Rediscovering Our Roots: Character Education in Pre-Colonial Sub-Saharan Africa and Its Relevance Today

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Posted Date: 26 September 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202509.2138.v1

Keywords: character education; African indigenous education; African philosophy of education; African initiation rites; informal education

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.2138.v1

Article

Rediscovering Our Roots: Character Education in Pre-Colonial Sub-Saharan Africa and Its Relevance Today

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Abstract

African indigenous character education remains highly relevant today as it offers valuable insights into addressing contemporary societal challenges. Rooted in communal principles like Ubuntu, it emphasizes respect, responsibility, cooperation, and social cohesion—qualities essential for navigating modern complexities. Initiation rites, once central to guiding youth into adulthood, instilled discipline, perseverance, and community values, laying a strong foundation for societal harmony. These rites' holistic approach, though critiqued for certain traditional practices, highlights the enduring need for structured moral and social training in youth development. The home, particularly under the guidance of mothers as primary educators, was the bedrock of African moral education. Through storytelling and cultural modeling, mothers nurtured values that prepared children for community life. This informal, lifelong education extended into the broader society, emphasizing interconnectedness and collective well-being. African oral literature, encompassing fables, myths, and proverbs, remains a powerful medium for transmitting moral values and cultural wisdom. These narratives address universal themes like trust, empathy, and fairness while preserving African heritage. The marginalization of indigenous education by Arab and European systems disrupted this cultural framework. Revitalizing traditional practices, while addressing historical limitations, offers a balanced educational model that fosters cultural identity, moral integrity, and resilience for modern African societies.

Keywords: character education; African indigenous education; African philosophy of education; African initiation rites; informal education

Introduction

As an African, I am proud that my ancestors valued character education long before Islamic and Christian values were introduced by Arabs and Europeans in. This paper aims at encouraging Africans to reconnect with their heritage and embrace character education in both formal and informal settings. It explores the role of character education within indigenous Sub-Saharan African societies in five parts: the nature of African indigenous education, the philosophical principles underlying it, initiation rites, the role of the mother and home, and oral literature. The paper also briefly introduces foreign education systems. While African indigenous education was primarily practiced before colonization, it still persists in some rural communities today.

Character Education Assimilated Within Indigenous Education

The word "education" is derived from the Latin term "*educare*," meaning "*to lead, to draw out*," or "*to guide*" (Gioia, 2019), implying "*bringing up a child to maturity*." The Sub-Saharan African societies began educating their young ones long before the continent had any contact with the outside world, such as Europe, the Arab world, and the Americas (Mosweunyane, 2013). With few exceptions (e.g., Eritrea, Ethiopia and Egypt) the pre-colonial system of education was informal; lacking scripts,

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.2138.v1

documented curriculum, and specific schedule for teaching and learning. Often education was provided through everyday experiences, interactions, and cultural practices within a community. Teaching and learning was typically unstructured, with knowledge and skills being passed down from one generation to another through observation, participation, and oral traditions (Sifuna, 1990).

Education is not necessarily synonymous with schooling but involves bringing up a young person to maturity, whether it is in an informal, formal or non-formal approaches (Bennaars, Otiende, & Boisvert (1994). The main goal of the informal approach was to enable African societies to preserve and transmit their values, fostering well-rounded individuals in all aspects of life (Ajira, 2004). In this system, every adult took the role of instructing while every young person was a learner. The African saying "the whole village brings up the child" emphasizes the communal responsibility in raising children, where everyone in the community—parents, relatives, and neighbors—plays a role in guiding, nurturing, and educating the young. Educating the young reflected the collective effort to instill values, morals, and life skills, ensuring that the child grows into a responsible and well-rounded adult within the society, and was an ongoing specialization of transmission of knowledge, values, skills, wisdom, and traditions from one generation to the next. The emphasize was on promoting good morals and social conduct and condemning any action or behavior that tended to hinder the development of acceptable behavior (Makoba, 2017).

