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**PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION
OF NIGERIAN EDUCATION IDEAS**

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**TAI SOLARIN AND EDUCATION FOR SELF-RELIANCE:
A PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE**

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Abstract

Over the years, western education has been widely accepted by many African countries to design their respective educational policies. Philosophical thinkers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, etc, have been major influences in their quest for good educational policies. Although, there may appear to be defects or deficiencies in the educational practices of these traditional educational systems however, the neglect of their own ideas which are peculiar and relevant to their societies have become the bane in the development of their educational systems. While nothing may be wrong with appropriating educational ideas from non-African cultural backgrounds, total rejection of their own models of education is uncalled for. This paper therefore examines the ideas of Dr. Taiwo Solarin on Education for Self-reliance as a way out of the educational doldrums these countries are plunged into which, among others, had resulted in unemployment particularly, in Nigeria. The paper notes that although Nigeria's education is rooted in self-reliance as stated in the National Policy on Education, commitment however, is only at the level of policy articulation. Using philosophical and analytical methodology, the paper examines education for self-reliance and posits that the present educational policy stifles the graduates' initiatives to apply their theoretical knowledge

pragmatically. The paper explores the views on education which reflects African cultural experiences based on vocational and technical education. The paper affirms that Nigeria is blessed with great thinkers and in our march to educational greatness, the paper concludes by advocating for the integration of Tai Solarin's educational idea into the National Policy on Education in order to tackle unemployment in Nigeria.

Introduction

Over time, it has been difficult giving a precise definition to unemployment. In the Great Britain, the department of Employment accepts as unemployment any school leaver who is not in paid employment but who is available for work and is capable of working¹. The Census Bureau of the United States of America accepts Lloyd G. Reynold's definition of unemployment as the difference between the amount of labour offered at present wage levels and working conditions, and the amount of labour hired at that level. Underemployment on the other hand is measured by the number of hours worked. Those who work for less than forty hours a week for voluntary reasons in Nigeria are considered underemployed². According to Smith Akewushola, Olateju and Adeyemi³, unemployment is a stock concept. This is because the number and identities of people in the labour category are always changing and therefore affect the level of those in the market. Unemployment has also been categorised as one of the serious impediments to social progress; apart from representing a waste of a country's manpower resources, it generates welfare loss in terms of lower output thereby leading to lower income and well-being⁴. Unemployment is a very serious issue in Africa, particularly, in Nigeria⁵. The need to avert the negative effects of unemployment has made the tackling of unemployment problems to feature very prominently in the development objectives of many developing countries. Thus, it is obvious to many policy makers that there must be a straight forward connection between education and employment/unemployment. Tai Solarin's philosophy of Self-reliance offers the hope of connecting education and employment issues.

Tai Solarin, famous in Nigeria as both a social critic and an educator, was born in 1922, educated in a Nigerian missionary school, served in the British Royal Air Force during the World War II, and finished a bachelor's degree in History and Geography at the University of Manchester, Great Britain in 1952. Tai returned to western Nigeria to become the principal of Molusi College, Ijebu-igbo, in Ogun state from 1952 to 1955. As a result of Molusi College Governing board's forceful commencement of each day with hymns and prayers, and march his students to church every Sunday, he protested and eventually quitted. He wasted no time as he started his own school, Mayflower School in 1956, followed by the Mayflower Junior School in 1959, both located at Ikenne, south western Nigeria, where Tai lived for the rest of his life. He was one of the most prominent educationalists in the history of Nigeria, and was at the vanguard of criticism of not only the social, political and economic policies of the country, but also of the structure and practices of its education system.

