



Flexible Learning Strategies in Yorùbá Education

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on Yorùbá indigenous education (hereafter called Yorùbá education) and its flexible learning strategies. It describes flexible learning as a learning practice that empowers the student with control over, what he learns and how he learns it. The paper highlights that Yorùbá education is a complex education system. It is holistic, fundamental and integrated with an all-encompassing curriculum. Yorùbá education is sophisticated, organised, well managed and cohesive with a vast subject matter that comes as integrated knowledge. The Yorùbá individual was inducted with Yorùbá education into mores, customs, principles, and practices of the Yorùbá society. The paper identifies the tools used in Yorùbá education and how these are applied in a flexible way to get the best outcomes.

Keywords: Yorùbá, Indigenous education, mores, customs, principles

Introduction

Flexible learning is as old as creation. It was there at inception. It came with God and has heavenly ordination. God was the first teacher and indeed introduced education into the world in a flexible way. God taught himself skills by allowing Himself flexible learning opportunities through creation (Fagunwa, 2017). All His creation works were learning by doing albeit in a flexible way.

Flexible learning is the learning practice that is concerned with the student overseeing the pace and time at which he learns. With it, the student is empowered to be in control of how he learns and he is not under pressure to achieve certification with the speed and routine of the formal school system. There is also flexibility with the requirements needed for his learning including assessment and certification. The purpose of flexible learning is to allow the student to mediate his education at his own pace and convenience. The student learns within the limits of his comfort. The individual is in control of his learning. He is in the driver's seat of his acculturation experiences. The seat of education is with him and its speed is decided by him. Tools for his learning are diverse and within his reach. The authority for his education is not in some far-off lands. With flexible learning, the student is not marginalized or made a bystander. Flexible learning affirms and empowers the student to be a full participant in his own education. Flexible learning has a lot in common with adult education for its cradle-to-grave approach. It encourages continuous learning and nurtures in the individual the capacity to acquire skills and knowledge as long as he lives.

The Yorùbá are of African descent and a major tribal group in Modern Nigeria. They effectively occupy Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti States and a substantial part of Kwara, Kogi and Edo States of Nigeria. A considerable number of this group can be found in the Republic of Benin and Togo (all these known as Yorùbá Countries before the European Partition of Africa). Pockets of Yorùbá are found in some West African Countries (e.g. Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Gambia). Yorùbá descents are also found as Diaspora group in North America (USA and Canada), Latin American Countries (Brazil, Pern, Cuba, Haiti) and the Caribbean Countries (Jamaica, St Lucia, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago). These are either descendants of people sold into slavery or voluntary or economic migrants.

Yorùbá indigenous education (hereafter called Yorùbá education) is education that *is native or traditional to the Yorùbá. It is that education which is in characteristic manner, method, or style passed down from generation to generation to ensure* cultural, social, attitudinal, customary and institutional continuity of the Yorùbá people. Yorùbá education is the raw, unspoiled education delivered, handed over and

surrendered from one generation to the next by the Yorùbá about what is native and customary to them. It is Yorùbá traditional education. In this paper, Indigenous education shall be used co-tremendously with traditional education. In other words, the terms ‘indigenous’ and ‘traditional’ shall be used to imply one another and to denote Yorùbá indigenous education as Yorùbá traditional education (Yorùbá education).

The paper shall appraise Yorùbá education and its flexible learning Strategies. It shall highlight the achievements and challenges of these and identify what can be borrowed from these in current practices.

Yorùbá Education

The Yorùbá like most African societies have a complex indigenous education system. It is predicated on the ‘*Omólúwàbí*’ ethos which is education geared towards making the individual a complete person with good character, gainfully employed and productively engaged for the society. ‘*Omólúwàbí*’ is derived from “*Omọ ti Olú iwà bí*” (child born by good character) or a child with high moral background.

The Yorùbá education predates the coming of the white man. It was part of their cultural heritage. Yorùbá education is not compartmentalised and with an all-compassing curricular. It is sophisticated, organised, well managed and cohesive. The Yorùbá inducted the individuals into the mores, customs, principles practices of the society. The subject matter taught is vast care as integrated knowledge.

