

Teaching in Indigenous African Society: The Indigenous Method Dimension

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous African communities have a very rich heritage of educational practices that have been passed down through generations. The present study examines teaching methodologies in traditional African communities, with particular emphasis on the role of music and indigenous educational practices as vehicles for knowledge transmission, moral formation, and cultural continuity. Drawing specifically from the Yoruba traditional educational systems, the study highlights how teaching extends beyond formal school settings into homes, peer groups, rituals, and communal activities. Central to this discourse is music, which functions as an oral tradition, prompting device, pedagogical tool, and medium for cultural preservation, socialization, and community interrelationship. Through songs, chants, storytelling, and performance, values, history, skills, and social norms are transmitted trans-generationally. The article further explores avenues of teaching such as oral tradition, apprenticeship, observation, and participation in daily and ceremonial activities, demonstrating how education in traditional African societies is holistic, experiential, and community-centred. While analyzing these methods, the paper underscores their relevance to contemporary education and argues that traditional African pedagogies offer valuable insights into inclusive, culturally grounded, and morally oriented approaches to teaching and learning.

Keywords: Traditional African education; Music as pedagogy; Oral tradition; Cultural transmission; Yoruba indigenous knowledge; Community-based learning; Apprenticeship.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is the organized process of conveying knowledge, values, skills, ethics, and attitudes from one individual to another with the aim of promoting understanding, competence, and responsible participation in society. In formal educational contexts, teaching typically occurs in structured environments such as schools, colleges, and universities, where trained educators employ organized curricula and standardized methods to facilitate learning. However, long before the emergence of Western-style schooling, African societies had developed effective and well-structured systems of education rooted in their cultural, social, and spiritual realities.

Traditional African education differs significantly from conventional classroom-based instruction in both approach and setting. Rather than being confined to formal institutions, teaching in African communities is embedded in everyday life and communal experiences. Learning takes place in homes, farms, markets, shrines, and during social and ritual gatherings. Education is viewed as a collective responsibility, with parents, elders, and skilled members of the community serving as teachers. The goal is not only intellectual development but also the cultivation of moral character, social responsibility, practical skills, and cultural identity.

A defining feature of traditional African teaching methods is their holistic nature. Knowledge is transmitted through oral traditions, observation, imitation, participation, and performance. Emphasis is placed on communal

learning, intergenerational interaction, and the integration of cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and physical development. Unlike Western pedagogical models that often prioritize individual achievement and standardized curricula, African indigenous education focuses on producing well-rounded individuals who understand their roles within the community and live in harmony with their environment.

Among the various instructional tools employed in traditional African societies, music occupies a central position. Music functions as a powerful medium for teaching, cultural transmission, and socialization. Through songs, chants, rhythms, and dances, communities communicate history, moral values, social norms, and collective memory. Music enhances memory, stimulates emotional engagement, and strengthens communal bonds, making it an effective pedagogical tool across generations.

This paper explores the teaching methods practiced in traditional African communities, with particular emphasis on the role of music in education and cultural transmission. Using the Yoruba people of Nigeria as a case study, the study examines the avenues through which teaching occurs, the content transmitted, and the enduring relevance of these indigenous educational practices in contemporary society. By engaging with these traditional methods, the paper seeks to highlight alternative educational philosophies that promote cultural preservation, social cohesion, and holistic human development.

The Role of Music as a Means of Teaching and Cultural Transmission

In traditional African societies, music has a significant role in teaching and cultural transmission. It serves as a powerful tool through which knowledge, values, and traditions are conveyed to younger generations who, in turn, take up the role of moderating, supervising, and coordinating the affairs of the community or societies, upholding the culture and beliefs which they have been taught and further pass it on to the growing generation. Individuals (male and female) see teaching as a responsibility they owe to the growing ones. This is done to prevent them straying in the course of life and career development. The imbibed culture helps the growing ones to be able to face the different challenges of life, fit in with the expected norms and behaviours and also to caution them from the excesses. The seniors or elders equip themselves with all the tools and methods for teaching. Music, being an important instrument which captivates emotion is mostly employed for teaching, instructing and training among traditional African folks. Below are some of the importance of music in education, its various functions, and its impact on preserving and promoting cultural heritage in traditional African societies.

