

Relevance of Indigenous Education in the Contemporary Youth Education: Case of Initiation Rites of Wamakonde in Tanzania

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Abstract

This paper explores the relevance of indigenous education in the contemporary youth education in Tanzania. The paper employs interviews and focus group discussions to collect data. Through Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and likumbi and chiputu initiation rites as its case, the study found out that indigenous African performances are used in instructing the youth and familiarising them with values and socially-required attitudes during the initiation period of initiation rites. However, rites have received confrontation and criticism by some scholars because of their use of some sexual instructions that have a potential of encouraging early marriage and early pregnancies. Nonetheless, this does not nullify the facts that chiputu and likumbi are strongly relevant practices and play crucial role in advancing education.

Introduction

Any valid and relevant education should have a strong foundation erected around the human experiences. Education should motivate the learner to understand the how and why of many things in his or her society and the real world around. As a cultural practice and process, education is not only tied to formal schooling but extends beyond the schoolroom door. It moves carefully and ethically when it consciously reflects against the backdrop of real experience of existing life. In other words, education methods, contents and forms should be generated and passed through generations for the benefit of the needs of the community and the understanding of the community's environment in which the education is sculpted. African indigenous education as prehistoric practice with strong ties to indigenous education institutions such as *jando* (for boys) and *unyago* (for girls) has always belonged to the community of its origin. *Jando* and *unyago* are initiation rituals which mark rites of passage from childhood into adulthood. They are also an initiation academy of many ethnic groups in Tanzania with different ethnic names such as *chiputu* and *ntengu/likumbi* of Wamakonde, *digubi* of Wakaguru, *mkole* of

Wazaramo, and *ngasi* of Wachaga (Njewe, 2018). Knowledge offered and acquired through practices found in these institutions is what in this paper is referred to as indigenous education.

Background

In pre-colonial African society, theatre played a central role in religious, academic and other social practices in the process of educating, criticising, regulating behaviour and generally monitoring the welfare of the community. Children participated in theatre as performers through which they were equipped with different skills. As a result, the cultural heritage of the ethnic groups was kept alive and passed on to the children. The theatre, therefore, was essentially utilitarian and it sought to raise, discuss, impart and pass societal norms to successive generations. Accordingly, learning was carried out in a variety of ways, from accompanying and assisting parents and relatives who had knowledge to apprenticeships and rites of passage (Weaver, 2011). Passing on knowledge to the successive generation through theatrical performances is therefore, one way among others and individual knowledge acquired through this path fits the historical contexts and needs of indigenous peoples. Participants in initiation institutions were or still taught the necessary skills and knowledge to function and work within that particular society. Education system of such kind is mainly characterized by being communal in both ownership and practices as it is shared across generation by initiating participants into adulthood through training them for economic production and social responsibilities within a specific society.

Despite indigenous education being accredited for its utilitarian nature, its relevance in today's world is in an inauspicious situation. This is in a sense that, indigenous education as a social historical phenomenon which embodies man's expressive capacity has always reflected the lived life in the moment of his development. The life and moments of today's development are largely shaped and charged by globalisation. It is an undeniable fact that the world we live today has not remained the same, and that cultural activities including indigenous education have always contributed towards and at the same time manifest socio-economic development. Thus indigenous education whether under communalism, or socialism or neoliberalism is directly linked to susceptibility of existing conditions both internally and externally (Lihamba, 1985).

The current state of politics and social-economic development, therefore, is what pre-determines the relevance of education. Thus, relevance of indigenous education is determined by the globalised world we live today. The world dominated by Western education systems which position itself “at the top of a pedestal that seemingly rests on its own laurels”? (Jacob et al, 2015, p.3) The questions are i).why do African societies still practise initiation rites? Examples of these rites are *mophato* of Basotho, *likumbi* and *chiputu* of Wamakonde of Tanzania and Bachewa of Malawi, *ulwaluko* of Xhosa people of South Africa, *chinamwali* or *chisungu* of Bachewa of Zambia and Malawi as well as *lihawu* of Eswatini just to mention a few. ii) Is there any relevance of the practices in the today’s globalised world?

