Tradition and Educational Reconstruction in Africa in postcolonial and global times: The case for Sierra Leone

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Author: Yatta Kanu
Associate Professor
Department of Curriculum, Teaching & Learning
Faculty of Education
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2
Canada

Email: kanuy@ms.umanitoba.ca

Yatta Kanu is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada. Her recent scholarly work focuses on curriculum, culture and student learning, and education in postcolonial contexts.

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Abstract

Critique of colonial and postcolonial education in Africa as perpetuating cultural and intellectual servitude and devaluation of traditional African cultures has led some African intellectuals to call for a re-appropriation of pre-colonial forms of education to rediscover the roots of African identity. But precisely how can African traditional forms of education be re-appropriated for this purpose while at the same time responding to the requirements of living successfully in postcolonial and global times? The author of this article posits that re-appropriation of African traditions should not be an appeal to an allegedly "better" past to which we nostalgically return instead of responding to the world as it comes to us. Tradition, it is argued, exists only in constant alteration; tradition can be rethought, transmuted, and recreated in novel ways in response to the meanings and demands of emergent situations. Drawing on the Akan concept of Sankofa (meaning "return to the past to move forward") and the postcolonial notion of hybridity, the author creatively re-appropriates some indigenous educational traditions of her tribe, the Mende of Sierra Leone, to theorize curriculum and pedagogy for Sierra Leone in postcolonial, post-war, and global times.

Introduction

Since the decade of independence in the 1960s, much has been written about how best to facilitate nation-building in Africa after European colonization. As education is generally regarded as the key to national development, proposals for nation building have included the reform of inherited educational systems which were erected to maintain the colonial social order and which continue to function to foster neo-colonial dependency, promote elitism, and inadequately prepare individuals for living successfully in their communities and in a rapidly changing world. Paramount among these reform proposals has been the call to re-appropriate African indigenous educational traditions that were marginalized or dismantled during colonial rule in Africa. Proponents of this call over the last forty years have included Kofi Busia who criticized colonial schooling in Ghana for separating students from the life and needs of their community, Ali Mazrui who links contemporary education in Africa with a rural-urban divide,

and more recently Elleni Tedla and Apollo Rhomire [1] who describe both colonial and postcolonial education as perpetuating cultural and intellectual servitude and the devaluation of traditional African cultures. But precisely how can African traditions be re-appropriated for education that is grounded in the continent's past while at the same time meeting the demands of living successfully in postcolonial and global contexts today?

In this article I attempt to address this question in the case of Sierra Leone. I draw creatively on the Akan concept of Sankofa (meaning "return to the past to move forward") and examples from the Mende ethnic group to re-think and re-appropriate some traditional African educational values and social organizations that were neglected or dismantled during the height of British colonial administration in Sierra Leone. This period is generally understood as spanning the late nineteenth century until the late 1950s when, for reasons of military and economic exploitation, British imperial grip on her African colonies tightened and education (curriculum and pedagogy) assumed greater significance as an arsenal in this exploitation. Sierra Leone and the Mende are the very country and ethnic group that comprised the cornerstone of British educational experimentation in Africa.

Sierra Leone was founded as a settlement for freed slaves in 1787 after the demise of legal slave trading. It was taken over as a British crown colony in 1808 but British control did not extend into the hinterland of the country until the closing years of the nineteenth century when a Protectorate was declared in Sierra Leone in 1896. Thereafter formal education, which had been left largely to Christian mission societies, was taken over by the colonial civil government and used as a systematic and measurable tool for economic exploitation, reduction of native resistance to white rule, transformation of native outlook, and meeting the limited needs of the colonial civil service. Unlike French colonial education in West Africa, total assimilation of the

African natives does not stand out in the historical literature as an active goal of British colonial education in West Africa.[2] However, British effort to transform native outlook through "the provision of gradual means of developing a higher form of civilization" [3], meant that many indigenous forms of education in the West African colonies were dismantled or allowed to lapse through neglect and marginalization. This was the case among the Mende who comprised the largest indigenous group in Sierra Leone. According to Caroline Bledsoe, at the time, the proximity of Mende speakers to the coast as well as their distance from the Islamic influences of the North made them logical targets of educational and missioning efforts.[4] Bledsoe writes that these efforts sometimes involved the physical removal of Mende children from their families and placing them in boarding schools to increase geographical access to school but also to decrease the 'contaminating' influence of parents and elders on the children. Education, whether for the 'altruistic purposes' of the missionaries or the naked exploitative strategies of the colonial administration, was used to engineer the production of the minds and souls upon which to erect a new society in Sierra Leone. In the process, Mende indigenous educational traditions were rendered meaningless.

Sierra Leone gained political independence in 1961 after one hundred and fifty years of British rule. Historical research by Donald Stark[2] reveals that politically the country inherited a divided population mainly because colonial strategies such as 'indirect rule' through local chiefs and pitting the Creole freed slave communities against indigenous ethnic groups accentuated differences among the various ethnic groups, making it difficult for the people to see themselves as Sierra Leoneans first and foremost. The economy was poor and undeveloped as colonial economic efforts had concentrated mainly on the extraction and exportation of Sierra Leone's raw materials for the benefit of British companies. Colonial social programs such as education

(schooling) had been made available to only one-third of the population even though Sierra Leone had a proud history of higher education in Fourah Bay College which had been founded by the Church Missionary Society in 1827 as the only degree granting college in British governed West Africa. In the forty-five years since independence Sierra Leone has suffered from political instability, economic stagnation, and social upheaval, leading to much borrowing of money from international financial institutions to survive. In return these institutions have imposed their own economic conditions which successive governments in Sierra Leone have had to fulfill in order to secure the financial loans.