Music as an Oral Tradition: In traditional African societies, where written language may be limited, music serves as an essential form of oral tradition (Nzewi, 2007). Through songs, chants, and rhythms, important information about history, customs, and societal norms is passed down from one generation to another. This oral transmission of knowledge ensures the continuity of cultural practices.

Mnemonic Device: Music acts as a mnemonic device in traditional African societies, aiding in memory retention and recall. Complex rhythmic patterns and melodic structures are employed to facilitate the memorization of important information, such as genealogies, rituals, and proverbs (Arom, 1991). This ensures the preservation of cultural knowledge and facilitates its transmission.

Cultural Context and Values: Music in traditional African societies reflects the cultural context and values of the community. It serves as a means of socialization, teaching individuals about their roles, responsibilities, and the values upheld by their society (Kubik, 1999). Through lyrics, dance movements, and instrumental performances, music communicates social norms, ethics, and moral teachings.

Rituals and Ceremonies: Music plays a central role in rituals and ceremonies in traditional African societies. Whether it is a birth celebration, initiation rite, marriage ceremony, or funeral, music accompanies and punctuates these significant life events (Agawu, 2003). It creates a communal atmosphere, facilitates emotional expression, and reinforces the cultural significance of these rites. The use of specific songs, rhythms, and dance movements helps participants connect with their ancestors and spiritual realms (Nketia, 1974).

Community Building and Cohesion: Music serves as a unifying force in traditional African societies, fostering

a sense of community and social cohesion. It is often performed collectively, involving singing, dancing, and drumming. These communal music-making activities strengthen social bonds, promote cooperation, and cultivate a shared identity among community members.

Music serves as a Pedagogical Tool: In African societies, music is utilized as an effective pedagogical tool to convey knowledge and life lessons. It facilitates learning by engaging multiple senses and enhancing memory retention (Arom, 2004). Through rhythmic patterns, melodic structures, and poetic lyrics, music aids in the transmission of historical events, moral teachings, social customs, and practical skills.

Enculturation and Cultural Preservation: Music plays a crucial role in the enculturation process, ensuring the transmission of cultural values, norms, and traditions from one generation to another (Turino, 2008). It serves as a vehicle for preserving the collective memory of a community, fostering a sense of identity, and strengthening social cohesion.

Oral History and Story-telling: Through music, oral history and storytelling are preserved and transmitted across generations. Griots, the oral historians and custodians of tradition, utilize music to recount ancestral narratives, epic tales, and historical accounts. Music serves as a mnemonic device, enabling the retelling of intricate stories with accuracy and emotion.

Social Commentary and Cultural Critique: Music in traditional African societies often serves as a platform for social commentary and cultural critique. Griots and other musicians employ their art to address societal issues, voice dissent, and advocate for social change. This allows communities to reflect on their values and challenge prevailing norms (Diawara, 1990).

By recognizing the role of music in traditional African education, we can appreciate its richness, diversity, and enduring significance in these societies. By recognizing and appreciating the power of music, the youth of this generation can gain deeper insights into the cultural richness and diversity of traditional African societies by paying positive attention to the factors enumerated above.

Avenues for Teaching and the Contents Taught

The home where a child is born is the centre of education for children in Africa. From the age of one (1) to the age somebody can own a home as a man or to the time she is sent out in marriage as a woman, he or she is a child under tutelage. From the first age, such a child begins to acquire education that would mould him or her for moral maturity. Parents who are properly cultured are the first teachers and hold the duty to give their children training. Being a unique ethnic group among others in Africa with a cherished rich cultural affiliation, the Yoruba of Nigeria is specifically examined to shed light on their unique teaching methods and subject matter that were central to the long-standing educational systems and practices. The teaching contents of the Yoruba people, as a unit with rich culture among the multi-ethnic groups, culture and languages in Africa, reveal the multifaceted role of music in traditional African societies and its impact on the communities.

