

# **Indigenous Knowledge as Foundation for Sustainable Development in Nigeria**

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## **Introduction: Conceptual Analysis**

***Indigenous Knowledge as a Component of Indigenous Education:*** Indigenous knowledge is a crucial component of indigenous or traditional education. Education has been widely acknowledged as a potent tool for positive social transformation and national development. However, the full potential of education is yet to be harnessed for true development in many developing economies of the world, especially those of the African continent. This unfortunate situation is largely due to widespread misconceptions about education on the one hand, and development on the other, as well as the intricate relationship between the two; both as processes and goals.

In most Anglophone nations, especially those of Africa, including Nigeria, education is often misconstrued as the ability to speak, read and write impeccable English. This is largely the consequence of the current rapid englishisation process as driven by neo-liberalism and the attendant globalisation. The crucial questions at this juncture are: what roles for the



hundreds of indigenous languages in the twin process of mass education and national development? What happens to indigenous knowledge systems and wisdom locked within these languages (Lawal 2014a; Lawal, 2014b)

As aptly and pointedly noted by Fafunwa (2005: 1-2), one of the most important factors that militate against the dissemination of knowledge and skills and therefore of rapid social and economic well-being of the majority of people in developing countries is the imposed medium of communication.... English, in the case of Nigeria for instance, is the language of commerce, trade, administration, politics, education and international communication. But how many Nigerians communicate in English inside and outside Nigeria? Shall we say 30 million out of the 130 million Nigerians? How do the remaining 100 million carry on their daily lives? We know that the 80 percent of our people who do not speak English carry on the business of life and living on their farms and in the markets, at festivals and religious ceremonies speaking in their own mother-tongue, just as well as all the Germans, Russians, Japanese, English and Chinese do in their own languages.

Undue emphasis has also been placed on education as a process of certification. However, the well-documented evidences of personality imbalance and behavioural maladjustment among many school products as well as their un-employability in the world of work would seem to suggest that many certificates these days only possess face validity. As we grapple with certified ignorance and un-employability, we must also raise questions about the largely uncertified traditional knowledge, values and skills for which the indigenous languages are the veritable repositories (Lawal, 2014b).

We cannot equate education with schooling which is only one leg in the formal, semi-formal and informal tripod of



education, and which may negate the true spirit of balanced education, as is the case in many third-world countries. Indeed, the renowned British philosopher, George Bernard Shaw, once remarked quite incisively that schooling had disrupted the process of his education. Without paying adequate attention to the indigenous knowledge system especially via informal and semi-formal education, what goes on within the school system would be as good as miseducation.

This would explain why education in the contemporary world is misconceived as the processing, packaging and commodification of human beings as products to be dispatched to an international money-driven and greed-impelled labour market. The primary ennobling goal and value of education as a process of liberating the body, mind and soul of learners so that they can be locally useful and relevant first, before being globally competitive, are now being gradually eroded. For education to truly be a liberating rather than a domesticating process (Freire, 1970), a sizeable dose of indigenous knowledge, values, and skills is a *sine qua non*; if the recipients must be firmly rooted in their cultural and intellectual heritage for which they are expected to be the agents of positive transformation and renewal.

### ***The Concept of Development***

In the tedious phraseology of international political economics, development has become one of the buzzwords of the globalisation era. Through diplomatic chicanery, growth is often bandied as development, as in the case of Nigeria, a rich country with poor citizens in the great majority, which is considered by World Bank and IMF officials and their local stooges as the fastest-growing economy in Africa. This ego-fanning diplomatese crumbles in the face of massive infrastructural decay, institutional dysfunction and pervasive corruption (Lawal, 2014b).



According to Global Financial Integrity, Nigeria ranks number 7 among the top 20 countries with the highest illicit outflows with the conservative estimate of \$129 billion between 2001 and 2010 (Akinyemi, 2013). This is the hallmark of an exocentric, mono-cultural, oil-based economy which relegates all other resources to the background. Not only financial capital is drawn to the centre of the global economy, indigenous brains are also steadily and insidiously evacuated to the developed world. The crucial question is: How can indigenous knowledge systems be deployed to sub-serve a truly home-grown, socially relevant and development-oriented system of education in Nigeria?