The globalised world

The world we live today is very interactive between the local and global communities, through movement of people (labour) and knowledge (technology) across international borders. Such an interactive process is what is branded as globalisation. It is a process or condition of the cultural, political, economic, and technological meeting and mixing of people, ideas, and resources, across local, national, and regional borders (Vasylieva, 2019). Such a process or condition has made the world increasingly shrink to become one global village and in this context the globalised world. Globalisation as described by Lihamba (2007):

Facilitates the movement of ideas and cultural products through porous borders and enabling peoples a glimpse of alternative ways of producing and consuming culture. Globalization manifests itself also as aggressively anti-local, anti-indigenous production of art ideas and the various forms of cultural activity which cannot be commoditized into profitable objects (p. 11).

The subtext of the statement that “globalisation manifests itself ...as anti-local, anti-indigenous production of various forms of cultural activities” regards globalization with great suspicion. Within this suspicion, globalization is seen as a threat to cultural identities and those in this strand claims that globalization is a coined vocabulary to replace the term ‘global pillage’ (Shule, 2010). There is also a view that globalisation is very beneficial for it brings about trading opportunities, improved market and technology access, better health, and promoting global social movements (Jackson, 2016; Stiglitz, 2002). The proponents of globalization convince and

influence others about hegemony of globalization by presenting diverse frameworks to explain it. They firmly advocate for a “borderless world” in which “territory” is least important and ultimately it will tend to lose its distinctiveness (Scholte, 2008; Qadri et al, 2016).

In fact, globalisation is real and through globalization the societal formation and modernity of the western world are replicating in the rest of the world and identities of nations are disappearing (Sen, 2002). Western cultures such as religion, pop music, movies, western drama series, modelling, fashion, and games are today diffused into cultural practices of many geographical places of the planet. The diffused western cultures are either adopted with some modification or replace the local culture regardless the fact that they have different meaning in the destination societies (Qadri et al, 2016). In this case globalization becomes synonymous with westernization and therefore modernisation. People begin identifying with larger groups, beyond their family, clan, or tribe. Through identifying their own societies as akin to those of outsiders, people begin measuring their cultural and political orders according to a broader international schema, and opening their eyes to transnational inspirations for internal social change. The modernised societies see the indigenous culture as incompatible to the globalized world and must be abandoned or abolished, and that it is inevitably important for a society to be westernized in order to successfully be modernized. Jackson (2016) articulates the situation clearly that while most people and communities resist, dismiss, or deny the possibility of a global human collectively, they nonetheless compare their own cultures and lives with those beyond their borders. It is from this background this paper attempt to critically explore the relevance of indigenous education through which people’s cultures are transmitted from generation to generation even in the todays globalised world.

Methodology

This is a qualitative case study research in which interview and focus group discussions that involved 16 participants were employed. Two focus group discussions of 7 participants in each were conducted at Nkongi village in Newala District of Mtwara region. Two *likumbi* custodians and religious leaders were also interviewed around the same dates. Nkongi village was

purposively selected because the *chiputu* and *likumbi* rituals are actively practised to date. It was important to interview religious leaders (who represent modernisation) and the *likumbi* custodian so as to grasp the conceptualisation of how indigenous education is either or not relevant in today's youth and morals.