The Yorùbá are essentially religious. Religion is a major influence on their education. It enables the Yorùbá to sustain their physical and spiritual life. Yorùbá mythology believes that the world was created when there was a deluge and a demiurge (Olódùmarè) brought order into chaos. He (Olódùmarè) sent a chicken with five toes to spread sand upon the waters and create land on earth. Olódùmarè created the universe and other smaller gods and gave these gods dominion over some specifics in nature. These gods or deities take responsibility for nature and order the course and purpose of man. To perform their roles the deities are involved in activities of social practice of lifelong education, community structuring and flexible learning of

“... institutionalized learning opportunity, having a humanistic basis directed towards the participant's development that ... occur at any stage in the ... lifespan. This development ... refer to knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and the senses” (Aleksandra Marcinkiewicz: 2014)

Indigenous religion nourished Yorùbá culture and fostered ‘*Ọmọ́lúwàbí*’ ethics. It also played glorious parts in community integration. Religious instructions are reinforced through the family, community, age grade and guilds. The life of the Yorùbá is replete with religious innuendos and references as manifestations of their belief in God. Yorùbá religions behove the individuals the responsibility of living a chaste and morally upright life. Yorùbá sentences are a mix of religious words, have religious connotations and are predicated as such. They thank God for everything. The typical Yorùbá day starts with greetings, exchanges, questions and thanks for and about good health. The Yorùbá asks “/A a ji i re bi?” or “e a ji daadaa bi?” (Have we woken up well)? To which the Yorùbá responds “A dupe” meaning thank you whilst the thank you said is not only to thank you for asking after their health but indeed a short form of ‘*a dupe lowo Olorun* (we thank God)’ merged with thanking you for asking after their well-being. It is not unusual to hear the Yorùbá swear “*Olorun n gbo* (God is hearing or God is my witness) as proof of honesty or truth of what they are saying and in some other examples people Swear the same with their family deities such as *Ifa, Sango, Osun, Oya* etc. Libation is poured into the spirit of ancestors as a mark of respect for the departed and forebears. Shrines are located everywhere in the villages and compounds to reinforce and remind people of divine presence and the need for piety, humility, reverence and responsibility to community protectors. Thus morality, chastity and steadfastness are learnt in flexible ways and reinforced.

The Yorùbá revere morals which are seen as the cornerstone of community life. They had norms that taught them morals and which regulated their social life. These norms cause them to have high standards of social accountability and private and public morality. Yorùbá traditional religions mandate individuals with the responsibility of not just worshipping and making

sacrifices to the ‘*Òrìṣàs*’ (the gods or deities) but also living a chaste and morally upright life. There were many festivals in place to celebrate morals and sanction immorality. Idowu (1962) highlighted that moral values are particularly important to *Omólúwàbí*. These include chastity in sexual matters, selflessness (avoidance of selfishness), hospitality, kindness and generosity avoidance of wickedness, truth and rectitude, avoidance of stealing, dependability in keeping covenants and bonds, straight forwardness, avoidance of hypocrisy and protection of woman as weaker sex.

It is everyone’s responsibility to prepare the young for adulthood. Children are brought up in ways that allow flexible learning. They are involved in the practice of religion from cradle to grave. Through religion, mythologies, stories, proverbs and wise sayings, religious examples and mentoring the Yorùbá teach children about the centrality of virtue, good behaviour and godliness in Yorùbá life. Children are shown everyday examples of honesty, hard work, piety, discipline, generosity and community maintenance. They are exposed to everyday experiences of dedication and good behaviour in their community lives. The elderly and older ones lead younger ones and children by example and everyday experiences of good behaviour. Thus throughout lifetime and in a continuing way the Yorùbá child learns flexibly about God and about his social responsibility to his community.

Disability was seen as an act of God. It was seen also as human diversity and in other instances interpreted to be retribution for evil done before. However, persons with disabilities were not excluded from education. They were seen as ‘*Eni Orisa*’ (person of the deity) and taken care of at the shrines. They were allowed to learn at their own pace. Many learnt *Ifá* corpuses and became ‘*Babalawo*’ or *Iydnifa* (Ifa priests or priestesses). The community provided for their needs and they learnt different skills. Many became adept diviners and priests and priestesses of the gods and managers of the shrine. *Teele* in Ibe-Ife is a High Chief title reserved for a person with a disability.

Yorùbá education is holistic. It involves the people as full participants in education (both their own and their children’s education). The system of education is such that the entire community participates in its process. The authority for what is taught lies in the community and society and not outside the community. Teachers are varied and local. What is taught is vast. No one

is left out. Due to its flexibility of learning there are no failures and no drop-outs. The young are involved, everyone is a teacher and contributing member as education is continuing, lifelong, and is to satisfy community needs. The teaching strategy is very flexible, dictated by purpose and rich. Learning is done flexibly by observation, repetition, memorizing, practice, singing, writing, storytelling, poetry recitation, talks, dramatizing, dancing, riddles and proverbs.