In this environment a brutal civil war developed in Sierra Leone in 1991 and lasted eleven years, killing an estimated 75,000 Sierra Leoneans, injuring well over 200,000 people, and forcing half a million others to flee to other countries as refugees. This war formally ended in 2002 and since then, the country has experienced an influx of foreign agencies and organizations with ideas about educational reconstruction in post-war situations. Concurrently, there is much talk among the international financial community about how low-income countries like Sierra Leone can tap the gains of globalization by investing in their human capital through educational reconstruction. Discourses about educational renewal not only in Sierra Leone but in post-independence Africa as a whole have recently rekindled the argument among African intellectuals that for education to be meaningful in Africa today, it has to be based in the wisdom, teachings and traditions of the continent's ancestors, particularly in light of the irrelevance of colonial education to the lives and needs of Africans.[5] It is in this context that I attempt to creatively re-appropriate some Mende indigenous educational traditions, in the spirit of Sankofa, to theorize curriculum and pedagogy that realistically respond to the ambiguous cultural contexts that characterize postcolonial, post-war, and global times in Sierra Leone.

Before doing so, however, I provide some note guides to help the reader to understand some of the terms that undergird my discussions in the paper. After that, I briefly describe the concept of Sankofa, positioning it as a critical lens for examining the present and for recovering tradition creatively.

Definition of terms

Colonial: This term is used here in reference to colonialism defined as both the physical conquest and control of African territories by the Europeans, and as the domination and control of the minds of those conquered. From the perspective of the colonizer, the colonial imperative is to 'civilize' the conquered and keep them in a perpetual state of psychological subordination. In other words, although the physical occupation and control of territories may end, the processes of colonial cultural production and psychologization persist.

Postcolonial: 'Postcolonial' is conceived here in reference to three conditions: as the period after independence which marked the physical departure of the European powers from their former African colonies; as the political and cultural movement which seeks to challenge the received histories and ideologies of former colonial nations to allow insurgent knowledge to emerge;[6] and as a position that calls for a major rethinking of pre-given categories, histories, and traditions in order to be able to live successfully within the cultural ambiguity that characterizes many African societies in the wake of European colonization.

Identity: Historically, this construct has direct connections with how individuals think of themselves and others. The concept has its roots in the nineteenth century conception of the human being as a unified individual whose 'centre' consisted of an inner core that remained the same throughout that individual's existence. The essential centre of the self, in this equation, was the person's identity.[7] In postmodern analysis, however, identity is not as fixed, unified or

centred as nineteenth century rationalists had conceived of it. In the postmodern sense, identity is continually being made and remade, just as cultures are, and individuals may see themselves in a variety of ways that are not always consistent.[8] Also inherent in the concept is a view of the past and how the past shapes us, a feature that has direct relevance for postcolonial analysis. This postmodern orientation to identity is what undergirds my discussions in this paper.

Hybridity: Technically, a hybrid is a cross between two different species.[9] The term is used here as a postcolonial construct to describe the cultural mixtures and multi-layered forms of interactions between the civilizations of the colonized and those of the colonizers. The political and intellectual cross-fertilization entailed in the logic of this mixture embody multiple power relations which make possible the subversion of colonial authority. Homi Bhabha[10] argues that, as a critical element in research relating to the postcolonial condition, hybridity reserves the effects of colonial disavowal so that denied knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and undermine the authority of that discourse. Bhabha posits hybrid or multilayered identities as a characteristic of the postcolonial and global condition.

Indigenous education: This term refers to locally developed forms of teaching the young, based on the traditions and values of African natives.

Global times: Used here in reference to globalization, this term refers to the current global/world conditions which are characterized by: changes in the capital and finance markets; the global expansion of new technologies; the rapid movements of people across national and international borders; and the transfer of cultural and other values /ideologies /products, especially of western origin. In global times, phenomena are no longer territorial, geographic or national—a condition that has produced local forms of resistance but also an increased sense of belonging together as humans to one common globe. Globalization has produced modes of economic restructuring (by

supranational organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, and WTO) involving budget reductions affecting social services. It has led to the reduction of state sponsorship and financing of education while at the same time imposing business management and efficiency standards as a framework for making decisions about curriculum, teaching, testing, and teacher training. In the former African colonies, these global times suggest that the growing importance of the knowledge economy in the re-alignment of global capital portends educational changes for the economic and sociocultural survival of these countries.

Sankofa: "Returning to the past to move forward"

The Sankofa concept is derived from the Akan people who make up one of the largest cultural/ethnic groups inhabiting Ghana and the Ivory Coast. The literal translation of the term means "retrieving the past is no taboo, thus say the ancestors". The Akan have an ancient and rich cultural tradition that includes the extensive use of pictographic symbols as a writing system, with each symbol representing a specific proverb or saying rooted in Akan experience. One of the commonest Akan symbols for Sankofa depicts a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backward. There is an egg in the mouth of the bird, depicting the "gem" or knowledge of the past upon which wisdom is based and from which generations would benefit. This symbol is often associated with the Akan proverb "Se wo were fin a wosankofa a yenyi" which translates to "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten".[11]

Sankofa teaches that we must go back to our roots in order to move forward—that is, we should reach back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us, so that we can achieve our full potential as we move forward. As a measure of time, Sankofa looks at history as a circular process (rather than the linear construct of time prevalent in Western culture) where we think of

the past not as events frozen in time, but rather as occurrences that are at one with the present and the future.[12] Sankofa implies that to initiate a progressive civil social existence, one that preserves our humanity, we would have to reach back into the past for the wisdom of our ancestors, the best of our traditions, and renew and refine these traditions for new meanings that are relevant for the present.[13]

