
REVISITING THE TRADITIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM IN NIGERIA: A CALL FOR REVIVAL AND REFORM

Simon Iruoghene Imoh,¹ Ifeoluwa Abigail Omidiji²

¹ Department of Educational Management, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State, simonimoh1@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7596-5638>

² Department of Educational Management, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, omidijiifeoluwa@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Nigeria's indigenous education system, rooted in community participation, moral development, and vocational skills, predates colonial schooling and once played a vital role in preparing individuals for productive societal roles. However, Western-style education has largely displaced these traditional models, leading to the erosion of cultural identity, rising youth unemployment, and a widening skills gap. This paper revisited the core principles, goals, and pedagogical methods of Nigeria's traditional education system, emphasizing its holistic, inclusive, and context-specific approach to lifelong learning. Through comparative analysis, it highlighted how traditional education focused on character, community, and practical competence. Drawing on current challenges in Nigerian education, the study advocated for a blended reform strategy that integrates indigenous knowledge, mother-tongue instruction, apprenticeship models, and community participation into the formal curriculum. It was concluded that reviving and reforming traditional education practices can enrich the national education framework, strengthen cultural continuity, and better equip youth with the skills and values needed for sustainable development in a globalized world.

Introduction

Nigeria's contemporary education system, shaped by colonial and Western models, has often marginalized indigenous learning. However, before the arrival of Islam and Christianity, African communities had well-established systems of teaching that prepared young people for life in their society. Traditional education in Nigeria

consists of informal, home, and community-based learning that immerses children in cultural values, practical skills, and social responsibility. Although often overlooked today, this system ensured that nearly every individual acquired trade, moral grounding, and a sense of belonging. Its aims include preserving cultural heritage, adapting youths to their environment, and

instilling values critical to communal survival. In contrast, Western-style schooling introduced under colonialism emphasized literacy, abstract knowledge, and white-collar careers, but often failed to equip many Nigerians with practical skills or cultural identity. As Ibe-Moses and Okafor (2021) observed, even though modern education had advantages, “a scrutiny of traditional education could bring a balance to our failing educational system”.

The growing disconnection between home and school in Nigeria has far-reaching consequences. Many Nigerian youths, exposed solely to formal classroom instruction, lack vocational competencies and a strong cultural identity, contributing to rising unemployment and social vices (Odumade, 2014). Globalization and urbanization have further widened this gap, denying children access to indigenous systems of education rooted in oral traditions, practical skills, and communal values (Ajayi, 2016). Scholars and cultural experts have warned that Nigeria’s rich fables, taboos, and oral traditions are being “crushed under the weight” of foreign influences, as language and culture rapidly shift under external pressures (Abimbola, 2006; Olatunji, 2020). In response, UNESCO (2003) advocated for the integration of cultural heritage into national curricula, asserting that

education grounded in indigenous knowledge can “equip students with skills that are invaluable in the workforce while promoting life skills, inclusivity, and global readiness. Against this background, this study revisits Nigeria’s traditional education system by calling for revival and reform.

Concept of Traditional Education

Traditional Nigerian education, often called “indigenous” or “folk education,” refers to learning that takes place naturally within a child’s cultural context, outside formal schools. It is community-centered and multi-faceted: children acquire knowledge and skills by observing and participating in their daily routines. Andrew Adegga noted that “traditional or indigenous education is an educational system in which the individual learns the values, culture, norms, skills, language, and habits of their own society,” deriving lessons from everyday experiences and relationships. In effect, a child is “taught” by family and kin through tasks, stories, ceremonies, and play, rather than by a teacher in the classroom.

Omolewa (2007) noted that informal and vocational training are at its core: every person is “practically trained and prepared for his/her role in society,” with storytelling, proverbs, and myths serving as learning tools. He

argued that traditional African education, though not written or standardized, always aimed at “excellence and quality” in a broad sense, combining physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual development. This implies that a child might learn history, ethics, and mathematics through practical activities such as counting tasks while farming or understanding laws through folk tales. In short, the boundaries between the subjects were blurred and knowledge was deeply contextual.

