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Deciphering Traditional African Education in R.S. Peters' *Education as Initiation*¹

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Abstract

In this theoretical paper, I examine education in traditional African societies in the context of R.S. Peters' (1966) conception of "**Education as Initiation**". Philosophers of education have developed a concern and insight into the notion of education primarily by addressing the question of conceptual analysis: what do we mean by education and add a justificatory question: how do we know that education is valuable? Traditional conceptions of education have viewed education as the process of initiation of new entrants into the practices of a given social group. This paper focuses special interest on the extent to which traditional African view of education is defensible within the R.S. Peter's conception of education. I draw some philosophical insights by interrogating some perspectives on **indoctrination** and **initiation** in the understanding of the notion of the **aim of education**.

Keywords: *knowledge, tradition, culture, indoctrination, transmission*

¹The concept originates from Richard Stanley Peters' Inaugural Lecture (1963).

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Introduction

Richard Stanley Peters is, by any measure, one of the greatest philosophers of education. His long, illustrious career has significantly moulded the direction of philosophy of education and defined an agenda of questions in the Anglo-Saxon world specifically and other parts of the globe in general (Burbules, 2000). In his *Ethics and Education* (1966), Peters' analysis of the concept of education has "...mapped out some of the most significant contours of education and provided a rich vein of research in education for philosophers of education" (Ozolins, 2012, p. 236). Peters' liberal view of education is that education should enhance the chances of one to emerge a better person capable of acknowledging the good. While admitting that training, instruction and learning by experience are processes of education that in the end constitute the relevant achievement (Peters, 1967), he proposes that it is education as initiation that epitomises the achievement of what is worthwhile. The initiation of others into a social world encourages the initiates to join in exploring realms marked out by more differentiated forms of awareness (Peters, 1966, p. 52). The knowledgeable person turns the eye of the inexperienced outward to what is essentially independent of persons. Nevertheless, does such a notion of education as initiation not imply indoctrination? Philosophers of education have obsessed themselves with combining the meaning of indoctrination and initiation with a better pedagogical method in mind (McDonough, 2011). It is by becoming clear about what accurately constitutes indoctrination that will assist to elucidate the frame that delineates it from "acceptable educational processes" (Phillips & Siegel, 2013, p. 12) though there is no unanimity in locating the border.

Education can be referred to as a means of transmitting one's culture from one generation to the next and a process of bringing about reasonably enduring change in human behaviour (Adeyima & Adeyinka, 2003). Education is therefore the main instrument employed by the society to preserve, maintain and grapple with its social equilibrium (Kingsley, 2010). Traditional African education can be referred to as ways of teaching and learning in Africa that are founded on indigenous knowledge gathered by Africans over centuries in response to their different physical, political and socio-cultural challenges. Africa's heritage has come to be referred to as traditional African education and this is an education of Africans before the coming of the Europeans. Such an education prepared Africans for their responsibilities as adults in their communities (Boateng, 1983). As a process, it involves "...packaging and passing indigenous knowledge and skills orally from generation to generation" (Mosweunyane, 2013, p. 50). From this brief description, such a tradition involves 'transmission', 'induction', 'preservation' of and 'preparation' for a heritage of customs and values. The question that attracts my attention then is to what extent can R.S Peters' conception of education as initiation be instrumental in illuminating traditional African ways of educating?

In this theoretical debate, I start by exploring the notions of initiation and indoctrination thereby showing their connection and disjunction, where possible. I then proceed to unpack Peter's conception of education as initiation before providing an exposé of traditional African education. The paper will wrap the discussion with a critique R.S. Peters' conception of education within the context of traditional African education.

