

A Vision of the Past and Present; a Case Study for Initiation Schooling among the Lemba in Mberengwa District Zimbabwe

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Received December 10, 2014; Revised February 05, 2015; Accepted February 10, 2015

Abstract This study examines a vision of the past to the present in schooling through the eyes of the Lemba people in Zimbabwe. The authors argue and puncture the myth that there was no schooling before the coming of the whites in colonial Zimbabwe. A Case Study of the Lemba in Mberengwa is used. The focus is on the Lemba initiation schooling for boys. The curriculum included the goals, content, methodology, circumcision and graduation. An historical method is used through interviews and a critical examination of oral literature on colonial schooling to the present. The authors grew up among the Lemba people and are therefore able to bring their own intimate knowledge of Lemba tradition to bear on the study. Their experiences, observations and interaction with the people in Mberengwa is an added advantage in the investigation and analysis of this project. It is hoped that new insights would contribute towards the largely untapped wealth of indigenous knowledge and how these findings could be adapted to Zimbabwean context.

Keywords: *schooling, initiation, Lemba, circumcision*

Cite This Article: Peggy Doris Fungai Siyakwazi, and Ben John Siyakwazi, "A Vision of the Past and Present; a Case Study for Initiation Schooling among the Lemba in Mberengwa District Zimbabwe." *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2015): 220-224. doi: 10.12691/education-3-2-16.

1. Introduction

In this paper, the authors examine and discuss a vision of the past initiation schooling among the Lemba people in Mberengwa District. African people had their own system of schooling. However, the Europeans who came to Africa considered that the blacks were savages, pagans without a history and culture of their own. An historical method through interviews of initiates and analysis of documents is used in the study. It is hoped that the findings would contribute to insights and analysis of new indigenous knowledge.

2. Definition of Terms

In order to contextualize the discussion, Schooling and Initiation need to be briefly defined. Schooling is the process of being formally educated at school. It is therefore a gradual process of acquiring knowledge in every society at various stations in life, having a desire to transmit their knowledge and culture to the next generation. This view is confirmed by Magadzire (2012:239) who states, "Schooling is the act of transmission of knowledge from generation to generation and developing human traits that contribute to economic

output, social stability and the production of new knowledge." Therefore Schooling is an important component of a life-long process of education, teaching youth not only an understanding of an important phenomenon, but also the process of learning.

Wikipedia (2014:1), the free encyclopedia defines the concept initiation as,

"a rite of passage ceremony marking entrance or acceptance into a group or society. It could also be a formal admission to adulthood in a community or one of its formal components. In an extended sense it can also signify a transformation in which the initiate is 'reborn' into a new role".

This Ampim (2003) sees as a movement from one phase to the more mature phase. According to the definition above, initiation is a rite of passage ceremony as a formal admission to adulthood with the climax of circumcision.

3. Background

Before the coming of the white settlers in colonial Zimbabwe, African people had developed their own system of schooling but the view held by many Europeans who came to Africa was that the blacks were savages, pagans without a history and culture to perpetuate. Indeed this is a theory of dehumanization in education. This type

of mistaken belief reflected the ignorance of the European about the African Education System. The basic assumption was that Africans did not have formal schooling. This naive way of looking at African Traditional Education presupposes that there was no social interaction or socialization. In addition, other scholars also tended to assume that since Africans knew neither reading nor writing, they had no content and method to pass on to the young. Contrary to the view that Africans received no education before the coming of the white settlers, one of the scholars shed some light on this issue adding a new dimension. He states that one of the purposes of indigenous education was to fit African youths into their society and to teach them love and respect for their families, ethnic groupings, religious beliefs, and traditions (Sifuna, 1990). This suggests that there was what Datta (1995:2) calls "customary" education. This view was also shared and supported by former Professor of Education, Charles T. Loram of Yale University. As Chairman of the Jeans Conference in Salisbury (now Harare) which was attended by representatives from East Africa, South Africa and United States, he states:

It is of course incorrect to think that Africans received no education before the white man came to Africa. Indeed in some respects indigenous African education given in the mission or government school, was as much as the instruction springs directly from the everyday needs of tribal life and the method is one of doing not listening (Loram, 1935:7).