Such an appeal to tradition is itself controversial in our world today where the charge is that tradition is disappearing, that "it is simply no longer able to provide the thread needed to keep the fabric of social life from unraveling"[14], and that its demise should be seen as an opportunity for newness, creativity, and modes of individualism hitherto impossible or unimaginable. Karl Marx, in the Eighteenth Brumaire, dramatically expressed this revolutionary attitude toward tradition:

> The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living…The social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required world-historical recollections in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.[15]

My position is that this is not a productive way of thinking about tradition. There certainly are dangers inherent in retreating to an allegedly "better" past rather than creatively responding to the world as it comes to us. However, it would be foolish indeed to ignore whole realms of experiences and meanings that have been nourished for generations, and on which we can draw for insights about nourishing our own lives. I, therefore, argue for a return to tradition; more specifically, I call for a return to what was deemed and still is deemed to be valuable in

indigenous African education that can inform educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone today. These indigenous practices are among what David Gross[16] calls "substantive traditions"—that is, those long-standing modes of thought or practices that for centuries have organized social and cultural life. In proposing a re-appropriation of tradition, however, I do not mean a restoration of an earlier set of norms, or a 'heimisch' (home) to which we nostalgically return, as articulated by traditionalists. Rather, I propose a re-appropriation of tradition to bring these traditions forward in a manner that disturbs and challenges some of the complacencies of present-day curricular and pedagogical conceptions and practices. Sankofa, in this sense, is embraced not as some nostalgic return to earlier traditions but for the "creatively disruptive effects"[17] of these traditions, disruptive because they call into question some of the norms that have shaped formal and informal education in Sierra Leone. In formal education these norms include the application of business management standards to education, the schism between theory and practice, and the erosion of the life-world of Sierra Leoneans from curriculum and pedagogy. Informally, they include indigenous practices such as teaching the young to defer to authority unquestioningly.

How can tradition be recovered for these critical and creative purposes? To answer this question, I present, in the next section, a brief discussion of tradition and the possible attitudes one might adopt in rethinking tradition. My discussion draws on the ideas of two leading thinkers on tradition as a form of postmodern / postcolonial critique—David Gross and Brian Fay.

Framing tradition, rethinking tradition

Tradition is an existing set of beliefs, practices, teachings, and modes of thinking that are inherited from the past and that may guide, organize, and regulate ways of living and of making sense of the world. The term comes from the Latin verb *tradere*, meaning to transmit or to give

over; the noun *traditio* indicates the process by which something is transmitted or handed down. Gross depicts the central responsibility involved in *traditio* as receiving something valuable or precious, preserving it, and passing it on to those who come after. Tradition, however, is not merely preserved and passed down intact to subsequent generations. As traditions are handed down consecutively over time, they undergo changes because the relations that encompass a receiving generation are never exactly the same as those of the transmitting generation. Gross writes:

> As social and cultural changes occur, so do ways of confronting and organizing experience. And as experiences change, so do modes of perception, including perceptions of what a tradition is and means. When needs and perceptions shift, no matter how slightly, the inherited traditions cannot help but be apprehended and assimilated differently. Hence, no tradition is ever taken over precisely as it was given, or passed on precisely as it was received. Rather it is always adapted to a situation.[18]

In the past tradition provided the cohesion that held social life together, and by indicating what was culturally normative, tradition established a framework for meaning and purpose. As human beings, we are embedded in our cultural traditions. Therefore tradition cannot be treated as something purely external which can be simply accepted or rejected on the basis of rational analysis; neither can it be treated as something which is wholly Other, "as if one could continue to be a person even if it (tradition) were entirely rejected".[19] This suggests that the relationship between personal identity and tradition is far more intimate than implied in Karl Marx's previously quoted statement. People understand and construct their identities in terms of the traditions that are a part of them and, as Fay illuminates, "coming to be a person is in fact appropriating certain material of one's cultural tradition, and continuing to be a person…means

working through, developing, and extending this material and this always involves operating in terms of it [tradition]".[20] An appreciation of the importance of tradition in shaping identity enhances our understanding of how tradition imposes limits on the change that is possible in a society. No matter how revolutionary the change, some continuity will remain in the form of certain modes of thinking, perceiving, relating; certain habitual ways of behaviour will survive as important ingredients in the identities of the people "who are what they are because they so deeply share them".[21]

All earlier traditions exist in three forms today. First there are traditions that have been neglected or dismantled as active processes but continue on as fragments of value or behaviours in the periphery of their original contexts. Second, there are traditions that persist at the centre of social life, but at the cost of being rationalized by the state or commercialized by the market. Third, there are traditions that endure more or less intact, but primarily on the margins of society and within a greatly diminished sphere of influence.[22]

Of the three forms in which traditions currently find themselves, my concern is with the first, that is, those social and cultural traditions that British colonial administration neglected or dismantled as part of the educational processes of African children, but which continued on the margins as valuable fragments of indigenous child-rearing practices. In rethinking traditions such as these, one could: (a) bury lapsed or dismantled traditions and move on to opportunities for newness and creativity; (b) reject present realities and engage in a coercive restoration of lapsed traditions under the assumption that they were better or morally healthier than the world we now have (traditionalism), or (c) bring back lapsed traditions into the modern world, not to escape into them, but to reclaim them as an opportunity for understanding and rethinking the present.[23]

For my purpose here, the last attitude and relation to tradition is the most compelling because it salvages outmoded traditions that can contribute significantly to solving contemporary problems. Precisely because they were neglected or marginalized under colonial rule, our sense of connectedness to them has lapsed and so they represent something other than what they represented to preceding generations. They now embody something strange or Other—the *unheimisch* that disturbs our present-day sensibilities and raises doubts about some of our hitherto protected illusions. Rethinking lapsed traditions in this way not only makes possible a better understanding of the present, but "it also lays the groundwork for something just as important, namely, a critique of modernity from outside".[24] Through this critical leverage, tradition ceases to be an obstacle to progress and becomes a way forward.

