

Sankofà: The Vocation of a Religious Educator in West Africa
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The original two-fold purpose of this paper was to demonstrate how new forms of pedagogy were employed in the teaching of a new course, Educational Philosophy, and to document development of the Educational Philosophy syllabus prepared and taught by an expatriate in West Africa. The first section, “the vocation of a religious educator,” reflects the author’s synthesis of recent literature on pedagogy. The resulting emphasis upon education as mutually transformative human interaction becomes one of the most recurring themes throughout the paper.

The second section, “the vocation in West Africa,” takes up a major question: how does a non-African teach Educational Philosophy to African students in Africa? This section deals with the curriculum, the students, questions which emerge, course findings, and the responses of students and religious educator to the encounter they are having with new knowledge and with one another. This section goes beyond the original scope of the paper in that it portrays the mutual vulnerability shared by students and religious educator alike as together they realized some of the history between their African and Caucasian races.

The third section, “Sankofà: Elements of a Vocation,” illustrates how the course curriculum juxtaposes the development of African indigenous thought and education with the development of liberalism in the modern world. Sankofà (“Return to the source and fetch.”) and Sankofan education are presented as imperatives for the survival and revitalization of African life in a global world. Again, this section goes beyond the paper’s original scope in describing students’ actual responses to topics in the curriculum.

The paper concludes with recommendations for future work in educational philosophy from a West African perspective. The paper was originally viewed as an initial attempt to chronicle the curricular and teaching experience from a purely educational perspective. The actual writing of the paper led to the creation of a “documented memoir.”

The reflection necessary for the writing of the paper evoked a bit of passion, so that it is not an objective reflection upon praxis. The presence of passion may be one of the elements inherent in the vocation of the religious educator!

This paper was written in an environment of reverence. The reader is entrusted with excerpts from the content of classroom dialogue. The author hopes that its reading will also serve as an experience of the sacred.

The Vocation of an Expatriate Religious Educator

A survey of select pieces of recent literature in religion, education, and religious education provides a setting within which to consider the design and pedagogy for Educational Philosophy, a new course, taught in Nigeria, West Africa in the summers of 2000 and 2002. The literature focuses on the nature of education, styles of pedagogy, the importance of the word in pedagogy, forms of the word in pedagogy, and the power of the word to go beyond its present meaning into new applications and expressions. The course is designed for enrichment, yet its content is that of a course given for 2-3 academic credits.

While education has been defined as “transformation” (Dewey and Bentley 1949), education can also be considered as human “interaction” with a “sense of purpose, design, or meaning.” Not only do persons possess the capacity to interact with one another, they also interact with the multiple contexts which make up their lives (Moran 1997, 156).

Since pedagogy is integral to the design of “transformative human interaction,” practical analysis and critique of particular styles of pedagogy, such as the case study, Gestalt, the phenomenological approach, narrative, and consciousness raising, can be quite helpful to the educator who is trying to refine approaches to teaching. At the same time, the religious educator can impart new life to each of the respective pedagogical styles by infusing it with a theological interpretation, for example, process theology (Moore 1998).

Academically critical conversation is essential to the process of the transformative human interaction which is education. While dramatic performance, dialectical discussion and academic criticism are important forms of academic conversation, reflection both upon the use of words within the forms and upon the manner in which the words and forms are structured, is even more important. Such reflection occurs with the hope that transformative, interactive life forms may realize their full potential in the lives of students and teachers alike (Moran 1997, 183-186).

The word is of prime importance in conversation because it has value, in itself, and for its ability to express what is known in the present moment. Further, the spoken word is a catalyst for unfolding thought and action, and thereby, for new knowledge.

Use of the word in the forms of narrative and autobiography allows for reflection upon experience and for open inquiry. Careful attention to the word in education can have significant moral implications for both the individual and the community. (Moran 1997, 186, Erricker and Erricker 2000, 73-75).

