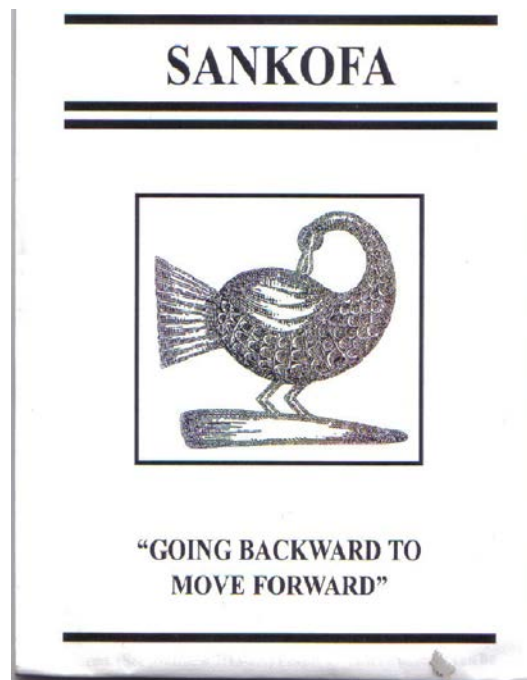


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Sankofa: 'looking back' to reclaim indigenous knowledge and skills to confront youth unemployment in Ghana



Abstract

Sankofa means 'go back to reclaim the past'. It comes from the three Akan words- *san*[return], *ko* [go] and *fa* [take]. *Sankofa* is an indigenous philosophy symbolically depicted by a bird whose neck is turned backwards. Before colonialism indigenous craft men taught the youth the trades through apprenticeship to equip them with skills for employment. The colonialists introduced Western education to educate locals for employment at the lower levels in their administration. The formal education overshadowed the indigenous knowledge instead of integrating it into the school curriculum. This absence of practical skills in the curriculum led to the colonial legacy of unemployable school graduates. The education system did not only fail to cater for children with no aptitude for academic education but more importantly succeeded in creating the culture and crave for white collar jobs. Today most school leavers regard the trades as jobs for illiterate people. Since independence successive governments have done little to integrate indigenous skills into the school curriculum and the absence of transformation could be the cause of unemployment in Ghana. Using the philosophy of *Sankofa* as its theoretical foundation this paper advocates 'reclaiming the past' by integrating indigenous knowledge skills and knowledge for self-employment

Key words: *sankofa*, indigenous knowledge, unemployment, colonialism, curriculum, trades

Introduction

Before the arrival of the Europeans to the then Gold Coast in 1482 AD and its concomitant colonisation the people of Ghana had their indigenous education- knowledge, skills and values. The colonialists introduced Western education to educate locals for employment at the lower levels in the imposed administration. The formal education overshadowed the learning of indigenous knowledge and skills; instead of integrating them into the school curriculum they were pushed to the fringes of the socio-economic and political life of Ghanaians. Thus colonisation was not only a political imposition, but also a cultural one, something which gravely affected, or even perhaps infected African values, religious and indigenous systems of education (Wiredu 2005:1). It covertly or overtly overshadowed much of Africa's indigenous knowledge system, values and practices because the indigenes were taught to believe that their skills and values were obsolete. The absence of practical knowledge and skills in the curriculum has led to the colonial legacy of unemployable school graduates because the formal education system did not only fail to cater for children with no aptitude for academic education but more importantly succeeded in creating the culture and crave for white collar jobs. Since independence successive governments have done very little to integrate indigenous knowledge and skills into the school curriculum and this absence of transformation in education might be the major cause of unemployment in Ghana today. Most of the youth who come out of school in Ghana today lack practical skills for employment and even look down on the trades as jobs for the illiterate. Using the philosophy of *Sankofa* as its theoretical foundation this paper advocates the '*reclaiming the past*' by integrating indigenous knowledge and skills into the school curriculum. This can teach the youth who have no aptitude for academic programmes some practical skills for self-employment and thereby reduce unemployment among the youth, who are economically active citizens of the country. Africans, and for that matter Ghanaians, need to take historical evolution and hence lessons from the past, into account in order to be able to establish a viable educational project (Diop 2000:85-88).

Sankofaism: An indigenous African philosophy

Sankofa which literally means, 'go back to reclaim' is an indigenous African philosophy and cultural custom of the Akan of Ghana. The Akan use proverbs and symbols extensively in their everyday lives to convey important messages. The *Sankofa* symbol is a mythical bird that flies forward sometimes with its head turned backwards and an egg in its mouth. The interpretation of this backward gaze is that there is wisdom in learning from the past, both to understand the present and to shape the future. In his understanding Galloway (2004:3) sees the egg in the mouth of the bird as representing the 'gem' or knowledge of the past upon which wisdom is based. The egg also signifies the generation to come that would benefit from the wisdom. The forward and backward gaze of the *Sankofa* bird is based on the Akan proverb, '*Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki*' which translates to 'It is not an abomination to go back for something you have previously forgotten.' The Akan believe that the past illuminates the present and that the search for success is a lifelong process, in fact a journey. Life is a journey, and sometimes as

people undertake a journey they may have left some very important things home and have to turn back to fetch them before they continue. In the same way, in life, people do introspection by reflecting on important current or past issues in order to plan a suitable strategy and action for improvement.