The next section, therefore, describes three traditions of indigenous education among the Mende people of Sierra Leone that were neglected, marginalized or dismantled in British colonial education. I juxtapose these traditions with education during and after colonization so that through their 'strangeness' they raise questions about British colonial education and its legacies in Sierra Leone and thus provide us with a better understanding of current educational practices in this former British colony.

Mende Indigenous education versus education during and after colonization

Indigenous approaches to education among the Mende emerged from indigenous knowledge systems based on understandings of the physical, social, and spiritual environments. These approaches were grounded in norms, values, and traditions developed over several generations and they are characterized by many features. Here I focus on three features that did not become part of the processes of formal education during British colonial administration in Sierra Leone

but which survived as fragments of informal education, especially in Mende rural communities. These features are**:** (1) Interwoven curriculum; (2) communalism; and (3) multi-layered understanding transmitted through stories and proverbs.

Interwoven curriculum: Mende indigenous education was for an immediate introduction into society and preparation for adulthood. It was largely informal and emphasized job orientation, social responsibility, spiritual and moral values, and community participation. These aims were interwoven with the content and learning processes which were derived from the needs / purposes of the society and its patterns of work. Education was, therefore, relevant and closely linked with productive activity. There was no division between manual and intellectual education or between theory and practice; learning occurred in social settings as lived rather than through formal school programs. In teaching farming to the young, for example, the Mende did not provide their children with elaborate theoretical discussions for later application. Instead, from an early age, children simply accompanied adults to the farms where they participated by observing and emulating what adults did. From about age six, children could be seen with tiny blunt utensils digging the soil, planting seeds, chasing birds away from crops, and harvesting. Over the years, they acquired necessary knowledge about the land, the soil, different seasonal crops, and trees that were imbued with spirits and therefore not cuttable. From years of observing and emulating their mothers and other significant adults, Mende girls learned how to take care of their families and how to balance household chores with the chores of farming.

There were aspects of pre-colonial Mende education which could be described as 'formal' because there was a specific program and a conscious division between teachers and learners. Two examples of this kind of 'formal' education were the apprenticeship system and the education provided by the 'poro and 'sande' secret societies. In the apprenticeship system youth

(usually boys) from an early age would be assigned for years to experts to learn vocational skills such as craftsmanship, artistry, weaving and blacksmithing. The 'poro' and 'sande' secret societies carried out the initiation or 'coming-of-age' education of Mende boys and girls respectively. In the 'sacred bushes' of these societies, boys and girls were not only circumcised but also underwent trials of endurance, received information on tribal and sexual customs and learned the secrets of masked figures like the 'sowei' and the 'gbeni'. The duration of this coming-of-age education ranged from a few weeks to several years and, like informal education, it was directly connected with the needs and purposes of the community. Because it was for entering adulthood, the work and ways of adults provided the material for this education.

How 'formal' and informal educational knowledge was perceived by its teachers/proprietors (known as 'karmohs') and received by learners was equally important, making the pedagogical relationship highly significant in Mende culture. Knowledge was not seen as having intrinsic value (for elevating humanity) independent of social relations between the learner and the teacher. Rather, the Mende saw valued knowledge as a key economic and political commodity 'owned' by the 'karmohs' who controlled access to it through rituals based on secrecy and who could demand compensation for imparting it to those who benefited from it.[25] Compensation normally occurred through years of service, deference, and loyalty to the 'karmohs' by the learners who held the firm spiritual belief that by rendering these services and dispositions, they were 'buying (earning) blessings' from the 'karmohs'. In return, the karmohs, parents or elders who imparted this knowledge would ask God, through the ancestors, to pour His blessings on the learners in acknowledgement that they had fulfilled their obligations. Acquired knowledge that was unaccompanied by ancestral or earned blessings was believed not to benefit (elevate) the person acquiring it. Thus the Mende placed education within "local and authority structures of

obligation and mystical agency"[26], a cultural framework still used by illiterates and the educated alike to reinterpret and subvert the meaning of the schooling and social relationships imposed by colonial and missionary education. For example, one often hears comments such as "You can have all the degrees in the world but if you do not have blessings, that education will lead you nowhere (in terms of prosperity, honour or elevation)".

The foregoing examples of the interwoven nature of Mende indigenous education demonstrate clearly that the impartation of abstract knowledge that was divorced from the needs, values and spiritual beliefs of the society was not part of pre-colonial education among the Mende. The Mende did not believe that people first had to develop theoretical understanding of things and events and then apply this knowledge to concrete situations. Rather, understanding was conditioned and constituted by reflection upon how to act wisely in concrete situations. Hans-Georg Gadamer's [27] argument for an inextricable connection of the theoretical and practical in all understanding held true in the Mende philosophy of education. Any theory emerging from such a system was grounded in practice; knowledge was practice-based and deeply linked with the spiritual beliefs of the people.