Two other goals of this education were to appreciate the culture and obey authority and the law. Adults narrated the history of the community and the heroes who contributed to the greatness of their people. The cultural practices passed from generation to generation were also narrated to impress moral values upon the young generation. The community's authority figures, such as elders, parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, had roles and privileges, depending on their age and gender. Each community had laws for various human functions, such as marriages, funerals, engagements, murders, wars, divorces, and inheritances, which had to be respected and adhered to. Therefore, the indigenous education had to achieve awareness of existed traditional laws among the young generation (Makoba, 2017).

Ajira (2004: para. 7 & 10) stated that another goal of traditional African education was:

To promote good morals in society. Every society is concerned about fostering moral character in children and forming responsible citizens. Thus, traditional education also targets the development of moral character in children. The learners were instructed on how to behave in a good manner in society... The learner develops physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, and socially; powerful education must consider their development in all these aspects.

In pre-colonial Africa, moral education was an integral part of cultural practice. Children were taught communal expectations directly and indirectly as they lived their daily lives. Matemba (2010), referring to Sub-Saharan Africa, noted that:

As children played, engaged in societal practices (such as worship, funerals, marriage, and hunting), and interacted with parents, relatives, and other adults, they became knowledgeable not only about the essentials of their culture but also about the expected personal and social moral values of the community (pp. 330-331).

Direct instruction was provided when children gathered around the fireplace in the evening. They were told stories, riddles, songs, dances, and proverbs that conveyed moral values. The message behind this instruction was always to show that socially acceptable behavior results in blessings, prosperity (e.g., in abandonment in wealth, successful trade and fertility and children), fame (e.g., renowned worrier and esteemed elder), and happiness. Conversely, immoral behaviors were believed to lead to sickness, poverty, the death of loved ones, and bad luck (Mbiti, 1990).

Philosophical Foundations of Character Education in Traditional Africa

African traditional education was deeply rooted in philosophical principles rather than existing in a vacuum, as argued by scholars like Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2003), Achi (2021), and Njoroge and Bennaars (1990). These principles—preparationism, perennialism, functionalism, communitarianism, and holisticism—were foundational to the education system. Importantly,

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character education was not a separate discipline but an integral part of the broader indigenous education system (Abidogun, 2022).

Preparationism emphasized preparing boys and girls for their future societal roles. For instance, boys were groomed to become breadwinners, family heads, farmers, hunters, warriors, and rulers, while girls were prepared for roles as future wives and mothers. The initial education of a child was typically the responsibility of the mother within the home environment, where girls were taught to raise their children according to societal expectations. An example of this character education is still seen in rural Tanzania among the Swahili, where girls are taught social etiquette and behavior by older women or aunts, including how to respect elders, interact with in-laws, and maintain harmonious relationships within the extended family (Kimaro & Njogu, 2021). Essential virtues like humility, patience, and respect are emphasized as crucial for a successful marriage and family life (Kaguru, 2003; Shija, 2012; Swantz, 1985; Mbiti, 1990).

Perennialism involved the preservation of traditional systems and values, ensuring that what was taught remained constant and was passed down through generations. Education in this context was deeply intertwined with rituals, ceremonies, and daily practices, which were crucial in safeguarding cultural traditions (Ocitti, 1994; Abidogun, 2022). This approach provided stability and continuity within society by reinforcing established customs, laws, and moral values, thereby strengthening community identity and coherence (Bassey, 1999; Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2020).

The concept of functionalism emphasized the practical purpose of education, ensuring that learning served immediate needs. Students were not only prepared for the future but were also productive as they learned. Tasks such as tending animals, collecting firewood, and showing obedience to elders were integral parts of their education, fulfilling societal expectations according to age and gender. Boys were prepared to become heads of households and breadwinners, while girls were equipped with skills for domestic roles like cooking, weaving, and childcare (Achi, 2021). This approach instilled a sense of responsibility and productivity from a young age. The Tigriyna-Eritrean proverb, "As a skin is malleable when it is fresh, the character of a child can be molded in its young and tender age," reflects this belief in early character formation. Engaging in practical tasks also taught children the value of hard work, perseverance, and resourcefulness—traits essential for personal development and community service (Nsamenang, 2006). By contributing to the household and community, children learned the importance of cooperation and the rewards of working for the common good.