According to traditional Yoruba religion, for example, it is the duty of parents to bring up their children ethically and in the knowledge of God. From the beginning, children are made to believe in reward and punishment. Parents teach their children by sending them on errands and that they should report back to the parents with any gestures of others within and outside the home. Such errands educate children in some sequential instructions; carrying objects and relating to other members of the family in the neighbourhood. It also teaches children social skills needed for verbal communication. The actualisation of the errands is highly valued, because it gives the opportunity to the child to relate and interact with others.

Importantly, seniority among the Yoruba family is not in any way underestimated. The cultured parents distinguish themselves in terms of seniority among children. According to Fadipe, cited by United Nations University in the Yoruba family (n.d.), distinctions defining seniority were, of necessity, elaborate and were expressed in the myriad terms by which individuals greeted and addressed each other.

Furthermore, the traditional education of a child continues with the peer groups of different home backgrounds. Individuals who make up each group, who have acquired education through common ideas as they walk, work and play together in any circumstance. These ideas teach morals and values in the Nigerian society. Such common ideas include folk songs which they have learnt in their different homes. Folk or traditional songs are an integral part of the life of everyone born into a typical African family. Children take an active role in music and making music by the age of three or four. For example, musical games played by children prepare them to participate in all areas of adult activity - including fetching of water, farming, grinding, gathering of different materials like firewood, snails, fruits, etc., hunting, apprenticing, attending ceremonies like festivals, weddings, funerals and dances. They often set out singing and dancing their way from one village to another, or a dance may be held to cement a good relationship with neighbouring villages. Such musical games made children acquire the fundamental principles and have an extremely important educational function. Below are considered among others the avenues where Yoruba people where teaching is emphasised.

Oral Tradition: Oral tradition was the primary avenue of teaching in traditional Yoruba society. Elders played a crucial role in imparting knowledge through storytelling, proverbs, and folktales. These narratives served as mnemonic devices, encapsulating historical events, moral lessons, and cultural values.

Apprenticeship and Observation:

- Craftsmanship:** Traditional Yoruba society emphasised skill acquisition through apprenticeship. Young individuals would learn various trades by observing and assisting skilled artisans, such as blacksmiths, weavers, potters, and woodcarvers.
- Farming:** Agricultural knowledge and practices were passed down through generations, with children observing and assisting their parents in farming activities. This hands-on experience provided practical knowledge of farming techniques and sustainable practices (Adegbite, 2011).

Peer Group Activities: During the neo and early colonial era, all age groups among the Yoruba people had common features. For example, children between the ages of 6 to 12, 13 to 16 and 17 to 20 would always come together in their groups (either to play, run errands running or in their free time) and share family experiences from which they learn. The other senior group also come together, this time in gender identity; male and female groups respectively engaging in other deeper discussions that concern their future and their welfare. In some of these gatherings, learning through music takes place. Since music holds a significant place in the cultural fabric of traditional societies, it forms the background to communication skills that express language and grammar vocabularies, idioms, poetry, proverbs, and oral literature to develop and preserve cultural expressions.

It is also expressed through historical and ancestral knowledge, which includes myths, legends, and genealogies, taught to foster a sense of identity and pride among the younger generation. Moral and ethical values are also emphasised through music and poetry to reveal the concept of 'Omoluwabi' or 'Omō rere 'that is to portray a good character, 'Eewò' that is integrity and teachings that instil self-discipline, principles of honesty, respect and communal responsibility.

Some of the songs used as a method of impartation among the Yoruba include the following. These three songs were selected to represent some of the various aspects of life that are focus to establish the cultural and identity of the Yorubas and as a rich representation of African culture. The songs are: Iwa Omoluabi, meaning the character of a good child. The second song is Aye Ole, which is 'the life of a lazy man', while the third one is Awa yoo soro, meaning we will perform our sacrifice. These songs exhibit the teachings on cultural transmission, and without this method (capable of aiding children, youths and adults to memorise and bear the subject of culture in mind), put in place, little would the people be able to imbibe concerning the cultural systems. Suffice it to say that in the twenty-first century system of acculturation, most African youths are ignorant of the culture because they are not rooted in African cultural education.

Iwa' omolúwabi

Arranged by
E.O.Ayeyemi, 2023

Call

Response

7

13

Interpretation:

Good child don't lie Who do you resemble?