Theoretical Conceptualisation and Clarification

In employing philosophical and analytical method to examine Tai Solarin's ideas on self-reliance education, it is important to conceptualise education. The term education is quite elusive and very difficult to pin down to a single definition because numerous authorities in different fields have described it as it appeals to them. As difficult as the definition of

education may be, in his *Philosophical Foundations of Reform in Higher Education*, Babarinde⁶ simply described education as the total sum of what is left after we might have forgotten all we learnt in schools. Citing Peters⁷, Babarinde asserted that

it is a process of being initiated into knowledge and understanding which in turn regulates the recipients' attitudes, emotions, wants and actions. The recipient has to be more than just 'knowledgeable', the knowledge has to alter his view of the world that is, the interpersonal world, the world of social, economic and political institutions. While these knowledge and understanding have to be worthwhile, the process of acquisition must also be ethically defensible. And these processes include all organisational models in which these processes are promoted. They include the formal, non-formal, informal and casual modes⁸.

This implies that education is expected to restructure the recipient in order to transform his society positively. The knowledge acquired by the learner must have been through morally approved methods.

Education is an indispensable factor in the all round development of any nation. The genesis of Nigeria's traditional education was progressive in nature because of its emphasis on functionalism. Enoh⁹ stated that traditional African education is not admired for the mere facts of its being indigenous to Africa rather, a mere permanent justification thought. Babs Fafunwa gave the seven cardinal goals of traditional African education to include; the development of the child's latent physical skills, the development of character, respect for elders and peers, intellectual training (including the poetic and prophetic aspects, vocational training which includes agricultural education, trade and crafts), the acquisition of specific vocational training to develop a healthy attitude towards honest labour, the development of communal spirit, and promotion of cultural heritage. The success or failure of an education system is usually measured in terms of the extent to which it has attained its main objectives. Upon the imposition of western style of education, Africans viewed education as a central body of essential knowledge that must be transmitted to all who came to school. In imparting knowledge to the learner therefore, a teacher could use different methods of teaching like the lecture or play-way methods, while the learner was expected to learn what the teacher taught by memorisation and reproduction of the same on the examination day.

Over the years, self-reliance has been advanced by many African states men and scholars as a viable alternative strategy to dependence on the developing countries. As a matter of fact, self-reliance is one of the bases of effective community development in the traditional pre-colonial African society. This concept of self-reliance is located centrally within the discourse of African pre-colonial community development and largely connected to related concepts like self-help, mutual-help, indigenous participation and rural development.

The needs for local alternatives and self-reliance have been voiced in more explicit terms by other scholars. For example, Brett¹⁰ has called for cooperative and voluntary alternatives, while Sandbrook¹¹ has emphasised the need for small-scale community solutions. In its fundamental sense therefore, self-reliance is defined as a state of mind that regards one's own mental and material resources as the primary stock to draw on in the pursuit of

one's own objectives, and finds emotional fulfilment not only in achieving the objectives but of having them primarily by using one's own resources. This asserts that the development of related skills and attitudes of a people can enable them to satisfy their basic needs in order to be self-reliant, and to minimise dependence on agencies external to their communities.

Tai Solarin's Education for Self-reliance and Unemployment

Tai Solarin was in love with the traditional communal African societies, this he attributed to the absence of laziness. According to him, every individual had something productive to offer for the good of all. His belief was that the traditional African communalistic societies discouraged their members from substituting work with prayer. To him, even though they prayed, they were more on their heads than on their knees¹². This may therefore account for Solarin's espousal of humanism, which places a high premium on the human being. Solarin observed that among Nigerians, the absence of the spirit of self-reliance and resourcefulness has given way to indolence, parasitism and attraction of anything foreign.

