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**The Place and Role of Local Communities and Traditional Values  
in Formal Education in Senegal.**

A Literature Review by Maguette Diame, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

**Introduction**

Like the other regions of the world, Africa has a distinctive way of educating its people, particularly the young, which has been based on the transmission of socio-professional aptitudes, skills, and knowledge from generation to generation to perpetuate the social values of communities. Considering the multitude of ethnic groups and communities present in the region, traditional education has been performed through different channels depending on the group's beliefs, social organization, and values. However, such education systems share some commonalities, such as the paramount place of elders in the system. From birth, Africans are immersed in a cultural setting that values the authority of elders and emphasizes practical knowledge. Elders embody wisdom and knowledge, as in Hampathe Ba's equation of the death of an elder African man to the burning down of a library (Devey, 1993). In the southern part of Senegal, for instance, the most important part of the traditional education process is performed through a two to three-month initiation period during which young people, boys, are gathered and hidden in sacred places of the forest and trained in different aspects of life. Training is the exclusive province of elders, who make sure younger generations know the history, secrets, values, and skills of their community to ensure their perpetuity. Such practice is also common in Mali, Guinée, Burkina Faso, Niger Nigeria, Guinea Bissau, the Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and other African countries (Mbaye, 2004, WHO, 2007).

Additionally, storytelling is an important part of the traditional educational system. Storytelling, full of moral values in addition to entertainment and educative value, is an efficient way to denigrate flaws and vices and to encourage communal living, respect, humility, endurance, hardship, and other socially healthy values. In Senegalese stories, for example, the hare embodies a good example to follow, while the hyena is the anti-hero as depicted in *Les Contes d'Amadou Coumba*, Birago Diop (1958). Through the family, too, children learn how to become responsible fathers and hard workers or good wives. The skills learned through the family include cooking, dressing, and appropriate interaction within the community. Here the role of the educator lies not only with the parents but also with the whole family and with neighbors. Full rights are given to any member of a family or neighbors to correct, harshly if need be, children who are misbehaving.

The journey from childhood to adulthood is a hard and rich process through which the child learns how to become a responsible adult by acting according to the laws and guidelines of a specific community. In the Senegalese community organization, mothers bear the whole responsibility for their children's socioeconomic failure or success. The in-law family and the whole community put the entire blame on a mother whenever one of her children fails to find a job or a "good" husband or becomes a wrongdoer such as a thief, prostitute, drug addict, etc., or simply fails an exam. On the other hand, it is her pride whenever one of her children succeeds in any field of life. For this reason, Senegalese mothers feel great responsibility and concern for the

education of their children. Furthermore, most mothers are housewives and stay at home while the fathers are out for reasons related to work. This paper reviews the literature on the place and role of traditional culture including the local community and values that have occupied traditional and formal education in Senegal and Africa in general.

### **African traditional education: Place and role of community and values**

In this section, I highlight the main aspects of traditional education that give a strong place to traditional values and the local community, focusing on the Senegalese context.

According to Mazonde (2001), the main aims of African traditional education are to,

preserve the cultural heritage of the extended family, the clan and the tribe and to adapt members of the new generation to their physical environment and teach them how to control and use it; and to explain to them that their future, and that of their community, depends on the understanding and perpetuation of the institutions, laws, language, and values inherited from the past. (P.3)

Such goals of traditional education are intrinsic to local values and the local community. Similarly, African indigenous education is defined by Zulu (2006, p. 36) as,

a means to an end; social responsibility; spiral and moral values; participation in ceremonies, rituals; imitation; recitation; demonstration; sport; epic; poetry; reasoning; riddles; praise; songs; story-telling; proverbs, folktales; word games; puzzles; tongue-twisters; dance; music; plant biology; environmental education, and other education centered activity that can be acknowledged and examined.

This is barely found in the formal education implemented in Senegal and West Africa. Chaleard (1996) and Nyerere (1968) argue that failure to incorporate some aspects of traditional culture reduces the African youth's competences for local needs and prepares them to be merely operational in the formal economic system that serves the best interests of the former colonizers. Learning the former colonizer's values to the neglect of Senegalese values has managed to make many Senegalese adopt the French way of life and value the knowledge learned in the formal schools more than local knowledge (Wane, 2008). Traditional education was meant to maintain social cohesion and build a strong personality and identity to children for the survival of the community; as Durkheim (1956) argues,

Society can survive only if there exists among its members a sufficient degree of homogeneity; education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the child, from the beginning, the essential similarities that collective life demands. (p. 70).

