



African Culture as a Medium of Empowering Kenyan Youth in Nairobi Province, Kenya

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This exemplifies contemporary use of artistic cultural creations in Canopen Education Services foundation to facilitate youth to come to terms with their social psychological and economic challenges

1.0 Background

It is generally believed that cities are centers of politics, culture, complex service provision systems, enterprise development and innovation. (DFID 2000; p.3) Nairobi the capital city of Kenya has not been spared the above notion. Since independence, and even before, many young people have migrated to Nairobi in search of socio-economic and even political opportunities in a bid to improve their economic well being and social status.

The population of Nairobi city has grown rapidly from 350,000 people at independence in 1963 to 2.7 million according to 1999 Kenyan census. Approximately 55% of the current city population lives in informal settlements (slums) existing below the poverty line. Majority of the households depend on incomes of less than Kshs.2000 per month (US\$ 25). Most residents in the informal settlements therefore live from hand to mouth and cannot afford to send their children to city council schools because they cannot afford to buy uniforms, books or raise building fund levies. The alternative is for the children in informal settlements to enroll in non-formal schools for them to develop useful skills for self employment to enable them participate in valuable economic activities. That way they will not become economically excluded like their parents currently are.

Middle and high-income families in Nairobi Province live almost exclusively in nucleus families. They live in low populated areas of the city with 25 units and 14 units per hectare respectively as compared to 250 units per hectare in informal

settlements (slums) (NISCC, 1997) Most homes of middle and high-income families are barricaded with high concrete walls and steel gates. Generally, these families lead very secluded lives; Extended families having broken down consequently socialization of children and youth is left solely to the parents and schoolteachers

Parents in this social stratum are very busy people striving to maintain their economic status. They have very little time for socializing their children. When out of school the children are mostly in the company of house helps and family drivers. A majority of parents are not also endowed with skills of guiding their own children on social and psychological issues. Though well endowed with material needs, children of middle and upper class families can be socially excluded if their personal development is not probed by people conversant with Socio - Psychological needs of youth.

2.0 Needs of the youth

The afore stated inadequacy of parents in socializing their youth has its roots in the traditional African system of bringing up the youth. Personality development of the youth was not solely the responsibility of the parents but that of the extended families as well. Grandparents and other responsible adults counseled young people on: -

- Sensitive topics such as sexual behavior
- Other society roles, values and traditions

They did so through story telling, proverbs, songs etc. (Mutie and Ndabuki 1999, p.154) Grandparents will have acquired guiding and counseling skills experientially while dealing with theirs and other youth. Today; parents are expected to prop their youth socially and psychologically even before they have had experience counselling other youth or have had any training.

According to (Brown 1965 p.52) “All societies face the problem of training the individual to think, feel and act in accordance with patterns of a particular society of which he is part. This is because rules of conduct, ideas, goodness and beauty, ways of communicating and solving problems do not spring full-blown from the human nervous system. Materials for constructing descriptions, explanations, rules and values come readily at hand from Biological, Social Cultural, Psychological services”

The parent who may be having the first youth in the family needs some prior experience to imbue that corpus of guiding the young people. The teacher like the parent is also trying to come to terms with the role of guiding the youth for the first time. The youth of middle and high-class families may therefore be excluded from participating effectively in the society if the teacher and parent do not succeed in the process of socializing them.

“One of the problems of formalized schooling today is that parents tend to assume that teachers will provide for all the learning, disciplinary and socialization of the youth, including the ethical values of society. The schools as they are today do not have the capability; time or even motivation to teach the values of society. This is because the schools are geared almost entirely to the passing of final school examinations. On the other hand; the teaching of social values is assumed by the

teachers to be the responsibility of the parents.” All the education commissions after independence viz.; - Ominde (1965), Gacathi (1976) Kamunge (1988) the unimplemented Koech commission (1999) emphasized the need of incorporating cultural values and practices in the school curriculum. With the introduction of new concepts in education, the methodology was expected to change so that it can be practical and experiential for it to impart change in the learners.