The history of education from the on-set to the present time and the changes that has taken place showed clearly that each reform or change is preceded by a new idea or philosophy. It can be said that Plato, Socrates and Aristotle, discovered the main principles of education thus, making education a weapon of liberation from ignorance, poverty and diseases. Soren Kierkegaard, Maxine Greene, Jean Paul Sartre and others propounded existentialism. They emphasised freedom, choice and responsibility in their ideas, rejected traditional metaphysics and tried to restore man as the master of his world rather than being slaves to destiny, a god or devil or even technology. Julius Kambarage Nyerere of Tanzania is known not only as one of the world's most respected statesmen and an articulate spokesman of African liberation and African dignity, but also as an educator and an original and creative educational thinker. Apart from his involvement in politics, Nyerere was an articulate theorist of education whose views deserve more explanation. Nyerere's views on education can be located within the nationalistic ideological view of education in Africa. A characteristic of this position is the view that education has to reflect and sustain national priorities, aims and aspirations. In addition, it has to translate the national ideology into curriculum¹³. Nyerere first articulated this idea in 1967 later, he reflected upon this view and modified it into education for liberation. Anyanwu's position was not different from the stand of Tanzanian president, Julius Nyerere, when he asserted that self-help enables the local people to exploit their advantage resources, which would otherwise lie dormant and thereby perpetuate the ignorance and poverty of their community, by making use of the under-utilised labour. The emphasis is on democratising with reliance on what people can do for themselves. In line with the above, Nyerere's publications articulated education for independent Tanzania and by extension, for Africa. Such publications include *Education for Self-reliance* (1967), and *Adult Education and Development* (1976).

In the history of Nigeria, Dr. Tai Solarin provided a very comprehensive philosophy of education which is sensitive to both the school and the society. He believed that the gateway to societal transformation is the transformation of the school system itself. Solarin had an optimistic view of the individual and of the society. In his view, both can become anything

depending on how they choose, and on whether or not they accept responsibility for their choices. There is also a clear pragmatic thrust in Solarin's philosophy that is, a system of thought which stresses the human being's use of intelligence to overcome problems that confront him/her in his/her interactions with the environment¹⁴. He opined that we choose to become, and can only become what we want to be, not through prayer, but hard work, persistence and courage. The implication of this is that the inculcation of self-reliance through problem-solving skills ought to be central to education.

Philosophically, liberalism envisions the ideal society to be one that embraces a wide range of individual liberties that is, within the liberal environment. It is evident that the enjoyment of individual freedoms and rights often infringe on other peoples' freedoms leading to tensions and conflicts. Tai's vision of society was based on self-reliance philosophy that essentially under-scored anti-capitalist socio-economic milieu. In this case, Tai's world view tends to be at variance with liberalism. On the other hand, different cultures have different established values just as conservatives in different cultures have differing goals such as the preservation of social classes. Conservatism is usually propagated by the elite who enjoy state machinery to protect and preserve the status quo in the society. Tai's world view tends to cohere with the conservative theory to some reasonable extent. First, he espoused self-reliance as the basis of social and economic development; work by everyone, fair sharing of resources collectively produced and respect for human dignity. Essentially, indigenous African communalism which frowned at indolence was to be adopted and adapted to Nigeria. The above theories however depict a scenario where Tai's ideas relate more with conservatism than liberalism whereas, Tai did not categorically state specific affiliation to either.

Solarin identified what to him are the problems confronting the education system in Nigeria. Pertinent among these are parasitism and indolence, emphasis on paper qualifications and enslavement of the mind. Accordingly, he opined that education should aim to inculcate in individuals the habit of work, and to equip them with the necessary skills that will enable them to contribute their quota to the growth of the society rather than remain huge parasites. Education should therefore be more of the development of problem-solving skills with which to confront the various challenges of life, rather than the acquisition of information that will never be put to productive use. He was of the view that it is impossible for a country to change if the education of that country is not undergoing a change; a change no matter how infinitesimal, is only possible with the education of the people¹⁵.

Solarin affirms further that the colonial education bequeathed to Africans did not awaken their critical consciousness. Rather than free an individual's mental powers, this education promotes fear of almost everything; parents, teachers, day-light, darkness, thinking and speaking¹⁶. Solarin primarily attributes this mental enslavement to the veil of religion which allegedly preaches fatalism and renders the individual irrelevant even to him/herself. Consequently for Solarin, the goal of education should be the building of a new community

by producing individuals who can stand on their feet, men and women who are mentally free and independent¹⁷.