Unfortunately, school curriculum during British colonial administration in Sierra Leone was far removed from this indigenous view of education. The early founders' motives for establishing education in the Freetown colony (as the original British colony in Sierra Leone was known) may have been 'altruistic' (they saw education as a key to the enlightenment and social and economic improvements of the freed slaves); however, by the time schooling became specifically targeted for the indigenous population of Sierra Leone, it had become a means of economic and political exploitation. Short-term and exploitative, the purpose of the British colonial school system from the late nineteenth century was instrumental—to train a small

number of Africans to 'man' the local administration at the lowest ranks and to staff the few British capitalist firms in Sierra Leone. Curriculum content and the teaching methods employed in the schools were intended to achieve these limited instrumental purposes. Curriculum knowledge was intended to 'civilize' the natives and 'civilized knowledge' comprised practical skills like agriculture and crafts for the boys delivered in government trade schools. There were elite schools such as Bo Government Secondary School for Boys and Harford School for Girls, fashioned after English public schools for cultured ladies and gentlemen, where boys studied European history, science, literature and the arts and girls studied handwork and homemaking. Curriculum was therefore alien, abstract and divorced from the needs and values of Mende rural communities and transmitted through didactic teaching and assessment methods that ensured its digestion without reflection, challenge, or questions. The colonial intent was for 'civilized knowledge' to be ingested in its purest form, unmediated by local influences, and passed on intact to subsequent generations. As 'civilized knowledge' was seen as objective with intrinsic values for elevating and developing humanity independent of social contexts and social relationships, the teacher was merely a conduit for delivering the curriculum for the greater good of colonial designs.[28]

Since independence, education in Sierra Leone has been characterized by the same instrumental, technical, and human capital approach prevalent in the Western European countries that have funded educational activities in the country. Human capital theory rests on the assumption that formal education is highly instrumental in improving the productive capacity of a population. In the current contexts of economic globalization, this view has had tremendous influence on, and indeed determined, education policies not only in Western countries but also in many former colonies where funding agencies and organizations such as the World Bank, IMF,

and OECD (sometimes referred to as 'the new colonizers') have introduced and demanded the implementation of economic structural adjustment policies (for example, the introduction of user fees) which stifle indigenous African responses to educational crises.[29] The belief in human capital theory as a key agent for the development of a society has produced an explosion in educational enrolments and expenditures in both the industrialized and the developing countries. In Sierra Leone, this expansion has been accompanied by increasing demands (by the funding agencies) for state interventions in education through bureaucratized and controlled curricular practices within which education is planned, implemented, and evaluated education in ways that are similar to the values of business culture. This has led to widespread acceptance of the technical model of education which frames curriculum and teaching questions in terms of technical management focusing around pre-specified objectives, identification and organization of learning experiences to obtain the objectives, and the most effective means of evaluating the achievement of the objectives. The model lends itself well to the bureaucratic management of education where the aim is to fragment, control, measure, and rationalize education so that the best economic dividends are reaped from educational investments. It is a marked contrast from the interwoven approach of indigenous education where aims, content, and methodology are all merged and grounded in the socio-cultural values and needs of the people, making education effective and meaningful for the society.

Communalism in Mende social thought and practice: Ghanaian social philosopher, Kwame Gyekye,[30] describes communalism as the doctrine that the group (society) constitutes the main focus of the lives of individual members of that group and that an individual's involvement in the interests, aspirations, and welfare of the group is the measure of that individual's worth. The doctrine of communalism emphasizes the activity and success of the wider society rather than,

although not necessarily at the expense of, the individual. Implicit in communalism is the view that the success and meaning of the individual's life depend on identifying with the group. This identification is the basis of the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the group:

> It (identification) is also the ground of the overriding emphasis on the individual's obligation to the members of the group; it enjoins upon him or her the obligation to think and act in terms of the survival of the group as a whole….Since this sense of obligation (responsibility) is enjoined equally upon each member of the group—for all the members are expected to enhance the welfare of the group as a whole—communalism maximizes the interests of all the individual members of society.[31]

Communalism as a social philosophy was given institutional expression in the social structures of many rural African societies. Because it was participatory and characterized by social and ethical values such as solidarity, interdependence, cooperation, and reciprocal obligations, the material and other benefits of the communal social order were likely to be available to all members of the community. Furthermore, its intricate web of social relations would tend to ensure individual social worth, thus making it almost impossible for an individual to feel socially insignificant.[32]

Communalism, demonstrated by a strong sense of solidarity with the community and willingness to live and work together, was an active component and objective of indigenous education among the Mende in rural Sierra Leone. This component and objective were instilled into the young from a very early age, and certain activities were undertaken to encourage and nurture them. For example, youngsters between the ages of ten and sixteen were divided into groups known as "age grades", and from time to time, they would be required to perform specific tasks to contribute to community effort and progress. Thus in a village community, for example,

all young men belonging to the sixteen year "age grade" might be assigned the task of building a wooden bridge for community use, or helping a community member with the harvesting of his or her crops. Such assignments were carried out under the supervision of adults and performed with great enthusiasm, accompanied by community work songs rather than by competitiveness and selfishness. Individual success or misfortune was seen as community success or misfortune. For the rural Mende there was no life without the community. Recent research[33] has pointed out that the communal or collective approach has a long pedigree on the African sub-continent and has provided the cultural basis for indigenous self-help movements such as 'harambe' in Kenya and 'tirisano' which is currently being used by the government of South Africa for educational reconstruction.

