

African Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Assessing the Training of the Gusii Children During the Pre-Colonial Period

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to discuss the Gusii indigenous education system. Before the coming of Christian missionaries to Africa, Africans and indeed the Gusii people had their own education system. Each ethnic group had a different education which was different from each other based on the different environments. Each ethnic group taught its youth different knowledge, skills and attitudes according to their environment and their needs. This paper examines the organization of African indigenous education among the Gusii of Kenya, the teachers, methods of teaching, the curriculum and indeed a comparison of this kind of education to the formal education that was introduced by Christian missionaries in the second decade of the 19th century A.D.

INTRODUCTION

The Abagusii are a Bantu group who live in western Kenya (Nyaundi, 1997). The Gusii currently occupy Kisii and Nyamira counties. “The term Gusii is an ethnographic convention formed by dropping the plural marker in the ekegusii language” (Akama, 2019). The people use the term Abagusii to refer to themselves. Abagusii is the people, Ekegusii their language and Gusii their land.

Gusiiland (Kisii and Nyamira counties) cover a total land mass of about 800 square miles, situated between longitude 35 30’ and latitude 0 30’ south (Akama, 2019). Gusii the land of the Abagusii people is relatively hilly and sloppy and its terrain rises in the south east direction to altitude of 2,134 metres and the slopes westwards (towards Lake Victoria) reaching 1,372 metres at its lowest point. It has a number of flat buttered valleys that has many springs, rivers and riparian land forms (Akama, 2019). It has a number of escapements, hills and mountains. The Gusii highland has extremely fertile soils. This plus the ideal climate has enabled the Gusii to engage in many agricultural activities since time immemorial. Rainfall is quite plentiful and it supplies diverse agricultural activities and animal husbandry (Akama, 2019)

Before the coming of Christians missionaries to Gusii in 1911(the Catholics) and the Seventh -day Adventists in 1912 the Gusii had an indigenous education that played an effective role (Maangi, 2011). Before introduction of Christianity the Gusii believed in one supreme God (Engoro) who created the world but did not interfere directly in human affairs. Instead interference was caused by the ancestral spirits (Ebirecha), witches (Abarogi) and impersonal forces. They believed that displeased ancestral spirits (Ebirecha) were responsible for diseases, the death of people and livestock and as well as the destruction of crops (Maangi, 2011)

Education is a lifelong process in which the older generation imparts skills, values and knowledge into the young ones for their own survival. Education should not be confused with schooling but a life-long process that is conducted by many agencies. It is an action exercised by the adult population on those who are not yet ready for life (Kelly,1999). It is the process of cultural transformation from one generation to the next but also within it.

Gusii children in the pre-colonial period acquired informal education which is the life long process whereby every child acquired attitudes, skills, values and knowledge from their day to day life experiences and other

educational influences in their particular environment for their own survival. Therefore, they learnt to survive in life through the instructions from their parents and their elders by adapting to the environment. If the Gusii children were able to survive through what they were instructed by their parents and their elders then the Gusii had an education.

Organization of teaching

As stated earlier the Gusii youth acquired most of their knowledge, skills, values and attitudes through informal education especially at home. The teaching and learning process of basic knowledge and skills was organized in the home and anywhere people carried out social, economic and political activity within the society. Therefore they were not formal schools as we know them today, classrooms and libraries. The homestead in indigenous Gusii education was the school and indeed, everywhere human activity took place.

Teachers

All responsible adults and the parents constituted the teaching force. The parents had the first duty to educate their children. When they were out of the homestead, other adults members of the community were responsible to teach them in instances where the children exhibited some ignorance of basic knowledge, skills, customs and etiquette. Whenever corrected by members of the community, the children took it positively without question unlike today when children would question when corrected by those who are not related to them especially parents. The father and the male adult members of the society made sure that the boys acquired all the knowledge and skills they needed to know and so was the mother and female adults for girls. It should be noted though that not all knowledge and skills were known by every parent or adults. Those particular knowledge and skills were taught by the specialists and not to everyone. For instance not every adult knew knowledge on medicine and surgery and not everyone was trained in surgery. The knowledge of performing certain social and religious ceremonies were not known to everyone. The skills of circumcising (*Ogosara*), extracting blood from the cows (*Okorasa*) was not known by everyone. Therefore those who knew those technical skills taught the youth about them. It should be noted that not all the boys and girls learnt those particular skills. It can be argued with clarity that among the Gusii there were general teachers who taught basic skills and basic knowledge to the young members of the society such that the children knew knowledge, skills, history, customs and desirable social behavior of the society. Then there were specialist teachers who taught technical knowledge and skills that were learnt formally. Formal learning also took place especially during circumcision when the young received formal instructions from the elders. It should be noted that by the time the child was grown they had basic knowledge and technical skills useful to themselves, the family and the society in which they lived.

TEACHING METHODS

The main method of teaching for the children and the adolescents was learning through productive work. This kind of learning enabled children to acquire the right type of feminine or masculine roles (Ocitti, 1973). This method of teaching enabled children to learn by being useful; they worked hand in hand with the adults. It prepared children through a number of stages that made them capable future husbands and wives (Ocitti, 1973). Among the Gusii the ability to handle various domestic and farm tasks was seen as the most important qualifications for a grown up marriageable person. Therefore parents made sure that their girls mastered the domestic skills through work. Children were expected to learn by seeing and initiate what the adults were doing. The instructions were issued when they made mistakes or when they failed to perform work with satisfaction. It should be noted that this training was gradual considering the age of the child.

