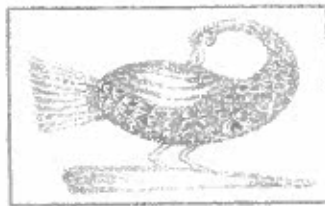


**The Wisdom of Our Forefathers:
Sankofaism and Its Educational Lessons for Today**

by

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SANKOFA



**"GOING BACKWARD TO
MOVE FORWARD"**

Abstract

In Ghana, formal colonial education sought to produce literates to fill the junior positions in the imposed administration. This paper examines and puts into perspective a contrasting African philosophy of Sankofaism, exploring how this indigenous philosophy should guide the process of Africanising education. The paper proceeds from the assumption that education is the transmission of knowledge, relevant skills and values to ensure development. A system of education should be informed by the values and aspirations of its beneficiaries. The Africa of the 21st century requires a new form of education that is firmly anchored in indigenous African thought while borrowing appropriate ideas and technologies from the rest of the world.

Key words: Education, Africanisation, indigenous, Sankofa[ism], colonised, wisdom, forefathers

INTRODUCTION

In every society good education is seen by many as one that involves the transmission of knowledge, skills and values to its younger members as a way of ensuring not only its continued improvement but also its economic and social advancement. To this end a system of education is informed by the values and needs of the particular society or what that society expects from education. In other words, educational outcomes are determined by the thinking and values of a society. In Africa, before the advent of colonialism and its concomitant introduction of Western education, indigenous systems of education existed where the relevant knowledge, skills and values for socio-economic survival were taught to the younger members of society. However, the philosophy that informed the education provision of the colonisers of Africa was different. It only suited their own aims. To a very large extent the colonisers' agenda for education was to produce literate Africans to fill junior positions in the colonial administration (which was imposed on Africans) and in other cases to help spread Christianity. Western education, which overshadowed the indigenous African education, was neither adapted to nor integrated into the African context, value system, needs and realities of the environment in which it was planted. This colonial education 'agenda' has left African nations with a legacy of turning out in droves school graduates who are not only aliens to their own culture and society but are also unemployable and can hardly contribute to the socio-economic development of their communities and the continent at large.

The Africa of the 21st century requires the development of a new form of education that is firmly anchored in indigenous African thought while it borrows appropriate ideas and technologies from other parts of the world. In this regard, Wiredu (2004:24) points out that

this, for us in Africa, must of necessity involve a complex of capabilities, drawing on our heritage of indigenous knowledge, on the one hand, and on the other, cognitive resources available in other cultures, East or West, provided they do us good.

Herein lies the justification for an indigenous philosophy of education that can assist to transform and Africanise the formal education which is based on Western ideals. This article examines and puts into perspective an indigenous African philosophy of Sankofa ('go back and take it') which can offer guidance as African countries grapple with the process of Africanisation of education. The article argues that there are

important values in the philosophy of Sankofa – a legacy from our forefathers – which underscore African indigenous knowledge systems and have significant lessons for the reformation of formal education in Africa today.

SANKOFAISM: AN INDIGENOUS AFRICAN THOUGHT AND PRACTICE

Sankofa (which means 'go back and take it') is an indigenous African philosophical thought and cultural custom among the Akans (Twi-speaking people) of Ghana. The Akans use proverbs and symbols very extensively in their everyday lives to convey important messages. The Sankofa symbol, is a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backward. The thought behind this is that there is wisdom in learning from the past, both to understand the present and shape the future. In his understanding Galloway (2004:3) sees the egg in the mouth of the bird as representing the 'gem' or knowledge of the past upon which wisdom is based. It also signifies the generation to come that would benefit from the wisdom. The forward and backward gaze of the sankofa bird is based on the Akan proverb, '*Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenki*' which translates to 'It is not wrong or shameful to go back for something you have previously forgotten.' The belief among the Akans is that the past illuminates the present and that the search for success is a lifelong process; in fact a journey. Life is a journey, and sometimes as people undertake a journey they may have left some very important things home and have to turn back to fetch them before they continue.