### ***The concept of sustainable Development***

Development is a continuum and every nation struggles to attain a measure of it, which she would have to sustain and even build upon progressively. In this regard, development is conceptualised as the quality of human life in a given society in terms of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being at both personal and collective levels, as a consequence of the quality of infrastructure and institutions within the society. Sustainable Development has been most memorably defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable Development approaches our planet, the earth and all the life it sustains as being interconnected through space, time as well as the circumstance and quality of life.

Sustainable Development has to do with the attainment of infrastructural, social and economic progress without exhausting or depleting earth's natural resources and jeopardising the patrimony, heritage and future of generations to come. An important segment of natural resources comprises the



cultural and linguistic heritage of the people, but this is often down-played in the blind race for modern science and technology.

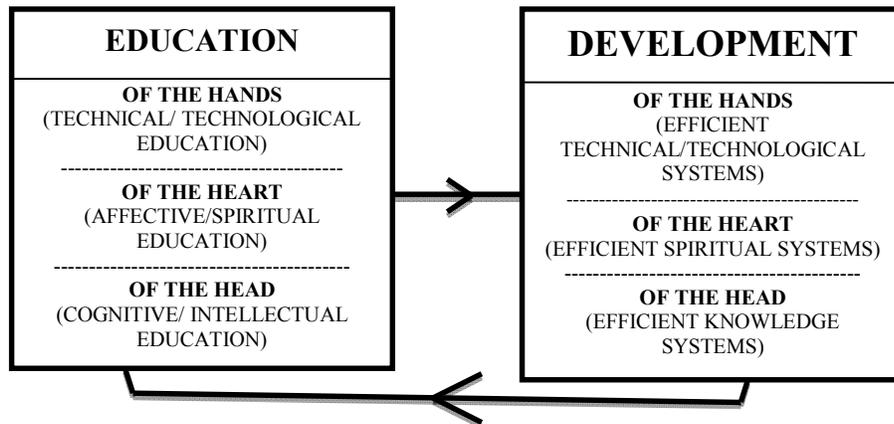
Two key concepts of “needs” and “limitations” are embedded within our previous operationalisation of Sustainable Development. Needs must be approached from the perspective of the teeming poor and underprivileged who desire over-riding priority. The idea of limitations is imposed by technological innovations and advances with their accompanying complexity of social organisation and the environment’s ability to meet contemporary and future needs. Sustainable Development thus provides an approach to make quality decisions on the issues that affect all human beings, especially how education, including the indigenous knowledge component, can be made to sub-serve total and balanced development that would meet the needs of contemporary and future generations.

### **How Can Indigenous Knowledge Contribute to Sustainable Development?**

Indigenous knowledge is an agent and indeed a catalyst for sustainable development. This is discussed under this section

#### *Relationship between Education and Development*

Since knowledge is only an integral part of education, it is deemed proper to first establish the connection between Education and Development as graphically illustrated in Figure 1.



*Figure 1: A symmetrical, reciprocal nexus of Education and Development (Lawal 2014a)*

As noted earlier on, Education has intrinsic potential for personal as well as national development, but this potential may not be fully or properly tapped, depending on the underlying ideology of development. The background constitutional/legal, economic and political frameworks which undergird the educational system of a society are themselves the logical concomitants of the nation’s ideology of development, as enshrined in the nation’s constitution.

The quality and level of development also have backwash effects on the goals, structure and content of education. In sum, as evident in *Figure 1*, there is an accordance of mutual legitimacy between the content and process of education and development. This reciprocal influence translates into a vicious circle in the case of retrogression/continuous under-development, or into a virtuous circle of progressive



development. The result is that development and under-development tend to perpetuate themselves through the quality of the educational system, except there is a radical, decisive intervention.

The relationship between education and development is not only reciprocal but also symmetrical as the three components of education (intellectual, spiritual and technical) correspond harmoniously with those of development, thus making development the flipside of education.

