

## *African Life Circle Rituals as a Socio-Cultural Context for Education*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*African life circle rituals are an integral dimension of life in traditional African societies. These rites occupy a glaring place, as it is an issue that forms the African traditional lifestyle. This piece studies the different major dimensions of the African life circle rituals. This research studies them as indigenous model of education, a model that creates a meeting point between education and culture. During the study, the hermeneutic and phenomenological methods of inquiry were employed for the collection and analysis of data. The inculturation theory was employed as a theoretical framework for this. It submits that these life circle rituals in traditional societies provided the socio-cultural context for education. And although it was disrupted by the colonial and missionary enterprises, it can still be incorporated into our education systems for the promotion of education and learning.*

**Keywords:** *African, Rites of Initiation, Rites of Passage Life Cycle Rituals, Education, Socio-cultural, context*

### **Introduction**

Bopp et al. (1985), Cajete (1994) and Brendtro et al. (1998) argue that there exist traditional indigenous approaches to education employed by traditional peoples for the communication of knowledge from one generation to the next. These traditional peoples in the

contention of Cajete (2000), Hampton (1995) and Buffalohead (1976) have thrived on these indigenous models of education long before the advent of their colonial masters, or their encounter with Western civilization. These traditional forms or models of

education are often characterized by oral tradition, transmitted through stories, during ceremonies, apprenticeships, songs, proverbs, folktales, etc. Stressing its wholistic nature, Armstrong (1987) avers that the African model of education is a natural process integrated into every daily life event within the social unit. Thus, Colorado (1988), Corsiglia and Snively (1995) and Freeman (1995) observe that indigenous education addresses all the main areas engaged by Western education: natural sciences, social studies, religion and philosophy, history, physical education, the arts, personal planning, and life-skills. From the foregoing, it can be said that in the traditional model of education, learning spread across every dimension of the human experience: mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. With the current development in the area of cultural renaissance, the quest for the rebirth of the African cultural heritage, this work focuses on the analysis of the African life circle rituals to study how it provides a socio-cultural context for education. However, during the course of this work, the concepts rites of passage, rites of initiation and life circle rituals are used interchangeably.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Inculturation theory is used to underpin this study. As a concept, it was first introduced into the academic community by Cardinal Sin of Manila at the Synod on Catechesis held in Rome in 1977, with focus on the need for an inculturation of Catholicism in a variety of forms.

Generally, it emerged as a theory in a bid to make the Christian religion, coached in Western culture at home in Africa through dialogue. Shorter (1988), Metuh (1993, 1996a and 1996b) and Walligo (1991 and 1996) had maintained that communication between human cultures can only take place effectively through dialogue and participation, through listening and through readiness to learn. Kurgat (2009) avers that it is only through interdependence in corporation, and congruence that conversions can successfully take place. There is an emerging consensus that culture is a developing process in which there is and there must be a continuous dialogue between faith and culture. This is still very important as Schreiter (1991) observes that much of the continent of Africa still staggers under

the burden of neo-Colonialism and continued economic subordination to the powerful cultures of Europe, Asia and North America. This theory is relevant in this study because we are dealing with developing an African educational methodology that would be in tandem with the African spirit without undermining the universal principles of education. Its emphasis on dialogue, participation, through listening and through readiness to learn are very important principles for the development of an African system of education that allows for the interaction between education and culture.