Education, Initiation and Indoctrination

The term education has been allocated an assortment of meanings by different scholars and philosophers. To this end, there is "...no univocal definition of education as the concept has been exposed to different and often contradictory interpretations" (Balogun, 2008, p. 228). While Ducasse uses the etymological root of the word as coming from Latin "*educere*" (Ducasse, 1958, p. 1) which means to "lead out", Schofield prefers "*educare*" which means to "*form*" or "*train*" (Schofield, 1972, p. 32). Hamm has proposed that we can have a clear understanding of the concept of education if we isolate it by the uses to which it is put. He asserts that we can have a better conception of education if we categorise it by its *sociological* (through informal socialization processes), *institutional* (formalized through institutions such as schools) and *general enlightenment* (for gaining general knowledge and understanding for its own sake in order to develop the individual's mind) uses (Hamm 1989). But if by education, is meant to *lead out*, to *form* or to *train*, surely it is accurate to infer that while on the one hand, there is, the experienced (person or object) to lead, on the other hand is the inexperienced to be led through some process or activity. Such a process is education. Hence, education should enable individuals to survive in a society, cultivate good habits and develop good citizens capable of earning a good living (Adeyima & Adeyinka, 2003). Education, therefore, has a function of developing goodness. In the context of this paper, I ask an ontological as well as pedagogical question directed at the *whatness* and *howness* of education. More specifically is education initiation. Whether in the affirmative or not,

how can initiation be distinguished from indoctrination? How then can we decode R.S. Peters' conception of education as initiation within the traditional African notion of education?

The concept of initiation features quite prominently in the writings of philosophers of education (Biesta, 1996; McDonough, 2011; Passmore, 1967; Siegel, 2012; Thiessen, 1985). Of interest is its popular association with the concept of indoctrination (Thiessen, 1985, p. 229). However, the question is how do we separate (if we can) initiation from indoctrination? Conversely, can we educate without initiating or indoctrinating? The word initiation originates from the Latin word *initiare* which means "to start, to introduce" (Christoph et al., 2000) or "*beginning*" in which a real initiation is a beginning of the initiate moving into a new life. The initiate, i.e. the person who has undergone initiation, is to be a transformed being capable of contributing to the social, political and economic life of his or her community. The process of initiation concerns undergoing a fundamental set of rites to start a new phase or beginning in life. Hence, Hudson (1973) connects initiation to education by concluding that, "...initiation is a necessary condition for education" (p. 177). Nevertheless, before proceeding to discuss the conception of education as initiation, it is quite pertinent that we differentiate initiation from indoctrination.

Indoctrination has been well defined for some time, probably most conclusively by Thomas Green, as pedagogy recognised by the *way* the content is taught and not by the content of *what* is taught (Green, 1972). This may occur when, for example, the teacher leads the learner to a correct answer without concern for the reasons behind the answer. To this end, when pedagogy is said to be indoctrinatory, it "...presents the existing cultural codes and vocabularies as the authoritative determinants of action and judgment. Any deviation from the code undermines not only the legitimacy or propriety of an act or judgment, but moreover undermines its meaningfulness" (McDonough, 2011, p. 707). Hence, indoctrination takes place in situations where there exists some measure of authority or control and it is in this context that we can argue that initiation involves indoctrination. For example in the parent or teacher/child relationship the "authoritative nature of the initiation process" (Thiessen, 1985, p. 238) places the former in a privileged position of *determining* the initiation into which the latter is initiated hence no opportunity to make a choice. To this end the child –learner is under manipulation by the parent or teacher thereby violating their autonomous being. Another example is the use of rhetorical expedients such as, "mindless drill, recitation, and rote memorisation" (Thiessen, 1985, p. 234). On this view, initiation into new experiences involves indoctrination. In addition, White defends indoctrination in the teacher-child relationship as he suggests that, "...we are right to make him unfree now so as to give him as much autonomy as possible later on" (White, 1973, p. 22) thereby acknowledging the need to coerce a curriculum on the child. These indoctrinatory devices described above fail to cultivate a collection of what Aristotle has referred to as "intellectual virtues", among them, humility in the face of evidence, integrity, honesty, thoroughness in defence of the truth and criticism of falsity. In this sense, indoctrination is the home for all efforts to impede the critical spirit. Given the above explication, the question then is can education as initiations into social traditions avoid indoctrination.