As an indigenous African thought Sankofa is based on the premise and belief that human beings are part of the past and that this past shapes the present. The present would also determine and greatly influence the future. In other words, we cannot know where we are going unless we know where we are coming from. People's past could hold sweet, bitter, positive or negative memories, but whatever it might be, they can learn from it in order to move forward. In life people literally need to take steps backwards to reclaim the past so as to understand the present and to realise why and how they have come to be where they are and who they are. Sankofa may also mean that people's past is as important as their present and their future. In this way to make the best out of the present and plan for the future Africans must 'gaze backward' to the past for appropriate guidance to ensure future success. Sankofaism therefore teaches that Africans must 'gaze backward' to their past for appropriate guidance in order to succeed in their forward movement. No matter how far away Africans have travelled they must always return home. They need to do some retrospection. In recent times the awareness and the need to reclaim a true African identity has begun to grow among many Africans (both on the continent and among those who are part of the diaspora). In Dzobo's (1976:132) view,

this apprehension of reality is the passport for our journey as a people. It represents what we Africans see as life and understand it to be because of the perspective of our environment and of the experiences we have gone through as a people.

The phrase 'apprehension of reality' could mean the various setbacks experienced by Africans throughout their history, such as colonialism, slavery, civil wars, socio-

economic and political instabilities, diseases and poverty – some of which still haunt the African people and impede their progress. This therefore calls on Africans to 'gaze backward' in order to study and analyse both the bitter and the good experiences of the past and to learn from them as they make a leap forward in this new century.

Considering the viewpoints expressed on the topic by various writers including Dzobo (1976), Galloway (2004) and Tedla (1995), one can argue that Sankofa is not only an indigenous African thought but also a way of life or practice. As a practice Sankofaism brings Africans face-to-face with a new awareness of historical realities and African identity. As the Akan adage goes, '*Tete wo bi*' (The past has something to teach the present generation). Thus, when the present generation of Africans do some retrospection they can learn from the past to assist them in reclaiming their heritage and in seeking direction for their present and future endeavours.

LESSONS FROM SANKOFAISM FOR EDUCATION TODAY

It is not an overstatement to say that many sub-Saharan African countries face the challenge of transforming their educational systems to incorporate some valuable African indigenous knowledge systems in order to make modern education more relevant to their respective contexts. This observation is made in the light of the fact that colonialism has left African countries with a legacy of education systems that reflect the ideals and values of the West. There is a critical need to transform education to reflect African values and needs. Kawagley and Barnhardt (2004) hold the following view:

The depth of indigenous knowledge rooted in the long inhabitation of a particular place offers lessons that can benefit everyone, from educator to scientist, as we search for more sustainable way to live on this planet.

As African countries reflect on the type of education that would be more relevant or meaningful for the continent and its people, policy-makers and curriculum planners, like the mythical *sankofa* bird, might have to 'gaze backward' (look back) to the past and reclaim some important African values expounded by the indigenous African philosophy of Sankofaism which can make present-day education more African.

The transformation can start with the curriculum. In other words, what is taught and learnt at the schools must be transformed to incorporate the needs, values and aspirations of Africans and their contexts. In Africanising education the first thing education planners and policy-makers in the various African countries could do is to scrutinise the current school curriculum and the education systems in general and find ways and means of integrating African identity (values) and relevant skills. This may not only make what is taught at schools useful to school graduates and their communities, but will also identify them as true Africans. Wolhuter (2000:14) appropriately points out that making education relevant to the needs and situation in

Africa means, firstly, that curricula and textbooks have to be reformed so as to take account of the African environment and cultural heritage and secondly, that education should be re-directed so as to make it more responsive to the needs of the people. Sharing in these sentiments, Diop (2000:88) argues for the need to take into account historical evolution, and hence lessons from the past, in order to be able to establish a viable educational project that has been overlooked by organic research, whose concern has been to go along with the action of the political leaders. Africans must 'gaze backward' into their indigenous education system and blend its valuable aspects with the adopted formal (Western) education. In this way education could be more meaningful to the African context and value systems where indigenous education has a relation to general knowledge, production, society, culture (language, traditions, religious rites, music dances) and ethnic values.

It is my contention that Sankofa must be seen as a cultural renewal and development which should, through education, make Africans more aware of the value of their indigenous cultures, including their beliefs, religion and languages. This cultural awareness and renewal can start within the formal education systems. There is thus an urgent need for education policy-makers, planners, politicians and educators to transform education by contextualising it and by incorporating relevant African cultural values and practices such as patriotism, humaneness, respect for fellow humans, co-operation and the use of indigenous languages side by side with the dominant foreign language. This would contribute to the unification of the various ethnic groups within a country. Consequently people would not feel the need to shy away from their African roots, norms and practices. Dzobo (1976:134) expresses the hope that

this new cultural awareness will shape a new generation of Africans and bring African society into being. *Sankofa* then is a revaluation of our indigenous way of life and a new search for our true identity as people. *Sankofa* is a critical reappraisal of our indigenous culture so as to restore it to its true image by discovering its potentials for the improvement of quality of life.

