

## THE PROBLEM OF PRIMITIVE EDUCATION WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE IBO OF NIGERIA\*

J. B. C. ETUKA OKALA

*Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois*

Many definitions have been given to the word "education" by deans of psychology and education. Underlying all these definitions, there is an admission that education is what remains after all the Geometry, Latin, or Biology that has been learned is taken away. In other words, education is the process of orienting the child to the full utilization of his culture. Whether it has led him up into the fullest, noblest and most fruitful relationship with the world in which he finds himself, and thus has fitted him for the struggle of life is the significant consideration for education.

We are not, however, concerned with "education" in terms of schools, colleges and universities. Our chief interest in this paper is: How did the native African in general and the Ibo in particular get his education and what kind of education did he get? To answer this query we must first make sure of the psychology behind the primitive form of education. It was an attempt of the adults to guide the future generation into the behavior patterns and value systems into which they themselves had been led. In other words, primitive African education is a legacy handed down from one generation to the next so that the practices and items of knowledge that were current during the great ancestors' life-time might continue in forms as near as possible to the ancient customs and usages.

In strict parallel to the modern theory which states that education starts at birth, the education of the Ibo child starts at birth. In Iboland there is a ceremony immediately after the birth of a child. This ceremony known as Maa-Maa consists of a chant by a group of men, women and children:

Child when you grow up be a good man—Maa maa

When you are a man have sense, have tact—Maa maa

When you are a man tell mother to buy you a hoe—Maa maa

Then start to go to farm and work out yams—Maa maa

Mother tells you word, hear [= obey]  
Father tells you word, hear [= obey]

And in modern times such lines as the following have been incorporated:

When you grow up ask mother to buy you slate—Maa maa

That you may learn book and work out money—Maa maa

The native belief is that the foregoing makes an impression on the undeveloped mind of the new-born child. The modern educational psychologist would, however, be relieved of his anxiety on hearing of such a wasted lesson period by reflecting on the fact that the grown-up children who joined in the ceremony were enabled to hear for themselves what took place at their own Maa-maa ceremony.

For a long time the child receives no direct instructions as to his behavior. But his presence in the family as a new-born child affords the material for the instruction of others. For example, the grown-up girls, who expect to be mothers some day, are given object lessons in the nursing and care of their own babies when they have them.

Later, when the child is eight days old, the naming ceremony furnishes the setting for a historical survey of the family. Every Ibo name has a meaning and the meaning either summarizes the historical background of the child's family or the circumstances of his birth or the hope of what the child will be. The review of family history included in these rites has an obvious effect on the half-grown children who are present.

As we can see, then, the social significance of Ibo names is of considerable importance in the process of education. Names of outstanding warriors are given to children in order to immortalize the

\* Contribution from the Collegiate Section.

achievements of great generals and fighters and also to provide suitable standards for the children to emulate. We say: "Agua onye afa chi ya analu"—If we give a name to a child, his god accepts it. This implies that the child will be expected to have supernatural aid in living up to the standards set by the great man whose name he bears.

The child's whole philosophy of life may be tempered by his knowledge of family feuds and injustices which are revealed in the names of the other children of the polygamous household to which he belongs.

I shall now consider the first step mentioned: Nursing. The Ibo give no solid or nourishing food for the first three days. During this time the baby is given only water. Because the mother's milk is unfit for the child's use at this time, treatment is given to make the milk healthy and useable. The child is nursed at 6 a. m., again at 9 a. m. or 10 a. m., and at equal intervals throughout the day and when it cries. A young maiden who may be privileged to study infant nursing observes in minutest detail the whole procedure of nursing. She is free to ask questions but is regarded as a "dunce" if she asks questions on points she should have observed herself. After an apprenticeship of about three months the young girl takes over the bathing and care of the child.

As soon as the child is able to go about and to play with other children, the mother's duty is to find out the type of children the child plays with. Sometimes the child is commanded to keep away from a particular boy who may be known to be dishonest or disrespectful to elders. In the ubiquitous mud pie plays, children symbolically express what they have seen the older folks do in ordinary life.

