

Opinion Article

Indigenous Education in Nigeria: Philosophical Foundations, Practices, and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

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Background: Before the advent of Islamic and Western education, Nigeria operated a well-established indigenous education system rooted in African philosophical traditions. This system, though informal in structure, was purposeful, functional, and deeply integrated with the cultural, social, and economic life of communities. Understanding its philosophical foundations and practices is essential for addressing contemporary educational challenges.

Objective: This conceptual paper critically examines the philosophical foundations, goals, curriculum, methodologies, and characteristics of indigenous education in Nigeria, with a view to identifying elements that remain relevant for contemporary educational practice.

Methods: Employing philosophical analysis of existing literature, this paper synthesizes scholarship on African indigenous education, drawing upon works by Fafunwa, Ocitti, Kanu, and others to construct a comprehensive conceptual framework.

Results: The analysis reveals that indigenous education in Nigeria was grounded in sound philosophical principles including preparationism, functionalism, communalism, perennialism, and holicism. Its curriculum was comprehensive, covering physical, moral, intellectual, vocational, and social development through practical, participatory methods. The system successfully transmitted cultural heritage, inculcated moral values, developed practical skills, and fostered social cohesion. However, it also exhibited limitations including rigidity, conservatism, lack of standardization, and limited scope for critical inquiry.

Conclusion: Indigenous education offers valuable lessons for contemporary Nigerian education, particularly regarding functionalism, community involvement, character development, and practical skill acquisition. The paper proposes a selective integration of indigenous educational principles into modern curriculum to address gaps in values education, vocational training, and social cohesion.

Keywords: indigenous education; traditional education; african philosophy; nigerian education; curriculum development; cultural transmission

Introduction

Education serves as an instrument for the development of both the individual and society. It is not new to any race, and every society, irrespective of time, people, or place, has evolved one education system or another [Ayeyemi & Olupayimo, 2026; Mara, 2006]. In light of this, it should be noted that an educational system existed in Africa long before the arrival of Islamic and Western systems of education. As Fafunwa (1974) strongly asserted, no history of education in Africa is complete without adequate knowledge of the traditional or indigenous educational system prevalent in Africa before the arrival of Islam and Christianity [Madzore, 2026].

The African traditional education system aimed at inducting members of society into activities and modes of thought that conform to the norms and values of the society (Mara, 2006). African societies were famous for their rich cultural heritage, which was preserved and transmitted from generation to generation through the system of traditional education. This system, though lacking the formal structures of modern schooling—elaborate buildings, classrooms, professionally certified teachers, and written curricula—was nonetheless purposeful, comprehensive, and effective in meeting the needs of its society [Mdhluli & Masipa, 2026; Nwaubani, 2008].

In Nigeria, the practice of indigenous education has been maintained up to today, particularly in rural communities, due to its richness in ideology and its capacity to produce physically capable, creative, employable, honest, and law-abiding citizens [Umar & Shagari, 2013]. Practical orientation and functionalism remain the hallmarks of the traditional education system. This reality is evident in the existence of young men and women, especially in rural communities, who are regarded as "professionals" not because of school certificates, but because they can perform their vocations with all elements of professionalism [Madzore, 2026; Umar & Shagari, 2013].

Despite its enduring relevance, indigenous education has been largely marginalised in contemporary educational discourse and practice. The formal education system in Nigeria today bears little resemblance to the indigenous system that preceded it, and the rich philosophical heritage that underpinned traditional learning remains largely unexplored as a resource for addressing current educational challenges. This conceptual paper seeks to bridge this gap by critically examining the

philosophical foundations, goals, curriculum, methodologies, and characteristics of indigenous education in Nigeria, with a view to identifying elements that remain relevant for contemporary educational practice.

Philosophical Foundations of Indigenous Education

Conceptual Clarification

Traditional or indigenous education in Africa, like any other effective system of education, was based on sound philosophical foundations. Ocitti, as cited by Kanu (n.d.), identified five fundamental principles that underpinned indigenous education.

Preparationism implies that in indigenous education, people were trained to equip them with the required skills for the fulfillment of their gender roles in the family and the community. Boys were prepared for male-dominated occupations such as farming, hunting, fishing, and blacksmithing, while girls were educated in domestic arts such as cooking, home management, and childcare [Umar & Shagari, 2013]. This gender-specific preparation ensured that every individual could contribute meaningfully to the economic and social life of the community.

Functionalism implies that traditional or indigenous education is practical and participatory in nature. Children learn through working and observing their masters (Kanu, n.d.). Education was not an abstract exercise but was directly connected to the lived realities of the community. Practical orientation and functionalism are the hallmarks of the traditional education system [Okoro, 2010; Ayeyemi & Olupayimo, 2026]. The emphasis was on producing individuals who could survive and live decently amidst all odds in life.