Good child don't lie Who do you resemble?

Good child don't lie Who do you resemble?

Don't lie Who do you resemble?

Don't lie Who do you resemble?

Good child don't play prank Who do you resemble?

Good child don't play prank Who do you resemble?

Good child don't play prank Who do you resemble?

Don't deceive Who do you resemble?

Don't deceive Who do you resemble?

Good child is not lazy Who do you resemble?

Good child is not lazy Who do you resemble?

Good child is not lazy Who do you resemble?

Not lazy Who do you resemble?

Not lazy Who do you resemble?

Any child that lies He is evil

Any child that lies He is evil

Any child that lies He is evil

That lies He is evil

That lies He is evil

The textual analysis of this song revealed that no cultured child behaves in an unruly manner in the society. It is believed among Yoruba that any child or individual who underwent traditional or cultural education cannot lie, play prank or be lazy. This could be so because he or she would have been taken through and taught life experience. This kind of education received at the background encapsulates all aspect of living; dressing, respect for elders, self-discipline, hard work, power to resist covetousness, submission, tolerance, love and unity, wisdom in handling situations and lots more. If anyone expected to have come out of a descent and discipline family eventually misconducts him or herself in the society, the question 'who do you take it from' arises. The song concludes that any person or child who falls short of the high cultured expectation, he or she is tagged 'evil'. In other words when a child conducts him or herself well, he or she makes the family, the community, state and country where he was raised proud. In this respect, The Yoruba say *bi Egungun eni ba jo o re l'awujo, ori a ya oluwa re'*, meaning 'when the masquerade dances, the master feel proud'. Masquerade among Yoruba people literary refers a traditional religious deity, full of spirit of the dead symbolic to specific lineage of family. They are typically adorned in colourful fabrics that are intricating. Masquerading is often held for entertainment purposes such as during festival. During these festivals, they perform dances and rituals, accompanied by drumming, singing, and chanting. Their movements and gestures are believed to convey messages from the ancestors to the community. When their performance are favourable to the people, the families they represent become proud.

(Lazy Man's Life)

Moderato

Voice

E - ni b'o - le ko r'o -

Arranged by
E.O. Ayeyemi (2023)

Piano

Moderato

4

mo - bi, - O-le fa so i - ya b'o - ra sun, O-le a - la - pa ma

Moderato

8

si - se. - - - E wa wa - ye o - le lo - de

Moderato

10

o, E wa wa - ye o - le lo - de o.

Moderato

Interpretation:

The mother of lazy hasn't got a child,

The lazy's cover cloth is suffering,

He got arms but would not work,

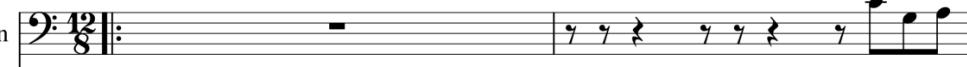
See how worthless his life would be,

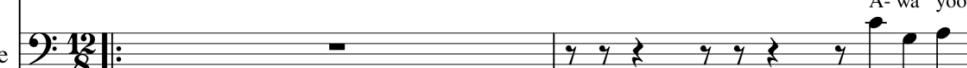
Textual analysis of the above song describes the life of lazy men in African societies. It is generally believed that a lazy man typically lacks motivation and ambition to pursue goals or engage in productive activities, delays important task until the last minute or ignore them, leading to increased stress and consequences, relies on others for various tasks and responsibilities, without a strong work ethic or willingness to pursue meaningful employment, do not actively seek new experience or acquire new skills which could result to limited intellectual and emotional growth. The Yoruba see this type of life as a deterrent to development of the society and realise that the parents that produced such a lazy child has not gotten somebody to rest upon in their old age, because that child is a failure.

AWA YOO SORO

(We will do sacrifice)

E.O. Ayeyemi, (2023)

Men 

Baritone 

A- wa yoo

Tambourine 

Wood Blocks 

Cymbal 

Concert Bass Drum 

3



so ro i- le wa - o a- wa yo so- ro i- le wa - o A- wa yo so ro i- le wa - o, a wa yo

6

so ro i - le wa o. E sin kan ko pe - o e e sin kan ko pe ka-wa ma so - ro A wa yo

9

so - ro i - le wa o.