This communal social structure was, however, weakened considerably by massively-changing population patterns during British colonial rule in Sierra Leone. British infiltration into the country's hinterland and World Wars I and II in which many Sierra Leoneans participated as British subjects were accompanied by massive migrations of the young from the rural areas of the country to the main trading and population centres such as Freetown on the coast where the wars in particular had created a sudden market for unskilled labour. Migrants were drawn to the high-wage public works which war necessarily required, including armaments, modern port facilities, communication structures and civil defence projects. The equally sudden completion of these projects left large numbers of unemployed labourers in the towns.[34] To survive as town dwellers, the migrants had to abandon their rural outlook and develop different skills such as literacy, commercial and professional skills. In the process, they were forced to rely on individual talents rather than the team work involved in rural life. Much more widespread was the new understanding, based on capitalist individualism, that individual labour should benefit

the person concerned and not some wider collective such as the clan or the community.[35] Geography and the new culture of city life, therefore, set young migrants apart from the rural community practices in which they had been brought up.[36] This colonial legacy of individualistic values has continued on in Sierra Leone after independence. In schooling, for example, the individualistic value of distinguishing oneself from others and claiming one's autonomy to affirm one's basic originality has produced classroom arrangements, teaching / learning processes, and assessment strategies that have left students with the belief that their originality and full potential can only be developed through the rejection of communal values such as interdependence, cooperation, and social responsibility.

African indigenous modes of communication: Stories/folktales/myths/legends and proverbs were four primary ways through which a great deal of African values, philosophical thought, knowledge and wisdom were taught.[37] Preliterate African culture was characterized by an oral tradition that found expression in stories, folktales, proverbs and parables that provoked a great deal of reflection and promoted cognitive growth among the young. As there were no written records of the ancient past of the Mende people, all that has been preserved of their knowledge, myths, philosophies, liturgies, songs, and wisdom was handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. These oral media preserved, more or less accurately, the history of the people, their general outlook on life, and their conduct and moral values, and they were used in Mende rural communities as forms of indigenous knowledge which played an important role in the education of the young. For example, adults would gather youngsters around a fire at night and tell them myths and legends that not only captured the tribal past but also passed on political and cultural information that helped the youngsters to relate precedents to the present and grasp the prevailing ethical standards of their tribe. Stories that personified animal characters were

often told, and these stories, while explaining the peculiar trait of each animal, also transmitted the virtues valued by the society. For example, stories about "kasiloi" (the spider), always taught youngsters about the unwanted consequences of traits such as greed, egotism, disobedience, or cunning. Typically, a spider story would begin with a question such as "Do you know why the spider has such a slender waist?" The question would then be answered by an instructional story such as the following:

> Spider was invited to two feasts in two villages at the same time. Not wanting to miss either feast, Spider tied a rope around his waist and gave each end of the rope to each village. He instructed each village to pull the rope precisely when the feast began. The harder Spider was pulled in each direction, the smaller his waist became. He screamed and screamed in pain till his neighbour heard his cries and came and untied the rope. Through greed, therefore, Spider lost the feast in each village and never regained his waistline.

The narration of these stories was interspersed with frequent bouts of songs that kept the listeners engaged, interested, and involved in the narration process.

Proverbs are particularly useful as powerful tools that teach without being intrusive. A great deal of African traditional wisdom and folklore is expressed through proverbs which have the ability to reveal the characteristics and qualities of situations, times, and persons in a way that is hard to capture in clear language or in a direct manner. In addition to stories, therefore, proverbs were used in Mende indigenous education to teach moral values and appropriate behaviours without directly and overtly moralizing and criticizing an individual. Many of these proverbs survived in the lyrics of Mende songs; others can still be seen painted on buses and trucks across the country, for example (translated from Mende): 'No pain no gain'; 'Don't look

where you fell, look where you tripped'; 'Nobody knows from which direction the wind will blow to bend the chicken's ear' (meaning: it's not always possible to predict the sources of one's good or bad fortune).

Proverbs act as metaphors to guide moral choice and self-examination because, when reflected upon, they act as mirrors for seeing things in a particular way. More than any theoretical discussion or philosophical writing, proverbs throw light on the concrete reality of lived experience; they serve as important pedagogical devices because they provide experiential case material on which pedagogical reflection is possible.[38] As learners break into (analyze) the proverbs or stories they are able to reflect on the meanings and implications embedded in the experiences. Indigenous Mende educators therefore used proverbs and stories as teaching devices to promote and measure cognitive development and provoke reflection that helped learners derive meanings which informed and guided conduct and behaviour. Furthermore, these pedagogical methods brought the learners and the community together and promoted intergenerational communication because the elders, as the sources of the stories, songs, and proverbs and as experts in oratory, were charged with the responsibility of teaching them to the young.

Unfortunately, these powerful traditional teaching and learning tools in African education have been eroded by formal schooling, despite the fact that their usefulness as sources of African wisdom and cultural knowledge had been well documented as far back as the nineteenth-century by scholars and missionaries like J. G. Christaller,[39] who collected and published well over three thousand Akan stories and proverbs. The inclusion of these indigenous educational tools in British colonial education would have also contributed to the community's sense of agency and empowerment, addressed the problem of the separation between the school and the community,

and closed the intergeneration gap that disenabled parents to contribute to their children's education. Negation of indigenous of this indigenous mode of learning in colonial education can be explained by the fact that British colonial education was an ideological process in which education and schooling were used as agents for the internalization and acceptance of British cultural values, and as vehicles for developing in the colonized peoples the preferred sense of psychological and intellectual subordination. Cameron McCarthy and Greg Dimitriades have categorized these practices of negation as *ressentiment (*after Nietzsche) which they describe as "the specific practice of identity displacement in which the social actor consolidates his identity by a complete disavowal of the merits and existence of his social other".[40] With Linda Tuhiwai Smith,[41] I posit that the negation of indigenous views constituted a critical part of the colonial strategy, mostly because these views would have challenged and resisted the mission of colonization.

Educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone: Embracing Sankofa creatively

In this section I attempt to recover, creatively, aspects of the foregoing Mende educational traditions and integrate them into the content and processes of formal education to make curriculum proposals that are responsive to the educational needs of Sierra Leone in postcolonial, post-war, and global times. Creative recovery means taking a critical look at certain aspects of tradition that may have been effective for earlier purposes but now need to be re-appropriated in new ways to serve today's purposes. The curriculum proposals I make take into account the fact that curriculum is not a static system unaffected by change. Curriculum, like all bodies of knowledge rooted in human experiences, must constantly renew itself and draw on other currents of thought in order to remain relevant and viable.

In this regard, the recent move by curriculum scholars, worldwide, to internationalize the discourses of educational reform and research should be thought of not only as exhortations of change but also as a way of reshaping the images of social action and consciousness through which individuals are to participate.[42] Underlying the new discourse of internationalization is curriculum consciousness that "denotes a collective sense of a group of people, a community that begins to imagine and feel things together".[43] This imagining of ourselves as a community participating, interpreting/understanding ourselves, and creating knowledge together is critical to curriculum reform in postcolonial and global times. *Hybridity*, as articulated earlier, becomes crucial in the formulation of this reform agenda.

One of the consequences of European colonization and, now, the global migration of former colonial subjects into the metropolitan centres of Western Europe has meant that, intellectually, culturally, and politically, the colonizer and the colonized have been brought together in identity formation that is continually in a process of hybridization. Identity formation in these contexts occurs in what Homi Bhabha[44], in his analysis of the postcolonial, calls "the third space of translation"—a space where the meaning of cultural and political authority is negotiated without eliding or normalizing the differential structures in conflict. Elsewhere, I have referred to Bhabha's "third space" as the place for the construction of identities that are neither one nor the other.[45] I have argued that because of centuries of Western European impact on Africa (from missionary and trade activities to outright colonization and, now, globalization), it is no longer possible to postulate a unitary Africa over and/or against a monolithic West as a binarism between a distinct Self (as African) and Other (as European). There is no longer in Africa a unitary set of discourse about progress and change; rather, there is a hybrid, a third space, where local African and global images meet in a weaving that has its own configurations and

implications. This overlay is best expressed in the response of Giyatri Spivak (the Indian diasporia scholar) to critics who have faulted her on not seeking possibilities of discovering and/or promoting 'indigenous (Indian) theory' in her writings**:**

> I cannot understand what indigenous theory there might be that can ignore the reality of nineteenth century history….To construct indigenous theories, one must ignore the last few centuries of historical involvement. I would rather use what history has written for me.[46]

Indeed, education itself in Europe's former colonies occurs within an overlay of discourses that move in the interstices of the colonial and the colonized. The rapid movements and collision of peoples and media images across the world have further disrupted the traditional isomorphism between self, place, and culture. The Eurocentric and Afrocentric debates[47] that have emerged in discourses about curriculum reform are themselves driven by nostalgia for a past in which Europe and Africa are imagined without "the noise of their modern tensions, contradictions and conflicts".[48] These debates refuse the radical hybridity that is the reality of today's major metropolitan societies everywhere.

Educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone must be informed by these realities even as some indigenous traditions are recovered and used to make such reconstruction meaningful and relevant for Sierra Leoneans. Thus imagined, educational reform does not involve pitting indigenous Sierra Leonean cultural knowledge against that of the West; instead, reform would occur in a 'third space' which recognizes the heterogeneous basis of useful knowledge and the need to find abiding links that connect African knowledge and values and the knowledge and values entailed in Western education. The hybridity entailed in such a process produces knowledge that can be best described as an alloy of racial, cultural and ethnic metals.[49] For

instance, the technical-rational or managerial efficiency approach that currently pervades curriculum development in Sierra Leone which has produced implementation difficulties could be reformed by utilizing the Mende indigenous practice of interweaving curricular aims, content, and methodology to enable successful curriculum implementation and to make education more functional and relevant to the places and lives of the students. This hybrid approach would not diminish Western education which carries significant parental enthusiasm because of the prestige and economic capital it carries. Rather, the approach would place school curriculum firmly within a cultural framework that can be used by teachers to provide students with insights into students' own cultural values and the tools they need for interpreting the ambiguous cultural contexts in which they are now living. The situational and contextual analysis preceding the development of such curriculum would take into account the contemporary needs and goals of the society, the local values and dispositions considered to be important, and the cultural resources available in the society. Such a process would facilitate the selection of curriculum content and teaching methods based on the environment in which the curriculum is developed and used, not on educational objectives and principles as defined solely by outsiders. Curriculum and pedagogy thus become hybrid processes in which communal values such as cooperation, interdependence, and social responsibility (sorely needed in citizenship education after the civil war in Sierra Leone), and stories and proverbs are integrated into classroom learning. Curriculum would also be adaptable and open to further interpretation and renewal in light of changing circumstances and specific contextual needs and aspirations.