However teaching in most schools is still teacher centered and is characterized by mere transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil. The pupil rarely participates in the process of processing the knowledge. This approach leads to low interaction, low participation and low self-esteem and consequently low motivation for learning is too frequently centered in the classrooms. (Gacathi 1979, p.27) Most of the Kenyan classrooms inhibit learners full participation because of the very long time learners have to sit still and listen to the teachers which is tiring and stressful. In an attempt to ease stress some learners resort to violent acts. For example “Some teachers may promote learners to engage in undisciplined activities by over stretching their pupils intellectually, particularly if the learners are forced to remain in class well after school hours leading to excessive fatigue” (Muchira 2000 p.14)

Besides incorporating cultural values and practices in Philosophy of Kenyan education system the Ministry of Education Science and Technology has established guidance and counseling departments in schools. Virtually all schools have guidance and counseling teacher but the training the teachers get is not adequate enough for them to handle all learners needs effectively. In particular, actions of learners emanating from the unconscious motives pose real challenges to the guidance and counseling teachers since every child comes into a world equipped with a set of instincts, the unconscious and an enormous capacity for conscious acts. A conscious mental act is a thought a desire or actions known directly, concurrently and experientially. As such, conscious mental acts can be made yield to the wills of direct control. A preconscious mental act is known but not directly. We cannot group it through direct experience, thought, drives memories and feeling. We can only reason to it” (Maurus p.16)

3.0 Vocational skills and economic challenges of the youth.

The pre-independence commissions of education in Kenya viz: (Fraser Report, 1909) and the Beecher committee in 1949 emphasized the teaching of practical and technical/industrial education, while the Phelps – Stokes commission and advisory committee on education in colonies, 1925, was to address the needs of the individual communities so as to preserve the best of their traditions and prepare them for work. (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2000.)

It was believed that the youth would acquire practical employable skills, which they would use to create income-generating projects. For the youth in informal settlements of Nairobi Province, such skills would be very useful for creation of income generating projects, which would uplift them from social - economic exclusion. Unfortunately the style of implementing the practical subjects did not argue well with the African youth whom they were supposed to boost. In the colonial based vocational education, “The African was trained as a brick layer, a mason or a carpenter whose duty was to perform menial tasks under the direction of the supervisor; a foreigner who owned not only the brick but also the tools of trade.” Other than stimulating

initiative, innovativeness and entrepreneurship, technical education was enslaving and led to resentment of non-academic education among Africans. Technical and vocational education was also seen as a stumbling block to African ascent to top managerial jobs, most of which were held by Europeans.

The technical and vocational education was also destined to make non- African indigenous products, which were deliberately discouraged by the colonial administration in favour of manufactured goods from the United Kingdom (Koech 1999 p.4), thus alienating the learners from their environment.

The first post independence commission of education (Ominde 1964) de-emphasized teaching of vocational subjects. The teaching approach was purely academic oriented and aimed at producing high level managers and other white-collar job cadres. By 1970 however, most of the existing white-collar jobs had dwindled because of the inflation of oil prices and world recession. Unemployment became rampant and it was realized that formal education was not meeting the needs of the people. (Gacathi 1979). This was a common phenomenon in Africa as exemplified by (Durojaiye 1976, p.13)

“ The cry is for the content and format of the African child. The cry is for content and format of education which is relevant to African needs. We want education which is functional in terms of usability of skills and knowledge it offers within the context of African setting.”

Four post independence commissions of education viz; - Gacathe (1979), Kamunge (1988), Mackay (1981) and Koech (1999) have critically examined the economic needs of the people of Kenya and how education can be modified to produce school learners with skills to meet their economic needs. Since 1986, Technical and vocational subjects have been introduced in both Primary and secondary education. The teaching of these subjects has nonetheless been more theoretical than practical and very examination oriented. Development of employable skills has consequently been subdued. No feasibility study is done to establish the demand of the products made at school. Neither is the cost effectiveness of producing the same accessed.

