

# MAINTAINING THE HEGEMONIC INTERCOURSE BETWEEN CULTURE AND EDUCATION: TOWARDS A DECENTRALISATION OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Nigerian educational system is run with little or no respect for the deserved relationship between culture and education. With its preference for an overcentralisation and overbureaucratisation of educational policy, cultural elements of each regional or ethnic multiplicities are made to suffer on the altar of one-indivisible-nation. This makes it easy to relegate indigenous languages to an optional grade in the policy. It equally makes it easy to underplay some indigenous cultural elements to the advantage of foreign values and mores. This paper contends that any educational system which adopts a centralization policy makes deep cultural values far away from the people. A decentralization of educational policy instead, paves a way for the observance of the endemic relationship between culture and education.*

**Key words:** Culture, Education, Decentralisation, Educational Policy, Language and Society.

## INTRODUCTION

It has been established that there exists a strong relationship between education and cultural ideologies. Culture, on one hand, represents the summation of everything a society has accumulated over a period of existence. Everything, here, includes knowledge, belief, art, law, custom and all other capabilities acquired by man as a member of a society. Nkom's definition appears encapsulating. According to him, culture is;

the dynamic outcome of a society's struggle to harness and tap the resources of its environment for its material welfare and of its continuing attempt to fashion out an acceptable way of organizing its material reproduction and regulating or harmonizing the relationship between individuals and groups in the society and between that society and other societies (Nkom 1982:232)

A society's culture is the expression of a specific historical situation and of a distinctive, irreducible view of the world, of life and death, of man's significance, of the tasks he has to discharge, his prerogatives and limitations, and of what he has to do and what he may hope for. All these functions are, however, passed down to man from one generation to the other through the instrumentality of education.

Education, in this case, serves the function of preservation and transmission of cultural ways from one generation to the other. It is what Ottaway refers to as a conservative function. This means that the task of education is to retain and hand over cultural values, norms, goals and behavioural patterns of the society to its young ones and subsequently, to posterity. Obanya confirms this opinion when he asserts that;

every human society devotes a considerable amount of time and energy to transmitting its cultural heritage to its younger generation. It is this inter-generational transmission of cultural heritage that is the primary meaning and the primary function of education (Obanya 2007:5).

Aside the cumulative function, education has another interesting function – the function of reformation and transformation of culture. This function appears antithetical to the first one, but indeed, it is not, it is rather complementary. As education ensures conservation, it also ensures that what is conserved is allowed to go through a process of change which is inevitable. This change is made possible through critical and inventive educated persons in the society, who are able to generate new discoveries that could bring about a new mode of life. This is why Elegbe believes that the major concern of education is;

to surround a child with all the influences which society may judge to be healthy for body and soul, while at the same time training the understanding to become, when it is ripe, the critic and judge of those influences (Elegbe 1972: 169-170).

Hence, education helps the society in conserving and reforming its values and belief system. Again, reversibly, one could ask this question: of what particular benefit is culture to education? One may answer by saying that culture is the basis for education. Akinpelu rightly notes that;

no educational system can exist in vacuo; it must exist in context, that is, it must fit neatly into other preferences, values and priorities of the society for which it is being designed. The type of society envisaged is a good

guide to the type of educational philosophy to be expected (Akinpelu 2005:152).

In another work, he reinstates the connection as follows;

a genuine system of education when critically studied and analysed should yield some distinctive value-system which must be identical with that of the society to describe that educational system as relevant. (Akinpelu 2005:159).

The point being made here is that education derives its existence and meaningfulness from a cultural ideology. It is an activity which goes on in a society, and its aims and methods depend on the nature of the society in which it takes place. This is implied in Cookey's keynote address at the conference organized by NERC (Nigerian Educational Research Council) for national curriculum review, that "it is the society which sets the goals which education follows"(Cookey in Adaralegbe 1969: xxvii). The inevitable inference one could make from the foregoing is that the type of culture and the kind of persons envisaged in a society determine the kind of education to come on board. This is exactly what Bethrand Russell means when he insists that;

We should have some programme conception of the kind of person we wish to produce...before we can have definite opinion as to the education which we consider (Stephen 2001:41).