Just like most African education systems the materials used in teaching and learning are flexible. They are local, available and familiar. Yorùbá education ethos has an ally in the Indigenous learning of the Amara Welloye of Ethiopia ((Tedler 1991) where no one is marginalized or a bystander and everyone has a stake. What is learnt in Yorùbá education is relevant to community needs and rose out of tradition and history. The language of teaching is local and understood whilst the subjects and skills taught have flexible curricular, vast scope are relevant and encompassing. Learning is holistic and flexibly achieved as everywhere is a learning centre. What is taught is fundamental and disseminated flexibly to achieve different purposes all at the same time. The Yorùbá tells stories to their children that teach different morals and skills yet in a digestible way. What is taught is non-compartmentalized hence has a flexible agenda and is from day-to-day experiences and relevant.

Yorùbá education did not operate in a vacuum. Its intention is to create an *Omólúwàbí*, a cultural man who is useful to the community. The Yorùbá personality is operated by four components *Ori*, *Ogbon*, *Íwá* and *Íṣé*. These relate flexibility with each other to give an appropriate foundation for *Omólúwàbí* education. *Ori* means head and is the very essence of personality. It controls the life and activities of the person. *Ogbon* is Wisdom and includes intelligence and knowledge of mores, norms, values, language, proverbs, political, economic, religious and social activities. *Íwá* is a “character” and is the external manifestation of *Ori*. *Íṣé* means work and can be understood as a skill, particularly occupational skills but better still understood as a person’s overall endowments (Yoloye, 2006). *Ogbon* and *Íṣé* are associated with the physical part of the anatomy (the arm and hand) which are in turn responsible for the performance of traditional economic tasks like farming, hunting, dyeing, cooking, smithing, carving, building etc (ibid). They both

have education components but are manipulated flexibly by *Ori* and *Íwáto* to achieve desired outcomes. Thus the Yorùbá person learns to be an “*Ọmọ́lúwàbí*” and to achieve personhood. The Yorùbá say of an *Ọmọ́lúwàbí* that “*O seniyan*” (s/he is human). In other words human genes with all the inbuilt implied by the term (*‘seniyan’* - human). It implies the use of common sense and the ability to deal with situations and circumstances flexibly. It is predicated on flexible learning that allows a man to use his wisdom and intelligent to work productively for the good of his community.

Yorùbá education was managed by community institutions. They act flexibly and have the responsibility for the management, administration and continuity of society. They laid the foundation of a system of education and Tradition continues so long as life lasts. Education agents included the family, age grade, traditional societies and entire the community. Age and seniority is important and applies in all these social institutions. Age was a major impetus for doing what was right. The elderly are held in high esteem and seniority is a great cohesive force in the social fabric. There is transferable knowledge from what is learnt at home to behaviour practices in the community. The Yorùbá family is extended. There are no cousins, uncles or aunts but only parents, brothers and sisters. Yet the Yorùbá transfers respect of the older and elderly from home to wherever they meet other elderly persons. It is through the elders the Yorùbá world enjoys stability. The oldest man was the head of all. They respected him, honoured, supported and cared for him and the younger ones in succession. The oldest man in the family has to be man of wisdom and discernment in family traditions as he is the harbinger of knowledge, wisdom, culture and tradition. He generally took counsel from other senior members of the family but what he said was final. The seniority factors in the family also extended into the lineage, age grade, traditional societies and chieftaincy. Every member of the community learnt flexibly by participation or learnt by doing their bit within the family and the community. Community institutions (family, age grade etc.) provided support and assistance to members of their communities to maintain their health and independence. They gave emotional support and motivation to community members. They prevented the abuse of members and monitor and support all in managing their personal safety.

Yorubá education started from home. Children learnt language flexibly through their mothers, families and the whole community. They learnt from play, songs, lullabies, proverbs, myths etc. that extol community values and get integrated into their communities. Children learnt about social rules by which the community lives flexibly so that what was initially biologically given can come to attain social self-hood i.e. make the child become a person with all the inbuilt excellences implied by the term (Menkiti 1984, 172). Children learnt how to respect elders and the elderly. They learnt the language and participated in community actions. They learnt from the practices of others and addressed the older person as 'e (they) or *eyin* (them) i.e. addressed in the plural as if more than one person rather than 'o' (you) or *iwo* (you). This is much unlike in the English language where "you" is the same for singular or plural subjects. They mirrored older ones as these courtesies by prostrating or kneeling down for older persons rather than offering handshakes. They learnt respect for older persons through direct instruction, observation, participation, initiation into age grades, cults and traditional societies, Ifa corpus and religions, practice, proverbs, myths, stories, etc.