Following Durkheim's argument, the loss of traditional education in Senegal will inevitably lead to a loss of these values and may result in an identity crisis for the African future generation. Momouni (1968) describes traditional education as an education dominated by the parents, family, tribes, and community. Education did not take place in classroom settings but was part of daily life. Traditional education was highly valued, and it was the key to adulthood. At an early age, the family initiates the child in dominant social values such as how to be a good member of the community. When the child reaches puberty, community members, chosen for their knowledge and skills, assured his/her education through some initiation ceremonies. The child also used to imitate and observe adults at work to learn occupational skills. This is how professional skills were transmitted within family lines through generations (Moumouni, 1968). Education was

thus geared toward the acquisition of practical skills useful for the community and receiving a good education did not mean changing social status but maintaining and reinforcing the current social order (Mbaye, 2004).

Considering the multitude of ethnic groups and communities present in the region, traditional education has been performed through different channels depending on the group's beliefs, social organization, and values. However, such education systems share some commonalities, such as the paramount place of elders in the system. From birth, many Africans are immersed in a cultural setting that values the authority of elders and emphasizes practical knowledge. Elders embody wisdom and knowledge, as in Hampathe Ba's equation of the death of an elder African man to the burning down of a library (Devey, 1993). Mazonde (2001) describes the role of elder women who entirely control the puberty initiation of girls. In his example of Tongaland, the initiation includes social, physiological, and moral education. The process includes teachings of healthy sex habits, the knowledge of procreation, the right, and obligations of a woman within the community, self-discipline, and trials of courage. Older women also try to correct flaws noticed in a girl according to the traditions. Such practices may be positively viewed on the one hand as a barrier to depravation but also negatively labeled as a restriction to emancipation and disempowering women on the other hand.

Before the advent of Christian missionaries and Arabs to Africa, there existed no schools of the type that we have today (Katola, 2014). However, pre-colonial African communities had an education system that was informal in nature. In that education system, parents, grandparents, and elder siblings spared no effort during the socialization process to bring up community members who perpetuated the values that helped the community to be integrated. These values include honesty, respect, obedience, and generosity among others. The system bore similarities but each of the many ethnic groups had its distinctive features reflecting its particular life and culture. The education system was designed to create an ideal individual who would fully fit into and be accepted by society (Katola, 2014). This shows the paramount role family and community play in this educational system.

Storytelling is an important part of the traditional educational system. Nda (1984) describes storytelling as an educational tool that includes entertainment and exposes children to society's way of life and beliefs. Most stories mirror the society and they value good behaviors while sanctioning evil ones so that children harmoniously integrate their community. In Senegal and most West African contexts, it is conducted at night with elders, mainly grandmothers, telling stories to a large group of children till they fall asleep. This socializing aspect of it is losing ground as in cities children prefer to watch TV or browse the Internet. Storytelling has helped fulfill what Durkheim (1922) described as adults' role to perpetuate some customs that are crucial to the education and development of a community.

Through the family, too, children learn how to become responsible fathers and hard workers or good wives. The skills learned through the family include cooking, dressing, and appropriate interaction within the community. This division of responsibility based on gender has also reduced women's opportunities and power within the society according to Western and many Africans' perspectives. Here the role of the educator lies not only with parents but also with the whole family and with neighbors. Full right is given to any member of a family or neighbors to correct, harshly if need be, children who are misbehaving (Mazonde, 2001). The journey from childhood to adulthood can be a hard and rich process through which the child learns how to become a responsible adult by acting according to the laws and guidelines of a specific community.