Solarin's educational ideas made him to establish the Mayflower School founded in January 31, 1956 on a vast piece of land in Ikenne, Ogun state, Nigeria. The school was named after the historical Mayflower ship that brought the first batch of pilgrims to the United States of America. Mayflower preaches a very strong educational philosophy grounded in self-reliance, self-sacrifice, public service and physical toughness. In Solarin's words, the students must be 'rugged'. A rigorous, military-style living regime requires that every student wake up at 5:15am for a round of moderate physical exercise which involved running and in-field stretches. In his days, Dr. Solarin urged his students to always 'lead' by example'. The school's motto is 'Knowledge is Light', and it is noted for the outstanding quality of its graduates, many of whom are leaders in Nigeria and abroad. The school's sound academic reputation has produced a long record of achievements, including the first female engineer in sub-Saharan Africa.

Akinsanya¹⁸ quoted in Akinpelu.¹⁹ noted that the philosophical principles of the experiment which are worthy of pursuit include the do-it-yourself philosophy which made the students join even in the construction of their own classrooms, dormitories, dining hall and recreation grounds, in baking of their own bread, washing of their plates, providing their own magazines, and so on. The above tenets of Solarin's Mayflower experiment in self-reliance embraced the various aspects of the concepts in education for self-reliance in the sense that it allowed the students freedom to experiment in various practical ways. This gave them confidence, knowledge, skills and self-assurances to try out something new. This no doubt involved some sacrifices whether of convenience or of some ideal standard. Throughout his lifetime, Tai Solarin, in his trademark khaki shorts, shirts and cap, was very critical of Nigeria's gross unemployment, as well as the prevalent preoccupation with fleeting pleasures rather than a collective commitment to enduring virtues. For Dr. Solarin, commitment to high ideals and the value of hard work, honesty and sincerity, count much more than mere celebrations. This charismatic visionary ensured that Mayflower School imparted academics with vocational skills. If his message of self-reliance had been embraced, many of our unemployed graduates would have been in self-employment; for the Nigerian curriculum would have combined the best of academics with the best in entrepreneurial training. If that had been the case, the current overdependence on white-collar jobs would not have been our lot.

The essence of highlighting these attempts at education for self-reliance by Solarin was to showcase that a nation can turn its own philosophy and system of education, if it decides to, and most importantly, Nigeria's educational system can be modified in this direction so as to match the policy statement of self-reliance in her National Policy on Education with action in order to liberate the nation from much dependence on other countries for her domestic needs in food production and in reducing unemployment level in the country which has resulted in the present social, economic and political crises today in Nigeria. Rather than paying lip-service to vocational and technical education at the level of policy articulation alone, it is highly indispensable for stringent measures to be put in place to facilitate resourcefulness, self-realisation, self-sufficiency and above all, self-reliance.

Another aim of education for Solarin is mental freedom. In his opinion, an educated person is essentially one who is autonomous, reflective, critical and capable of making choices without undue external influence. To him, a curriculum is only relevant if it grows out of the peculiar circumstances of the living environment in which the school is situated, and in so far as it helps the individual to understand that environment. The school system is therefore society simplified. Thus, for Solarin, the curriculum should be made relevant to local needs. Solarin outlines a very detailed curriculum plan for the primary school level based on the principles of validity, relevance to life, variety and suitability. At the secondary school level, he insisted that all students should study science and acquire vocational skills²⁰. Solarin believes that the humanities (religion excluded) should be taught at all levels, so as to bring about a broad understanding of the human being on the one hand, and to create a balance between such knowledge and practical disposition towards the betterment of the society on the other hand. A very low place is accorded to sports in Solarin's educational philosophies and ideas.

Solarin believed that at the tertiary level, the curriculum should be extensive in order to cater for the varied interests of the learners. He recommended a general curriculum during the first year, with specialisation in the later years. Whether in History, Geography, Science or Music, it was his belief that what is included in the curriculum must be relevant to life. On the whole, Solarin's curriculum is characterised by relevance, suitability to the learners' level of attainment, balance between practical and academic studies, a common practical scheme for all in order to avoid parasitism by some, highly informal character, teaching through practice rather than theory, and relating subject matter to the present²¹. Solarin recommended a method of group learning through research in order for students to discover facts on their own. He also advocated a democratic conception of education, where there is a free dialogue between the teachers and students, between the school management and the students union, and between the school and the local communities.