To further illustrate the interaction between education and cultural background, we shall quickly consider how educational systems have gained their point of departure from cultural ideologies. We may begin with ancient civilization in Greece. In the Greek world, the Spartans were given to war. It was not a tendency they had intrinsically, but situations around made them so. Not finding it easy with original inhabitants of the territory which they had required, they needed to continuously fight, conquer and maintain victory over their assailants. Thus, the Spartan society was essentially militaristic. As one would expect it then, the educational system set in place was designed to evolve military men who were strong enough for combats in territorial defence. It was geared towards physical prowess, military strength and skills, doggedness, obedience to law and constituted authorities. Although, this kind of educational system has been considered too myopic and shallow, it nonetheless buttresses our point on the relationship between educational system and cultural ideology.

Athens were neighbours of the Spartans, but their ideology contrasted the latter. Their ideology was to prepare for war and more importantly, make peace with the neighbouring cities. This was not because they did not have hostile, war-like neighbours, but rather than declare total and permanent enmity against their neighbours, Athenians opened up and diplomatically absorbed many other smaller city-states, teamed them up with herself and floated a confederacy. The educational philosophy which was then set in place to achieve this was geared towards producing men who were gifted in war-skills and more importantly men who possessed acumen for peace making. It was a system designed to develop the citizens in the cultivation of the intellect. To achieve this, Adenokun notes that the Athenians subscribed to all-round development of man – mentally, physically, socially, culturally and morally (Adenokun 2006:37). The curriculum consisted of reading, writing, poetry, mathematics, physical training and education, gymnastics, *et cetera*.

Again, in the ancient Roman world, education was at the beck and call of cultural ideology. The Roman society focused on agriculture as the mainstay of her economy, and on war, needed to protect the territorial integrity of the empire. It thus followed that the traditional Roman education was inextricably woven around agriculture and war.

In modern times, examples abound in:

- Union of Soviet Socialist Republic, now commonly referred to as Russia. The ideology adopted is socialism; and the philosophy of education imbibed is oriented to reflect this ideology.
- The United States adopts capitalism and pragmatism as her socio-cultural and economic character. The educational system, albeit not entirely the same across the states, is largely pragmatic and capitalistic.
- We have another example in Tanzania. President Julius Nyerere, in Arusha Declaration, configured a “National Ethic” which was a blueprint of the socialist and communalistic society that Tanzania was to be. This blueprint was immediately followed-up with an educational philosophy captioned: “Education for Self-Reliance”.

One could go on and on to cite examples of societies that evolved cultural ideologies for themselves, and immediately coupled such ideologies with complementary educational philosophies and systems which would help to achieve such ideologies. What this translates into is that no nation produces an educational philosophy, unless it has first identified the kind of society and the kind of people she wants in the society. This submission is what Babs Fafunwa has in mind when he pontificates thus;

Before we can discuss intelligently the type of educational structure, organization and administration suited to a renascent Nigeria, we must first and foremost ask the most important philosophical question in educational planning: What kind of Nigerian society do we plan for? – a socialist, capitalist, fascist, islamic, christian, animist? (Fafunwa 1967:22)

The foregoing discussions obviously reflect a symbiosis: culture needs education and vice versa. Perhaps, this is why Obanya considers culture and education as inseparable, as they are two sides of the same coin. The two concepts are, in his opinion, indistinguishable as the primary definition of education is acculturation (Obanya 2007:37). In these interactions, however, culture occupies a more important seat for there cannot be anything called education if there is no culture in the first instance. Education as pointed out by Ottaway, is an activity which goes on in a culture, and its aims and methods are dependent on the culture of the society in which it takes place (Ottaway 1962:1&38). This means that the culture of a people informs the type of education predisposed to her young ones. Now, if “every type of society has its own underlying cultural dimension,”(Nkom 239) and it is true that “education depends on the total way of life of a society”(Ottaway 1962:11), then, the kind of education provided will be different in different kinds of culture/society. This is what comparative education has made us to know. Although human beings are essentially the same in all spheres, they however constitute some differences in their values, aspirations, belief-system, occupations, languages, dressing and all other categories that make up a way of life. These differences are incidentally caused by locations in the globe. As such, different locations have made people to imbibe different ways of life. A particular way of life is in turn preserved and transformed with the kind of education adopted, which in turn takes its point of departure from the cultural ideology the society wishes to adopt, and the kind of people the society wishes to evolve.