The elderly are referred to as '*Baba*' (Father) or *Baale* (Father of the House) and young wives are betrothed or married to the elderly in their old age to care for emotionally, physically and other needs of the elderly as the older wives get engaged in raising grandchildren and managing the households. The female elderly persons were cared for by grandchildren, daughters, sons, younger wives and daughters-in-law in the family. Even the young widows were cared for. They were betrothed (*sulo 'po'*) to younger men (especially sons or younger brothers of the departed) in the lineage whose role is to take responsibility for their welfare including having children. Members of the family learn flexibly about family care, cohesion, unity and continuity. They learnt to belong by respect for tradition.

The community participated in traditional education flexibly through local actions, meetings, festivals, age grades, and traditional societies etc. Festivals promoted the teaching of morals, culture and age old practices and re-enacted historical age-old events that had been there from time immemorial.

"Through poems, incantations, epic folk tales, lyrics the traditional society informed the community about issues of moral, civil, religious and agricultural education" (Omolewa: 1985:97).

The individual learnt from age grade through initiation into appropriate adulthood whilst traditional societies initiated one into the secrets, logic and philosophy of the community.

The Yorùbá individual learnt about being a productive person in his community flexibly. No Yorùbá is unemployed in the traditional system (Majasan 1967, Yoloye 1978, Omolewa 1982a 1982b). Education is tailor-made to guarantee employment. The flexibility in learning to be gainfully employed is applied as

"Employment is woven into an individual's life right from boyhood through family organization and it is as much a shame on the individual as on the whole family if anybody is not properly settled on a job before he becomes independent of his father or his guardian" (Majasan 1967:47).

Even flexible learning is applied to traditional medicine and healing which are areas the Yorùbá excelled in. Knowledge of herbs for particular ailments was rife. Every member of the traditional society was involved in its use and practices. The Yorùbá have good idea of the use of plants, their efficacy and potency. The Yorùbá were vast in the knowledge of plants and animals and especially symbolism to prevent and cure diseases. *Ofo* (poetic incantations) is spoken during preparation of *oogun* (medicine) and through *a'se* (amen), *ofo* becomes a power that makes plant medicine work. The Yorùbá learnt divination and magic as specialist skills and used them to cure ailments minor and major. Pierre Verger (Fatunmbi 1995:13) did a study on the use of plants among the Yorùbá and concluded that knowledge of plants and the power of *ofo* through *ase* are creative forces for healing and cure. He demonstrated his conviction in various remedies by linking medicine, magical formulae and pharmacology (Falola 2016:29-30). Kay Moss (1999) examined some of the documents used to cure diseases by Africans in the 18th and 19th centuries and was amazed at the combination of herbs, incantation and witchcraft to cure diseases in Africa. She repudiates those who cast aspersion on these

procedures by calling them primitive and contends that these “*demonstrate incredible knowledge, great insight into people and the forces that shape their lives*” (ibid, p 28). If one examines the use of the word ‘knowledge’ in the above-referred studies, these are testimonies to Yorùbá indigenous education as a transmission of worthwhile values and discernment from generation to generation.

Children were inducted into the use of herbs and learnt about their efficacy from childhood. The morning starts with women of the household warming and heating various herbal preparations to be taken by members of the family. Each person is given a cup of ‘*agbo*’ (liquid medication) to prevent and combat general and common ailments especially constipation, haemorrhoid, fistula problems, malaria, yellow fever etc. men are given medication for virility, erectile dysfunction, painful back, vertebral pain and sexual power (*opaeyin, afato, aleko* etc), whilst some are given ‘*agunmu*’ (powdered medication), ‘*gbere*’ (herbal incisions) *ebu* (burnt medication) ‘*awopa*’ (balm), and others as a treatment for health problems and illnesses they have. Specialists were trained for orthopaedics, mental health, midwifery, paediatrics etc. while traditional propitiators and spiritualists deal with *ajakalee arun* (epidemics, infectious and communicable diseases) like *Sopona* (small pox), *iko egbe* (tuberculosis) etc.