Living in postcolonial, global times involves a rethinking of pre-given categories, histories and traditions. Therefore certain aspects of Mende indigenous education itself have to be interrogated for their inherent limitations for addressing contemporary educational needs and

problems. For instance, a crucial objective of indigenous education among the Mende was the preservation of the ethnic or community heritage, accomplished through the transmission of values such as unquestioned respect for, and acceptance of, the views of elders and 'karmohs' as authoritative. The successful transmission of these values required obedience and conformity. But while this approach may have helped to sustain the ethnic Mende values and hold the community together, it has been criticized by some Sierra Leonean scholars as transforming African children into submissive youngsters who, although biologically equipped with the same keen interests and imagination as their counterparts from other cultures, quickly come to lack the spirit of initiative, creativity, and critical thinking. There is, therefore, a need to question whether the tradition of instructing children to accept authoritative teachings simply out of deference for authority figures will serve them well in today's contexts of globalization and multiple post-war challenges requiring creative and expanded critical thinking skills that appreciate how different cultures and societies solve problems. While an intimate connection does exist between personal identity and particular traditions, humans are not passive in the way that traditions define identity or destiny. Human beings can affirm some of their inherited traditions, transmute them, or recreate them in novel ways.[50] Indeed continuing to be a person means continuously revisiting tradition and upholding certain elements of it while rethinking others. On the issue of tradition and change Gadamer writes:

> …Tradition is not merely what one knows to be and is conscious of as one's own origin…Changing the established forms is no less a kind of connection with the tradition than defending the established forms. Tradition exists only in constant alteration.[51]

I interpret Gadamer here to mean that, in addition to having a past which affects us in innumerable and complex ways, we have a present that to some extent always differs from the

past and is animated by concerns and interests driving it towards the future. Thus the past shapes us but we contribute to its outcome by responding to it in light of our current needs. Confronted with new situations that we seek to understand, we are forced to re-examine our traditions in relation to emergent realities and the meanings and demands of those realities. The real issue, it would seem, is the political will and preparedness to read tradition as an open-ended text rather than as a closed entity.[52]

Cumulative events such as the European infiltration into Africa, the subsequent colonization of the African continent, the Western-style education that colonization brought, and the current forces of economic and cultural globalization have all led to a present that differs from our past and to changed and changing concerns shaping our future. This invites questions about how to educate students so they become able to function meaningfully and effectively in these new contexts. In Sierra Leone, it invites critical reflection on certain aspects of traditional educational practices (e.g., the uncritical acceptance of authoritative teachings) that may have served well to hold the community together, but that now need to be examined critically vis-à-vis incoming authoritative ideas about education for development and, since the end of the country's civil war, lectures about peace, justice, equality and human rights. We must appreciate that indigenous educational experiences that discourage critical questioning are likely to shape and mediate how Mende children experience Western-style education. Having been socialized not to question or disobey authority, children come to extend these values to all authoritative sources, and then take these sources for and as granted. I believe that children can be taught to assume a critical voice towards authority without necessarily devaluing, disrespecting, or destroying authority altogether. A critical voice, rather than merely destructive criticism, attempts the

delicate work of rearticulating the tensions within practices, the constraints, and the possibilities, even as it questions the taken-for-granted knowledge that shapes everyday life.[53]

Educational reconstruction based on the creative re-appropriation of tradition requires improvement in teacher education on two fronts. The first would have to be an emphasis on the preparation of teachers as critical inquirers who, through offering themselves as models, will eventually pass the habits of critical inquiry on to their students. On the second front, teachers would have to be taught the cultural traditions that are important to the people of Sierra Leone and how to blend these desirable traditional values and principles with current and appropriate formal educational content and processes. Improvement on these two fronts will equip teachers to help students develop the knowledge and skills necessary for successful living in postcolonial/global times.

Conclusion

My imagination of educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone as a hybrid process in which the past is retrieved creatively and combined with the realities and needs of the present is partly informed by Immanuel Kierkegaard's[54] argument that no matter how much is subtracted from the individual there is always a 'remainder' that could embrace the task of reconstituting the Self. This reconstituting process involves what Kierkegaard calls 'repetition' which, like Sankofa, is a forward movement that is cognizant of the past. Through the process of repetition the individual becomes able to press forward,

> …not toward a sheer novelty which is wholly discontinuous with the past, but into the being which he himself is….Repetition is that by which the existing individual circles back on the being which he has been all along, that by which he returns to himself…".[55]

The experiences of European colonization and neo-colonization, in a variety of forms, have led to self-fragmentation in many Africans. A fragmented self lacks full access both to itself and the world, thereby impairing capacity for informed action. Amidst such fragmentation, we need to define ourselves in terms of new memories through which we come to know, understand, and experience ourselves. These memories, however, need not be lodged within monolithic African identities, for we are both what we know (our African knowledge and traditions) and what we do not know (others' knowledge and traditions). As Priscilla Wald has cogently argued: "Older identities are now estranged and one's 'home' (identity) is no longer located where one thought it was".[56] If, indeed, we are serious about the construction of a new narrative about education for development in postcolonial and global times, then reform needs to be based in communities where relations are no longer unidirectional or univocal, whether flowing from the former colonies to the colonialists or vice versa. The challenges facing the African sub-continent in the 21st century (for example, poverty, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, consolidating fledgling democracies, fostering social cohesion) transcend national boundaries and single sets of discourses. They could be called "supranational or transnational challenges", as Walter Parker et al [57] have suggested. Educational response to these challenges requires hybrid curriculum thinking and acting which consists of overlays of multiple discourses and plural strategies, including the creative re-appropriation of substantive traditions. Jomo Kenyatta got it right when, forty years ago, he enjoined teachers to

> "promote progress and…preserve all that is best in the traditions of the African people and assist them in creating a new culture which, though its roots are still in the soil, is yet modified to meet the pressure of modern conditions". [58]

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