Individuals, most especially children, engage through the forms of narrative and autobiography, in an ongoing, creative, artistic endeavor to fashion their own spiritual growth. Through narrative and autobiography, people employ their rational, intuitive and emotional capabilities, as they work towards personal integration. (Erricker and Erricker 2000, 66-69).

Reflection upon this compilation of literature suggests that the religious educator’s calling involves commitment to a process of mutually transformative human interaction, deliberately structured in methodology, as well as in use of the word. There is a challenge both in the professional literature and in the particular task of designing and teaching Educational Philosophy, a new course, in West Africa. The Caucasian religious educator of the United States, may interpret the challenge as an invitation to “launch out into the deep” (Luke 5:4).

The Vocation in West Africa

After articulating the challenge to the religious educator, this section briefly describes two works on educational philosophy which contributed significantly, both in content and in structure, to the course (Noddings, Njoroge and Bennaars). Then a description of some elements of course content is interspersed with representative samples of the students’ and religious educator’s responses to the literature, the presentations, the films and the small learning group discussions. With hindsight one can trace the development of what might be termed “mutually transformative human interaction.”

The primary question becomes, “How does the Caucasian religious educator engage West African adult students, most of whom are themselves either teachers or preparing to become teachers, in the formal study of educational philosophy, which is essentially a European and American academic discipline?”

On the one hand, education, and educational philosophy particularly, is considered of high importance in contemporary West Africa; on the other hand, nearly all of the available literature situates the development of the theory and practice of educational philosophy in the modern western world (after 1500).

In other words, how can the content and methodology of Educational Philosophy, taught in West Africa, become the occasion of a mutual commitment to a process of transformative human interaction, while at the same time remaining true to itself as a formal academic discipline?

An excellent survey of the western view of educational philosophy with related accompanying bibliography of primary source readings offers ample material for an advanced student who has acquired proficiency through previous university studies within or outside of Africa (Noddings 1998). However, the same survey is both daunting and of little apparent relevance to the typical West African undergraduate for whom the course is designed.

How and where does the religious educator begin to fashion a curriculum directed toward mutually transformative human interaction? The contribution of indigenous East African educational philosophers, established scholars through their work in the “western” world, suggests that there is an “African” philosophy of education, one which is both uniquely African, yet also open to understanding and dialogue with western world educational philosophy (Njoroge and Bennaars 1986).

The West African undergraduate knows that philosophy, in general, and educational philosophy, in particular, is an important reality with which to reckon. The undergraduate enters the course with anticipation and eager desire to learn. The student is startled to learn that philosophy and educational philosophy have become such highly developed disciplines that the western world does not apply the term “philosophy of education” to activity within Africa.

It is reassuring to find African educational philosophers stressing that despite western world ignorance, there is a long tradition of philosophical thought about education in Africa. Recent and recent past educational documents and reports reflect this tradition.

In fact, there is an indigenous educational tradition which is as old as African society itself. In addition, Islamic and Western Christian influences have been a part of African education for such a long time that they are considered to be quasi-traditional. Further, the last fifty years has seen a variety of both conservative and progressive expressions of contemporary educational thought.

Thus, contrary to western world misconceptions, it can be verified that there was and is an indigenous African educational tradition which serves as a carrier for explicit pedagogical thought. While the content of pedagogical thought varies from tribe to tribe, each generation conveys the tradition to the next.

An alternating pattern of exhilaration, dismay, and the return of exhilaration begins to emerge among the students. Pride at being African leads to strong attachment to the joys and sorrows of African identity throughout history. Questions, based upon curiosity, begin to surface. Some are engaged. As questions become more academically critical, students and religious educator alike raise the question: “What are some of the roots of the western world’s ignorance

towards Africa?" Engagement deepens. Students and religious educator depart together from the predetermined formal curriculum in search of an explanation.

Initially one can look to an ancient "flood" myth, predating Genesis, and later incorporated into the Book of Genesis, 9:18-10:32. It is important to note that, not God, but Noah, who curses his son Ham (which means "black") for looking disrespectfully at his father. Europeans, and perhaps others, have used this biblical incident to justify their notion that the African race is inferior and is meant to be subjugated by the other races of the world. This notion of white "superiority" over black is known as the "Hamitic Hypothesis." It is an hypothesis, not empirically proven (Appiah-Asanti 2002).