One is aware that the system of education in Ghana is quite different from French; different from Britain; even in the same country like U.S.A where there are heterogeneous

societies making up a country, they are said to have fifty educational policies. This is simply so because of the presence of diversities in culture. In the case of Nigeria on the contrary, diversities is sacrificed on the altar of unity. In the bid to unite Nigeria into ‘one indissoluble country’, following the aftermath of civil war (1967-1970), the policy-makers, under the instruction of the then Head of State, Gen. Yakubu Gowon, sought to use education to heal the wounds. Although this move was laudable, it was however the beginning of re-alienation of the Nigerian child. The policy-makers cared less about the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies that make up the entity Lugard forcefully brought together as a ‘nation’. They became oblivious of the fact that even in our similarities, there exist lots of disparities. The way of life of the Yoruba man is, unarguably, different from the Hausa man. A policy which does not take this into cognizance is naturally bound to fail. No wonder Nkom had considered Nigeria as a classic example of a country where systematic planning of the culture components of the development process have been absent. The failure to appreciate that culture is the reason for education, and that wherever there are diversities of culture, there ought to be diversities of educational policies and systems, is one of the key reasons for educational inefficiency in this country. For education to achieve its optimum in Nigeria, a decentralization of the national policy is inevitable. Decentralization, here, does not negate our unity, it as a matter of fact, strengthens unity. It co-importantly, ensures that people manipulate the resources in their immediate environment to their benefits, and the larger societal benefit. Obanya understands this position clearly when he says that a responsive national policy on education should accord both voice and visibility to the needs at sub-national levels. He says;

“In the Nigerian context, a responsive national educational policy would mean ‘36-37 policies equal one policy’. In practical and concrete terms, each state of the Nigerian federation would require a state-specific policy. The overall national policy can then take the form of a general policy framework, while the state policies will contain the bulk of the specifics. The policy development sequence should be one in which state-level policy dialogues feed into national realities. The process will also help in broadening the scope of participation in policy development” (Obanya 2007: 209)

Obanya’s submission has revealed so much. It needs only be said that the only policy that ever worked since the intrusion of western education in Nigeria, was that of the regionalization era in the 1950s. With Awolowo and Awokoya in the west, Azikwe and Akpabio in the east, and similar efforts by Balewa in the north, a lot of landmarks were recorded. Education became close to the people; people’s needs were directly felt and response to education became an instrument

for exploration and exploitation of people's immediate environment; it meant adaptability and suitability to the community where one lived in; and more importantly, education became a tool for self-discovery, propagation and transformation of communal ethos. Yet in all these, the unity of the country was not circumvented. Practices in the west were emulated in the east, in the north, and so, there was a healthy competition and not rivalry which pervades the present scenario. This healthy competition would have continued but for the break introduced by Gowon's administration.

The point made so far is that the inability of our national policy to respect the relationship between culture and education constitutes a mismatch in the system. A reverse of this situation is possible if we can meaningfully identify diversities in our unity. A decentralization of the national policy will do this. This is the practice adopted in all countries with heterogeneous cultures. It is the system in United States, Spain, Brazil, New Zealand, Mexico, India, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, even Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Australia, Colombia and many other countries (Fisk 1996: 1-37) where homogeneity is far-away. It is a practice with promises of educational improvement; administrative efficiency; financial efficiency; development of local-contents; effects on equity (Fisk 1996: 24-29), and so on.

A related deficiency which demands attention in the policy is the position given to indigenous languages (mother tongues). Language occupies an important aspect of any culture. It is a non-material aspect of culture. It is a part of culture that cannot be toyed or tampered with. A little distortion generates a confused-identity. So important it is that Ojulari affirms unrepentantly that when there is "no language, no education" Ojulari. (2009:7). Thus, a culture-oriented education policy would include culture-related directives such as "languages of instruction, and particularly commitment to the development of indigenous languages for use in education" (Obanya 2007: 45). Incidentally, *the centrality of language to the teaching-learning process; the importance of Nigerian languages to the protection, preservation and promotion of Nigerian cultures and the enhancement of human dignity; and the necessity of learning a major language for purposes of promoting national unity and integration*, all have constitutional backing in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Co-incidentally, the government;

appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion and preserving cultures. Thus, every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (FRN in NPE 2004:5).