Parents also do not encourage their youth to undertake practical and vocational subjects because white-collar jobs are viewed as more prestigious than vocational and technical oriented jobs, (Tessier 1984 p.9)

The rest of the paper will therefore examine how some aspects of African culture can be used to bridge the gap between the school, the teacher, the parents and the environment and how these cultural aspects can enhance formal education to produce youth who are healthy socially, psychologically and economically.

4.0 Definition of African culture

According to (Ngugi 1972 p.4) “ Culture in its broadest sense is a way of life fashioned by people in their collective endeavor to live and to come to terms with their total environment. Its is the sum of their art, their science and all their social institutions including their system of beliefs and rituals. In the course of this creative struggle and progress through history, there evolves a body of material and spiritual

values which endow that society with unique ethos. Such values are often expressed through people's songs, dances, folklore, drawing, sculpture, rites and ceremonies. Over the years these varieties of artistic activity have come to symbolize the meaning of the word culture."

Culture is very broad and deep component of life and cannot be exhausted in a paper like this one. The paper will therefore confine itself to how artistic creations like songs, dances, folklore, drawing, sculpture, rites; ceremonies and drama have been used by African indigenous societies to guide young people to deal effectively with their socio – psychological and economic needs.

In indigenous African societies, the use of artistic creations for stimulating young people to acquire positive social and psychological attributes was the responsibility of the whole community which was intertwined in the families or communities rites and ceremonies. It was not possible for a young person to forego the set of phases of social and psychological development as exemplified by (Kenyatta 1978 p.115) "Thus in every generation; the Gikuyu tribal organization is stabilized by the activities of various age-grades and young people who act harmoniously in the political, social, religious and economic life of people."

As stated earlier the behavior of youth like that of other human beings is governed by both the "conscious" and the "unconscious". To understand and shape the psychological nature of the young people, their thoughts and actions, there is a need to evoke their unconscious capacities, through their involvement in the artistic creations such as folklore, drama, drawing, painting e.t.c.

(Bitek 1986, p.35) observes "In traditional African Creative activities; there is no standard text for any song or folk story, myth or chant. Each voice or body movement, the way the song is sung and the words and names used are the artists personal rendering of individual performance – any time anywhere, the individual is creating his or her own piece of art."

The youth participated in many festivals like harvest festivals, marriages, circumcision and funeral ceremonies. The adults also took part in those activities and the youth and old intermingled. During the different performances; the adults could understand the feelings, thoughts and moods of the young people. Through their own rendering of the songs, they could holistically guide the youth on what the society expected as far as the youth's social and psychological dispositions were concerned. Artistic creations could also be used in development of economically inclined skills. The skills were developed through a process of observation of what and how the economic activities of the family. Then there was the role-play when growing children internalized the theory and practice of those economic activities. The final stage was the creation of a product based on the skills learnt but could be modified according to need (Biker Staffe 1977)

The final product is made up of knowledge transmitted wholesale by another person. It is clearly stated in (Kenyatta 1978 p.123) that "it is the side issues becomes an assumption and it is the things that are assumed that are really learnt. Knowledge is related to practical needs and therefore, knowledge is merged into activity and can be recalled when the activity is required.

5.0 Conclusion

In 1992, the director of Canopen Educational Services Foundation realized the great potential of using artistic creations to promote socio – psychological and employable needs of the youth. However owing to the structure of formal education which confines learners to classrooms most of the times it is not easy for the youth to have time to roam and dance in the fields or an urban youth to travel to the rural areas and listen to stories from their grandparents. “Africa can never go back to its pre-colonial starting point but there may be a case of at least a partial retreat, a case for re-establishing contact with familiar landmarks of yester year and then restarting the journey of modernization under indigenous impetus. (Mazrui 1986). Consequently in the Canopen Educational Services Foundation, stories, poems and songs are used for socio-psychological stimulation and direction and also for creation of income generation projects.

A process of reading, reciting, brainstorming and personal reflection on the artistic creation is followed. Individual ideas about self and community issues are stated and expressed in form of a freshly created story, poem or song. The fresh stories are narrated or dramatized, songs sung and poems recited. The parents are invited at the end of each five days session to observe and listen to the artistic creations of their youth. The process also forms a seedbed for generation of ideas for self-employment project creation.

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