Relevance of indigenous education

As highlighted earlier that one of the places where indigenous education is offered is at the initiation academies such as *chiputu* and *likumbi*. The form and content of what is offered in these institutions involves “teaching and learning the indigenous types of knowledge implicated in the complex sets of physical and non-physical environment, economic, technological, political, and sociocultural spectra of the society” (Pesambili, 2017, p.20). Indigenous education is therefore experiential education as Jacob et al (2015, p.30) defines that “Indigenous education involves knowledge that is generated, obtained, and adapted to fit the historical contexts and needs of indigenous peoples and is then transmitted through educative means to others”

Indigenous education has purposes to serve and through the purposes its sustainability is assured. Ocitti (1994, p.44) in discussing characteristics of indigenous education highlighted three goals of indigenous education which are: “to know; to do and to be (or become)”. For Ocitti, indigenous education is meant to prepare its learners to understand and know by heart essential knowledge about all aspects of the culture of his or her society, know its ideology, survival mechanism, history of his or her society, know his or her roles for his or herself, his or her family and for his or her society. It is kind of education geared towards preparing the learner for practical work and skill acquisition for the societal socio-economic activities such as carving, clay working, masonry, hunting, fishing, herding and agriculture. Furthermore, indigenous education moulds its learners to the fullest developed and functioning individual (socially, morally and spiritually) as an acceptable man or woman of his or her society.

Indigenous education especially in Africa is complex and consists of non-formal, informal, and formal methods of instruction and educational institutions. For a large part it is

‘undifferentiated’, pragmatic, socially relevant, utilitarian, geared towards the needs of the community rather than the needs of the individual. Learners in the indigenous education are being prepared for a particular profession or occupational activity (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003). Epskamp (1992) describes that a learner in indigenous educational system goes through different successive age groups from the time he or she is born to the time he or she dies. These age groups always mark the beginning of a new type of education through rite of passage. One period in which life of passage is done is in pre-puberty, before young girls and boys are accepted into the circle of adults (Epskamp, 1992; Mlama, 1983; Lihamba, 1985; Njewe 2018). In Epskamp (1992) words, during this time “boys and girls are interned for an intensive and strictly organized crash course which ends with their initiation as young adults in society” (p. 12). During the internship period learners received practical education on agriculture other types of food production such as fishing, and animal husbandry, various trades and crafts, and certain knowledge and skills related to professions such as religious, medicinal, government, military, and leadership roles (Weaver, 2011). The instructional or pedagogical tool which was extensively used during rite of passage in familiarising the youth with values and socially required attitudes was traditional African theatre forms. The pedagogy of indigenous education was responsive in a sense that the knowledge and cultural experiences of all learners were valid and actively constructed. However, today there is some lamentation that indigenous knowledge/education about agriculture, husbandry, stewardship, and other forms of economic wisdom are seldomly reflected in the hierarchical textbooks and lessons that prioritize Western, European modes of education (Jacob et al, 2015). Mapana (2020) counts for his studentship experience in the traditional indigenous school. Mapana describes how the indigenous and modern educations remain firm and tolerated of each other even today:

I learned our cultural norm of respectful behaviour ... in traditional school – in particular, through initiation ceremonies. Among the Wagogo people of central Tanzania, East Africa, both girls and boys who are properly brought up are expected to go through a conscious, public process of tutoring when they learn about all matters concerning adulthood. This aspect of indigenous African socialisation remains very common; Westernized religious training has not destroyed, but rather reinforced this important transition from childhood to becoming a person (p. 34).

The coexistence of western and indigenous education modes in Africa is what many scholars are advocating for. However, in his summary, Mapana poses this very useful question “enculturative contexts that impacted upon my identity so critically: do they matter for young Tanzanians today? (p. 41)”. The call for having global indigenous education tree in which we are all interconnected as well as finding possible strategies to better incorporate it into the classroom (Lesongeur, 2017) creates doubt on the validity and usefulness of traditional indigenous education. To clear the doubt this study uses *likumbi* and *chiputu* rituals which are young boys’ and girls’ initiation rites among the Wamakonde of Mtwara in southern Tanzania.

