

Review

Thinking initiation for leadership roles in Africa

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The agonizing condition of most African States has generated debates in contemporary times on a continent caught in the web of deepening predicaments. From severe economic, social and political instability to poor and bad leadership, Africa is perpetually and increasingly looking for the miracle model of salvation from her predicaments. Western-borrowed paradigms fail to work in Africa as a result of what Ali Mazrui termed the postcolonial political traumas of disruption and displacement. Attempts are made to look inwards for African traditional systems as prophylactic measures. This study explores initiation for leadership roles in Africa. It examines leadership in African intellectual history and practices. Through a critical analysis of initiation as imbedded in African traditional education and philosophy, it argues that a modified principle of initiation would lead to effective and sustainable leadership in Africa.

Key words: Africa, initiation, education, leadership, tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The slow pace of development in Africa is often attributed to the continent's loss of its traditional core values and orientation which are needed to prepare the youths for leadership roles. In the traditional African society, there were certain machineries in place for instilling into the minds of the youths some measures of its ethical values and etiquettes for the purpose of moulding their ways of interactions in society. It was expected that certainly, such young ones would grow up to know the distinction between what is good and what is bad, for it was part of the training to shun off vices and pursue virtues. Consequently, attitudes such as stealing, hatred, destruction of another man's properties, killing, murder, and all other crimes that would plunge the family and, by extension, the community into predicaments, were avoided. Invariably, any child brought up in this kind of atmosphere and arrangement would have the opportunity to become a virtuous person and, by implication, a good

leader.

It is disheartening therefore to note that a major problem bedeviling African society and individual African state is the problem of leadership. One would have thought that the adoption of democracy as a system of government in numerous African states would have bailed out the people from the cankerworm of backwardness and cesspit of corruption. But far from it, the politicians place their individual interest far and above that of the state. They interact most with the citizenry when elections are around the corner. During the electioneering period, they make several promises to the people; window dress projects aimed at alleviating the impoverishment of the people, and even spend monies to meet some immediate needs of the electorates. Once the elections are over, the same people become strangers to them and the promises are largely forgotten.

They return to their personal interest rather than those

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of the people they represent. Personal aggrandizement becomes the order of the day.

Furthermore, in many contemporary African societies, vices reign over virtues. This is truer as churches and mosques are continuously expanding their territories but their moral lessons are thrown to the wind by believers and even their leaders.¹ In recent times, constitutions are manipulated to the selfish interest of the people's representatives. Corruption, nepotism, robbery, looting of the treasuries, financial misappropriation, elimination by death or premeditated murders, and many alien crimes have become part of the culture of the people. Public office holders embezzle public funds and slash the money away in foreign banks. Politicians are recycled and the phenomenon of elongated tenure is regarded as a right of the office holders, ostensibly to enable them acquire huge gains and recoup humungous funds spent on elections.

Certainly, something is wrong with some behavioural trends in Africa in recent times. This is amply demonstrated in the attitudes and disposition of some African leaders. But still, the question that engages our mind at this point is: what has exactly gone wrong with the people and their leaders? It is reasoned that since Africa came in contact with the Western world, the cross cultural phenomenon had an adverse impact on Africans and specifically on the political office holders who show deficiency in leadership and lack the appropriate traditional training necessary to pilot their respective states. As a matter of fact, basic virtues such as civic duties, responsibility, honesty, decency, morality, and sincerity elude them. Something fundamentally must be done for Africa to get it right. Obadare and Adebaniwi in *Governance and the Crisis of Rule in Contemporary Africa* write:

...the study of leadership in Africa not only requires a re-evaluation of the analytical lenses used; more important, it requires a change of mentality which will force a new way of imagining, studying, analysing, and writing about the subject, in short, a new political anthropology of African leadership (Obadare and Adebaniwi, 2016:8).