In the Senegalese community organization most mothers are housewives and stay at home while the fathers are out for reasons related to work. Thus, mothers spend more time with their children at home and know their strengths and weaknesses, talents and flaws best, and can bring the appropriate improvement or remedy needed to tailor a good member of the community. Even in places like Dakar or other big cities where mothers go to work, it's up to the other women in the house such as grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and nieces to play the maternal role (Ba, 1981; Sow, 2003). Unlike traditional Senegalese education, Western education is conducted differently and has different objectives. The role of elders and mothers' as educators has been transferred to younger, technically trained people who might come from different ethnic groups. The locations have shifted from houses and the bush to schools built on the Western model; the medium of teaching is no longer local languages and coded messages such as riddles and proverbs but French. Children are no longer educated to become responsible community members but to find a job other than farming in most cases. The contents of what is taught have thoroughly changed. Traditional values and socio-economic skills transmitted from fathers to sons, elders to youth, and mothers to children are replaced by general-knowledge teaching, specific knowledge such as mathematics, sciences, grammar, etc. and skilled knowledge-based more on foreigners' culture, history, and economics (Illich, 1971; Mazonde, 2010; Cuthbert, 2014;). The changes that accompany the Western educational system have had major impacts on different aspects of most West Africans' way of life. Communities play a lesser role in the system, which has constituted a source of frustration and distance from the formal schools in Senegal (Wane, 2008).

### **History of reforms in the Senegalese formal educational system**

The history of the Senegalese educational system has been significantly marked by colonization. During the pre-colonial period, the social organization of the country was based on castes and ethnic communities. The transmission of knowledge, competence, and socio-professional aptitudes was performed within families and socio-cultural groups. Even today we can find in Senegal some particular families or ethnic groups that retain the monopoly of skills and/or knowledge for making particular tools and instruments or to traditionally cure specific diseases. This socio-professional classification has resulted in the system of social castes in Senegal. For example, the "*griots*" make and beat the drums and some families cure snakebites, others treat malaria, and so on so forth. Such knowledge has been transmitted from parents to children and can rarely be acquired (Momouni, 1968, Cuthbert, 2014) by one who is a stranger to a particular social group. Socio-cultural and traditional values are transmitted through an initiation system which can differ in performance from one community to another, but they have the same objectives of building up socio-professional aptitudes.

Besides, we have the gradual implantation of Koranic schools that started right after the introduction of Islam in the 10<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Religious teaching/learning was the main means of conversion. Later on, with the expansion and consolidation of colonialism, a clash was inevitable, not between Western education and traditional education or between traditional education and *Koranic*/religious models, but between the two foreign "imposed" ones. The colonial authorities saw in these *Koranic* schools an obstacle to the expansion of French schools. Despite a tough resistance of the former, the French Western model of education managed to overtake the religious one in terms of geographic spread and population reached by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as discussed by Ndiaye (2010) in his article "Les Réformes de l'Éducation au Sénégal". He argues that the colonial school has been considered disconnected from the social, religious, and community realities of Senegal. Therefore, communities that still cling more to

traditional values in Senegal are reluctant to send their children to formal schools, which has still affected the formal educational system progress towards EFA (Ndiaye, 2010).

In 1960 when the country got its independence from France, secularism was the motto of the educational authorities. Objectives set by the authorities, such as universal education, were taking shape with rapid progress in terms of enrollment rate and infrastructure until 1980. African authorities made the vow to reach universal primary school by 1980 at the conference on African education in Addis Abeba, 1961 (Mazonde, 2001). Meantime in May 1968, the educational system was the target of a worldwide social movement that challenged existing hierarchy and curriculum at all levels of the educational system, especially in France. Senegal experienced an echo of post-1968-French educational reforms, culminating in 1981 in the *États Généraux de l'Éducation et de la Formation* (the National Consultation on Education and Training) which set up the basis of what is called *l'École Nouvelle* (the New School) with its main objectives being the integration of communities and social diversity (Ndiaye, 2010). The state started to increase the educational budget, and the new national fund for education was created to facilitate the financing of education by giving back part of the enterprises' taxes to the educational sector.

However, this project was hit by the consequences of Structural Adjustment Programs of the mid-1980s. The government was forced to reduce educational expenses, stop training and recruiting professional teachers, and cut back any social support to schools, families, and communities to get loans from the international financial institutions as required in the SAPs (Kapoor, 2011).

Two other major dates mark the history of education between 1960 and 1980. In 1972, a law was passed (loi 72-36) to change the educational objectives as set by the colonizers to a new orientation, with the main objective to form a genuinely Senegalese citizen. This law was meant to adapt education to the local communities and focus on and integrate local realities into the curriculum (Ndiaye, 2010). Such laws and measures were also undertaken at a national level, to depart more from the educational system left by the former colonizers in Africa. However, on the ground, little to nothing was done to bring an actual change by authorities, most probably because such changes require deep studies and financial means.