### **Education as Culture and Culture as Education**

There is a strong relationship between education and culture. Education as a concept points to a universal element, however, culture points to the particular. Culture on the one hand, is a social heritage that encompasses a people's way of life, which includes knowledge, beliefs, customs, laws, arts, morals etc., that a group of people build up and expect members to acquire, share and live by. Culture does not come from human genes, but rather it is learnt and taught. This bears with the etymology of the word culture as *colere*, which means "to cultivate" or "to practice". Kanu (2010), therefore posits that the human person is, the author and architect of culture. Education on the other hand, is the process of transmitting cultural heritage for the development of individuals spiritually, intellectually, physically and morally for his/her own personal good and for the good of the society. While education transmits culture, culture provides the *locus* or *locale* and the instruments for education. Akagbogu (1999), therefore, writes on the dynamics of education and culture

*All over the world, people in every society take pains, devote time and attention to educate the young ones to be functional adults. In most cases, these pains, devotion of time and attention to the rearing of young ones are geared towards impacting and transmitting of cultural and social knowledge that would enable the young ones fit in well into the social and physical environment of the society in which they live. In the process of impacting this social and cultural knowledge*

*to the young ones, different socio-cultural values and norms are used. (p. 70).*

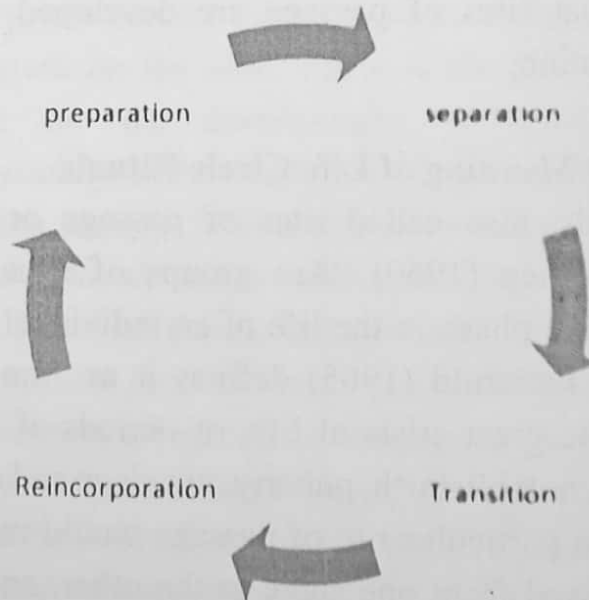
This notwithstanding, education is not just a process of transmitting culture, it is culture, because its methods and principles are determined by cultural contexts. Therefore, for education to be relevant and achieve its basic aims among peoples, localities and times, it must be inculturated, that is, it must be adapted to a cultural pattern. When education is done in such a way that it finds a home in a particular cultural context, and finds expression through elements proper to the culture of particular peoples, it would become a principle that animates, directs and unifies cultures, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation. Thus, Konare (cited by Kanu 2015), the Chairman, African Cultural Renaissance Day, expresses the view that, for African educational system to be meaningful and contribute towards bringing about sustainable development that would change the lives of Africans for the better, there should be a link between culture and education, and the rebuilding of the African Education systems so that the curriculum is informed by and based on African culture. Lets us see briefly the African culture. It is from this understanding that rites of passage are developed as a socio-cultural context for education.

### **The Nature and Meaning of Life Circle Rituals**

Life circle rituals, also called rites of passage or rites of initiation, according to Gennep (1960) "Are groups of rituals which celebrate transition from one phase in the life of an individual or a community to another" (p. 5). Fairchild (1965) defines it as "the ceremonies which cluster around the great crisis of life, or periods of transition from one status to another, notably birth, puberty, marriage and death" (p. 262). The performance of a particular rite of passage would mean that the person involved has passed from one stage to the other, and since the African universe is a religious one, all rites of passage have religious undertones. Madu (2011) avers that rites of passage have the following characteristics:

- a. It ensures a change of condition from one religious or secular group to another.
- b. Each stage is an outburst of new life due to the intervention of the divine.
- c. The divine order is recognized, acknowledged and actualized in the rites.
- d. These rites are only the re-enactment of the archetypal patterns of the gods in *in illo tempore*.