Similarly, in her investigation and study of African political systems at the indigenous, colonial and post-colonial levels, Mueni wa Muiu drew many conclusions among which "the re-engineering of the entire political system in African societies. She advocates for a development of African states based on African cultures and values" (Muiu, 2008:7). This study aligns with Muiu's ideas. The study argues that a modified model of initiation will bring back lost values and guide most

¹ One of the primary roles of religion which is to instill high moral values in adherents is lost in most contemporary religious centers. Worldly and material prosperity is now their primary goal. There is even competition among adherents in this race for materiality. This is further reflected in leadership positions.

African societies through the process of development.

I have identified among other values and traditions, initiation as that part of traditional African training mechanisms that is needed to reform the attitudes of the African leaders towards the development of their community and people. In some African communities, rites of initiation are practised to educate initiates on the responsibilities of the new level they are about to attain. Some processes of initiation include seclusion and vigil to infuse a sense of focus in the initiate. For clarity therefore, it will be expedient to start my discussion by looking at the idea of initiation in relation to the African culture, as this will lead me into the ethical evaluation of the practice as well as the need to recall and reinvent it in the contemporary African society for the purpose of evolving responsible and transformative leadership.

INITIATION AND AFRICAN CULTURE

The term initiation is used in this work as a cultural and educative phenomenon. From its etymology and Latin origin *initiare*, initiation means to begin, beginning, to incorporate or to integrate. However, the idea in which initiation is embodied is culture. The importance of culture to man and his life can be seen in their inseparable relationship. "The idea of a culture generates a concept which, at one level, provides unification for the peoples of the world; including those who once have and also have continued to populate the world through time and across the space" (Jenks, 1993:11).

Culture, to Anyanwu (1985:274) is the "product of human experience." Culture is the function of experience and differences in culture give rise to differences of mentality (Anyanwu, 1985:282). As a matter of fact, cultural experiences differ from place to place and this explains why the Chinese, Indians, British, Africans and many other world cultures are different from one another. According to Kroner (1951:71) "the culture which man builds is experienced not as a system but as an actual reality which dominates his life and in which he participates by his attitude through active contributions and creativity." Thus, Ashley Montagu (1961:20) sees experience as a phenomenon which "is determined by the pace...in which groups and individuals live, and it is for this reason that groups and individuals belonging to different cultures will differ mentally from one another." It is from this experience that people gain insights in terms of which men try to organize their lives and generate their total worldview.

Man is a cultural being and as a human being, he "experiences everything in the light of his culture, which stamps and moulds his experiences by generating the conceptions which inform him, when he perceives the world and himself or his fellow-man" (Kroner, 1951:71).

That is why Jenks sees culture as:

The great help out of the present difficulties; the pursuit of

the total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matter which most concern, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits (Jenks, 1993:22).

This quotation suggests that culture is a reservoir of experiences. Different experiences of life pose different challenges. In Africa, at a certain stage of physical and mental development, one comes to terms with this stark reality of life which Roderick Seidenberg in *Anatomy of the Future* captures this way: "by common consent we live in the age of crisis" (Seidenberg, 1961:7). Indeed, since man thinks culture, acts culture, lives in a culture, and culture makes him what he is, any attempt to address this societal crisis must start from culture. It seems reasonable enough to propose that for me to address the African crisis of leadership in the contemporary period; I should take a refuge under the elements of our cultural experiences in order to provide a prodigious panacea that can stand the test of time. For this purpose, one major element of the African cultural practice which this paper has identified is initiation.

The term is used in two broad ways; first, the general assumption and second, the specialized meaning. In the general assumption, initiation means a rite of introduction into a society. By this meaning, initiation is understood as initiation into cults or secret societies or fraternity and so on. In this sense, it introduces an individual to an esoteric world. The specialized meaning of initiation conceives it as the traditional rites which are held for the purposes of introducing young men and women into adulthood, so as to confirm their readiness to take up responsibility for the development of their community. This aspect of initiation, in some cases, may start in the "bush" which makes the exercise itself a seeming resemblance to that which, as earlier pointed out, introduces one to an esoteric world.