The Notion of Education as Initiation

In Peter's 1963 Inaugural Lecture, *Education as Initiation* three criteria namely, the normative, the cognitive and the procedural are used to account for his conception of education as initiation. Peters uses the notion of initiation to describe education as a *family of processes*. More specifically, he proposes that education

- (i) implies the transmission of what is worth-while to those who become committed to it;
- (ii) must involve knowledge and understanding and some kind of cognitive perspective, which are not inert and
- (iii) at least rules out some procedures of transmission, on the grounds that they lack wittingness and voluntariness [on the part of the learner (Peters, 1966, p. 45).

Firstly, Peters characterises education as the development of the mind in which the product (the educated person) is a result of the "...initiation of an individual into public traditions enshrined in the language, concepts, beliefs and rules of a society" (Peters, 1966, p. 49) and not a product of individual experience from the empiricists' perspective. In this view, there is social action in the development of the individual's mind. Hence, Peter's conception of education is that it involves the activity whereby society introduces new knowledge and skills to new entrants. In the above context, Peters considers education as a form of socialisation. Hamm (1989) adds that this view emphasises the habits of socialising the child into the existent culture. This view can be criticised since "... it matters not if the beliefs acquired are false or correct, if the practices and skills developed are or not morally acceptable

from a universalisable standpoint nor if the outcome of the training and rearing process results in blind adherence to the doctrines and rituals of the cultural group” (p. 30). Nevertheless, in Peter’s view, this more recent child-centred view of education and its accompanying concern for “...critical thinking, individual exploration and experimentation” (Peters, 1966, p. 54) at the expense of the transmission of knowledge can be criticised. In his view, critical thinking without content is vacuous. Besides, the processes of critical thinking, exploration and experimentation are only possible and “...only mastered ...under the guidance of one who has been initiated” (ibid). He therefore holds that initiation into a discipline or a field of thought—with its history and customs, literature and devices, values and criteria—is an attainable and adequate purpose of education. For him, this is different from indoctrination in that indoctrination involves affixing a specific set of values in the succeeding generations. To this end, Peters concludes that

Societies can persist in which bodies of knowledge with principles immanent in them can be handed on without any systematic attempt to explain and justify them or to deal honestly with phenomena that do not fit. Fixed beliefs are thus perpetuated. When this is done, we are presumably confronted with what is called indoctrination (Peters, 1967, p. 19).

Secondly, Peter’s criterion of education as involving knowledge and understanding covers, and is consistent with, education as initiation. In this context, initiation, “even when connected to the various ceremonies and rites suggest an avenue of access to a body of belief, perhaps to mysteries that are not revealed to the young” (Peters, 1966, p. 54). Hence, for Peters the educated person has, “... a body of knowledge and some kind of conceptual scheme to raise this knowledge above the level of a collection of disjointed facts which in turn implies some understanding of principles for organizing facts and of the "reason why" of things” (Peters 1966:30). On this view of education as initiation, it is presupposed that the initiate makes a free choice thereby satisfying Peters’ “wittingness and voluntariness” (Peters, 1966, p. 55) conditions although initiation does not always satisfy the normative criterion. Thus, the process of initiation is broader than the process of education.