Loram's description offers some insight into indigenous education before the coming of the white settlers. Even the Advisory Board of Education in Southern Rhodesia (now Harare), had two years earlier stressed the fact that it was unsound to build a system of education unrelated to the background of the African (Siyakwazi, 1983). This paper supports Loram's views and attempts to puncture these myths through a case study of the Lemba initiation schooling for boys in Mberengwa District.

The Lemba Initiation Schools

It is noted that under indigenous African education, there was schooling from birth through adulthood. A case study of the Lemba people in Zimbabwe, demonstrates that there was schooling but no writing was carried out. Knowledge was passed on verbally from generation to generation. In this subsection, the focus is on the curriculum of the Lemba initiation schools. Like a modern school, they had goals/purposes, content of the curriculum, methodology of teaching and provision of graduation at the end of the initiation.

Their goals/purposes are to:

- transmit knowledge skills and cultural values-hard work, kindness, secrecy and character building;
- offer an opportunity of initiation as a ritual for coming of age through circumcision;
- prepare candidates for acquiring knowledge on sexual matters, marriage, religion and family responsibility;
- acquire new names as a symbol of being a new creature;
- assume new status of manhood and responsibility;
- attend initiation schools in the bush;

- endure hunger pain and courage;
- train for leadership and
- award a knife as a symbol of graduation certification. (Siyakwazi, 2012)

4. Content of the Curriculum

Among other things, the curriculum includes the following: Humanistic values- 'Ubuntu' or 'Unhu'; some variety of skills such as hunting, cooking, self-defense, health, sex, healing skills, courtship and marriage, history of the 'Lemba' people including family trees, music and dance, self-reliance within the environment, Lemba choruses, story-telling, sports, particularly running and wrestling, religion, fishing, taboos, secrecy and classified information and how to slaughter an animal. (Personal communication with Mr Muratu at Great Zimbabwe University on 12 May 2013 at 10am)

5. Methodology of Teaching

In the curriculum it is noted that there is no reading or writing in the Initiation schools. The initiates are grouped according to their ages for example adults are taught topics such sex, marriages, courtship separate from young children. The young initiates have separate sessions. However, there are also joint sessions. Teachers called 'Vadambi' are well experienced elders and quite knowledgeable on the Lemba culture and practices. They are role models, counsellors, advisors, historians and teachers for the initiates. Learning is deliberate and incidental. A wide variety of teaching strategies such as: story-telling, the clan's history, memorization, demonstration-use of bow and arrow, observation, learning by doing, essential items such as bows, arrows, spears, wood for curving, sending and receiving messages, and observation. (Siyakwazi, 1983)

The Lemba Initiation Schools

Among some societies such as the Lemba, Venda, Shangani, Xhosa, the Fengu and Zulus, initiation schools are organized initiatory ceremonies (commonly called rite of passage) making the attainment of manhood assume educative significance. The role and process of the initiation schools are brilliantly summed up by Lucas (1972) who states:

The passage to adult status may be observed by rites admitting youths into secret societies and closed occupational groups or by rituals associated with onset of puberty. An initiation rite may be preceded by long probationary period during which candidates are taught to endure hunger, pain, and hardships and are required to demonstrate mastery of skills necessary to adult life. It may not be too far-fetched to draw analogies, as some writers have done between primitive probation and the process of formal schooling in modern society.

The above philosophic statement by Lucas has some common elements with the Lemba initiation schooling that we will discuss.

Organisation of the School

The normal practice with initiation schooling is for the prospective head of the school applies to the District Administrator for a special permission for a site to establish a school in the bush away from the villages. In the case of Mberengwa, the District Administrator grants authority to operate the school, these schools operate in Chief Mposi who is also a Lemba. Recruitment is carried out and there is a registration fee of \$100.00 paid by each participant. The age may range from 6 years old and above. Local people are warned that it is a no-go area during that period between 4-6 weeks. This confirms that the Lembas are a secret and a closed society. Mbiti (1970:158), indicates that "the initiates go through a period of withdrawal from society, absence from home, during which time they receive secret instructions before they are allowed to rejoin their relatives at home."