In the early centuries of Christianity there was a movement towards "de-secularization," that is, the construction of knowledge in such a manner that all knowledge was seen to be in conformity with the revealed truth of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Isidore of Seville (d. 636), among those who reshaped the content of knowledge so that it conformed to scripture, explained that the origins of the African race were to be found in Noah's curse of Ham.

While one can wonder how anyone might think along such discriminatory lines, the following excerpt may be illustrative of church authority in Isidore's day: "We are not permitted to form any belief of our own will or to choose a belief that someone else has accepted of his own. We have God's apostles as authorities, who did not themselves choose anything of what they should believe, but they faithfully transmitted to the nations the teaching received from Christ. And so even if an angel from heaven should preach otherwise, let him be anathema." (Etymologie 8, 3, 2-3 quoted in Brehaut 1964,70).

Isidore was one of the great minds of the dark ages; many of the original sources upon which he drew are now lost to us. At the same time, he was a man of his time, non-reflective, non-critical, and sometimes placing contradictory views side by side without any attempt to reconcile them or explain them. One can see, then, how Isidore might have fallen into recording a biblical justification for "looking down" upon those of African descent (Brehaut 1964, 45, 50, 212).

Over the past 150 years, consciousness of the Hamite identity has surfaced again and strongly. British explorer John H. Speke educated Kamesi, the African king, with respect to the Biblical account of Ham (Speke 1864, 224-225, 242-243, 494-496). The effect of Speke's teaching was to justify nineteenth century European colonialism in Africa. Speke also provided the intellectual foundation for present day racist attitudes; missionary work, education, Speke's view, and even present day genocide can be traced to Speke's line of thought. (Seligman 1968, note prior to 1, 61, Africa 1995, Mamdani 2001, Haynes 2002, 30-35).

Through probing the roots of western ignorance towards Africa, students and religious educator alike become more deeply engaged with their findings as well as with one another. A subtle awareness of our own racial similarities and dissimilarities begins to seep into the atmosphere. We look at one another differently. The tones of our voices change. We choose our words more carefully as we penetrate more deeply into the attitudinal sources towards past differences between our races.

There are moments of hesitation. Then it becomes clear that students desire to know the sources of their own African identity more fully; they want to move forward. Through fiction and film, the students meet East African tribes struggling with some of the dilemmas posed between indigenous and Christian education, between tribal custom and missionary indoctrination (Ngugi 1965, Female Circumcision 1998).

Through studies in African culture, students journey with an African-American woman as she traces her indigenous roots, with their implications for educational thought, in the Amara people of Wello Province, Ethiopia. While on route, they discover 17th century development of scientific empirical thinking, the 18th century “Enlightenment,” and 19th century social Darwinism with their destructive implications for modern African education and development. They also examine modern African education (Tedla 1995, 79-108, Dark Passages 1997).

Students have now acquired a deeper knowledge of the western view of some elements of their own culture, such as female circumcision and the Atlantic slave trade. At the same time, they also have a new understanding of attitudes and practices which separate them from the western world. The religious educator’s understanding is deepened. Students and religious educator have somehow become a “we” in the process of mutual interaction and discovery.

The modern western world and its technology evoke less of a sense of wonder than previously. There is a sense of “lost innocence” among us as we strive to pick up the pieces of our shattered vision of reality. Meanwhile, we plod forward noting the existence of such fields as ethnophilosophy and phenomenology of African education, philosophical analysis and critique of African education. We learn of an existential focus in educational philosophy, which is cognitive, normative, creative and dialogic. We briefly probe their components as we note the absence of concrete writings and experiences. These theoretical descriptions of an African educational philosophy definitely have value (Njoroge and Bennaars 1986). If the religious educator had also incorporated practical, close-to-home examples of literature and situations, student learning and involvement would have been enhanced.