It is baffling, then, with the above realization, that the place given to languages in the policy is optional, coming behind mathematics, English and even French nowadays. If learning a major national language is a national and natural responsibility, then, its learning cannot be optional but compulsory at all levels. Again, if the language of the immediate environment is considered so important in achieving literacy and numeracy, why should it be taken as one of the 'other' subjects which could be dropped later? If government is serious about implementing the policy, why do we have language provisions couched in cautious escape phraseology – 'subject to the availability of teachers'?. Perhaps, the government needs to learn from the results of the research conducted by Fafunwa and other experts on effect of mother tongue on learning. The research confirmed that those who have their total primary education in mother tongue, who had turned to technical pursuit, have proved more resourceful than their counterparts from other schools when they met on the technical plane. The children demonstrated greater manipulative ability, manual dexterity and mechanical comprehension. In their relationship with their colleagues, the children demonstrated great sense of maturity, tolerance and other affective qualities needed for integration with those they came in contact with (Fafunwa 1989:141) . Similar results have been obtained in similar researches carried out in Philippines, Niger Republic, etc. Without going far, countries like England, France, Germany, China, Korea and Japan use English, French, German, Chinese, Korean and Japanese respectively as their mother tongues to educate their children. The same results have been produced. Why should Nigeria be different? Perhaps, if education is decentralized, it will be easy to use our local languages as major mode of communication and education, and it could then be required that the Nigerian child studies another Nigerian language and other international languages as 'other tongues' or 'further tongues' in order to foster interactions beyond one's coast. Summarily, with the disposition of the policy to overcentralisation of education and relegation of indigenous languages, it has created no room for the actualization or implementation of what is contained on page two of the policy; that Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on the full integration of the individual into the community.



## CONCLUSION

Since it has been argued that education and culture are inseparable, and that wherever there is cultural variability, {a culture differing from another culture} there must be corresponding difference in educational systems, we recommend that urgent steps be taken towards respecting the various cultural components in Nigerian educational policy. Ojulari argues that;

Education should not force the cultural values of the majority on the minority but rather moderate the values to be taught in small societies on acceptable and rational model. This is the situation in Nigeria and one way to foster unity among the various cultural groups is through knowledge, appreciation and awareness of other people's culture. Our education should then be shaped on different communal needs and values; it is then education could be of great relevance to us all (Ojulari 2010:13).

If indeed justice is to be done to the statement made on page four of the policy, that efforts shall be made to relate education to each community needs, then each culture or region would be allowed to develop its own strategy to respond to its peculiarities and idiosyncrasies. We argue that a decentralization of the policy is inevitable. Akinpelu agrees that there is "a grave need for extensive decentralization in the nation's educational system so as to allow for local adaptations and experimentations" (Akinpelu 2005:115). His agreement is sequel to his research on the problems and future prospects of the Nigerian education system. Among other critical shortcomings and deficiencies identified as militating factors against efforts at providing qualitative education for all, he observed that "over-centralization and overbureaucratization in the management and control of the education system with consequent inevitable inefficiency, frustration and shifting of initiative" (Akinpelu 2005:210) constitutes a great cog in the wheel of educational progress. The decentralization of education, proposed here, will ensure that each cultural variation in Nigeria is well taken care of. Education will no longer be alien to those who receive it.

Along with decentralization, is the idea of catering for indigenous languages in the country, after all, language is an essential aspect of culture. The relegation given to indigenous languages in the present policy must be revised. Native languages are used in America, England, Germany, France, Italy, China, Japan, North and South Korea, *et cetera*, to ensure that their children explore their natural endowment and environment, and thus, acquire at very early stages, self-confidence, personal initiatives, resourcefulness, creative reasoning, skills for

adaptability necessary for further growth in later stages of development (Olamosu 2000:11). Why is Nigeria different? After all, the experiments conducted by experts have revealed the power of mother tongue on intellectual growth. Hence, Nigerian languages should no longer be taken as just a subject, which will be dropped later in the educational ladder, meanwhile, preference is given to English and French, and they are used all through the process of education. Decentralizing education makes this process much easier. It is gainful to conclude with the following words from Obanya;

Promoting education-in-culture and culture-in-education will help in addressing the issue of relevance, which has eluded education reforms in post-colonial Africa. It will also lead to a desirable paradigm shift that returns education to its original meaning of acculturation, thereby contributing to rediscovering the education that Africa lost with colonization (Obanya 2007:53).

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