Circumcision

This is an important exercise of ensuring the Lemba initiation schooling is completed. Experienced traditional Lemba surgeons perform the operation on the initiates. This is a rite of passage symbolizing acceptance into the Lemba society and a formal admission into adulthood. It should be noted that such acceptance comes with certain responsibilities and rights such as slaughtering a goat or a beast.

Graduation

This marks the end of the initiation schooling. It is an occasion for celebration with family members and all graduands will have new names. One impressive and outstanding feature about the new names is that they are purposeful and meaningful. In some cases they originate from family experiences. To illustrate this point, below are a few names:

Kufandada – I die when I want; Mashavakure - searching afar; Mufandaidza – I die after trying; Chikwevanhandira – a bush walker.

This nomenclature signifies and confirms a new status of manhood; and the privilege attached to it and to show the community that one has achieved a new status (interview with Mzezewa 10th of June 2012).

The graduation is very important as evidenced by a great transformation and giving of new names which are always meaningful. Calling the old name is forbidden and where this is violated one pays a fine: such as a beast or a goat. At the graduation, the initiates march and dance and sing ritual songs. Each initiate is given a knife for competency in performing skills and is entitled to carry it like a modern certificate from a college. Relatives and friends shower him with presents and assume a new title (Mudabe) which means a leader.

6. Analysis of the Initiation Schools

Justification of the initiation schools

The overriding consideration governing African indigenous education is security. The ethnic group always struggles to maintain itself against formidable odds such as wars, plagues, floods and ecological upsets. The youths are taught that the curriculum particularly in the initiation schools, that the requisite for survival is in conformity to

the group's norms. This argument is used for justification of teaching secrecy (interview with Mzezewa, 13th of June 2012).

The significance of the initiation schools

The initiation signifies and confirms a new status of manhood and privilege attached to it to show the community that they had achieved new status (Personal interview with Mzezewa, 10th of June 2012). The initiation schools were a major vehicle for preserving cultural heritage and promotion of its continuity. This idea confirms R.S. Peters' thesis that views education as initiation of the youth into their culture.

Chinyoka (Personal interview, 6 June 2012) says the significance of initiation schools is that they foster opportunities to create and explore ways of dealing with social issues. The schools serve the interest of the Lemba people to mould the youth to a predetermined pattern and to ensure that the social fabric is kept intact. However, an analysis by the authors of the Lemba culture shows that it is affected by intermarriage with non Lemba people and challenges of migration. Their culture encourages conformity to the Lemba cultural practice such as marriage within the Lemba ethnic group.

Lucas (1972:17) makes an analysis of initiation schools. He states;

The fundamental purpose of these schools is to fit the youth into society and through their efforts, youngsters are trained to co-operate in an industrial bureaucratic society. Indeed it is a hard task bringing people into line, showing them that, what constitutes acceptable behaviour and how to serve society's needs.

Therefore, the school must succeed in its functions. Early schooling is crucial because it represents the child's first contact with institutional life. The individual must conform to its requirements. A society is impossible unless its members cooperate and work together, share beliefs, and customs are social glue that keep a culture from disintegrating as a society.

An analysis of the Lemba Initiation Schooling reflects the following:

- The youth spend from three (3) weeks to three (3) months or more of temporary settlement at an initiation school under the guidance of an experienced teacher who is schooled in the Lemba Traditional Culture. The youth is being initiated and accepted into the tribe. A new name is given and this symbolizes that the youth reached a certain stage of development, and is now accepted as an adult (telephonic interview with Dr Mashingaidze, 20th of January 2013).
- The school has goals, content of the curriculum, knowledge, methodology; followed by circumcision and graduation.
- The education received has both the content and a method. The content of the curriculum is 'knowledge' and what is worthwhile (values). Under this situation the method allows the learner to understand what is being taught. This is confirmed by Schofield (1972:40).
- The learner goes through the curriculum, is initiated into the education of the Lemba Culture, that means he is committed to specific situations of the curriculum into a wide variety of skills such as hunting, fishing, counting, slaughtering a beast,

cultural history, sex education, marriage, secrecy and good human relations. The significance of this process is the transmission of the knowledge to the Lemba youth.

- Knowledge and skills were acquired through socialization in the family and community by celebrating occasions and rituals.
- Recent research shows that some African education had formal planned programmes and good examples are Lemba and Shangani initiation schools.