As an indigenous Akan philosophy *Sankofa* is based on the premise that we cannot know where we are going unless we know where we are coming from. People's past could hold sweet or bitter memories, positive or negative, but whatever it might be, they can learn from it in order to move forward. At some stage in life people literally need to take steps backwards to reclaim the past so as to understand the present and to realise why and how they have come to be where they are and who they are. *Sankofa* may also mean that people's past is as important as their present and their future. In this way to make the best out of the present and plan for the future Ghanians must '*gaze backward*' to the past for appropriate guidance to ensure future success. *Sankofaism* therefore teaches that Africans must often '*gaze backward*' to their past for appropriate guidance in order to succeed in their forward movement. No matter how far literally people have travelled in life they must always '*return home*' i.e. do some retrospection. In recent times the awareness and the need to reclaim African identity has begun to grow among many Africans (both on the continent and among those who are part of the diaspora). Dzobo's (1976:132) affirms that

this apprehension of reality is the passport for our journey as a people. It represents what we Africans see life and understand it to be because of the perspective of our environment and of the experiences we have gone through as a people.

According to Quan-affour (2008) the phrase 'apprehension of reality' could mean the various setbacks experienced by Africans throughout their history, such as colonialism, slavery, civil wars, political instability, diseases and poverty – some of which still haunt the Africans and impede their progress. This therefore calls on Africans to '*gaze backward*' in order to study and analyse both the bitter and the good experiences of the past and to learn from them as they make a leap forward in the new millennium.

Considering the viewpoints expressed on the topic by various writers including Dzobo (1976), Galloway (2004) and Tedla (1995), it can be argued that *Sankofa* is not only an indigenous African thought but also a way of life or practice. As a practice *Sankofaism* brings people face-to-face with a new awareness of historical realities and African identity. As the Akan adage goes, '*Tete wo bi*' (The past has something to teach the present generation). This is why *Sankofaism* can be used to address the problem of unemployment among the youth of Ghana.

Theoretical framework: The Empowerment Theory

As a paper that advocates the equipment of youths with relevant indigenous knowledge and skills for employment it is content is grounded by the empowerment theory. To empower literally means to provide strength, energy or make able. The concept empowerment cuts across social, economic and political endeavours of individual humans, communities and

nations. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) are some of the proponents of the empowerment theory. Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems and proactive behaviours to social policy and social change (Rappaport, 1984). Perkins and Zimmerman(1995: 570) define the concept empowerment as “an intentional ongoing process centred in the local community, involving natural respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources. Simply put, empowerment is a process by which people gain control over their lives, democratic participation in the life of their community (Cornell Empowerment Group,1989) and a critical understanding of their environment (Zimmerman, Isreal, Schulz and Checkoway, 1992). All theories of empowerment include both the process of empowering and outcomes. It is argued that actions, activities and structures may be empowering and the outcome of such processes result in a level of being empowered (Swift and Levin,1987). The major principle of the empowerment theory is that individual and group participation led and facilitated by a community member, an expert in specific skill, can lead to building of capacities for community and national development. Empowerment is thus both individual and group endeavour to bring about socio-economic transformation. The theory has some positive implications for development. It implies that some individuals and community groups lack some important knowledge and skills and therefore incapable of participating in the socio-economic life of their communities. The theory sees empowerment in general terms as a process that enables individuals, through participation with others to achieve the primary personal goals (Perkins & Zimmerman, 2005). Such personal goals, in the context of this paper, could be the acquisition of relevant practical skills to earn a living and contribute to community and nation building. The theory therefore advocates the strengthening (i.e. equipping individuals or group of) people with the relevant knowledge and skills to enable them play meaningful roles in the socio-economic development of their respective communities. This process of empowerment involves collective action in mobilization of resources to equip individuals or group of people with competencies needed for survival and community advancement. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) affirm that at the community level empowerment refers to collective action to improve the quality of life in a community and the connections among community organizations. Empowerment is an important construct for understanding the development of individuals and communities. Community empowerment, however, is not simply a collection of empowered individuals.

Training the youth in indigenous trades and skills to curb unemployment

Before the advent of colonialism in Ghana African values and indigenous trades and skills which were job oriented were taught by master craft men and women to the youth. The indigenous education was sidelined because the priority on the colonialist education agenda was to use formal education to turn out school graduates who could support their imposed colonial administration. Hountondji (2000:39) affirms that in most African countries the present educational systems were set up at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century with clear primary aim: formal education was intended first and foremost to train young people for civil service. Wolhuter (2000:14) adds that “the indigenous populations were educated outside the context of their own cultures and environment. Schools were used