As an atheist and vehement critic of irrationality and hypocrisy, Tai Solarin rarely supported religion in Nigeria. He opined that

Nigeria is dying today of religion and outrageous religious beliefs. The worst bane of African non-development is chronic dependence on the deity to solve all earthly problems. Blacks hold on to their God just as the drunken holds on to the street lamp for physical support only²².

Like a prophet, northern Nigeria is presently drowned by Islamic fundamentalism. He therefore asserted that to get the young Africans weaned from their almost congenital reliance on fate, they must be educated to stand on their feet²³.

When Tai Solarin wrote about his own moral philosophical ideals, his true humanism was well revealed. He asserted that anything that man wants to do must be done by man himself. Anywhere he wants to go, he must personally propel himself aggressively in that direction. He further teaches that prayer is useless, and that it is better to teach people how to solve their problems, and to give them the power and freedom to act. According to him, he wants to be teaching the poor how to live creatively by making use of his hands and feet

and not giving alms to the poor.

Also significant in Solarin's thoughts are his remarks on equal educational opportunities. Denouncing all forms of discrimination, he avers that all Nigerians have equal rights to education, so that obstacles such as social status, gender and religion should not be erected in the way of equal access to it²⁴, and it is in full recognition of this democratic concept of education that Solarin advocated the boarding school system. He asserted that it is the best welder of the various peoples in a country into an indivisible mould.

Dr. Solarin teaches self-reliance for education as well as commitment to Nigeria as a nation. As far as Tai knows, Mayflower is the only school that does not teach a particular religion or lead the students in hymns and prayers. He has actively opposed church ownership of the school since 1952, yet they still remain almost entirely sectarian. Tai remarks that if national devotion to religion is what makes a country great, then Spain and Portugal should have become the greatest nations on earth. Nevertheless, he allowed his Christian students to build their own chapel on the school ground, as long as no school money went into its construction or maintenance, and no time was lost from their studies. Tai also blames the many sectarian schools for dividing Nigeria. As a result of their innate competitiveness, they undermined any chance of teaching a common Nigerian nationalism. The result is that rather than rallying behind Nigeria in a national crisis, people rally behind the banner of their particular creed, and that leads to ethnic violence.

In the light of this, we face daunting odds for the most part in Nigeria. For our young people, it is not a level playing field. Children attending schools in the industrialised countries are learning to use information and communications equipment simultaneously with learning to write, often at age five (5) or six (6). A Nigerian child is not so fortunate. On the strength of this, there is the need for a new focus on overhauling our education system in order to compete favourably with other countries in the world in terms of development, self-sufficiency, productivity and self-reliance. Other countries have managed to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Malaysia and South Africa are good examples showing exactly what is possible. Nigeria is blessed with abundant natural resources and few environmental challenges. The country is however squandering her precious natural resources – the human resources – mostly through lack of pragmatic quality education which has more often than not resulted in productive youths either travelling abroad in search of greener pasture or engage in fraudulent activities due to non availability of the white collar jobs our educational process groomed them for.

Conclusion and recommendation

Educational development and expansion as we know does not necessarily make people of countries more prosperous instead, it may (and does) leave the graduates without jobs and the schools with increasingly burdensome claims on public funds; a view coherently corroborated in Nigerian educational system right from the colonial education system to the present one, with the rise of formal education on one hand, and a general neglect of economic and local realities on the other, resulting in the dearth of viable manpower. This consequently accounts for the wide economic gap between developing and developed coun-

tries which is traceable to their level of technological advancement and the extent to which vocational and technological education is encouraged and pursued. It is in this regard that this paper proposes the integration of Dr. Tai Solarin's Education for Self-reliance into Nigeria's National Policy on Education and sincere implementation of same in the nation's educational system.

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