Interpretation:

We shall perform the rituals of our family,

We shall perform the rituals of our family,

No religion! No religion can stop the ritual,

We shall perform the rituals of our family.

The role music plays in African community is cannot be underestimated, because the daily life of Africans as such that cannot detach from music. It is central sometimes to rituals ceremonies. Whether it is a birth celebration, initiation rite, marriage ceremony, or funeral, music accompanies and punctuates these significant life events (Agawu, 2003). It creates a communal atmosphere, facilitates emotional expression, and reinforces the cultural significance of these rites. However, the encroachment widespread influence of Christianity and Islam indeed

relegated the use and function of traditional religion and to the level of disregard. The traditional devotees could not freely perform their required sacrifices at the coming of these new religions. These traditional activities were regarded as idolatry. Agu (2011:16) comments that in spite of the well-established musical traditions and practice among Nigerian societies, external influences laid the foundation for infiltration of other music genres, including pop and contemporary music. Music is intimately linked with individuals and groups of people within society in Africa. It is a powerful part of culture and everyday life and a vital aspect of both sacred and secular ceremonies. Traditional music is still practised and performed widely in spite of the influence of globalisation on world cultures, Ayeyemi, (2017). This is therefore reflected in the above music that in spite of the introduction of the new religions and their influences, traditionalist will continue to perform their rites, rituals and do their festivals. No religion would stop them from doing this.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Music as a pedagogical tool in African societies. It is utilized as an effective tool to convey knowledge and life lessons. It facilitates learning by engaging multiple senses and enhancing memory retention Through rhythmic patterns, melodic structures, and poetic lyrics, music aids in the transmission of historical events, moral teachings, social customs, and practical skills.

Procedure for Teaching Using Indigenous Music in African Societies

Teaching using indigenous music in African societies can be an effective and culturally relevant approach to education. This procedure outlines the steps to incorporate indigenous music into the teaching process. Below are the benefiting highlights that support the implementation of this approach.

- a) Understand the Significance of Indigenous Music: Familiarize yourself with the cultural, historical, and social significance of indigenous music in African societies. Explore research articles and books that discuss the role of music in African cultures.
- b) Identify Indigenous Music Styles: Researching and identifying specific indigenous music styles that are relevant to the African societies worthy of teaching, considering various genres, such as traditional folk songs, drumming rhythms, storytelling chants, and ceremonial music and consult ethno-musicological studies and fieldwork reports to gain deeper insights into different music styles.
- c) Integrate Indigenous Music into Lesson Plans: Aligning the chosen indigenous music styles with the curriculum objectives and topics. Incorporating the music into lesson plans, ensuring a balanced integration with other instructional materials. Connect the music to relevant subjects, such as history, geography, social studies, or language arts.
- d) Involve Indigenous Musicians and Elders: Collaborating with local musicians, community members, and elders who possess expertise in the indigenous music styles. Visiting or and inviting them to share their knowledge, perform, or conduct workshops for students. Respectfully acknowledge and learn from their cultural traditions and practices.
- e) Encourage Active Participation: Engaging students actively in the learning process by encouraging them to participate in creating and performing indigenous music. Providing opportunities for students to play traditional instruments, learn songs, practice rhythms, and explore dance movements. Foster a sense of pride and cultural identity among students through active involvement.
- f) Promote Cultural Understanding and Appreciation: Facilitating discussions about the cultural context and significance of the indigenous music styles. Encouraging students to reflect on their own cultural heritage and draw connections to the music being studied. Promote empathy, respect, and appreciation for diverse cultures and traditions.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous music has emerged as a powerful mode of teaching in African societies, facilitating the preservation of cultural heritage, fostering learning outcomes, and promoting cultural inclusivity that foster cultural appreciation, identity, and understanding among students. By embracing indigenous music and leveraging modern technology, educators can unlock the full potential of this valuable educational resource. However, careful consideration must be given to ethical and cultural sensitivities to ensure the authentic representation and respectful integration of indigenous music in educational practices through lesson plans and involving local musicians and community members, educators can create a meaningful and inclusive learning environment.

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