western individualistic values and notions of the self-concept.

The Role of Gender Construction

Gender construction is a gradual process that cannot be separated from social relationship. It is always in this relationship that what one does as far as gender is concerned others consider him or her as specific in a certain manner either female or male. Gender has got varied dimensions depending on a given group of people, time, and space. This fact is expressively true to African societies. In the article, "Sociology of Gender [12]" it has expounded that;

Gender is more fluid—it may or may not depend upon biological traits. More specifically, it is a concept that describes how societies determine and manage sex categories; the cultural meanings attached to men and women's roles; and how individuals understand their identities including, but not limited to, being a man, woman, transgender, intersex, gender queer and other gender positions. Gender involves norms, attitudes and activities that society deems more appropriate for one sex over another. Gender is also determined by what an individual feels and does.

It is in the above view that a member of society finds himself or herself fitting because he or she adheres to what the society demands from them. Again, as it can be viewed, the whole society in an African setting is responsible for the upbringing of every member in the society in reference to attitude, personal perspective, norms, activities and the like. Until recently, there have been rare cases in relation to gender role conflicts among

African societies. Female and male from a given family grow knowing their specific roles. It would always be considered unnatural for an old man to conduct himself in the way contrary to what social norms have spelt out. All these have ethnically been supported.

In 2001, a report was submitted to the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP), Dakar, Senegal. This report was about Culture, Gender and Development [13]. There is, in the report, a rich exploration of the phenomenological aspects in the whole process on how most African societies have gone about in ascertaining the balance on gender construction trends. The report also, observed the virtual significance of folklore, literature, music, dance, done within the limit of norms, ethos, values, beliefs, and cords of socially acceptable conducts, philosophy, modes of life, religion, and ideology as employed methodologies.

An emphasis on the place for education especially for girls as a crucial factor in economic development is a clear importance. Karata and Mweta [14] reiterate that educating girls is a wise economic choice. Investment in girls' education yields some of the highest returns of all development investments, giving both private and social benefits that accrue to individuals, families, and society at large. This need, so to speak, needs strong efforts based on the fact that most of traditional African societies still lag behind against girls rights to formal education.

Conclusion

In this brief review, it can be deduced that human social character is a conjugal process which involves nearly everybody in an African society. However much we can appreciate the new approaches toward construction of social character, contextual approaches still prove significant. There are evidences on the ground to date clearly indicating failure in that internalization has not taken roots in the social lives of Africans specifically in rural areas because people still holding to traditional values.

There are choices people make following what their aspiration as they focus to their near future. It is within this aspiration that a conclusion can be established that it serves as the motivator in one's life whether political, social, educational, or any discipline. The role of suggestion, thus, cannot be evaded since being in the same social oriented environment does not, by any means, guarantee same way of perceiving choices.

We have seen by far, that traditional way of constructing social character in African society as opposed to the westernized methodologies may not necessarily match. However, transformation is deemed important but should be put in place with lots of caution otherwise they may face a risk of not being internalized and hence ownership and sustainability remain to be challenging.

The pool of literature seems to lay focus on the fact that gender imbalance is still a problem in African societies. Traditionally, there has been a system where roles of women and men were introduced. This trait as well has been put in action differently depending on the people group.

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