### ***Three Streams of Wisdom: The Triple Heritage***

The Triple Heritage thesis was originally postulated by the late Kwame Nkurumah, but Prof Ali Mazrui was to become his foremost and most powerful exponent. The thesis argues that Africa's future lies within the dynamics of Euro-Christian, Islamic and Traditional Heritage, and how to integrate and convert them to a harmonious, even if trimorphous epistemology. Many Africans, including Nigerians, especially Muslims, have become quintessential scholars who have drunk from the pool of this tripartite intellectual capital. These three knowledge systems fairly parallel the formal (Euro-Christian), semi-formal (Islamic) and informal (Traditional) systems of education in Nigeria and many parts of Africa. Furthermore, The Triple Mandate has also informed Lawal's (2010) model of the three streams of wisdom which have furnished the universal pool of wisdom, civilisation and development.

Of all these streams, the traditional system has been under-valued, scandalised and subjugated through colonialism and western education. However, many Asian countries have

re-invented their own traditional knowledge systems and integrate them harmoniously into Euro-Christian and Islamic systems. Malaysia and Indonesia are classical examples in this category. Nigeria is far from according indigenous knowledge its rightful place in the educational system which itself is currently witnessing profound crisis of irrelevance, discontinuity and dysfunctionality.

The world has benefitted immensely from Islamic civilisation and wisdom. George Bernard Shaw had foreseen and predicted that the western world was going to benefit immensely from Islamic knowledge system, civilisation and culture. Islamic knowledge system has contributed to the universal pool of wisdom in the areas of mathematics, science and medicine. The decimal system in use today is based largely on Arabic numerals, with the invention of “Zero” being a watershed in the development of mathematics. Modern algebra, algorithm and alchemy have also drawn inspiration from Islamic culture. The search for Qibla direction in prayers by early Muslims provided impetus for geographical and astronomical studies with the Ka’aba in Mecca taken as the centre of our Earth. Little wonder then that Philips Emeagwali, the world-renowned mathematician, reportedly credited his mathematical feat to the inspiration he derived from an Arab scholar, a Muslim religious leader.

The fast-expanding lexicon of English attests to the influence and contributions of indigenous and modern knowledge systems from other cultures to western civilisation. Words and terms beginning with the definite Arabic article “al”



(e.g alcohol, alchemy, algorithm) are borrowed from Arabic. “Robot” in English is from the Czech “Robotanik” while ‘Novel’ is from Spanish “Novella” and “Drama” from the ancient Greek “Dromenon”, among very many loan-words in the English vocabulary. In the field of science and applied science, a lot still needs to be learnt from Nigerian indigenous phytomedicine and other aspects of traditional medicine.

Beginning with Egyptian civilisation, the world has also benefitted appreciably from African indigenous knowledge systems in the fields of writing, architecture, traditional medicine and the liberal arts. Many modern art forms and motifs are rooted in African traditions especially as they relate to the oral, visual and the performing arts. Western scholars are still investigating the rich forms and functions of African indigenous cultures so as to borrow from their deep humanistic ethos to soften the mechanistic texture of western civilisation.

Ruth Finnegan did extensive scholarly works on African oral traditions, while the German-born Ulli Beier and Karen Barber have contributed immensely to Yoruba cultural scholarship. More recently, Deborah Klein, the anthropology professor at Gallivan College, Santa-Cruz, California, U.S.A was recently in Ilorin to conduct an illuminating study of the historical development of Fuji music from its humble beginning in *Wéré* religious music among Muslims during Ramadan fasting period to its present international, cross-over generic status.

Unfortunately, when a nation has been systematically brain-washed into losing confidence and faith in its potential

and capacity to actualise its lofty destiny, it looks down upon its values and virtues and search aimlessly for saviours outside the genius of its heritage. Such is the sorry state of Nigeria in terms of the parlous state and unenviable status of her indigenous knowledge systems in the schemes of education and nation-building. Nothing attests to this better, as graphically illustrated in the earlier quotation from Fafunwa (2005) than the monumental neglect of indigenous languages, the veritable mirror and conveyor of the intellectual heritage of the people, in the blind pursuit of the twin goals of nationalism and nationism.