Ibe-Moses and Okafor (2021) highlighted that traditional children’s play literally mirrored adult duties, such as boys pretending to herd cattle. As soon as a child is physically able, he or she begins contributing to the community, whether by gathering firewood or carrying water, while also learning about that task. Elders then refine this knowledge; for example, a boy helping on the farm will eventually be sent off to learn specific farming techniques or animal husbandry under the guidance of a skilled parent or relative. This apprenticeship model implies that education is embedded in work. Ibe-Moses and Okafor also noted that the child learns about the trade of the family from cradle to adult life, so education and livelihood are inseparable.

Seven Cardinal Goals of Traditional Education

Fafunwa (1974), a renowned Nigerian educator, distilled the underlying objectives of traditional African education into seven cardinal goals. These goals illustrate the holistic purpose of the system.

- *Physical development:* To develop a child’s latent physical skills (coordination, strength, agility).
- *Character building:* To cultivate integrity, discipline, and moral character.
- *Respect for authority:* To inculcate respect for elders and persons of authority.
- *Intellectual development:* To develop a child’s intellectual skills (reasoning and problem-solving).
- *Vocational training:* Provides specific vocational skills and fosters a healthy attitude toward honest labor.
- *Community participation:* To develop a sense of belonging and ensure active participation in family and community affairs.
- *Cultural heritage:* To instill appreciation and promotion of the community’s cultural heritage.

These goals are implicitly achieved in everyday life. For example, physical games and dance developed agility, communal chores and village festivals taught cooperation and cultural values, and learning a trade under a parent imparted vocational competence and work ethics. According to Omolewa (2007), the ultimate aim of traditional

education was to produce “an individual who is honest, respectable, skilled, cooperative, and conforms to the social order of the day”, reflecting Fafunwa’s goals of traditional African education. However, traditional education seeks to train the whole child’s body, mind, and soul in preparation for adulthood.

Processes of Traditional Education

Traditional Nigerian education does not follow fixed classes or timetables. Instead, they operate through multiple overlapping processes that ensure learning at every stage of life. The key processes include the following:

- *Observational and imitative learning:* From infancy, children learn by watching their elders. For example, a child may learn farming practices by following a parent to the field or by observing her mother’s cooking and cleaning.
- *Oral tradition and storytelling:* Elders teach values and history through stories, songs, and proverbs. Moral lessons are woven into folktales, and practical knowledge is embedded in nursery rhymes or cautionary tales. This auditory method is continuous; lessons are imparted during communal gatherings, ceremonies, or even casual conversations.

- *Apprenticeship and hands-on training:* Beginning in early childhood, young people begin to assist adults in economic activities. Boys and girls are assigned tasks and are gradually assigned more responsibility. For instance, a boy helping to tend livestock is formally taught herding and animal care skills by his father. Special trades (weaving, carpentry, blacksmithing, medicine, etc.) are learned directly from master craftsmen or herbalists. Each youth acquires marketable skills through on-the-job training. This system ensures that every individual is economically productive, as no individual is left without a form of vocation that sustains the economy.
- *Rituals and ceremonies:* Cultural rites of passage during puberty, marriage, or other milestones serve educational purposes. For example, during initiation, elders intentionally teach taboos, communal laws, or sacred knowledge relevant to adulthood. Ceremonial gatherings for festivals or age-grade celebrations are also occasions for the intergenerational teaching of history, ethics, and communal responsibilities. In this way, formal lessons are embedded in cultural practices.

Comparison Between Traditional and Modern Education Systems

A side-by-side comparison between Nigeria's traditional and contemporary schooling.