The critical reappraisal of African culture can best be done through education of the youth who would be the future generation and the next leaders. Education can help retrieve African culture from the false and vulgar image exhibited by Western writers. Indeed, some Africans have believed this picture of the Western way of life to the extent that they have become agents for the propagation of the white man's culture and for the conversion of the African from his own way of life to that of the white man's. Some Africans have consequently become contemptuous and ashamed of the indigenous African way of life and have thus come to reject it. The corollary to this attitude is a belief that the white man's way of life is a model to be copied and appropriated by Africans (Dzobo 1976).

Tedia (1995:209) is of the opinion that the formal education systems inherited from the West need to be critically appraised and overhauled:

[T]he uncritical and often unconscious absorption of the negative images projected about Africans through the media, music, books and the education system has led most of Africa's "educated" young to use Western values in judging African sensibilities. Because they have accepted the West as their reference point and as the legitimizer of everything, they do not see much value in the traditional African way of life. The question then becomes, what is to be done about the lost children who are neither Africans nor Europeans? Can the African world afford to lose so many of its young to the deadly school it has uncritically embraced? The loss is even greater through the fact that the "lost ones" do not remain lost. Many return as policy-makers and implementers to tear apart what is left of African traditions and heritage. It is out of this concern to preserve the African way of life and prevent the loss of children that one must come up with a different type of education.

It is for the above critical reasons and others that I argue in this paper for the Africanisation of education to make it a liberation force that can save Africans from cultural imperialism, the loss of African culture and identity. To talk about culture is to talk about language, because language is the embodiment of culture. It is critical for African governments to demonstrate the political will to raise the standards of indigenous African languages to the same status as the language of the colonisers – e.g. English, French, Spanish and Portuguese – in the school curriculum.

This is not to suggest that these foreign languages must be phased out. As *de facto lingua franca* for Africans they need to be retained, but indigenous languages must be developed to the same level as those adopted foreign languages. Since the Western education system has alienated people from their own languages and from their culture, Africans need to 'gaze backward' to reclaim their past. The attempt to destroy the African languages and culture must be reversed through proactive educational reform measures. To annihilate a language is tantamount to destroying a people's collective memory bank of their past achievements and failures, that is, their experience over time, which forms the basis of their identity. It is like uprooting that people from history (Ngugi wa Thiongo (1997:57). Language is an important vehicle for the transmission of their culture and traditions. This is why formal education must be reformed to reflect the realities of Africa and its people. By 'looking back to their past' like the mythical sankofa bird, Africans can transform the present educational system to incorporate teaching children, through their mother tongue, the ideals of sankofa. These ideals are humaneness, respect for life and human dignity, communicating appropriately and co-operating with others, fear of God, living and working in harmony with people from diverse backgrounds and seeing skills acquisition and use as a very important means of survival in today's world. When education moulds children in this way, they would be proud of their African-ness, and be responsible and accountable to their people by the time they leave school or grow up to be adults, parents or leaders. This holistic moulding of children can also make them assimilate the dignity of labour (e.g. working for

oneself on the land, in a workshop or doing manual work), and bring them to respect and value life and the rights of others. This in itself would eventually reduce serious crime in society.

When the African indigenous concept of Sankofaism is assimilated into education and training, managers of all domains may apply humane management styles where the workforce can be perceived as humans and not as machines. If workers are treated with compassion, respect, understanding, care and support, and if they have job security, they will regard management as family and work harder and collectively to increase production for the organisation that employs them. The incorporation of the teachings of Sankofa into the formal education system and curriculum may assist organisations to instil African cultural values in their management style. The shifting of the paradigms from purely western and including African paradigms entails transforming management style from dictatorship to relationship, shifting orientation from manager to mentor, engaging in affirmative action, and thereby reversing discrimination and finally, following the indigenous African management practice of *ubuntu* (Lessem 1996:7).