The journey of mutually transformative interaction becomes more intense as dialogue and academic criticism plunge to greater depths of analysis and critique. Questions such as the following are raised: “Who are the producers of our literature?” “What is its real purpose?” “Where are the works, not merely by African authors, but by West African writers and film producers?” “What is the perspective of the works chosen for the course?” A sense of conclusive climax arises in the midst of the group: “Now that we have experienced this “awareness raising” encounter through the spoken, written, and visual word, how can we actualize “the sense of power” which emerges?” “How can our efforts and desires make a difference, for the better, for Africa?”

We are both full of power and powerless in our desires to know and to act. We look to “Sankofa” as we continue our journey with Tedla.

Sankofa: Elements of a Vocation

A review of some components of indigenous African thought and indigenous education provides a context in which to situate an understanding of Sankofa. Indigenous African thought is centered in the community with special emphasis on such elements as affirmation of life, creation, the community, the human person, and human work. Indigenous African education focuses upon the formation of character; it deals with the whole of life, as known in community. The community educates its members. African ways of knowing encompass the whole of life, the invisible and the visible which manifests it. African ways of thinking about education are descriptive and rooted in the senses. So one can be brave or lazy, and one can know with one’s eye, one’s heart, or one’s abdomen.

Indigenous African thought and education are illustrated by analyses of thought and education specific to the Welloye, one of the major groups of the Amara people who in turn comprise 80% of the population in Ethiopia. They have always been an independent nation, except for the Italian occupation between 1936-1941. Their society maintained the same stable structure up until 1974.

A comparative analysis between indigenous African thought and education on the one hand, and the development of western thought after 1500 on the other, highlights attitudes demeaning to the African way. Liberalism in the west includes a mechanical view of the universe, empiricism and evolution; each of these holds economic and social implications destructive to Africa.

The inherent values and characteristics of indigenous African thought and education are very much at odds with those of western liberalism. It is startling to realize that the assumptions of western liberalism constitute a significant portion of the foundation upon which African development and modern African education are built!

During summer 2000 and again during summer 2002, students commented, at this point in the curriculum, that it is difficult to live in present day Africa, because there are two “scripts” running in their heads: that of the African and that of the modern world. One must often attempt to ignore one “script” in order to think and act out of the other. When confronted in class with words describing the differences between indigenous thought and education and present day experience, students recognize the phenomenon of the two “scripts” all too well. They begin to use their own vocabulary which is equally descriptive and perhaps more vivid.

Some students question the worth and validity of the accomplishments of “the colonial masters.” They are seeking a way to be genuinely true to themselves as Africans in the modern world. Others indicate that new thoughts and images are arising in their minds. While they do not describe the thoughts and images concretely, there is a consistency in the nature of the comments: Despite the unprecedented nature of these thoughts and images, there is a familiarity about them; they are wonderfully beautiful and peaceful. The students enjoy ruminating over concepts and representations which have entered their minds for the first time.

Tedla’s journey through studies in African culture leads her and us to the matrilineal Akan people in Ghana. From the Akan, she learns of “Sankofà,” which literally means “return to the source and fetch.” Sankofà employs values derived from the African heritage as the criteria against which to evaluate society and the education it promotes. Inclusive, Sankofan education relies upon theories and practices derived from African peoples of every time and place. Sankofan education empowers all persons of African descent, reclaims African history, and teaches indigenous ways. Sankofan education finds expression in cultural, intellectual, spiritual, and community life as well as in good health and fitness (Tedla 1995).

Students’ creative responses to Sankofà and Sankofan education led to individual presentations as well as to group skits and pantomines. In some cases students taught and learned from one another with respect to the pedagogies found within their particular indigenous tribal customs. This was an occasion of rich mutual appreciation of the background and heritage of others. In other cases, the students devised specific forms and strategies for education of the marginalized within African society.