In terms of procedure, Peters argues that education is not an activity and one can never speak of having completed education. For Peters, “To be educated is not to have arrived at a destination: it is to travel with a different view” (Peters, 1965, p. 110). While getting factual information and mastering skills is important for an initiate, “...understanding of principles for the organization of facts” (Peters, 1966, p. 30) is highly cherished if one has to develop into an educated person who understands these standards and come to care for them. Understanding implies that an educated person has the ability to enter beyond the superficial details in order to “...extract essentials and construct a coherent structure” (Newton, 2000, p. 8) from the information given. To this end, his conception of education consists in the transmission of intrinsically valuable knowledge suitable for the development of an autonomous being. He argues that to accomplish educatedness, a person has to be *initiated* into “a family of processes” and so education “refers to no particular process” (Peters, 1967,p. 1), which if successfully engaged, the outcome of the education process is the “educated man”. Hence, for him, “...education implies that a man’s outlook is transformed by what he knows” (Peters, 1967, p.7). For him to educate is “to initiate others into a form of life, which they [the initiators] regard as desirable, in which knowledge and understanding play an important part” (Hirst & Peters, 1970, p. 20). From the foregoing he concludes that “Education involves essentially processes which intentionally transmit what is valuable in an intelligible and voluntary manner and which create in the learner a desire to achieve it, this been seen to have its place along with other things in life” (Peters, 1965, p. 102).

Traditional African Education as Initiation

Traditional African education is an integral part of the culture and history of a local community, which is stored in various forms and transmitted through various modes (Omolewa, 2007, p. 594). Efforts are made to ensure that every person develops a set of skills with the primary aim of producing a *whole* individual, a lifelong learner who is cultured, humble and dutiful, integrated and reactive to the needs of the family and neighbours (Nikiema, 2009; Omolewa, 2007). Hence, it is an education for inculcating the values and attitudes that enable the individual to be integrated into the wider society (Fafunwa, 1974; Majasan, 1967). In addition, (Scanlon, 1964) states, “the education of the African before the coming of the European was an education that prepared him for his responsibilities as an adult in his home, his village and his tribe.”(p. 3) Given the aims shown above the question then: what method(s) ensured this process of education produced an educated person?

The climax of African educational experience was the ritual passage ceremony from childhood to adulthood. In her description of the traditional process of education and the educational institution as the “Bush School”, Watkins writes,

...for the Poro and Bondo societies conducted their training of boys and girls respectively outside of the village or town. The training given to the youth prepared them for military, family, agricultural, and cultural purposes. Mental and moral training are also undertaken. Each youth must go through this training before he could be considered a worthy member of the society (Watkins, 1943 in Marah, 2006, p. 17).

Further to this, Davidson (1969) adds an example of the Tiriki people of Kenya. He writes that

Until you are ten or so you are counted as a 'small boy' with minimal social duties such as herding cattle. Then you will expect, with some trepidation, to undergo initiation to manhood by a process of schooling that lasts about six months and is punctuated by ritual 'examinations'. Selected groups of boys are entered for this schooling once every four or five years. ... All the initiates of a hut eat, sleep, sing, dance, bathe, do handicraft, etc. ... but only when commanded to do so by their counsellor, who will be a man under about twenty-five. ...circumcision gives it a ritual embodiment within the first month or so, after which social training continues as before until the schooling period is complete. Then come ceremonies at which elders teach and exhort, the accent now being on obedience to rule which have been learned. The Tiriki social charter is thus explained and then enshrined at the centre of the man's life (p. 84).

Besides education given in the form of initiation ceremonies as cited above, in different societies there existed griots described by Mara as "walking dictionaries,' historians, or verbal artists who memorized the history, legends of a whole people and would recite them and teach their apprentices or audiences, publicly or privately; direct instruction was also employed" (Marah, 2006, p. 18). Group instruction, group assignments, internship and age groupings, private instruction by one's brother or sister, or one of the parents were also employed as methods to instruct the young. Children learnt by repetition, imitation, internalization and practice in order to realise full membership of the community.