'Gazing backward' like the mythical sankofa bird means that in tackling Africa's present-day political, economic and educational problems Africans need to rely on the legacy of their ancestors and should prudently borrow new ideas and technologies from outside the continent. For example, applying the African value of consensus in settling socio-economic and political disputes can save the continent lives, money and time and enable African countries to move forward. Just as their forefathers built upon this legacy bequeathed to them by their ancestors, so should the present-day Africans build on everything positive handed down to them (Tedla 1995:210). The present generation of Africans should deviate from bad ways that brought harm to their forefathers as well as to the continent at large.

Diop (2000:94) reports that when African education came into perspective during a preparatory meeting of experts that preceded the Jomtien International Conference on Education in 1990 it became clear that indigenous system of education has strong points that can be incorporated into the formal system of education. The importance of indigenous education was seen in the light of 'related knowledge'. For example it relates to moving from general knowledge to practice; education for production and development of society; culture through mother tongue education. It is furthermore significant with regard to the immersion of the elements of knowledge into cultural practices (games, masks and religious rites, dances, music, sport, etc.) as well as to recognised ethnic values. Thus, for learning outcomes of formal education systems in Africa to be more relevant and purposeful, the curriculum must relate to community needs, that is, what actually happens or what people yearn for in their communities. The curriculum must promote the learning of theory and practice – knowledge, skills and values that can lead to employment either in the formal or the informal sector of the African economies. Children need to be educated through an integrated curriculum that covers learning experiences from

a variety of courses, such as basic Mathematics, Science, Social Science (i.e. indigenous art, crafts, sculpturing, languages, ethics, civics, history, economics, management, marketing, co-operatives, accounting and geography), scientific agriculture (i.e. practical farming such as crop rotation and production, animal rearing, poultry keeping, soil conservation, farm technology where simple farm implements can be designed and manufactured) and applied science (i.e. building, carpentry, welding, basic electricity and engineering). These courses may not only broaden knowledge but are linked to skills which can lead to self-employment.

If what is learnt at school is made more relevant to their context or life world, school leavers may not shy away from working with their hands either in the field or in a workshop by practising or doing what some 'Westernised Africans' may regard as 'mean' or 'dirty' jobs. A 'backward gaze to the past' by policy-makers and politicians may enable them to learn that in indigenous African society everyone works. There is no such thing as unemployment or sitting idly for lack of work. Each person makes his/her contribution through work, both inside and outside the home. This is the type of outcome the 'new' Africa needs – education that can make people create jobs and not a mass of job-seekers without specific skills.

The philosophy of Sankofa requires educators to make use of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) in their pedagogical encounters with learners. To make teaching and learning more meaningful, teaching aids or materials must include examples or aspects taken from the learners' context. Teaching and learning must revolve around the communal life of Africans. Learning is a social activity and the more children are taught in groups where they are encouraged to discuss, study, experiment and support each other, the more they acquire knowledge, skills and (African) values of co-operation, humaneness, warmth, compassion, empathy, mutual understanding and a shared world view.

To summarise: the purpose of Sankofan education is the empowerment of the African people; the reclaiming of the brothers and sisters who are being lost to alienating educational systems, to prison and individualism; the reclaiming of African history which has been omitted, hidden, distorted or suppressed; and the teaching of Africa's indigenous crafts, technologies and medicine to the young (Tedla 1995:211). If we wish to achieve the abovementioned values, the transformation of formal education must aim at cultural and academic excellence, spiritual development, community building, the mastery of practical skills, excellence in the workplace and physical fitness and health.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the need for Africans to take a 'backward gaze' into indigenous skills, values, needs and aspirations and incorporate them into formal education systems inherited from the West. As African countries grapple with education transformation there is an urgent need to fuse the best practices in the indigenous African education systems with that of formal (Western) education in

order to improve and adapt the latter to the African context and needs. The blend of Western and indigenous elements of education could not only serve the needs, aspirations of Africans but may also relate education to the cultural identity and affinities of Africans. In this way the youth – the future African leaders – could be proud of their African way of life instead of despising it.

The article has argued that in the era of educational transformation it is crucial for policy-makers, politicians, educators and communities at large to design curricula that reflect the true nature, values and needs of the African continent and its people. Education must link what children learn at school to their world – what actually happens in their lives or communities. Concerted efforts should be made to study the African indigenous system of education and training and to borrow from those aspects of the formal (Western) education system that would empower learners to achieve better education outcomes that are truly African. People would thus boast of an education that is truly anchored in the African context. In this way unemployment could be reduced. If Africans do not look back to reclaim their past, they will not only perpetuate poverty, disease and instability, but may also be reduced to mental slaves and intellectual zombies in their own land.

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