The second major date was in 1979 with a law meant to restructure the teaching programs and to base school and teaching on the Senegalese realities. This law is organizing the school structure that is still governing the elaboration of national curricula (Ndiaye, 2010). Though the curriculum lays more and more emphasis on local realities, very important socio-cultural aspects of the country are ignored and/or threatened as the thesis discusses.

Before these major challenges, the Senegalese government partnered with international development institutions, such as UNESCO, to set up the P.D.E.F. (Decennial Program for Education and Training) in 1998/1999. This new plan brought some positive changes to the 1990 Jomtien goals: Education For All. After the 2000 education forum in Dakar, Senegal, the PDEF shifted from a decennial program to a longer-term development program for education and training ([www.education.gouv.sn](http://www.education.gouv.sn)). This program has three main components: access, quality, and management that govern the current educational system in Senegal. As stated in the PDEF document (2000), the main principles of the program are liberalization, participation, partnership, and decentralization. These principles are meant to bring communities and partners closer to the school milieu for the benefit of the country in general. As stated in this program and argued throughout this study, local community involvement is critical for a better educational system and an increased incorporation of traditional values could be an incentive for local communities to involve more in formal schools' activities.

The reform process has been occurring since the country's independence and has brought many changes in the integration of local knowledge and practices; but still, some find it slow and find that it ignores the basis of the Senegalese traditional heritage such as values, local languages, and rituals, which may be lost in the long term.

### **Traditional values and local communities in the Curriculum**

Educational thinkers have defined curriculum variously. According to Kelly (1999), the curriculum is viewed as a "syllabus which may limit the planning of teachers to a consideration of the content or the body of knowledge they wish to transmit or a list of the subjects to be taught or both" (p. 83); Dewey (1902) described "Curriculum is a continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies . . . the various studies . . . are themselves experience, they are that of the race." (pp. 11–12). Similarly, Bobbitt (1918) defined it as "the entire range of experiences, both directed and undirected, concerned in unfolding the abilities of the individual." (p. 43). Despite some differences in the way they are formulated, all these definitions acknowledge the power curriculum holds in the educational process of children through formal schooling. This paper discusses the place of traditional values and the local community in the curriculum in Senegal, and Africa in general, and different attempts that have been made to increase their incorporation.

The curriculum has been designed and implemented differently in Africa depending on who the former colonizers were and the local socio-political aspects. Since its main objective is to make sure that the teaching/learning process is leading to the desired learning outcomes (Obanya, 1995), the colonial system made sure to design curriculum in a way to reach the desired effects. In Senegal, people from Dakar, Goree, St Louis, and Rufisque, known as the four *communes*, were considered French citizens and could benefit from Western education as discussed earlier. The programs, then, were meant to assimilate and "civilize" those people as well as provide the colonial administration with educated auxiliaries. On the other hand, as Michael Crowder (1962) describes, the majority of Senegalese living in different areas of the country were kept as taxpayers, obedient subjects, and a source of labor and military services. Most of the people outside of the four communes could not benefit from Western education. During the colonial period, curricula in West Africa were tailored to fit the need of the colonizers and the best illustrations of this are the language of instruction, which were all European languages, and the actual content and materials in the curriculum which were copied from the former colonizers' model.

After independence, newly born African countries copied most of the former colonizers' political, economic, and social institutions, education included. Senegal is a startling example of limiting the former colonizer's institutions, especially in the judicial sector institutions as well as the educational approach and programs. The first main educational reform happened in 1972, twelve years after independence (Ndiaye, 2010).

The curriculum described as the document that governs pedagogical orientations, including details on what is to be taught and how to teach to compose citizens of a given society, should be more adapted to local realities to escape the ongoing domination and hegemony of former colonizers (UNESCO, 1995). Although sporadic changes have been made since independence to incorporate more local aspects in curricula and accommodate education to West African realities, still a survey shows that,

Instruction is in French, at the primary level, and 100% of the time in the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. The only exception is Guinea where instruction is 95% in French. In the Anglophone countries, the picture is different (Nigeria: 70%, Sierra Leone

45%, Liberia 25%, The Gambia 25%), mainly because the early years of primary education in these countries involve instruction in the various national languages. (UNESCO, 1995, p. 18).