A Critique

From the examination of Peter's conception of education as initiation, it is evident that he is critical of contemporary education's emphasis on "critical thinking, individual exploration and experimentation" (Peters, 1966, p. 53). For him education involves providing children with knowledge by inviting them to share in public inheritance in order to get "the barbarian "outside the gates, and inside the citadel of civilisation" (Peters, 1965, p. 107). But to get this process underway, there is a need for someone who is already initiated to guide the initiate. In other words, how else besides being initiated into the social domain of life except by being introduced to the public goods by the experienced others in order to share these thoughts and feelings? In the context of traditional African education, parents and the elders, through the experience of having been initiated themselves have a central role of ensuring that traditional values, customs and beliefs are transmitted onto new entrants of society for cultural continuity. Hence, such an education is a form of initiation.

In comparing education to initiation, Peters view is best explained by his second criterion of education as *gaining knowledge and understanding*. As children are engaged in ceremonies and rites they gain access to bodies of beliefs which could not have been exposed to them without initiation. However, we accept that initiation does not satisfy the normative criterion of education, that is, the transmission of what is *worthwhile* to those committed to it since one can be initiated into things that are not *valuable*, for example stealing. Such a concept of education therefore renders education thinner than initiation. While we may submit to Kazepides' critique of initiation as suggesting the inactive, submissive and conformist attitude (thereby aligning it to indoctrination) as opposed to the active, rational and independent thinking that should characterise the self-education process, we content that there is the passive side of education.

Peters' admission that education involves a transmission of what is worthwhile is an acknowledgement that the initiates in the educative process will, under the guidance of the experienced other, proceed from the submissive state to the more active and independent thought. Surely there is need to recognise that Peter's invaluable employment of the "...initiation metaphor to characterise education" (Thiessen, 1985, p. 233). However, we cannot deny the passive role of the child-initiate in the transmission metaphor in which there is no communicative, inter-subjective and interactive nature of actual learning in a social context marked by plurality (McDonough, 2011). On this view, Peter's conception of education as initiation fittingly explains traditional African ways of education in that the latter was a trans-generational transmission of culture that assisted in cementing African social solidarity. To this end, an educated person in the context of traditional Africa is one who "... acquires

community cultural knowledge , skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, norms and habits for the survival of society” (Balogun, 2008, p. 122).

In addition to the above, Akinpelu adds that the educated man is, “... equipped to handle successfully the problems of living in his immediate and extended family...(one) who has the ability to discharge his social and political duties; who is wise and shrewd in judgement” (Akinpelu, 1981, p. 149). Bolugan’s conception of an educated person is well located in Peter’s criterion of education as the transmission of cultural assets; as something of value in order to develop knowledge and understanding for a desirable state of mind. In Akinpelu’s assertion, traditional African education meets Peters’ criterion of education as providing worthwhile state of mind characterised by breadth and depth of understanding if they are prepared for making decisions wittiness in dispensing their political and social duties. By locating Peters’ conception of education as initiation in the context of traditional African education, the fundamental principle in initiation is that each person has uniqueness that each must encounter progressively. The above goes to challenge those who denied the existence of education in traditional Africa by referring to such systems as, “...tribal (*and*) not an education for change...” (Ocitti, 1973, p. 107). They have associated this to the demand for “...conformity, but not individuality, creativity or individual uniqueness. It taught strict obedience to the elders’ rules and authority” (Marah, 2006, p. 21). However, traditional African conception of education gave way for the initiation of the young into existing cultural values and beliefs so that they survive the socio-economic and physical challenges of their time and place.

Conclusion

In the debate above the researchers have attempted to examine Peters’ conception of education in which he provides an elucidation of initiation as *a way viewing* educational processes and not *a way of educating* the individual into the inherited tradition. His view of education is conceived as denoting the *processes* by means of which people are initiated into socially inherited beliefs and customs. An analysis of Peters’ conception of education within the context of traditional African view of education in Africa was done in order to unravel the connections or discontinuities between the two. It is clear to discern that the former’s position explains traditional African schema of education as taking the responsibility of sustaining societal survival and continuity through the initiation of new entrants into the truths and values of a particular community. Hence, traditional African view of education is best explained in the context of Peters’ conception of education as initiation.

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