### **Sources and Loci of Indigenous Knowledge**

As indicated above, the indigenous Nigerian languages are the repositories of the traditional wisdom and knowledge system of the people. Following our trichotomy of educational content and goal in *Figure 1*, The people's heritage transcends mere knowledge to include values and skills. The goal of Yoruba traditional education is the production of an *Omólúàbí*, a balanced person in terms of a sound intellect and a conscientious soul within a healthy and agile body. The natural vehicle for this holistic education is the mother-tongue.

Nothing is quite new about this position. As far back as 1930, the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures had passed the following resolution:

It is a universally acknowledged principle in modern education that a child should receive instruction both in and through his mother-tongue and this privilege should not be withheld from the African child. The child should learn to love the mental heritage of his people, and the natural and



necessary expression of his heritage is the language. Neglect of the vernacular involves danger of crippling and destroying the pupil's productive powers by forcing him to express himself in a language foreign to both himself and the genius of his race (Benzies, 1950:4).

This is not the medium for chronicling the efforts, achievements and failures of successive governments, right from the missionary era through the colonial phase to the present day, in promoting Nigerian indigenous languages as mediums and subjects of education. It is sufficient to state here, however, that the exocentric nature of the economic, political and educational policies of successive governments and the discontinuity syndrome in the educational sector have been largely responsible for the low status of hundreds of Nigerian indigenous languages today.

The other aspect of indigenous heritage can be broadly classified into oral, visual as well as oral-visual arts all of which have the local languages as the primary purveyor. The oral category is the folklore, which subsumes folktales, proverbs, tongue-twisters, riddles and jokes. Indigenous visual arts include painting, sculpture and crafts, while the oral-visual genre comprises the performing arts of music, dance and drama. Broadly speaking, a lot of documentation, research and popularisation has been done in these three categories. However, relatively little is done to consciously infuse them into the lower levels of education as the foundation for the nation's intellectual, ethical and technological transformation.

In this regard, there is evidence of lopsidedness, over-education and even outright miseducation in the production of the much-needed manpower for national development in Nigeria as indicated in Table 1.

<b>Manpower Level</b>	<b>Number of Graduates Produced</b>	<b>Manpower Ratio</b>
<b>Universities</b> (Largely intellectual and technocratic)	<b>67,024 (1998)</b>	7
<b>Polytechnics</b> (Largely technological)	<b>9,344 (1998)</b>	1
<b>Technical Colleges and Trade Schools</b> (Largely technical)	<b>37,376 (1998)</b>	4

**Source:** Federal Ministry of Education (2003)

Expectedly, the ratio of technical manpower should be higher than that of technological manpower which in turn should be higher than that of intellectual/technocratic manpower. The situation is lopsided in favour of technocratic white-collar manpower due to the unrealistic hankering after, and overpricing of university education to the detriment of technological and technical education. As a result, technical colleges are now in shambles, while the polytechnics have abandoned their noble mandate in their cut-throat struggle with the universities, many of which are, in turn, over-shooting their



carrying capacities with grave academic and administrative consequences.

Most importantly, the lowest levels of education, at which indigenous knowledge, values and skills can serve as the solid foundation for meaningful education and national development, are not accorded the right premium and priority of attention. Ironically, most unemployed university graduates are now forced to take up vocational and technical enterprises without the required training, commitment and enthusiasm to galvanise the nation into the comity of newly developed economies.

The language-in-education policy, especially as regards the mother-tongue as medium and subject, is actually crisis in practice, as the policy lacks any modicum of uniformity in implementation. The-straight-for-English orientation has now stabilised in the private kindergarten, nursery and primary schools as well as in elitist and middle-class homes. At the senior secondary school level, only a few of the hundreds of indigenous languages have retained their status as elective subjects in the curriculum, while at the tertiary level, there is no special incentive and motivation for studying the languages.

### **Conclusion**

From the proverbial experience of the Asian Tigers, true development would be difficult to attain, let alone sustain, without entrenching indigenous education with its component knowledge, value and skill systems as foundation for the education system. As Euro-Christian education has benefitted significantly from Islamic culture and civilisation, a sizeable



dose of indigenous wisdom would have to be injected into Nigerian education to properly ground it within its socio-cultural milieu and also give it the right humanistic bias that would facilitate balanced, holistic and sustainable development.