In Senegal, local languages are mainly taught to out of school people, mainly women who did not have a chance to attend formal schools, through some literacy programs and also to some students who major in linguistics or languages at the university level.

One of the main characteristics of formal education in Africa is the use of foreign languages as media of instruction. Despite some advantages such as a high level of achievement among marginalized groups and minorities, the use of foreign language in the educational system has highly undermined the performance level of students and it also constitutes a threat to local languages (Mazonde, 2001). In 2005 Senegal's Ministry of Education started to experiment with the introduction of national languages in 400 primary schools throughout Senegal (Walfadjril, Feb. 2011). This was probably an effort by the government to implement one of the main recommendations of the 1981 national consultation on education and training which was to give greater prominence to local languages in schools but also in officials' circles such as administration and parliament where French remained the only language used (Cavicchiomi and Eriksson, 1991). Even though the children who went under that experimentation made good results during the end of primary school exams (Entrée en sixième and CFEE), the Minister of Education described it as a failure, during his speech at the 2011 International Day of Mother tongues, because many parents decided to retrieve their children from such class. He acknowledged first the importance of local languages in the development process and the benefits of starting children's schooling through mother tongues. However, according to him, parents did not adhere to that initiative due to a lack of information. He also sees in the big number of codified local languages (6 in 2000 and 19 in 2011) an obstacle to the successful implementation of such a project. The project is now suspended for deeper studies (Walfadjril, Feb. 2015). Similarly, UNESCO (2005) argued that the biggest barriers to education remain the use of foreign languages in the teaching/learning process. Following UNESCO's steps, the Dakar Framework for Action (2000),

Recognizes the need to tailor primary education to reach those belonging to ethnic minorities to make education contextually located and locally accessible. Learners who understand the language they are instructed in are more likely to engage meaningfully with content, question what they do not understand, and even enjoy the challenge of new things. (p. 8)

However, as discussed by Mazonde (2001), the use of mother tongues has been facing many challenges and resistance sometimes even from the parents. Resistance stems from various sources including beliefs that African languages cannot deal with scientific concepts. Moreover, there is a big lack of materials and trained teachers to implement it and refusal to learn through a new language, as this is seen by most parents as a form a second-class education. All these reasons combined make it unsuccessful and still at the experimental stage, with some attempts to teach in local languages such as in Francophone West Africa.

Some great efforts are being done to adapt to the whole educational system to the local West African realities. In September 2010, experts from 39 countries gathered in Kinshasa to discuss curriculum reforms and how to adapt them to the local realities. In Senegal, the *case des tous petits* (small children's hut) initiated by president Wade in 2000 is an example of attempts that have been made to incorporate more local knowledge, local community, and values in the educational system. However, there is also a need to find a balance, what Bahba (1994) calls the Third Space, between local knowledge and values and knowledge coming from elsewhere. The curriculum should also promote the use of culturally relevant materials and knowledge. Finally,

teachers and school staff also must be trained to implement such a curriculum (Mazonde, 2001). Overall, changes in framing curriculum for and by Africans have been quite slow. One might argue that it's because the subject has a small political and economic dimension in Senegal and in Africa.

### Conclusion

Parents and community elders have played a major role as educators in traditional African society and Senegal in particular. With the advent of colonization and the introduction of Western-style education, the responsibility of educating youth has partially shifted from the parents and elders to formal schools. It first went to Western teachers, through missionary schools, and then gradually to local people who have been trained according to European concepts (Ndiaye, 2010). However, the institutionalization of the Western educational system has not entirely succeeded. Local communities and local values including traditional principles, practices, local languages, and local figures are less present in the educational system in Senegal and West Africa because most of the curricula are copied from the former colonizers. Therefore, there is a big gap between what schoolchildren live by in the community and what they study at formal schools, which has resulted in low school performance and loss of local traditional values and practices. Moreover, there has been a great tendency for a culturally relevant education pedagogy for more efficient education for sustainable and local development in Senegal and Africa. As discussed in this paper, there have been some efforts to incorporate more local knowledge and values as well as to engage more local communities in the planning, administration, and management of formal schools in Africa, however, it remains that most of these efforts are still at a project level. It is time educational authorities in Senegal and Africa implement some of these projects at the pilot level first to evaluate their efficiency and relevance before scaling up and replicating in different areas.

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