In two cases, students undertook additional independent, creative work. The first is a carefully researched paper (Owuamanam 2000) of moderate length; the author, is happy to make it available for further work:

***Should Indigenous African Education and Thought
be Wholly Incorporated into the Modern African Educational Curriculum?***

After defining and explaining African indigenous education from a philosophical perspective in such a way as to demonstrate meaning in differing forms of indigenous education, the author discusses three particular forms: specialized expertise as preparation for life in stratified African society, rites of initiation and folklore.

The author favors indigenous education due to its moral elements, its focus on the child, its flexibility to be both informal and formal, and its discipline. The major drawback to indigenous education is that it is geared towards set roles for girls and women, whereas western education tends to offer more opportunities to women. This problem with indigenous education is acknowledged, but not addressed. In conclusion, the author favors indigenous education because, despite its major disadvantage, the development of the total human person is fostered, character is strengthened, intellectual and vocational training are provided, and one experiences a sense of belonging to the community.

The second is a poem (Enendu 2002) in which the author reflects upon the meaning of Sankofà. After describing some effects of life in the modern world, she is drawn back to the influence of her grandmother. It is reproduced in its entirety with permission.

Where Have I Been?

“Immersed in thought I wonder where have I been?
I ask myself, again and again, where have I been?
Confused, disturbed, whirling deep within myself,
Where have I been?
Am I lost? I ask myself, have I lost myself?
Where am I? Where do I meet myself? Who am I?
I have wandered far and wide,
Gone to far flung places, danced to the piano,
Clinked glasses, the sound of false laughter familiar to my ears,
I have left myself behind,
Ah! What places I have been!
Yet hollow to my inner self, to the core of myself.
I am searching,
Searching and searching!
Perhaps I can find myself,
Will you help me find myself?
Light shines showing me the way,
The light of these past few days with you and myself beckons me.
I move forward, towards it,
Yet I look back to where I have been.
Will I go back?
Still you call me, Mgbokwo,
Nneochie calls me, ‘come and learn wisdom from my breasts’ she says.
I move forward,
To where I was born.”

While the two works cited above speak for themselves, nearly all of the students report that the sense of the Akan “Sankofà” enables them to look again at the richness of their tribal heritage and to integrate their heritage more fully with modern African life and education. Sankofà may offer a way in which to work with the two “scripts” which run in their heads.

The recent experience of teaching Educational Philosophy (summers 2000 and 2002) to West Africans on their home territory leaves this religious educator in great admiration of young teachers and teachers-to-be in their dedication and zeal for the greater good of their people. Their intellectual curiosity and their desire to learn as much as they possibly can are a great inspiration. Certainly this course should be taught again; some particular recommendations for the religious educator emerge:

1. The expatriate teacher would benefit from a workshop for new missionaries, perhaps one sponsored by Maryknoll, Overseas Ministries, or a similar Christian organization.
2. The curriculum should be developed further in order to place greater emphasis upon particular expressions of African educational philosophy: ethnophilosophy and phenomenology of African education, philosophical analysis and critique of African education, and the existential focus in African educational philosophy, particularly by West African writers.
3. There should be an accompanying anthology of primary source readings in African educational philosophy; it should include material by current West African writers.
4. The immediate task is to continue to survey the literature in order to develop additional course materials with a view to possibly designing a general textbook and an accompanying anthology of related primary source readings for student use.
5. Perhaps a former participant in the course might be asked to co-teach the course, thereby developing as a teacher and addressing some of the gaps between the expatriate’s academic preparation and the actual West African setting.

It should be kept in mind that cross-cultural teaching and learning is far more than an academic exercise. Instead, can be a human encounter at a most profound level where the religious educator would do well to remain open to others and open to being changed by them. Further, it should be kept in mind that, in exposing to others the riches of their own culture and traditions, the religious educator is unable to know or to measure the depths of their discovery. The religious educator would be wise to be open to the risk of mutual challenge. There should be trust in what the participants say. Then one is free to draw upon the feedback given and to continue forward with the sacred trust of being permitted to work with them.

Sankofà : Return to the Source, and fetch !

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