	Traditional Education	Modern Education	Comparison
Orientation and Goals	Traditional education aims to integrate the individual into the community. Its content is broad and interwoven, encompassing morals, vocational skills, and social norms as a unified whole.	In contrast, modern education is often viewed as a way to individual advancement. Schools have fixed subjects and grades; learning is compartmentalized (separate classes for math, language, science, etc.).	The traditional African system was not rigidly compartmentalized, whereas Western schooling generally is. Modern schools emphasize measurable academic achievement and preparing students for jobs in a national or global economy. This leads to specialization and testing, at the expense of community-based objectives.
Teaching Methods	Traditional learning is inductive and participatory. Students learn by doing, observing and listening. For example, an aspiring farmer learns by actually farming with elders. Stories and proverbs are used instead of textbooks. A school building may not even be involved; learning can occur under trees, on family farms or in craft workshops.	Modern education is deductive and standardized: students sit in classrooms, follow a written curriculum, take exams, and receive instruction primarily from trained teachers using books and technology. The learning process is structured by academic year and lesson plans.	Whereas traditional teachers (parents, elders, artisans) were community members chosen for expertise, modern teachers are formally certified and often disconnected from local traditions.
Role of Learner	In traditional settings, learners are often expected to be active participants who eventually contribute (even children do chores). They ask few questions and accept knowledge as handed down.	In modern schools, students are encouraged to question and participate in discussions, though the system remains teacher-centered at times.	Both systems recognize respect for authority, but modern pedagogy at least nominally values curiosity and critical thinking (though resource constraints can limit this).
Content and Scope	The indigenous system's content is local: farming techniques, tribal history, indigenous religion, local ecology. It is essentially region-specific.	Modern education introduces national language (English), global history, and scientific theories.	Traditional education had little about global affairs or science, which modern schools provide. Conversely, modern schools usually ignore local crafts and community rites, which traditional schools teach by necessity.
Assessment and Progress	Progress in the traditional system is measured informally by competency. A child "graduates" from an age-grade by demonstrating skills (e.g., a boy must hunt successfully). There are no exams.	Modern education uses graded tests and certificates to mark progression. Success is based on passing standardized exams (e.g., WASSCE). This makes modern education more uniform but can also exclude students who do not fit the testing mold.	

Relevance of Traditional Education in Contemporary Nigeria

In today's Nigeria, revisiting traditional education is not about rejecting modernization but about enriching the modern system with indigenous strengths. Several contemporary needs highlight its relevance.

➤ **Preserving cultural identity:** With more than 500 ethnic groups, Nigeria's cultural diversity is immense. If schools ignore the local culture, children will lose touch with their roots. Olagbaju (2020) warns that the globalization of language and culture is "denying the Nigerian child access to his indigenous system of education," which risks the survival of local traditions. Embedding traditional content in schools (e.g., teaching folk tales, local history, and songs) can counteract this erosion. Parents and educators are increasingly concerned that youths lack knowledge of their heritage; reviving traditional elements can instill pride and continuity.

➤ **Community and life skills:** Traditional education imparted not only academic skills but also "vital life skills" such as cooperation, respect, resourcefulness, and adaptability. In contemporary Nigeria, these skills are crucial. For instance,

environmental stewardship is a modern concern; indigenous knowledge about local ecology (plants, soils, and weather patterns) can contribute to sustainable agriculture. Similarly, communal values, such as ubuntu (the idea that one's humanity is tied to others) can help address social fragmentation. UNESCO's Peter Okebukola notes that using culture in education "equips students with skills that are invaluable in the workforce and enhances cross-cultural communication. In a global economy, the sense of respect and teamwork learned from traditional education is a competitive advantage.

➤ **Addressing youth unemployment and skills gap:** One reason for the call to revive traditional education is practical: Nigeria suffers from high youth unemployment and a mismatch of skills. The focus of traditional schooling on vocational training can be helpful. By integrating apprenticeship models and technical crafts into modern schooling, graduates can leave with tangible skills. For example, merging traditional farming techniques and indigenous knowledge of crops with agricultural education can improve food production. The current National Policy on Education (2013) acknowledges this need: it

mandates that early schooling be conducted in the native language to make learning more meaningful. This policy reflects traditional pedagogy: teaching children first in their home language, showing an official recognition of indigenous principles.

➤ **Social inclusion and equity:**

Traditional education is inclusive in nature, engaging in all ages and backgrounds. Modern schools can learn from this and become more accessible. In particular, reaching nomadic, rural, or marginalized communities has been a challenge for formal education (Fulani pastoralists often do not benefit from stationary schools). Adapting schooling to respect local lifestyles, for example, having mobile schools or flexible calendars that align with herding seasons, echoes the traditional accommodation of learners' circumstances. Such reforms could improve attendance and retention.

➤ **Intercultural**

understanding: Teaching traditional culture in schools not only strengthens identity, but can also promote unity across ethnic lines. If every Nigerian child learns about the values and practices of other tribes alongside their own, empathy is built. This is important for a multiethnic nation. Emphasizing a shared African

educational heritage (as opposed to a purely Western model) can foster a more inclusive national culture.