Medicinal plants have been part the food chain so much that sometimes it is difficult to decide when a medicinal plant ceases to be food or medicine. Food plants are used for seasoning after being fermented. From childhood, Yorùbá children learnt to identify plants that have medicinal value and girls are specially trained in their preparation. The Yorùbá also realise that animals have quite a lot to teach humans about the medical use of herbs thus Zoopharmacognosy which is “the process by which animals self-medicate, by selecting and utilising plants, soils and insects to prevent disease” (Tolu Odugbemi and Abiodun Ayoola: 2008:15) is learnt whenever opportunity permits. For instance, it is difficult to differentiate the poisonous mushroom from the non-poisonous. The Yorùbá therefore test for poison in mushrooms by giving them to chickens. If the chicken does not eat it then the mushroom is poisoned. This is learnt as part of daily living skills. From time immemorial extracts from ‘*ewuro*’ (*Vernonia amygdalina* or bitter leaf) and

'*efinrin* (*Ocimum gratissimum*) have been taken in the mornings to free the bowel and deal with constipation, intestinal and parasitic ailments long before Huffman (one of the pioneers of zoopharmacognosy) noticed in 1987 that a female chimp's excretion twenty-four hours after eating '*ewuro*' contained lower levels of worm. Collaboration of researchers from Japan, Canada, France and Britain have since identified an active ingredient that has anti-parasitic, antitumor and antibacterial properties in it (ibid).

Traditional medicine belongs to a complex field. The practitioners lay claim to spiritual power, inspiration and knowledge for their healing prowess. Since most ailments are shrouded in myths and thought to have spiritual undertones and religious components consultation is always necessary for diagnosis and treatment of some serious ailments and afflictions. Diagnosis of ailments is flexible. It comes from observation, consultation and experience. It also comes from divination. Here Ifa is consulted as it provides an avenue for communication and link with the spiritual realm and where needed relevant deities appeased. Ifa is used to counter the forces of evil whilst *Esu* whose totem is engraved on the opon *Ifá* (divination bowl) is the first counsel of *Ifá*. *Ifá* has 256 corpuses. These are known as *odu Ifá* and are double signs derived from sixteen single ones paired with secondary ones. Indeed, *Ifá* corpus is arithomatic extraction predicated on two to power eight. It is a Yorùbá historical legacy and documentation of tradition. Corpuses are oral, literary and to be memorised. They are recitals of poetics or *ese Ifá* incorporating stories, mythologies, examples and paradigms etc that are used by the priest for interpretation. Corpuses reference situations and circumstances and predict actions for atonement, correction or resolutions of various circumstances and consequences for not heading to *Ifa* biddings relative to the 256 codings. The Ifa priest learns to interpret corpuses flexibly to accommodate apparent realities.

Conclusion

There are various economic downturns in the national grid due to social issues, political crises, national debt problems, oil price instability and international economic glut. Gaps have opened in national education. Nigerian society is now very sophisticated and complex. Old tools are now

less relevant for current problems. New technologies are chasing new products. The systems are digital and automated. They are no longer analogue and manual. Educational structure that we have now is exam dominated resulting in failures and drop outs. Unemployment has crept in as new industrial opportunities could not accommodate traditional skills and age-old practices appropriately.

We cannot say we are in a hurry and not change a flat tyre. We need to borrow values from the past grid that has allowed flexible learning opportunities in the education system and produced complete persons or *Ọmọ́lúwàbí*. We need to incorporate the flexible learning strategies of Yorùbá education into the national system.

Recommendations

Yorùbá education has generally adapted well to flexible learning strategies for imparting knowledge. These strategies are vast and are integrated into Yorùbá education practices. Yorùbá education is not compartmentalized and it goes on as long as one lives. The pedagogic strategy is very rich. It is flexible, convenient and realistic. Learning experience is relevant, flexible and within the community. The pedagogic materials are locally produced, familiar and available.

The Federal, State and Local Governments need to involve more community institutions to participate in education through the family, age grade and traditional societies. Subjects and skills to be learnt should, be relevant and community determined.

The Government educational systems should input learning flexibility to empower the people with employment skills like Yorùbá education does. They should empower everyone to be stake holders and participate in education as individuals and parents so that the entire community participates in the impartation of knowledge and no one is marginalized or made a bystander.

Education has to be continuing and lifelong with the flexibility of learning so there is no room for failure as everyone learnt at their own pace and time.

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