Until the child is about eight years old, his credulity is much exploited. It should be explained that, in Iboland, the water supply for drinking and domestic purposes is stored in earthen pots. These are usually placed in a cool corner of the house. On the cover of the pot in which drinking water has been stored are to be seen as many as three to five cups, all turned upside down. Should the child form a habit of leaving the cups unturned after drinking, the mother orders him to turn over the cup. Otherwise, he is told, he will expose himself to the ghost who

drinks from any cup that is left unturned. The child obeys, not knowing that the real purpose is to prevent dirt or ants from falling into the cup and ultimately into the pot.

Proper meal-time manners are strictly inculcated. Washing of hands before meals is compulsory. The rule is: Wash your hands and eat, or do not wash your hands and do not eat. The child is told that if he sits down for a meal and leans to one side with one hand on the floor, the earth will eat all the food through the hand on which he leans and he will remain hungry. He is also told that if he hurries over his meal he will be caught by a ghost in the latrine. The above methods do succeed in inculcating correct hygienic practices.

As for personal hygiene, the child is helped to wash or bathe himself. This assistance is only meant to help the child to know to what parts of his body he should devote more time. A schedule of two baths a day is a pleasure to the child. The underlying reason is apparent when we take into consideration the climate of his homeland. From about the age of nine no child expects an elder to help him keep his body clean.

In addition to the foregoing methods of education the child depends on his personal observations. From the age of about nine, the male child accompanies his father to the farm, while the girl accompanies her mother to the market. The girl from this time on acquaints herself with domestic duties and the boy learns farm-craft by observing what others do on his father's farm. On the farm the boy's father teaches him the rudiments of agriculture.

In the market the girl is taught the intricacies of buying and selling. The child notices that her mother at the outset of any bargain will quote a price almost double what she has paid for her commodity she is about to sell to a customer. The customer in turn offers a price just a little below the cost price. The seller herself then makes a little reduction from her first price. The customer is thus tempted to offer a new price, this time well above the cost price. Further inducements are tried in an attempt to persuade the customer to offer more, and sometimes these are effective. After the encounter has ended the girl will probably fire a barrage of questions

concerning problems in trade. These questions are carefully answered and gradually the girl is allowed to attempt independent ventures.

In addition to individual training given by parents, training in folklore and good citizenship is given by the different secret societies and age group organizations. Most of the boys clubs are organized on a basis similar to the Boy Scout organization. The "Mbekwe" club, for example, meets at regular intervals to enjoy communal meals and to limelight each member's activities. This club prepares the boys for more advanced secret societies. "Respect of womanhood" is the motto of the club.

One culture trait that has contributed much to Ibo education is the lavish use of folk-literature—tales, proverbs, and riddles. Proverbs are used not only to point morals for young and old alike, but as signals or warnings against proposed actions. Children of about five to eight years of age who have been learning how to count by naming the constellations in rhymes and jingles will also be plied with brain teasers—riddles—before an old man tells a folk-tale to wind up an evening. Most of the tales are ornamented with folk-songs and dance-songs. At the end of the tale a free discussion generally follows on what each hearer could have done if he had been placed in some of the situations encountered by the hero of the tale.

I have defined education as that process which operates to bring the individual to

the fullest, noblest and most fruitful relationship with the world in which he lives. In modern American culture economic and social specialization and complexity have necessitated an educational system which is equally specialized and complex. In order to implement this kind of educational system, unusually elaborate institutions have developed. Because of pre-occupation with these specialized educational institutions, European and American educators have been forced to ignore or de-emphasize certain underlying educational processes which go on in all cultures, primitive or non-primitive.

Ibo culture, which incidentally is far from the stereotype of so-called primitive simplicity, has felt no need until recently for the erection of an educational superstructure of grammar-schools, high-schools and colleges on the European pattern. These became necessary only when the Ibo found that he had to compete with the European on the European's own terms. As I have indicated in this paper Ibo education has been focused primarily on the fundamental problem of orienting the child in his culture.

In the main the Ibo (and to a certain extent the "primitive") system of education emphasizes just those phases of child-rearing which are left in Western culture to more or less haphazard conditioning by parents and playmates. It is, despite this difference in emphasis, none the less an efficiently functioning system of education.