The difference, however, is that the neophyte does not stay permanently in an enclosed environment; he/she is transformed and changed into a new creature of an esoteric world; designed to use his new endowment to lead and positively transform his community. This is the positive and progressive type of initiation. It is this second meaning, which readily captures the author's in initiation. Thus, when recommending initiation, it is not proposing the establishment of cults or secret fraternities. It is not impossible for members of various secret societies to argue that they equally have good and progressive reasons for being involved in what they do. In our thinking, as long as their intention is not for the well-being of the citizenry, they cannot be equated with the transformative initiation which we stand to defend. Initiation has an intrinsic connection with life.

Lamine N'Diaye captures them well when he distinguishes three main categories of initiation in traditional Africa, namely, the tribal, the religious and metaphysical and the optional. They encapsulate the entire fabric of African life. The tribal initiations have the characteristic of being compulsory and are organized in

cyclical manner in order to allow the young generations of the community, boys and girls to reach the status of adult according to established norms.² The religious and metaphysical initiations allow adherents to experience the divine in order to be able to serve as intermediaries between human beings and the supernatural forces. At the end of the stages of initiation, the neophyte becomes a priest, a diviner or a prophet. The optional initiations are, as the term indicates, optional and depend on the individual's desire to participate in the initiatory rites in order to be familiar with the esoteric realities, the privileged domain of secret societies (N'Diaye, 2004).

Mircea Eliade defines initiation "in philosophical terms as a basic change in existential condition, in which the novice emerges from his ordeal, a totally different being, *another* being"(Eliade, 1975:x). In African traditional societies, life is thought within the categories of space and time. It is within this spatio-temporal determinant that human existence is comprehended. As a matter of fact, life and death are seen as the fundamental terms of existence and are so closely linked that one cannot be conceived without the other. John Mbiti in examining "the concept of human life in relation to time" is more explicit (Mbiti, 1969,24). He enumerates "birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, death, entry into the community of the departed and finally into the community of the spirit" (Mbiti, 1969,24). He emphasized that these stages represent "an ontological rhythm, and these are the key moments in the life of the individual" (Mbiti, 1969,24).

However, the stages above have a common denominator which is initiation because it entails the significant aspect of life which has an input or an effect on the other stages of existence under reference. Initiation involves some stages of life that are birth, rebirth and death in a symbolic way. The reason is that, initiation means a new beginning, a new start. Birth as expressed is a new start in life; marriage is also a new start in adulthood, while death is not the opposite of life or the end of it, but a transition to another new life of ancestors.

Various researches in African culture identify five major African initiation rites which are fundamental to human growth and development. They are birth, adulthood, marriage, eldership and ancestorship (Ampim, 2003). These rites serve as a bridge between the individual and the community on the one hand, the community and a potent spiritual world on the other hand. Consequently, through these initiation rites, members of the community grow and develop into responsible community oriented adults ready to face the challenges of life and keep the values of their community in highest esteem.

² This is embodied in the idea of age grades in African societies. For instance, when moving from adolescence to teenage or teenage to adulthood, persons within these age grades are gathered together to be transited by selected elders from the community. This is believed to sustain the tradition, culture, identity, values etc. of the people or what Igor Primoratz calls the ongoingness of a people. Primoratz argued this idea in his book *Terrorism: A Philosophical Investigation*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

General apprehensions of the rites' patterns show that every African culture examined individually adhere to these moments of cognitive and physical developments. From the Kota of Gabon, the Galla in Ethiopia, the Dogon in Mali, the Chagga and Nyakyusa (Tanzania), to the Yoruba, Edo (Nigeria) and Ndebele (Zimbabwe); rites of passage show different stages as mentioned above in the making of the "man" in the neophyte (Lugira, 2009:64). The only variations are the locations and time of igniting the set of acts that establish the passage of rites.