Communalism is a core philosophical foundation of African life, consistent with the Ubuntu (humanity) philosophy. In this worldview, the individual exists because of and for the community. Character education, therefore, embraced the essence of the community and aimed to promote communal welfare. Education was not just about personal achievement but about contributing to the welfare and cohesion of the community (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003). The Ubuntu philosophy, emphasizing communal bonds and shared humanity, underpinned character education by fostering values like empathy, respect, and collective well-being. This approach nurtured moral development and social harmony (Waghid, 2014). The entire community shared the responsibility of educating the individual, as the child was considered to belong to the community. Land, work, marriage, and other aspects of life were seen as communal functions (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003).

The final philosophical foundation of African traditional education is holisticism, or the concept of multiple preparation. This principle meant that there was no specialization in African traditional education. Adults were self-sufficient in various skills, including farming, animal husbandry, making household tools, understanding tribal laws, and building houses—skills relevant to their environment and gender (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003). Indigenous African education was inherently holistic, integrating moral, social, intellectual, and spiritual development into a single, cohesive educational experience (Waghid, 2014; Ocitti, 1994). This comprehensive approach ensured that learners grew in a balanced way, with an emphasis on character formation as much as on intellectual knowledge. The holistic approach also reflected the African worldview of interconnectedness, where the individual was seen as part of a larger community. Education in this context was about

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contributing to the welfare and cohesion of the community, naturally including teaching values such as respect, responsibility, and cooperation—essential for maintaining social harmony and collective well-being (Mbiti, 1991).

As Fafunwa (1974) notes, the goal of traditional African education was to produce a well-rounded individual who was socially responsible, intellectually competent, and morally upright. Character education was deeply embedded in daily life, with elders and community leaders serving as role models for younger generations (Ocitti, 1994).

Character Education Through Initiation Rites

Initiation rites, or rites of passage, in African societies provided direct instruction to adolescents as they transitioned into adulthood. These rites, often marked by external signs such as circumcision, tooth removal, or tattooing, were integral to teaching boys and girls about their societal roles. Designated instructors guided them through topics like sexual relations, community defense, respect for elders, and perseverance in difficult times. The completion of these rites was celebrated with a community ceremony where the newly initiated were honored with gifts.

For example, in pre-colonial Botswana, formal Indigenous education was primarily conducted in initiation schools: *bogwera* for boys and *bojale* for girls. These schools featured standardized curricula aimed at moral growth. Boys aged 12 to 17 attended *bogwera*, which lasted four years and was divided into two stages. The first stage, *bogwane*, covered societal norms, sex education, taboos, agriculture, and self-defense, with a strong emphasis on obedience and the consequences of disobedience (Mautle, 2001). As graduation approached, boys demonstrated the skills they had learned during an internship phase. The second stage involved circumcision and further instruction in values like honor, obedience, and moderation (Matemba, 2010).

Girls entered *bojale* at puberty, undergoing a three-month initiation process that included wearing thorny attire and face painting with fine clay. Their curriculum focused on motherhood, respect for elders and husbands, behavior toward men, hygiene, and household chores (Mgadla, 1989). Rituals such as walking with heads bowed and arms folded symbolized the position of a fetus, reflecting the community's expectations of women (Mautle, 2001). Both programs were rigorous, with strict discipline, early wake-ups, and punishments for disrespecting parents and elders (Brown, 1921).

In the Xhosa community of South Africa, the circumcision rite for boys extended beyond the physical act to include a month-long education on sexual conduct. Circumcision is viewed holistically, encompassing religious, physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions (Gwata, 2009). Key aspects of sexual instruction include responsibility, the right to heterosexual relationships, and the right to establish a family, with an emphasis on consensual relationships and community approval. Circumcised boys gain respect from girls, who prefer them over uncircumcised boys. The boys are reminded of the serious consequences of sexual misconduct, with lessons often reinforced through physical discipline, such as caning, for mistakes made in responding to instructors (Vincent, 2008).