In every rite of initiation, four stages can be mapped out: preparation, separation, transition and reincorporation. During the preparatory stage one learns the basic skills and responsibilities associated with the new status to which they hope to move into. The separation stage marks the separation of the participants from their usual social setting, to mark a departure from the past. The transition stage is a stage dominated by ceremonies that marks the movement or transition. The reincorporation stage confirms one's new status, with the rights, privileges and responsibilities. These stages has been presented in the diagram below



### *Process of the Rites of Passage*

#### **The Dimensions of African Life Circle Rituals**

The rites of passage among Africans include: pregnancy, birth, puberty, marriage and burial rites.

#### **a. Pregnancy Rites**

Africans understand pregnancy as a period of transition from conception to childbirth. Pregnancy rite is to facilitate the birth of the child and to protect the mother and child from evil powers and malignant persons through offering a sacrifice; Metuh (1985) maintains that it is a rite of separation of the child from the world of the ancestors and incorporation into the world of human beings. It begins as soon as the woman misses her period. Among the Igbo, oracles are consulted as soon as a woman conceives and sacrifice offered to *Ala*. Why are oracles consulted? Ezenweke (2012) holds that it is generally believed that children have come from the divine with a message for the community, consultations with diviners helps the community to know the message the child has brought and if possible to take precaution when necessary.

#### **b. Birth Rites**

Birth rites vary from one culture to another, however, in most African cultures, there are two stages of it: purification rites and naming ceremony. The purification rites according to Metuh (1985) begins after the woman gives birth, she and the child are secluded for purification. It is only after purification that she can begin to move around in the community. It is usually a ceremony of days, the number of days depends on the culture. To establish the community ownership of the child, the umbilical cord connecting the mother and the child is cut as a sign of the incorporation of the child into the community. After the purification rite, the naming ceremony begins, which Qurcoopome (1987) opines humanizes and socializes the child, making him a member of the human family.

#### **c. Puberty Rites**

Puberty rites in both boys and girls is an announcement that they have reached adulthood. It introduces the child from the world of dependence to that of independence, and the rights, privileges and duties of adulthood. It is a sign that they are ready for marriage and have reached the biological

maturity necessary for reproduction. The rite for boys and girls differ according to their particular roles in society as husbands and wives. While the women are taught folktales, dances and songs and roles that are peculiar to women in the home, the men are taught roles that they would play as the head of the home. This is a period of learning for both men and women. At the end of the rites, the women are beautified and brought to the village square where they would display their beauty and dance as well to the admiration of men. Men who are in search of wives usually find this period very interesting. The boys are also initiated into secret societies and masquerade cults. They undergo great hardships that they may learn through suffering, especially to prepare them for the challenges that would come with being a father. After this period, the boys come to the open and eat with the elders, a sign that they have arrived. Their seclusion and public appearance are symbolic: it symbolizes the death of the child and the birth of the adult, the death of dependency and the birth of independence.

#### **d. Marriage Rites**

In most African traditional societies, marriage is a business between families and not between individuals. Real discussions about marriage between families begin when both families consent. When the man and woman accept and the family refuses, the marriage would not hold. To show the hold of the family on the individual in issues of marriage, there are times when the parents or the family decide who the child should marry, sometimes, even before the child is matured enough to choose a partner for herself or himself, the choices have been made and introduced to him or her at adulthood. This is called arranged marriages. In places where this does not happen, many African societies go through middlemen who would come first to declare his mission. The declaration of this intention is usually spoken beautifully in proverbs. When accepted, he can now go back and bring the family of the man. During this period, the girl will have to show consent, sometimes by drinking wine with the man from the same cup. If there is mutual consent, the dowry is paid accompanied by the appropriate sacrifice. This is followed by a feast.

during which people eat and drink and dance. In the evening of the same day, she departs to her new home.