Communalism implies that in indigenous education, the training of children was a collective responsibility of parents, family, and the community. This signified that the child belonged to everyone (Kanu, n.d.). The proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” captures this philosophical orientation. Every adult member of the community had a stake in the upbringing and education of every child, creating a powerful social fabric that supported learning and development [Madzore, 2026].

Perennialism implies that traditional or indigenous education is a way of preparing children to become acquainted with the finest achievements of their cultural heritage (Kanu, n.d.). Education was essentially conservative, focused on preserving and transmitting the accumulated wisdom, values, and practices of previous generations. This orientation ensured cultural continuity and stability.

Holisticism implies that traditional or indigenous education was a multiple kind of education (Kanu, n.d.). People were productive in all areas: a trained dancer could also be a good farmer. Education addressed all dimensions of human development—physical, intellectual, moral, social, and vocational—recognising that individuals are complex beings with multiple needs and capacities [Mdhului & Masipa, 2026].

In light of these principles, the philosophy of traditional education in Nigeria was pragmatic in nature and operated based on the principle of productivity and functionalism. It aimed at providing a gateway to the life of the community. The philosophy centred on the people's way of thinking, beliefs, feelings, and way of doing things. Individual training incorporated various social values such as honesty, respect for the worth and dignity of others, hard work and productivity, self-reliance, as well as collective orientation towards maintaining social values and order [Okoro, 2010]. These formed the central idea of the African traditional education system.

Goals And Objectives of Indigenous Education

The traditional or indigenous education system in Nigeria and Africa was designed to produce individuals who would be honest, respectable, skilled, and cooperative, as well as being conformist to the norms and values of society. Fafunwa, as cited in Umar and Shagari (2013), listed seven cardinal goals of African traditional education: First, the development of the child's latent physical skills. The system aimed at identifying and nurturing the innate physical capabilities of children through various activities, games, and tasks appropriate to their age and development. Second, character and moral training. One of the most important goals was the development of good character, including honesty, integrity, respect for elders, and responsibility. This was considered essential for social harmony and cohesion. Third, development of intellectual and social skills. Children were trained to think critically about their environment, to solve problems, and to interact appropriately with others in various social contexts. Fourth, acquisition of specific vocational training and development of healthy attitude toward honest labour. Every individual was expected to learn a trade or occupation that would enable them to contribute to the economic life of the community and to value honest work. Fifth, inculcation of respect for elders and those in position of authority. Respect for age, wisdom, and legitimate authority was a fundamental value that maintained social order and continuity. Sixth, understanding, appreciating, and promoting the cultural heritage of the community. Education aimed to ensure that each generation understood and valued the traditions, customs, and achievements of their ancestors. Seventh, development of a sense of belonging and encouragement of active participation in family and community affairs. Individuals were educated to see themselves as integral parts of their communities and to participate actively in communal life. In line with these cardinal goals, the aims or objectives of indigenous education

in Nigeria can be specifically articulated as developing the child's physical skills, character development, preparing the young child for life, training the child for self-realisation, inculcating in the child the ability to relate with others, and inculcating discipline [Igbo, 2008]. A careful examination of these multilateral goals reveals that the traditional or indigenous educational system appeared to assume the position of a well-laid-out system, basically for initiation into society and preparation for adulthood. It was a system of education which generally emphasised social responsibility, job orientation, political participation, as well as spiritual and moral values [Igbo, 2008].

Curriculum Of Indigenous Education

The curriculum of the traditional/indigenous form of education in Nigeria conformed to African traditional education. The indigenous education had specified subject areas but had no formal examination system [Umar & Shagari, 2013]. Although the curriculum was not documented, it can be considered as having two folds of educational training, namely, physical and moral.

As asserted by Umar and Shagari (2013), the African indigenous education system has a wide curriculum for the realisation of its laudable objectives, the central ideology of which was to produce individuals who would be useful to themselves and to their communities. Okoro [2010] notes that the content of the curriculum of traditional education was comprehensive and based on the philosophy underlying the various job responsibilities in the traditional society. This means that the traditional education system was quite elaborate, and it embraced all aspects of human development.

By its social design, the traditional education system in Nigeria was meant to provide occupational and professional training. Hence, children were trained to master the main occupation of the immediate communities. For instance, fishing was emphasised in the riverine areas, while farming was emphasised in the forest areas [Okoro, 2010]. Equally, the growing children and youth were trained along the lines of honesty, respect, cooperation, patriotism, and above all, skills acquisition.