In West African traditions, boys are further taught to uphold the dignity of their manhood, with sexual reserve and control emphasized during initiation. A taboo associated with this lesson is the belief that engaging in intercourse too soon after circumcision would cause the foreskin to regrow, necessitating another painful procedure (Niang & Boiro, 2007). Endurance of pain is considered a positive lesson, preparing boys for the hardships of life. For example, in the Blin ethnic group of Eritrea, the ritual known as *shenghelna* involves the initiate being blindfolded, with hands tied, and walking barefoot. This process demands that the initiate endure physical and emotional suffering, demonstrating his ability to take on responsibility in a harsh semi-desert environment (Teklemariam, 2022).

For many Africans, circumcision performed in the bush without anesthesia is highly valued over hospital circumcisions, which lack respect in traditional societies. This preference is rooted in the belief that enduring pain during circumcision is essential to proving one's readiness for adult

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responsibilities (Mwiinga, 2020; Bowa et al., 2019; Niang & Boiro, 2007; Vincent, 2008). Upon completion of circumcision, boys are expected to adopt adult behaviors, such as attending community meetings, changing their style of dress, avoiding multiple sexual partners, and respecting elders. These changes are evident in their appearance, speech, and actions, marking their transition into adulthood (Niang & Boiro, 2007; Vincent, 2008).

Character education in African initiation rites thus emphasizes values like responsibility, respect for elders, and sexual conduct within the community. These rites are deeply embedded in traditional practices that stress the importance of discipline, social responsibility, and the endurance of pain, preparing boys and girls to assume their roles as responsible adult members of society.

Despite the effectiveness of traditional African moral education, researchers like Matemba (2010) and Ajayi (2017) acknowledge that these practices have faced criticism in modern times. The painful initiation rites, while instilling strong sexual discipline, are questioned for their relevance and harshness in contemporary society. Premarital sex, for example, could bring shame to a family and lead to punishment, while lying and stealing were met with severe consequences, such as seclusion or flogging (Gwata, 2009; Hodes, 2018).

This paper does not promote circumcision or exposure to physical or emotional pain, but rather emphasizes the intended educational values. Young men and women can still undergo initiation rites and ceremonies without undergoing circumcision. The sex education and preparation for responsible adulthood remain highly relevant. Abolishing circumcision should not mean abolishing the educational aspects of these traditions.

The Home as the Foundational Institution for Character Education

Traditional African education, though not extensively documented, was deeply rooted in practical, experience-based learning, with the home serving as the first educational institution. Mothers played a crucial role as the child's first teachers, laying the foundation for moral education through practical guidance and everyday experiences. They used storytelling to instill good character, provided direct instruction, corrected mistakes, and modeled cultural values (Inggs, 2021; Ogunlola, 2020).

Character education began even before birth, with taboos and instructions given to the mother, often guided by an elderly woman or midwife. These included dietary advice, herbal medications, and rituals using holy water to protect both the unborn child and the mother from harm (Thipanyane, Nomatshila, Oladimeji, & Musarurwa, 2022). These practices emphasized the importance of discipline, respect for traditions, and the interconnectedness of individual and communal well-being from the earliest stages of life.

African mothers were seen as the custodians of cultural values and were responsible for imparting essential life knowledge and values to their children from infancy. They were viewed as co-partners with men in the struggle for survival and well-being. The Shona proverb "musha mukadzi" ("A home exists because of a woman") underscores the vital role of women in creating and maintaining a stable and harmonious home environment (Mazuru & Nyambi, 2012). In this nurturing environment, children learned to speak their mother tongue, participate in daily activities like tending animals and cleaning the house, and respect traditions (Ogunlola, 2020).

Following the initial home-based education, the community became the broader "field" of education. There was no strict demarcation between these stages, and education was seen as a lifelong process. In the community, children expanded their learning to include more specialized knowledge in all aspects of life, such as tribal laws, ceremonies, farming, animal husbandry, and social relations according to age. Education in traditional African societies was holistic, with individuals expected to be proficient in multiple areas rather than specializing in a single profession (Achi, 2021; Ogunlola, 2020).