Likumbi and Chiputu Initiation Rituals

Wamakonde is an ethnic group that occupies southern Tanzania regions of Lindi and Mtwara and the district of Mueda in the northern part of Mozambique (Gabriel, 2014). Wamakonde are basically peasants practising mixed farming. They have cultural performances which, according to the local communities, not only link them to their ancestral spirits but also create a social bond among community members of all ages and genders. *Chiputu* and *likumbi* are, therefore, names given to a sequence of ceremonies which combine initiation rites and circumcision of boys and *Unyago/chipitu* for girls. Through initiation rites the young Makonde persons are transformed into adult members of the society. The practices of initiation ceremonies vary from region to region. Among the Wamakonde the initiation rite which marks their transition of both boys and girls from childhood to adulthood is done at the age of about 7 – 10 years, which in most cases are few years before puberty (Anu, 2017; Halley, 2012). The ceremonies are usually conducted after harvest and in particular during school long vacation in the months between June-July and October.

A *likumbi* ritual is organized independently by each clan. In a *likumbi* camp boys are trained on hunting, cultivating, proper sexual behaviour, respect for the property of others, and good conduct. Great emphasis is placed on the secrecy of all procedures and teachings of the *likumbi*. A novice who gives away any secret of the *likumbi* is threatened to acquire physical disease or madness. While in *likumbi* camp young boys are also taught about cultural norms and

expectations of adult life, as well as punishments for the past deeds with the goal of transforming them into more responsible and obedient individuals. These aspects are preceded by physical transformation of circumcision.

For wamakonde, *chiputu* is a passage of rite which represents the transition of young girls from a *nahaku*, translated as “childhood,” to a new developmental stage referred to as *mwali*, which translates as “bigness” (Halley, 2015). A girl is secluded to *chiputu* where she receives training that prepares her for biological changes. The training in *chiputu* utilises mainly short poems or riddles known as *midimu* or *mizimu* (singular *mzimu*) which are accompanied by specific dances. The meaning of each song or riddle must be interpreted by the older woman or girl who has already passed through the ritual.

Indigenous education from Freirian’s critical pedagogy

With reference to Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy learning is a process where knowledge is presented to use, then shaped through understanding, discussion and reflection (Freire, 1987). Central to critical pedagogy is its process in which the oppressed, in this case the learners, are prepared to become responsible members and citizens that the society wants them to be. Such pedagogical qualities are very explicit within *likumbi* and *chiputu* where all the trainings are utilitarian for the purpose of preparing and conscientising learners on their role in community and their new status. Teaching and learning methods and processes in these indigenous institutions and mostly *likumbi* and *chiputu* rite of passage, embody philosophies, skills, values, traditions, and attitudes of society that are accumulated, evolved, and transmitted from one generation to another. In one group discussion with some makonde men and women from Nkongi village, they emphasised that the education provided in those camps are very important in shaping learners to become better members of the society. One participant, for instance explained:

During *chiputu* camp we would always spare several days for *kupisha* [to introduce]. These are days that we specially use for introducing girls to the proper use of water for cooking and body hygiene. We also introduce girls to the proper use of the motor pestle in preparing family food.

The graduates of *likumbi* and *chiputu* in their new status become independent and thus revolutionalised. It should be understood that Freire's critical pedagogy is a problem-posing approach to education which breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of what he (Freire) refers to as "banking education" (Freire, 1996). The banking concept of education criticises the lecturing method of teaching as Freire (1996) describes:

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorise mechanically the narrated context. Worse yet it turns them into "containers" into "receptacles" to be filled by the teacher... Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor. (p. 52)

In problem posing strategy the learner enter into the task of finding a means to solve the problem and thus students now need more than words for an optimum learning experience. That is to say students learn best through doing and they are encouraged to take a degree of responsibility for, and ownership of their own learning. The degree of engagement, effort and two-way dialogue found in dramatic songs and riddles required in drama are beneficial in embedding learning, developing ownership and empowering the learner (Freire, 1996).