However a conclusion is fast drawn from the stages of life and the five major rites in initiation. The corroboration between the rites and human life is in essence the manifestation of the dynamism which characterizes the structure and tenets of African culture. In this perspective, culture is the dynamic process through which the society constructs, represents, enacts and understands itself and prepares its generations of individuals through a sound educational scheme and system provided by initiation. It represents the tool of concrete and actual development of African culture.

The role initiation play is a revolutionary one that establishes a new dimension of relations between the neophyte and his community. It is one that insures a new and fresh evolution in the sense of re-evolution, development, progress in the neophyte's life. By its dynamism, initiation modifies the fabrics of the society and the individual and in actual fact, it is believed to be the African culture's ideology, the foundation of political and social action. Initiation is the nucleus of African culture.

Methodologically, initiation operates by way of representation and symbols of an abstract which is later applied to the reality of life. What is meant is that initiation thinks life through symbols and presents it to the neophyte in a way to build in him the self-confident individuals in the society require for leadership roles. In any case, these symbols applied to concrete existence represent the vicissitudes of life. John Mbiti concurs with this view as he writes that:

Initiation rites have a great educational purpose. The occasion often marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge which is otherwise not accessible to those who have not been initiated. It is a period of awakening to many things, a period of dawn to the young (Mbiti, 1969:122).

The neophytes are accompanied in the process of training by supervisors and teachers who are responsible to give the candidates adequate lessons on all aspects of manhood and womanhood considering the case including leadership skills. It is obvious that the scope of this paper cannot capture the entire African reality on leadership through initiation.

From the north to the south, from the east to the west, African traditions exhibit the sequential features of

communal life. This is truer as the studies of Kenyatta (1965), Genep (2010), Turner (1981) and Mbiti (1969). Lugira demonstrates same developmental characteristics to African traditional rites. As a matter of fact, the studies of these scholars depict that initiation in African traditional societies creates a bond of friendship and brotherhood among the neophytes. An aspect that is critical and key to communal life in Africa. Initiation integrates the neophytes as full members of the community and instills in them the desired societal values of accomplished citizens successful in life.

THE EDUCATIONAL PURPOSE OF INITIATION

A critical examination of initiation rites attests to the fact that African traditions understand the different critical moments of the cognitive development of the child. The physical practical dimension of initiation is always accompanied by the second mainly educational. In this respect, most rites consider children between the ages of six and sixteen. The choice of the age range is based on the comprehension that this period is the most suitable time for the child to assimilate fundamental teachings of life and the most appropriate time for the functions of the mind among which is memory. In this respect, initiation rites play an important role as an educational tool in African traditional societies. They possess the garment of African values, norms and ethical paradigms for meaningful and purposeful life. African philosophy of education transcends the mere symbolism of social transformation. It shows the symbiosis between the individual and the society and represents the soul of African people.

African societies have developed a great connection between the single human being, the family and the society as a whole. These connections and interactions have given Africans throughout the ages possibility to live the reality of power in a decent manner that reflects the values and principles of the society. As a matter of fact, what is developed is nothing else but the art of leadership, coordination and interaction that are intrinsic to traditional values. It is a mode of education for social cohesion and harmony which prepares individuals to assume their functions in the society.

Segun Gbadegesin in his work: *Eniyan: The Yoruba Concept of Person* examines *Eniyan* has an ordinary and a normative meaning. The ordinary meaning refers to an individual with different parts of the body constituting his physical self. The second meaning has an ethical dimension as it represents "a comment or a value-judgment of the moral standing of a human being." This second meaning corroborates with the purposeful life we study. The Yoruba believe that man is in the world for a purpose; and the teleological feature of his existence exhibits the dimensions of the purpose among which the leadership role.

The purpose of the individual existence is intrinsically

linked with the purpose of his social existence. There is a symbiotic relationship between the individual in Africa and his social milieu that as such and tough, destiny confirms the individuality and individual's personality; in essence, it links it to the community. Individuality and community are interwoven and intertwined. Gbadegesin notes: "The individual is nurtured by the community and the idea of destiny itself emanates from communal experience." (Roux and Coetzee, 228) As a matter of fact in Africa, initiation constitutes the sum total of all experiences of the community through generations. As such, initiation is seen as the process by which an individual becomes a man fully integrated and armed with the essentials of the tradition as knowledge. It is then unacceptable for a leader or a leader to be ignorant of the fundamentals of the tradition, his tradition.