#### e. Rites for the dead

The rites for the dead can be divided into two: burial rites and funeral rites. The nature of a burial is determined by who has died, a child or an adult, and if an adult, an elder or a chief or a king. If it is an infant or a young person who has died, the burial is not delayed. There is usually little or no ceremony accompanying such burials. This is based on the fact that it is regarded as a bad death- *ajo onwu*. If it is a married person that has died, the in-laws of the person in question are formally informed. During the rites, the dead is ritually washed. The purpose of this rite is to strengthen the diseased as he or she embarks on the journey to the spirit world. In some cultures, if it is a man, the *okpara* (first son) performs the rite, and if the person has no son, a male from the extended family does that. If a woman, the *ada* (first daughter) performs the rite. Among the Igbo, after washing, a fowl is strangled and the head cut off. The blood is rubbed on the body of the diseased; the blood is sacrificed to the deities to accompany the dead to the spirit world. When the ritual-washing is over, the body is taken to the grave for burial. If it is suspected that the diseased was killed by someone, sometimes a cutlass could be put in the grave so that he or she can revenge.

Part of the rites for the dead is the funeral rites. This usually comes not necessarily immediately after the burial. It is not a second burial as some falsely refer to it; it is rather a continuation of the rites for the dead. It is a rite of incorporation of the diseased into the world of the ancestors- after the rites, the diseased is welcomed into the college of ancestors. This rite helps the deceased to secure his or her rightful place in the world of the living-dead. This is also marked with a celebration. It is a kind of thanksgiving. These rites for the dead are responsibilities that the living owe to the dead.

## The Educational Value of Rites of Initiation

Chummar (2008) laments that with the coming of missionaries to Africa without knowing the relevance of rites of initiation, they condemned them as devilish and savage. He writes:

Without understanding the real anthropological, social and cultural meanings of the customs, zealous European Missionaries tried to abolish traditional moral African customs which were protecting Africans in the ethical matrix. (p. 5).

Rites of passage have great educational value. The occasion 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 so many things, a period of dawn for the young when the collective cultural wisdom of a people or group is transferred to the members of the group. It provides a socio-cultural context during which meanings are communicated for the development of the person in question. According to Mbiti (1969):

This happens when they withdraw from other people to live alone in specially prepared huts away from the villages during which time, they receive secret instructions before they are allowed to rejoin their relations at home. This is a symbolic experience of the process of dying, living in the spirit world and being reborn (pp 158-159).

Corroborating Mbiti, Chummar (2008) writes on the educational value of the rites of initiation:

Initiation is preceded by a number of social and sexual ethical instructions, where a young person is prepared ethically for adulthood and where the person has to learn from elders of the family how to live responsibly as an adult and as a partner in married life, how to behave in matters of sexuality and procreation, in parenthood, family and community. This transmission of ethical principles from one generation to the next in the context of initiation is now mostly broken, leaving a *moral vacuum*. The growing curiosity about sexual knowledge and its functioning are then

satisfied mainly through the media and peers in immoral ways. (p. 5).

This is at the base of so many problems that African youths are experiencing in our time. The absence of such a forum for learning and establishing a relationship between socialization and the learning process has left a vacuum between the construction of the self and the educative experience. Teaching and learning within the context of the rites of initiation are not abstract and based on definitions, but rather the students are taught based on roles and responsibilities that they are expected to carry out daily in concrete historical circumstances. It is an education for survival.

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing has studied the rites of initiation as an indigenous model of education; a model that creates a meeting point between education and culture. It discovered that Rites of passage, in the African context, remain an integral dimension of life in traditional African societies. Thus, Ezenweke (2012) observes that these rites take a glaring place in the life of Africans, as it is an issue that forms the African lifestyle. Although, with the advent of Westernization, Western education has now taken over the educative roles that these rites of passage played in traditional African societies, and have at some times been categorized by Christian missionaries as devilish and by the colonial masters as uncivilized. This work argues that the consequence of the relegation of the rites of passage to the background is the creation of a vacuum in the learning process. It further submits that in our 21<sup>st</sup> century, characterized by violence in schools, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and other distractions which have been part of the public discussion on how to better educate our youth, the indigenous model of education provided by the rites of passage in traditional African societies can make a contribution towards stability.

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