The kind of education pioneered and championed is not new in traditional African education system; it is what features its indigenous education. This is evidenced by *likumbi* and *chiputu* rites which since history the Wamakonde of Mtwara region Tanzania performs these rites of passage and could not be eliminated by any organ be it from government or Christianity and Islamic religions. The religious domination instead found the alternative by establishing variations of the rites that would accommodate members of their respective religions or denominations. In such a situation, initiation rite of *likumbi* and *chiputu* is a living tradition in varied form. There is wamakonde who has either kept the traditional *Likumbi* and *chiputu* rite or made a transition from the traditional rite to the one accepted by Christianity or attached to Islamic practice of *maulid*. The Christianised *likumbi* and *chiputu* is called *Malangwe* and Muslim call the new rite practice as *Maulidi ya kualuka*. In the Christianised *likumbi* and *chiputu* rite of passage the initiates are kept into a church custody while for Muslims mark the final day of the rite with Maulid to purify the novices to become clean Muslims. The decision to Christianise the *likumbi* and *chiputu* rites might be in connection to what Mugambi (2002, p.29)

notes “while accepting the Christian faith, [Africans] could not and did not detach themselves entirely from their cultural and religious background”

The process of Christianization involved the adaptation of a traditional African ritual so that it became of value to the development of a Christian life in a Christian community. In the most successful cases such rites were not merely permitted to the believing African Christian, but almost required, and they achieved something resembling a sacramental status. By far the finest examples of the process of Christianization involved the adaptation of traditional rites of initiation (p.174)

Although the new faith has penetrated into *likumbi* and *chiputu* to a large extent, community members in Nkogi village where group discussion took place, strongly criticised the modern practice of the Christianised *chiputu* and *likumbi* called *malangwe*. They explained that novices or trainees both male and female who go through *malangwe* rite are taken to the camp mostly within church buildings where they are trained on Christian values. The emphasis they put on their training is Christian way of life than the cultural practices. One of the participants believes that the Christianised rites are the reasons for why most of today’s makonde youth do not respect or honour their cultural values. The attendant of Christianised *likumbi* and *chiputu* do not teach the initiated ones what is needed of a makonde woman and man such as hunting, farming, and parenting. Children are only taught the Christian prayers but not indigenous values and ethics. The participant explained:

Today’s youth are not patriots of Makonde culture. It is also shameful that they even curse all efforts done by our forefathers in protecting our culture by supporting *malangwe*, the Christianised *likumbi*. I am worried that people of my generation will be buried with our cultural values and will have no successors. They criticise the traditional *likumbi* basing on only small aspect of the use of offensive words and languages, they don’t really get the point of other worthwhile things that mould a whole individual. In fact, if your daughter or son is to go through traditional *likumbi* or *chiputu* she will have all that is needed for the Makonde citizen. [English translation is mine]

The concerns of the two participants above are the real issues of the identity and the wellbeing of Makonde society. The *chiputu* and *likumbi* initiation rites have a good educational intention behind them. The roots of education in these rites are explored in the work of Jambulosi (2009), who describes:

Having its roots in the African worldview, the practice of initiation rites includes a number of African traditional beliefs and values which inevitably include ancestral veneration and invocation. Since the emphasis is on becoming an adult, initiation also involves instruction on a wide range of moral issues which include sex -related instruction as part of the endeavour aimed at moulding the initiate. (p.12)

Furthermore, Jambulosi highlights what would be the benefit of attending the rites and the impact of neglecting it. He pointed out that:

One who has gone through initiation is expected to lead a life of responsibility and respect among people. Failure to do so would land one in the category of social misfits leading to the negative treatment of such an individual in the community (p.132).

Despite such revelation, there are some community members and scholars who attack the practices of initiation rites of *chiputu* and *likumbi*. They see these rituals as backward values of the Makonde dwellers of rural Mtwara that incubate their supposed resistance to change. The critics single out these initiation rituals as one of the causes of immoral behaviours, early marriages and pregnancies in the region (Halley, 2012). Such views and accusation of the rites were also raised by some participants who attended the Christianised *likumbi*. Their central argument was against the uncouth language of instruction used during initiation rites of *likumbi* as summarised here:

Jando na unyago wa kimila hawafundishi chochote, ni matusi na ushetani tu, yaani mtoto akitoka huko usishangae anakutukana matusi ya nguoni, anajiona na yeye mkubwa kuliko wewe... kweli ni aibu tu mambo haya kwenye jamii yetu hii. Sio kule kwenye malangwe mambo kama haya hakuna tena ni dhambi kubwa sana kutukana” [the teachings of traditional jando and unyago is nothing than abominable words and evil deeds, no wonder when they graduate they consider themselves adults and they can abuse you anyhow.... It is shameful to see things like these happening in our society. In malangwe we don't use such languages because is the considered sinful].