According to Dominique Zahan, "initiation is the slow transformation of the individual as a progressive passage from exteriority to interiority. It allows a human being to gain consciousness of his humanity" (Zahan, 1979:54). It can thus, understand that initiation becomes a process of "confrontation" between an individual and himself and his community.

Concretely, confrontation is not an adverse confrontation for destruction. The confrontation is rather the incessant self- enhancing process through a dynamic mechanism of edification. From the moment, the neophyte or precisely the leader- to- be guarantees his future role in the community through a steady and thorough process which leads into the state of responsibility.

Consequently, a life direction through social norms enables the individual to explore beyond the present moment of his existence and project to the future. As a result, he projects himself to the very presence of his vision and dream of leadership.

AFRICAN LEADERS AND THE NEED FOR INITIATION

The aim in this part of the work is to argue that initiation is very essential for African leaders if any meaningful development should take place. Initiation as it appears in African traditional system must be seen as a slow transformation of the individual, as a progressive passage from exteriority to interiority. It allows man to gain consciousness of his humanity (Zahan, 1979:54). It is a genre of sacrament of an educational system though esoteric but fulfilling. It grants the individual the ability of resurrection and a new life after he has been symbolically put to death. This aspect of knowledge is more prominent than the first.

Initiation is a way spiritual life is developed, perfected, and completed by constant meditation (Zahan, 1979:55). As such, education is meant to assist an individual to acquire a respectable personality, which, in essence, must impress and bring the desired leadership that

engenders progress and development for the society. However, this cannot be said of today despite the expansion of learning in all aspects of life. For instance, in the American society, despite the advancement in education and learning problems and vices such as crimes, terror, man's inhumanity to man has witnessed a steady increase.

Probably, education needs to be further defined in order to present a clear picture of our submission. An etymological analysis of the term education reveals that education derives from the Latin word *educare* which connotes the rearing of plants and animals as well as children. Most of the early meanings of education in English are related to the bringing up of children and animal rearing. It was the nineteenth century that gave a clear distinction of different meanings of education and made a clear distinction between education and training (Peters, 1973:54). By establishing this distinction, Peters asserts that there is a difference between acquiring knowledge for knowledge sake and knowledge that contributes to the development of an individual and provide guidance for his life.

Kevin Harris in his book *Education and Knowledge* states: "Education is centrally and necessarily concerned with the transmission of knowledge." Then he adds "this is not to say that the transmission of knowledge is all that education is concerned with..." (Peters, 1973:1) Harris goes on to expatiate on his submission as he sees education in the light of the provision learning experiences or the transmission of knowledge as it occurs in places like schools, universities and colleges etc.

In his book, *The Philosophy of Education* under the sub topic "Education as Initiation" Peters posits that:

To be educated is not to have arrived at a destination; it is to travel with a different view. What is required is not feverish preparation for something that lies ahead, but to work with precision, passion, and taste at worth-while things to lie to hand (Peters, 1973:20).

Given the above, initiation abhors the elements of education and vice versa. Initiation implies learning and, by extension, education through a process. The key role initiation plays in the life of a leader corresponds to the role education plays in his life and that of the society he has the responsibility to lead.

Human progress requires a vision. This vision must be of an idealized form of how things ought to be, with the focus on the best concept of the potentials of the group involved. It must be based on a vivid and exalted concept of what those people have been at their best. It must be drawn from a metaphysical conception of the order of the universe. It must incorporate the triumphs over encounters with disordered life form and it must have a sustained conception of the regenerative and transformative nature of human existence (Akbar, 1991:ix).