Criteria for evaluation of the Lemba Initiation School as offering formal education not non-formal

The old school of thought classifies the Lemba Schooling as non-formal education. The authors reject this approach since these schools are well organized with clear goals, curriculum content (knowledge) method for implementation by special Lemba traditional teachers. Critics who do not give recognition to these as formal schools are invited to evaluate them using Professor R.S Peters' three criteria which he puts forward for the concept 'education'. He states:

- Education implies the transmission of what is worthwhile to those who become committed to it.
- Education must involve knowledge and understanding and some sort of 'cognitive perspective' which is not inert
- Education at least rules out some procedures of transmission on the grounds that they lack willingness and voluntariness on the part of the learner. (Schofield 1972:36)

The above criteria seems relevant in assessing and determining whether these initiation schools pass the test as recognizable formal initiation schools. In conclusion these schools are viable institutions. This punctures the myth that there was no schooling in pre-colonial Zimbabwe.

Characteristics of indigenous African education in teaching and learning approaches reflected in the case study

- Adults pass on to the young their knowledge, skills and belief.
- Learning by doing.
- Emphasis is placed on how to cope with the environment such as hunting and collection of wild fruits.
- The nature of learning is mostly incidental and deliberate learning such as tilling the land.
- Learning in most cases is unplanned and children learnt directly from nature and culture. Some of the examples are the ability of identifying names of animals
- The adults served as role models for promoting skills and values such as dancing and singing.
- Knowledge and skills were acquired through socialization in the family, community; and celebrating occasions and rituals.
- There was a conscious division between teachers and learners with specific roles.
- Initiation schools have a curriculum which includes: history, hunting, health and sex education, cooking, marriage, religion, story-

telling, family and community roles and responsibilities and social behaviours.

- A major characteristic of the nature of schooling is structured in such a way that initiates are ritually introduced to the art of communal living. This is a period of withdrawal in the forest for many weeks.
- Going through this initiation curriculum, this meant 'coming of age' with some specific roles.
- The type of education has a cultural significance of being inducted into manhood. And at the end a graduation and initiates were given new names. (Siyakwazi and Chinooneka, 2012).

The above characteristics of indigenous education should be a guiding star in teaching and learning about the environment. These characteristics could be reflected in the following curriculum issues in: stating curriculum goals or outcomes; setting out curriculum content; working out teaching and learning strategies or approaches; promoting and designing of learning materials; and strengthening integration of knowledge.

7. Conclusion

The history of educational thought tells us that one of the major functions of education in a society is the transmission of culture and the preparation of young people to fit certain roles in society, states the All African Conference of Churches (1975:1). In our analysis, it is important to note that Lemba schooling is formal, aiming at inculcating in the youth, values of hospitality, bravery, dignity of labour, respect for elders and communalism as opposed to individualism. One of the criticisms of colonial education is that its planners failed to harmonize these values and this failure resulted in cultural conflict. It is significant to recognize that the essential aim of indigenous education seeks to produce an unselfish youth whose group interests are above personal interest. In the times ahead in Zimbabwe, we will undoubtedly make great strides by harmonizing both the new technology and the indigenous cultural heritage. Such a symbiosis could be realized through a broad – based curriculum that seriously takes into account positive aspects of indigenous education that is reflected in the Lemba schooling as well as contemporary needs and aspiration of the people.

Among other things, the findings of this study clearly shows that in pre-colonial times, there was schooling as evidenced by the Lemba initiation schools. These schools have instructors for learners with goals to be achieved in the curriculum that reflect oral content but, there is no writing or reading. Most of the instruction in the curriculum is mostly verbalized and the youth learnt through memorization. Finally the greatest challenge of researchers on indigenous education is to vigorously carry out developmental research work. The current education should be critically reviewed and inject new knowledge and insights from the Lemba schooling to include secrecy, confidentiality education, moral education, sex education at appropriate levels as part of our cultural heritage and characteristics of indigenous African education. These aspects have a possibility of promoting diversity in both vertical articulation and horizontal articulation in curriculum design and implementation. In this way, future

research investigations could further enlighten and deepen our understanding on indigenous knowledge. Finally Lemba initiation schools are a living history because they are contributing to African indigenous knowledge and society at large.

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