Some scholars (Bakari & Materego, 2008; Cabral, 1980; Kerr, 1995; Mlama, 1985) suggest that such opinions have deep roots in the colonial strategies of implanting Western domination through permanent and organised repression of the cultural life of Africans. According to Cabral

(1980) the implantation of domination was ensured definitively by physical elimination of a significant part of the dominated population.

This is to say all arguments that condemn traditional *likumbu* and *chiputu* are a result of colonial and neo-colonial cultural imperialist indoctrination which has shaped the thinking and doings of Christian population of wamakonde. However, the case is different with Muslims who form bigger part of population especially in rural Mtwara (Laurentius, 2012). Halley (2012) explains:

The Muslim proselytizers tended to take a more flexible approach to religious conversion than their Christian counterparts, refraining from condemning traditional practices such as initiation rituals[...].These influences together led to the conversion of the vast majority of Makonde in rural Mtwara to Islam and the integration of many Arab cultural practices into Makonde society (p 107).

It should be understood that indigenous education is the most important phenomenon in Africa and especially among the Wamakonde of Mtwara. Its ownership, construction, and consumption are historically communal and different from the constructions of global phenomena which are characterized as being both socially and historically constructed and much more, mobile and dynamic (Halley, 2012). These differences have created divisions among the community members into two groups: those integrated into the dominant global religion and achieved social cohesion; and those who were not yet acculturated. While many scholars acknowledge the wide variety of positive and negative impacts of cultural diversity research upon moral education in modern Africa, they still argue for the “enculturative contexts of parents, religious upbringing and formal community rites of passage such as initiation ceremonies” (Mapana, 2020, p. 37). It is through these lines that indigenous education stands to be relevant through the ages.

Conclusion

The question on the relevance of indigenous education is not new in the academic arena (Halley, 2012; Jacob 2009; Jackson-Barrett, 2011; Pesambili, 2017; Mapana, 2020). The overriding idea in scholarly works on indigenous education is basically that of acculturation and enculturation. According to Halley (2012) the acculturation is mostly conceptualized as localization, indigenization, domestication, glocalization, creolization and hybridization among others. The subtext to such conceptualisation is the acceptance that the primacy of indigenous education

especially that linked to initiation rite into adulthood is in shaping the adult personality. Therefore, for the better visionary understanding of the relevance of indigenous education one should first rethink and try to understand the philosophies of indigenous people and how the philosophies differ from and intersect with cultural diversity of the world. Instead of accusing the practice of *likumbi* and *chiputu* one should first understand the philosophy that makes it.

This paper argues that the practices of *likumbi* and *chiputu* rites are still relevant. Its relevance is rooted in its methodology which is participatory and practical that breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of what Freire refers to as “banking” education. Education process of *likumbi* and *chiputu* is a liberatory one because central to it is emancipation of both individual and his or her society. Indigenous education captures well Freire’s concept of dialogue as a process of learning and knowing that forms a unity between theory and practice (Freire, 1995). Indigenous education is relevant because its dialogic nature is not a mere “conversation that mechanically focuses on the individual’s live experience” but rather is the process that provokes learner’s curiosity that enables him or her to approach the object of knowledge (Freire, 1995, p.381). In this sense any knowledge created and lessons learnt during *likumbi* and *chiputu* rites will practically shape the graduates’ life after the rite. Remember indigenous education is utilitarian, it is meant to be practised, therefore, the motive of initiation rite of *likumbi* and *chiputu* centres on preparing students for adulthood responsibilities. .

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