Reviving and Reforming Traditional Education

To reap the benefits of Nigeria's indigenous education system, deliberate reforms are needed to revive useful traditional practices while adapting them for the 21st century, including the following:

➤ **Curriculum integration:** A formal curriculum should incorporate indigenous knowledge and methods. This could mean dedicated subjects or modules to the local culture, ethics, and livelihoods. Schoolchildren might study local history, traditional music, or folk literature as part of social studies or arts. Ibe-Moses and Okafor (2021) suggested re-evaluating practices such as communal learning, folktales, and group activities alongside modern subjects. Incorporating storytelling and local proverbs into language lessons would make education more culturally relevant. Importantly, teacher training programs can prepare educators to use these tools; teachers should learn to value and teach indigenous content.

➤ **Mother-tongue and bilingual education:** Consistent with national policy, early grade instruction should be in students' home languages, gradually transitioning to English.

Research has shown that children learn best in their first language. This practice, rooted in traditional learning (which naturally uses community language), can improve literacy and comprehension. After primary school, schools can continue offering courses in local languages (literature, oral history, etc.) to reinforce their cultural identity. Such language policy reforms would make education more inclusive of rural and minority communities.

- **Skill-based and vocational programs:** Schools should re-emphasize practical skill training. Technical and vocational education (TVET) can be expanded to teach agriculture, crafts, and trade that mirror traditional vocations. For instance, secondary schools may have workshops for local crafts (weaving, pottery, and carpentry) or school farms managed by students. As Ibe-Moses and Okafor conclude, education should be developed along Nigerians' "vocational and cultural lives." Furthermore, linking students with local artisans and farmers through apprenticeship schemes can formalize what used to happen in villages. For many youths not seeking white-collar jobs, this approach promises job readiness and entrepreneurship.
- **Community and family involvement:** Traditional education thrived because learning took place in

extended families and communities. Schools can revive this by involving parents and the elderly as instructors. Community elders, artisans, and leaders can be invited to schools to demonstrate their skills or give talk. In remote areas, schools might be organized on communal lines (as are traditional age-grade associations), promoting peer teaching and mentorship. School calendars can be made flexible to allow students to help farms when needed. Additionally, validating indigenous achievements (giving credit for skills learned at home) would honor community learning. Such reforms echo the recommendation from Nigeria's educational history to include animal husbandry and local labor practices in the curriculum.

- **Use of technology and documentation:** Modern tools can preserve and propagate traditional knowledge. Projects to record oral histories, proverbs, and songs via video or audio archives would prevent heritage loss. Schools can use digital platforms to connect rural knowledge holders to urban students. Mobile apps and educational radio programs (broadcast in local languages) can teach rural children science and math through culturally relevant stories. While not a traditional method per se, these approaches adapt indigenous content to modern media, aligning with suggestions that technologies

can bridge the gap in teaching heritage knowledge.

- **Policy support and funding:** The government and NGOs should support these changes. Curriculum development bodies (such as the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council) can officially embed cultural content in national curricula. Education policies could provide grants for schools that implement indigenous programs or create incentives for universities to train teachers in traditional pedagogy. Public awareness campaigns (through media and teacher workshops) can promote respect for indigenous learning among parents and teachers. UNESCO's call for "education through culture" should be operationalized in policy and practice, ensuring that cultural education is not just an idea, but a funded priority.

Conclusion

Nigeria's traditional education system, long viewed as superseded by Western education, contains valuable lessons that remain relevant. It focuses on character, community, and practical skills, and produces generations of Nigerians grounded in their culture and capable of vocation. Although it lacked formal literacy and tended toward conservatism, the core ideals of traditional education (such as respect for elders, communal responsibility, and work-based

learning) continue to offer solutions to modern challenges such as unemployment, cultural erosion, and social disunity. However, contemporary policymakers and educators should do well to revisit this heritage to preserve its strengths and reform its weaknesses through its integration with formal education. A reformed education system that respects Nigeria's traditions will be more inclusive, practical, and adaptive, better serving the nation's developmental goals while honoring the wisdom of its ancestors.

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