Character and moral education were central to African indigenous education systems, with a strong emphasis on the development of values that would prepare individuals to contribute positively to their communities. This principle was particularly emphasized in Yoruba indigenous

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education but was also true across various African societies (Ogunlola, 2020; Achi, 2021). Education continued throughout life, with specific moments of instruction, such as during initiation rites, reinforcing these values and ensuring that individuals were well-rounded and capable members of society.

In traditional African communities, moral education was not only the responsibility of parents but of any adult member of the community. Parents, however, were expected to be the primary moral models for their children, and a child's misbehavior was often seen as a reflection of the parent's failure to fulfill their duties. This collective approach to moral education reinforced the community's values and expectations, ensuring that children grew into responsible adults.

Character Education Through Oral Literature

African traditional values are deeply embedded in oral literature, including fables, myths, legends, and proverbs, which serve as crucial tools for imparting societal values to younger generations. These forms of oral literature are not only entertaining but also serve as educational instruments that convey moral lessons and cultural wisdom.

Fables

Fables in African societies are powerful pedagogical tools used to teach important societal values, often through stories that highlight the virtues of wisdom, obedience, and cleverness. Boateng (1983) illustrates how obedience to authority is conveyed through tales where characters must complete impossible tasks. For instance, a subject is ordered by a ruthless ruler to create a human being, and a tortoise is tasked with fetching water in a basket. Instead of outright refusal, the characters cleverly ask for equally impossible items, such as charcoal made from human hair or a strap made of smoke. These fables, often told around evening fireplaces, are designed to both entertain and educate, with narrators encouraging children to identify the moral lessons. A South African fable recounted by Brill (1985) tells of a childless couple who trust crows with their seeds, leading to the miraculous birth of eight children and the growth of a magical tree that provides endless food. The moral of this story is discovered through discussion, emphasizing trust, faith, and generosity as key virtues.

Myths and Legends

African myths and legends serve as philosophical reflections on human existence, expressing cultural values, establishing moral standards, and explaining the origins of various human situations. These narratives are considered a higher form of oral literature than fables, as they often convey deep cultural values, religious teachings, and historical knowledge. One such myth from Ghana and Malawi, as narrated by Mazzucco (2003), explains the origin of human diversity and death. In this myth, the god Sa creates a home, which is later improved by Alatangana, who also elopes with Sa's daughter. This act results in a diverse family with different races and languages, symbolizing the shared origins of humanity despite outward differences. The myth also introduces the concept of death as a form of divine retribution, suggesting that death creates space for new life. Other African myths, as noted by Miller (1978) and Alan Tour (n.d.), emphasize the responsible use of fire, the importance of sharing, coexistence with animals, the punishment of evildoers, and the relevance of kindness and wisdom.

Proverbs

Proverbs are a prevalent means of communication in African cultures, often used to indirectly teach moral values to both young and old. These concise statements, attributed to ancestors, are seen as unquestionable truths that validate traditional practices and beliefs (Boateng, 1983). Proverbs emphasize respect for elders, obligations to kin, and the proper attitude toward authority, playing a significant role in socializing children into acceptable behavior. For instance, the proverb "When two

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elephants fight, it is the grass that gets hurt" teaches empathy and the impact of conflict on innocent bystanders, while "He who digs a grave for his enemy might as well be digging one for himself" warns against the dangers of harboring ill will or seeking revenge, as it often leads to self-harm. Other proverbs, such as "The axe forgets, but the tree remembers," highlight the importance of empathy and mindfulness, encouraging individuals to consider the lasting effects of their actions on others. These proverbs not only convey moral lessons but also reinforce the values of self-reliance, responsibility, fairness, and the appreciation of one's heritage.