To achieve this, a virile, functional, development-oriented, multi-lingual policy would have to be consciously designed and painstakingly implemented so that as many of the indigenous languages can be empowered to contribute to education in one or more of its informal, semi-formal and formal contexts. In this way, the languages would be approached as indispensable resources for home-grown education in the service of people-oriented development, rather than remaining embarrassingly as a crushing burden.

### **ADÌẸ ÀGBÉBỌ**

Ẹ fetí sílẹ gbọ nàsià mi ọmọ aráyé  
Ẹ bá tẹ́tí gbọ làbàrì mi gbogbo adáríhunrun  
Obìnrin sọwà nù,  
Ó lóun ò lórí ọkọ  
Bóbìnrin bá sọwà nù tán  
Se bórí aláwìn nirúu wọn ọn ní  
Adiẹ àgbébọ nirúu wọn ọn dà  
Bí wọn bá dadìẹ àgbébọ tán  
Wọn a wá máa sí ká bí ẹyẹkẹyẹ  
Ẹyẹkẹyẹ tí í bà lórí igikígi  
Wọn a di tìmùtìmù fún oríkórí  
Ibùsùn fún akọkákọ  
Bàtà fún ẹsẹkẹsẹ  
Filà fún orí fẹégbé  
Bẹtigọ fún orí lànkọ  
Abetíájá fún orí dọngbà.



Wọn á sọ wọn di kẹ́tẹ́kẹ́tẹ́ ilé  
Wọn á sọ wọn di ràkún mí oko  
Wọn á máa mú wọn gùn bí ẹ̀sinkẹ̀sin  
Tibí á fi rọ́rí, tọ̀hún á fi nara  
Lágbájá á dé e sórí, làkàsẹ̀gbẹ̀ á wò ọ̀ sẹ̀sẹ̀  
Onílẹ̀ a bẹ̀ lé e bí ẹ̀sin, àlejò á mú un gùn bíi jẹ̀kí  
Wọn á gbá a síbí, wọn á gbá a sọ̀hùnún  
Wọn a sọ ọ̀ di bọ̀lù ọ̀mọ aráyé  
Ìyà tí n jẹ bọ̀lù kò sì kéré  
Wọn á forí gbá a  
Wọn á fẹ̀sẹ̀ gbá a  
Bí wọn ti n fitan gbá a  
Ni wọn n şubú lé e  
Wọn á fún un mábẹ̀  
Wọn á kí í mọ̀lẹ̀  
Àtọ́tá, àtọ̀rẹ̀ẹ̀,  
È sà mí àdúrà gbogbo mùtúmùwà  
Kórí má sọ wá di bọ̀lù fọ̀mọ aráyé  
Èlẹ̀dàá má fi wá şe pòò fún géndé gbogbo  
È sá máa tẹ́tí bá nàsià mi lọ  
È bá fara balẹ̀ kẹ̀ẹ̀ gbọ̀ làbàrí ọ̀rọ̀  
Bó̀bìnrin bá wá sọ̀wà nù tán  
Tó dorí ọ̀kọ akọ mú tó lóun ọ̀ lórí ọ̀kọ  
Tó dadie àgbẹ̀bọ̀, tó di káríilẹ̀-kárióko  
Káríilú-káriayé, ànfààní àdúgbò,  
Àwámáridíí nişẹ̀ Oba mi Ọ̀báńgíjì  
TÉdùmàrẹ̀ bá mí sára irúu wọn  
Tírú wọn bá fẹ̀rakù tán  
Mo şe bóyún ẹ̀yẹ̀ nírú wọn ọ̀n ní  
Béyẹ̀ ọ̀hún bá wá bímọ̀ sílẹ̀ tan  
Orúkọ kí ni ọ̀mọ̀ ì bá máa jẹ̀?  
Oròmọ̀dẹ̀ kò lórúkọ méjì bí kò şe Ọ̀kọ̀dàríjọ̀bí  
Ta ni kò mọ̀ pé Ọ̀kọ̀dàríjọ̀bí lọ̀mọ̀ àgbẹ̀bọ̀ adie?  
- R. Adébáyọ̀ Lawal



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