The National Open University of Nigeria [2017] categorised the curriculum of traditional education to include activities on character building, since conformity was necessary, extensive attention was given to developing moral character through stories, proverbs, and direct instruction. Physical training through physical contests, wrestling, and perseverance activities helped children develop physical strength, endurance, and coordination. Art and crafts, including carving, painting, modelling, and other artistic and creative pursuits, as well as song and dances, were integral parts of the curriculum. Intellectual training included singing, counting, games, arithmetic, and other activities that developed cognitive abilities. The study of facts about the natural environment taught children about plants, animals, weather patterns, and other aspects of their physical surroundings. Historical knowledge included stories about the gods and traditions of various societies which were preserved in folklore and regarded as legends handed down from one generation to another.

Nwaubani [2008] also summarized the subjects and experiences enshrined in traditional education to include participation at ceremonies and rituals; imitation, recitation, and demonstration; farming, fishing, weaving, carving, cooking, knitting; recreational subjects including wrestling, dancing, drumming, display, and racing; and intellectual training including local history, legend, local geography, plants and animals, poetry, and storytelling.

Teaching Methodologies in Indigenous Education

In the Nigerian traditional societies, the main emphasis of education was on "mastery learning." The methods of teaching in the traditional education system included indoctrination, modelling, initiation ceremonies, rewards and punishment, imitation, role play, oral literature, poetry, instruction, observation, participation, as well as apprenticeship [Okoro, 2010]. Apprenticeship was perhaps the most significant method of transmitting specialised knowledge and skills. Learners would spend extended periods under a master craftsman, learning through observation, imitation, and gradually increasing participation. This method ensured that complex skills were thoroughly mastered and that the cultural values associated with the trade were internalised.

Oral instruction through stories, proverbs, riddles, and myths was a primary means of transmitting cultural values, historical knowledge, and wisdom. These oral forms were carefully crafted to be memorable and to convey moral lessons in engaging ways.

Initiation ceremonies marked important transitions in the life cycle and served as intensive educational experiences. During these periods, young people were secluded and instructed in the knowledge and responsibilities appropriate to their new status.

Participation and observation were fundamental to learning. Children learned by participating in adult activities from an early age, observing skilled practitioners and gradually taking on more complex tasks.

Modelling and imitation were central to learning social behaviours and practical skills. Children learned appropriate conduct by observing and imitating elders, siblings, and peers.

To this end, the individual training under traditional education emphasised practical knowledge, skills, and character training. It incorporated various social values, the neglect of which, as observed by Okoro (2010), has led to consequences such as youth joblessness or unemployment, neglect of moral values, and the disappearance of social solidarity.

Characteristics Of Indigenous Education

Taking the goals, aims, content, and methods of the traditional education system in Africa, it could be seen that they are intricately interwoven; they are not divided into separate components as is the case with modern or formal education. Fafunwa [1974] pointed out that the characteristics of African traditional education were aptly summarized by Abdou Moumouni in his book, *Education in Africa*, as follows: the great importance attached to it, and its collective social nature; its intimate tie with social life, both in material and spiritual sense; its multivalent character, both in terms of its goals and the means employed; its gradual and progressive achievements in conformity with the successive stages of physical, emotional, and mental development of the child.

Amaele [2003] also submitted the following as some of the basic characteristics of traditional education in Nigeria. Education is a collective and social activity; almost everybody is involved in the training of the child. The responsibility for education was shared by parents, extended family members, and the entire community.

It is multidimensional in character in terms of its goals and methodology. Education addressed multiple aspects of human development through varied methods appropriate to different learning objectives.

It is planned in gradual and progressive steps. The curriculum was sequenced to achieve conformity with the successive stages of physical, emotional, and mental development of the child.

Education relies more on informal instruction. Most learning occurred through participation in daily life rather than through formal lessons.

The education has limited specialised training. While some specialisation existed, most education was general and aimed at producing well-rounded individuals.

Education depends so much on oral tradition. Knowledge was preserved and transmitted through the spoken word rather than written texts.

Traditional education is practical and general towards specific situations. Learning was directly applicable to the situations learners would encounter in life.

Religion, ethnicity, and education are very much related, interwoven, and inseparable. The spiritual and moral dimensions were integrated with all aspects of learning.

Education is basically conservative and opposed to change. The primary aim was preservation of cultural heritage rather than innovation.

Education takes place at any time or place. Learning was not confined to specific times or locations but occurred continuously throughout life.

Traditional education is a lifelong process. Education began at birth and continued until death, with learning occurring at all stages of life.

Based on the above submission, the African indigenous system of education was characteristically integral in experience, nature, and scope, as well as being very functional in purpose.

Merits And Demerits of Indigenous Education

Merits

Traditional education was believed to have lots of advantages. These advantages were identified to include functional citizenship, as it makes everybody a functional member of society, thereby minimizing the problems of unemployment and social unrest [Umar & Shagari, 2013]. It inculcates a high level of discipline among the people through its emphasis on character training and respect for authority. It transmits to the young ones those things which society considered worthwhile, ensuring cultural continuity. It promotes unity in society and brings peace and happiness to all members. It provides for physical, social, moral, and spiritual growth of the individual. It instills the fear of God and the ancestors, which serves to check members' character and behavior. Traditional education is adapted to the needs of society. Every member of society has the opportunity of receiving education in accordance with his or her ability and talent.