In addition to the above, African proverbs often challenge the status quo, advocating for justice, equality, and fairness. For example, "Once you carry your own water, you'll remember every drop" suggests that personal experience leads to a deeper understanding and respect for resources, teaching the importance of self-reliance and resourcefulness. Similarly, "Do not call a dog with a whip in your hand" emphasizes the need for empathy and sincerity in building trust and positive relationships, while "The earth is a beehive, we all enter by the same door" conveys the idea of fundamental human equality and interconnectedness. Proverbs such as "However far a stream flows, it doesn't forget its origin" stress the importance of remaining connected to one's roots and respecting one's heritage, while "When you marry a monkey for his wealth, the money goes but the monkey remains" serves as a cautionary tale about valuing character over material wealth.

In summary, African oral literature, through its fables, myths, legends, and proverbs, plays a vital role in imparting traditional values to younger generations. These narratives not only entertain but also educate, instilling moral lessons, cultural wisdom, and societal norms that help shape the character and behavior of individuals within the community. Through these stories and sayings, African societies ensure the transmission of their cultural heritage and moral values across generations.

The Introduction of Foreign System of Education

The introduction of Arab (11th century) and European (19th century) education systems in Africa had a profound impact on indigenous educational practices. These foreign systems, which were structured, formalized, and religiously motivated, contrasted sharply with Africa's communal, holistic, and culturally rooted approaches. This shift led to the marginalization and erosion of traditional values that emphasized community, oral traditions, and the integration of moral, social, and spiritual teachings into daily life (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003; Ocitti, 1994; Fafunwa, 1974). As these foreign systems became dominant, there was a significant decline in the transmission of traditional African values, customs, and languages, weakening cultural identity and cohesion within African communities. Furthermore, the new education systems alienated African students from their cultural heritage, fostered religious animosity, and disrupted existing socio-cultural systems by prioritizing Western and Arab knowledge and religious doctrines over indigenous wisdom and practices (Nsamenang, 2005). The character education traditionally woven into everyday life through stories, proverbs, myths, and initiation rites was disregarded, as Arab and European missionaries promoted Quranic and Biblical teachings as superior, dismissing indigenous education systems as outdated (Ali, 2022; Njeroge & Bennaars, 1994).

Conclusions

In contemporary Africa, the influence of Arab, European, and indigenous values on education systems is evident. Arab Islamic education, introduced from the 11th century onwards, brought Islamic teachings, while European colonialists and Christian missionaries, who arrived in the 1800s, introduced European political structures and Christian education (Ali, 2022; Njeroge and Bennaars, 1994). Despite some critiques, traditional African education effectively nurtured moral character, preparing individuals to contribute positively to their communities. However, negative foreign values such as individualism, modernization, consumerism, competition, materialism, capitalism, secularism, and racism often fail to address local needs. Even positive influences like Christianity,

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formal education, modern medicine, scientific knowledge, and infrastructure are not fully embraced by Africans.

Africans need to decide for themselves what character to instill in their children by revisiting, rediscovering, and reinvigorating their traditional values and practices, despite the challenges this may present. As the Tigre proverb says, "Betka minme -etexegbeka, tehafneka," which translates to "Your own house, even if it does not satisfy you, keeps you warm," implying that one's inheritance holds greater value because it is native. African students can take pride in embracing indigenous values, despite their limitations.

When local languages are ignored, and Christianity or Islam is imposed on African people—when the Bible or Quran replaces traditional values in education—character education risks becoming rote learning and superficial knowledge that fails to resonate with individuals. From the current standpoint, Africans should pause and reflect on their traditional values, integrating these into the existing Western and Quranic systems while discarding what does not serve them well.

Nevertheless, African indigenous character education has limitations that require attention. For example, the instructional methods used during initiation rites were often harsh, involving corporal punishment and promoting gender-based violence. The system was also very conservative, discouraging innovation and change. Recognizing these shortcomings is crucial for developing a more balanced and inclusive educational framework that respects and incorporates the richness of indigenous African values while addressing contemporary needs.

Declaration: This article is solely the product of my personal effort, undertaken without any financial sponsorship, institutional backing, or external research support. The work reflects my independent analysis, writing, and conclusions.

I further declare that there is no conflict of interest in connection with my employer, any organization, or any individual. The views expressed herein are entirely my own and have not been influenced by any external party.

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