to serve colonial interests: the quantity and quality of education that colonial administrations were prepared to supply were just enough to train staff for auxiliary and subsidiary positions such as clerks, interpreters and preachers.” The formal school system therefore did not integrate African values and skills into the curriculum and by so doing created a culture of turning out ‘Europeans in African skins’. The education was to a very large extent not relevant to the African [Ghanaian] context. Although Ghana attained political independence over 50 years ago very little has changed in terms of integrating indigenous knowledge and skills into the formal school learning experiences. This legacy of turning out school graduates with no specific skills has been the cause of high unemployment rate in Ghana. The formal school graduates roam the streets looking for white collar jobs which do not exist in Ghana in large quantities. To transform this situation Ghanaian education and curriculum planners like the *Sankofa* bird must literally go back to the past to reclaim the ‘discarded’ indigenous values, knowledge and skills which are career oriented. This is the smart strategy to address the problem of unemployment. The Ghanaian youth therefore have to be empowered by training them in practical skills which can make them job creators instead of job seekers. The application of the empowerment theory here is a paradigm’s shift from rhetoric to collective action where the youths can be equipped with practical knowledge and skills for employment. The training of the youth in African indigenous knowledge and skills is a right *backward gaze* that may not only reduce unemployment but also to relate to the rebirth, revival of African identity. It is time Ghana used its indigenous knowledge and skills to revive its socio-economic and political institutions, values and practices for job creation. As part of African renaissance Ghanaians should make a ‘backward gaze’ to the past and reclaim their practical trades for the reduction of unemployment. African Renaissance is understood as the reconstruction of our understanding of ourselves as Africans and how our relationships with the rest of humanity have led us where we are in the context of a global historical process. In short, the essence of the call for African Renaissance is a call for a continued African resistance to Western domination and exploitation of Africans in the process of Africa restating its original message and its own way that was at the same time universal (Gutto 2006:2).

Unemployment is major problem not only in Ghana but all over the sub-Saharan Africa. If this socio-economic and political problem is to be addressed then the school curriculum needs to be transformed. Indigenous knowledge and skills, particularly those that are job related, must be integrated into the school curriculum. Local community experts in specific indigenous trades can be invited or requested to visit the school on regular basis to provide lessons on the trades. The school in collaboration with the community can build some workshops on the school premises for the training in indigenous skills. Local materials such as cane can be used in teaching school children to weave cane baskets, chairs and beds. In the same way cotton can be planted and harvested by the school as part of agriculture lessons. The cotton can be used by local experts training the youth to weave / knit of indigenous colourful Ghanaian clothes of *kente* and smock. These clothes can be show pieces of African identity and export products to earn foreign exchange for the country. Local experts can also be engaged in the training of the youth the design and manufacturing of beautiful indigenous sandals or foot wear popularly called *native sandals*. There are varieties of the indigenous sandals or foot wear which are

made from worn out car tyres and hides, skins and furs of goats, sheep and cows. The indigenous foot wear may have both local and foreign market. They may not only be bought by chiefs and local wealthy Africans but also foreign visitors to Ghana on daily basis as tourists.

The preservation of local food stuff is another important indigenous knowledge and skill that must be imparted to the youth. Being a country in the tropics Ghana has a variety of food stuff which includes cassava, yams, sorghum, millet, plantain, banana, beans, mango, potato, ground nut and palm oil. The few aging people who have the knowledge and skills of food preservation are dying and without concerted effort to train the youth the country would soon lose the knowledge and skills in preserving food. During harvest time plenty of food exists in every part of the country but due to a lack of preservation skills there is no food security during lean season. Local experts in food preservation can be employed to teach both the growing, harvesting and preservation of the local food stuff. This can make the youth entrepreneurs and self-employed and employers.

There are very good aging carvers and sculptors in the local communities whose skills can be tapped and passed on to the youth through the school system. The youth can be taught to carve local beautiful artifacts, paintings and symbols of indigenous animals, chiefs and leaders to export or sell to both local and foreign tourists. These are indigenous skills for life which the youth can learn for a living instead of learning only subjects which would not find them work.

Ghana has traditions and culture which must be preserved and exported. The schools must train the youth cultural songs and dance. The knowledge and skills in indigenous songs may not only assist the youth to acquire skills for self-employment [i.e. hired to perform on important occasions or festivals] but most importantly identify themselves as Africans.

Important school subjects such as English, basic economics, accounting, mathematics and social studies which they learn side by side with the indigenous trades can be applied to the management of their projects to make their enterprises more sustainable.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the cause of the high unemployment rate among the youth of Ghana today has historical underpinning. The formal school system introduced by the colonialists deliberately refused to integrate African values and indigenous economic activities into the school curriculum. This has left the country with the legacy of turning out large numbers of unemployable school graduates whose education has very little relevance to the Ghanaian context. The paper concludes that for Ghana to be able to address the huge unemployment among the youth it must make a '*backward gaze*' to the past to reclaim its indigenous values, knowledge and skills and integrate them into the formal school curriculum. The reality is that the depth of indigenous knowledge rooted in the long inhabitation of a particular place offers lessons that can benefit everyone, from educator to scientist, as we search for more sustainable way to live on this planet (Kawagley and Barnhardk 2004).

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