Demerits

Demerits of traditional education include rigidity, as it is too rigid and too conservative, resistant to change and innovation. To some extent, it lacks critical examination, relying more on acceptance of established wisdom than on questioning. It is full of dos and don'ts, as well as fears and threats, which can limit individual autonomy. It is not open and as such does not give enough room for research and inquiry. It is mainly informal, hence limiting the span of knowledge. It does not have well defined structure, duration, or time. It equally has limited scope in terms of content and curriculum. It lacks uniformity in terms of standard since the standard varies from teacher to teacher and community to community.

Contemporary Relevance and Implications

Lessons for Values Education

One of the most significant contributions of indigenous education is its emphasis on character and moral training. The contemporary Nigerian education system has been criticised for producing graduates with technical skills but deficient moral character [Okoro, 2010]. The indigenous approach to values education—through stories, proverbs, modelling, and community participation—offers valuable insights for strengthening character education in schools.

Implications for Vocational and Technical Education

The apprenticeship model of indigenous education, with its emphasis on practical skill acquisition under expert guidance, has direct relevance for contemporary vocational and technical education. The functionalism that characterised indigenous learning—where education was directly connected to productive work—could inform efforts to make vocational education more effective and relevant.

Community Involvement in Education

The communal nature of indigenous education, where the entire community shared responsibility for the upbringing and education of children, offers lessons for strengthening school-community partnerships. Involving parents, elders, and community members in education could enhance learning outcomes and strengthen social cohesion.

Holistic Development

The holistic approach of indigenous education, addressing physical, intellectual, moral, social, and spiritual dimensions of development, contrasts with the narrower academic focus of much contemporary schooling. A more balanced approach that attends to all aspects of human development could produce more well-rounded graduates.

Cultural Identity and Relevance

Indigenous education was deeply rooted in the cultural context of the community. This ensured that learning was meaningful and relevant to learners' lives. Contemporary education, which often uses foreign examples and contexts, could benefit from greater attention to local cultural realities.

Lifelong Learning

The conception of education as a lifelong process, beginning at birth and continuing through life, is increasingly relevant in a world where rapid change requires continuous learning and adaptation.

Toward an Integrated Approach

The analysis suggests that rather than completely abandoning indigenous educational traditions or uncritically adopting them, a selective integration of indigenous principles into contemporary education could yield significant benefits. Such an approach would retain the strengths of formal education, including its capacity for systematic instruction, standardised curricula, certification, and preparation for participation in the global economy. It would incorporate indigenous values and methods, drawing on the rich heritage of indigenous education to strengthen character development, community involvement, practical skill acquisition, and cultural relevance. It would adapt rather than adopt, recognising that indigenous methods must be adapted to contemporary contexts rather than simply replicated. It would ensure balance, maintaining a balance between preserving cultural heritage and preparing students for a changing world.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper has examined the philosophical foundations, goals, curriculum, methodologies, and characteristics of indigenous education in Nigeria. The analysis reveals a system that was purposeful, comprehensive, and deeply integrated with the cultural, social, and economic life of communities. While it exhibited limitations including rigidity, conservatism, and lack of standardisation, it also demonstrated strengths in character development, practical skill acquisition, community involvement, and cultural relevance that remain valuable today.

The contemporary Nigerian education system, with its emphasis on formal schooling, certification, and academic knowledge, has largely marginalised these indigenous traditions. Yet the gaps in the current system—particularly in values education, vocational training, and social cohesion—suggest that indigenous education offers resources that could address these deficiencies.

Rather than romanticising the past or rejecting it outright, there is a need for a critical engagement with indigenous educational traditions that identifies elements of enduring value and adapts them to contemporary contexts. Such an approach could contribute to the development of an education system that is both globally competitive and deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural realities.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are offered. Curriculum developers should study indigenous education to identify elements that can be integrated into contemporary curricula, particularly in areas of values education, vocational training, and cultural studies. Teacher education programs should include content on indigenous educational philosophies and methods to prepare teachers to draw upon this heritage in their practice. Schools should develop

partnerships with communities to involve elders and cultural practitioners in education, particularly in transmitting local knowledge and values. Researchers should conduct further studies on indigenous education practices in different Nigerian communities, documenting the diversity of approaches and identifying best practices. Policymakers should recognise indigenous education as a valuable resource for educational development and create space for its integration into formal education. Communities should be supported in maintaining and transmitting their indigenous educational traditions, recognising their value for cultural continuity and identity.

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