Some philosophers in African History and Philosophy claimed that Plato studied in Egypt for over a decade under the Horite priest Sechnuphis. The advocacy of educating rulers or Kings in the way of philosophy in Plato's philosophy could be interpreted as an African legacy which corroborates the claim in this paper to educate leaders for an exemplary leadership. As a matter of fact, Onyewuenyi summarizing Plato observes that in *The Republic* the Greek philosopher had included a treatment of education at different levels (Onyewuenyi, 1993:247). He advocated a rigorous educational programme for those who are called to rule. Plato's idea and its similarity with African's pattern of initiation are striking.

In fact, Plato considers education as a tool to achieve justice, both at the individual and at social levels. According to the Greek Philosopher, individual justice is achieved when each individual set in motion his or her ability and develops it to the fullest. As a matter of fact, justice translates into excellence in this context. For the Greeks and Plato, excellence is no other thing than virtue. The sage Socrates is reputed to have said that, virtue is knowledge. Hence, knowledge is a condition *sine qua non* to a just life. The Egyptian influence on Plato (the disciple of Socrates) is quite instructive as his ideas are not too far from the African mind. Plato's emphasis on self-knowledge and the Idea of the Good reiterates the symbiosis between the individual and the state for a greater development. Plato considers this harmony as the ultimate goal of the society. An interpretation of this idea simply signifies the unavoidable connection between the individual, the society and, by implication, its leaders. Hence, a virtuous leader, knowledgeable leader cannot but impact positively on the society because through the social structure, he is educated and in return, he gives back to the society as a disciplined and well behaved citizen.

Interestingly, a keen look at contemporary African states shows a great contribution of modern education to economic development and where the case applies infrastructural development. However, the question remains: how can this development take place when the proper structures and mechanisms are not in place? This is truer as contemporary educational patterns pose serious challenges. In actual fact, the world faced with the replacement of education by instruction and indoctrination raises more questions in contemporary times than it solves. It naturally goes hand in hand with the abandonment of any real interest in pupils, students, the wellbeing and development of the society in general.

Recent instances of radicalization of youth speak volume. What is obtained today is a modern educational style that can simply be described as instruction.

Instruction is a practical enterprise in which a set skill or a standard quota of information is imparted for a purpose. The aim of instruction is to suit the subject to a task. As such, the time, dedication and selfless service for the purpose are no more in modern educational system. In

this line of thought Nwangwu (1976:7) in his work, *Universal Primary Education in Nigeria, Issues, Prospect and Problems* reflects on the various problems confronting modern education including the education of leaders and observes: "the instrumentality of education is embedded in its ability to preserve social values, help in attaining development of one's potentials, and attain perfect self-fulfilment".

Nwangwu adds that "education is the process by which every society attempts to preserve and grade the accumulated knowledge, skills and attitude in its cultural setting and heritage in order to foster continuously the wellbeing of humankind." (Nwangwu: 1993:7) Hence, considering the structure of African traditional societies, initiation which in modern term is education is the medium and the process through which an individual discovers himself, his humanity and potentials (Nwangwu: *ibid*). Through initiation, values are taught and leaders made.

Conclusion

The problem of leadership in Africa doubles as a problem of development. It is a known fact that most modern and contemporary leaders through their conducts and behaviours exhibit some questionable traits of character. Most leaders in contemporary Africa are no more representing the values and interests of the societies. Rather, they are simply a representation of their personal self. As a matter of fact, the individual has lost touch with his values and, by implication, his roots. The reason is not far-fetched. Most modern educational systems fail to understand the dynamic of individual- society-culture relationship in Africa. Consequently, the paper argues that the traditional educational pattern that initiation represents should be revisited and revived. Given that culture is dynamic and progressive, the process of acquiring knowledge through initiation for young Africans leaders may not be the same pattern. However, virtues such as sacrifice, courage, accountability, responsibility and altruism that constitute the tenets of African traditions are found in different initiation rites and they transcend time and space. Initiation rites are of great educational value. They represent a moment of confrontation of man with himself, the miniature society, which culminates in an enriched experience of positive transformation of the individual synergising with societal values.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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