Children also learnt through play. "Play is a spontaneous expression of innate patterns of behavior" (Ocitti, 1973). It played a critical role in preparing the youth for the future adults roles. The children were taught through play, games, songs, storytelling, riddles, rhymes, idioms and proverbs. These taught the children a lot of history, culture, sociology, economics, and philosophy, psychology and politics. Equally, they also taught literature, composition, public speaking, imagination, thinking and inventiveness. Most of the adults roles were learnt through make believe play. Most boys loved to imitate activities which were corresponded to their sex.

Therefore they initiated building houses of grass, went hunting and went digging. The girls on the other hand imitated their mothers cooking, grinding among others make-believe plays. Ocitti, (1973) argues that “when boys played hunting grasshoppers, chasing butterflies, throwing stones at birds or lizards or when they staged amock hunt... they imagined themselves as being involved as real hunters or animals. The same was true of girls when they played being mothers, looking after babies (Ocitti, 1973: 48-49)

The Gusii youth also learnt through oral literature. These included learning through myths, legends, folk songs and dances, proverbs and folk tales. Myths are tales imaginatively describing or accounting for natural phenomena or things which were beyond human understandings or tales about gods (Ocitti, 1973). The myths were used to explain the begging of things. The elders used the myths to explain things they didn't understand such as deaths and taboos. They were also used to inculcate moral message to the children and also for religious policies. The legends on the other hand are tales fabricated to account for real events that took place or that were believed to have taken place long time ago. They are fragments of actual history because they are about events that happened and people who really lived. The legends helped in teaching ancient history and culture. Songs and dances helped in reconstructing the Gusii history. Proverbs were also used widely. The use of proverbs during the pre-colonial period and even today is regarded as a sign of wit. Proverbs were the condensed wisdom of great ancestors. The proverbs taught morality to the Gusii youth. They dealt with different aspects of socio-political life, issues of cooperation, relationships and domestic affairs among many other issues.

The curriculum

A curriculum refers to the subjects which have to be taught in a course of study. The content of what was learnt and the scope is quite core in an education system. The subject matter of Gusii indigenous education can be said to be the total experiences of the family, clan and the community. The content grew automatically out of the environment. Children had to learn about the environment and have knowledge of the important aspects of their environment. They had also to be acquainted with the possibilities and challenges of the environment (Ocitti, 1973). Out of the understanding of the environment the children had to be equipped with the knowledge and skills of exploiting and overcoming the environment or rather adapting to the environment. They also learnt on the production and use of equipments that could help them conquer the physical environment. They were taught how to farm, hunt, built and prepare food. During the pre-colonial period the physical environment was quite difficult to live in. There were wild animals and snakes that were dangerous to people's lives. There were harmful plants and dangerous locations to live in. The young people in Gusii were given knowledge and skills to overcome all the difficulties in their environment and manipulate it so as to live a good life.

Apart from physical environment, the curriculum also had aspects of the social and spiritual environment that children were to be adapted to. There was a strong emphasis on the duties of relationship, readiness of support in physical, moral or social difficulties (Mwanakatwe, 1971). There was emphasis on strong communal sense, individualism was strongly discouraged. Through his relationship to parents, siblings, relatives, friends and other members of the community, the Gusii child learnt to imitate the actions of others, to assimilate the moods, ideas and feelings of those around him and thus to impersonate the group identity of the community which contributed to his social environment (Ocitti, 1973). A person was to live and serve other people according to the accepted manner, laws, taboos and a strict code of morality.

Respect for elders and superiors in rank as well as the sense of cooperation among others were togetherness or belonging, obedience among others were inculcated for the survival of the society and its members (Ocitti, 1973). The children were taught the standards of the community: How to speak, how to respond to greetings and how to behave towards members of the family, the clan and community. In a variety of ways children learnt what the community regarded as good, what was regarded as bad and adopted the community's concept of good life. The emphasis was strongly on the community life and on the behavior of individuals within it (Ocitti, 1973). Indigenous education among the Gusii inculcated a religious attitude to life. Before the coming of Christian's missionaries the Gusii knew that there is one God (*Engoro*). Religion was mainly concerned with morality and it gave support to the laws and customs of the community. Virtues such as honesty, generosity, courtesy and many such like were common in the Gusii traditional society. Religion

therefore, controlled relations to one another.

Gusii indigenous education and Christian missionary education

The history of western education in Gusii is the history of Christian missionary who evangelized this area (Maangi, 2011; Bogonko, 1992). Mission education changed the pre-Christian Gusii traditional, social, and economical and politics (Bogonko, 1992). The African indigenous education of the Gusii made sure that each member of the community was taught the basic knowledge and skills he needed to be useful to himself and the community. Western education as provided by the Christian missionaries during the colonial period did not manage to give education to everybody in Gusii to be useful in the above manner. Even today the post-colonial governments have not achieved 100% school attendance as it was during the time of indigenous Gusii education even with the free primary education programme introduced in 2003.

In Gusii indigenous education, there was emphasis on morality. The Gusii indigenous education taught every young person the culture, language of the society, decency of speech, good behavior and ethics in which those young ones lived. Western education that replaced indigenous education has not achieved much in moral training especially on culture, decency of speech, language and good behavior. The emphasis is on the cognitive skills. It emphasises on the teaching of mathematics, sciences, social sciences and other subjects both at primary and secondary school levels. This has contributed greatly to an increase of undesirable behavior in the society.

In Gusii indigenous education learning was mainly through productive work. The methods of teaching in western education do not emphasize learning by doing. In Gusii indigenous education the young people learned while applying the knowledge and skills learned. This means that they produced as they learnt, they did not wait until they finish school to be productive as it is in western education.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous Gusii education served the needs of the Gusii community as a whole. It ensured that every child got the basic knowledge and skills that enabled him to be useful to himself and the whole community. The education produced morally upright individuals who were not individualistic but who served the community's good. It is important to harmonize the entire aspects of African indigenous to western education practiced in Kenya today.

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