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PRIMITIVE EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA

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THE purpose of education, according to Professor Arthur J. Jones in his *Principles of Guidance*, is to prepare the individual for efficient participation in the activities of life. In other words, education should lead the individual into the highest, fullest, and most fruitful relationship with the culture and ideals of the society in which he finds himself, thereby fitting him for the struggle of life. Before the advent of western culture and its system of education, what purpose had the education of the native of West Africa? The philosophy of primitive West African education pointed to one thing—the attempt on the part of the adults to guide the future generation into the practices, habits and ideals which they themselves had been led. It was to fit the individual into the mores and laws of the tribal society. Education for the African child consisted not so much in receiving knowledge as in continuous adaptation to his environment. This involved moral training, loyalty to clan, tribe, family, and ancestral spirits.

With this philosophy of education, education began from the very moment of the child's birth. As soon as the child was born, he was bathed with medicinal herbs to insure strength and vigor in growth. After the thorough washing, he was carried in the arms of a middle-aged woman of reputation in the tribe. Other men and women walked behind her as she went toward the right entrance of the father's house. Going in through the front door was compulsory as the natives believed the child might grow to be a thief if they entered through the back door. As the train of the child's relatives moved on quickly, they chanted songs of the heroic deeds and achievements of the child's ancestors. Other children of the tribe were allowed to participate in this ceremony in order that they might hear and see what happened when they

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themselves were born. They were allowed to ask questions concerning what they saw and heard.

While this ceremony was going on, a messenger was dispatched to a kinsman in a neighboring village, asking him to come to perform a ceremony for the new-born child. Care was always taken that an honest, healthy, and truthful person was chosen, so that no evil character could crop up and influence the child as he grew. The kinsman, of course, was not aware of the fact that a child was born when he was sent for. When he arrived, he put into his palm from three to seven grains of alligator pepper, ground them with his teeth, and taking them from his mouth, he inserted the ground pepper into the child's mouth, using his forefinger in turning the pepper to reach every part of the child's mouth. The interchange of the pepper from the mouth of the kinsman to that of the child was believed to have a far reaching effect on the future of the child's character and behavior concerning honesty, truthfulness, courage, and health.

Sometimes the father of the child was allowed to perform this ceremony if he was in good health. If the father performed the ceremony, he addressed the child somewhat in this manner: "Son," naming him by the day on which the child was born, "My shortcomings should not be the lot of thee, my child. Thou knowest that I am weak in speech and lacking in courage. When thou growest up, and anyone challenges thee to a debate and fighting contest, accept the challenge and deliver the goods better than I have been able to. Speak, fight, and die like a man." If the child was a girl, the speech dealt with the ideals of womanhood. It must be borne in mind that even if the new-born child learned nothing from the ceremony, other children who happened to be present learned what took place when they were born. It was a sort of object lesson to them, and the ceremony itself, on the whole, had some psychological effect on the children.

The education of a child is largely a process of acquiring, in the first place, conditioned reflexes, and then, the more permanent associations and systems of conditioned reflexes that we call habits. Individual differences with respect to intellectual ability and emotional stability are partly due to the ease with which conditioned responses are formed and broken. The leaders of primitive West Africa, for a long time, consciously or unconsciously, have been aware of this psychological fact. Thus, to educate was to con-

dition the child to good habits and practices which would aid him in his conformity to the tribal mores. The education of the child, therefore, began seriously from the cradle. From the investigations and experiments in the field of the psychology of learning by men like Mobius, Thorndike, Yerkes, Sackett, and Keeler, we know that learning is a slow and gradual process. The primitive mind of the West African grasped this fact long ago—hence the education of the child began very early in his life.

From the cradle until the age of five, the child received no direct, formal education, but the methods of nursing and handling the child were based on certain fundamental primitive philosophies of education. He had to be carefully watched, observed, and cared for, so that bad habits and influences could not operate. It was believed that if early training were ignored, the child would grow to be maladjusted, and thus become a tribal misfit, a useless personality to himself and to the tribe to which he belonged.

As the child grew, he was taught to walk as soon as he could stand on his legs with help. When he began to speak, he was taught the right words and language. No curse or filthy words were heard by him. Care was taken that when he sat or walked he did not form the habit of letting his tongue hang out, as this was taken to be a sign of imbecility or idiocy.

As soon as he was able to go about and play, it became the mother's duty to find suitable children for him to play with. All the child was able to learn within the first six years of his life was mostly through observation, well-organized play with educational purpose, story-telling of an educative nature, and the child's willingness to comply with the instruction of his parents and nurses.

From the age of six to fourteen, formal education began. The male child accompanied his father to the farm, while the female child accompanied the mother to the market and to the farm for sowing and harvesting. The girl acquainted herself with domestic duties and learned from the mother what a girl should know about home economics. At about eight years of age she withdrew from boy playmates. The boy, on the other hand, learned the farm work by observing what other men did on his father's farm. He generally followed the vocation of his father, and he was taught the art of marksmanship, the use of the bow and arrow, the art of war, and the various methods of trapping animals. He went out to hunt and trap squirrels, birds, and lizards. On the farm the

boy's father taught him the names of various herbs, distinguishing between medicinal and edible herbs. The child learned to differentiate them. Boys who showed proficiency in detecting herbs generally became native doctors and priests.

Every nation or people seeks to preserve its existence by passing on to posterity the things by which it has maintained its life. This we may broadly regard as national education. Primitive West Africa was able to carry on its culture chiefly through its secret societies. These organizations acquired their nature from the mysteries and mysticism that surrounded primitive folk, and were the media of primitive education. I mention, as examples, two principal ones in West Africa—the Poro Society which is exclusively for males, and the Bundu Society which is exclusively for girls.

The African boy, especially if he lived in his primitive environment, was required by tribal laws and customs to enter, say, the Poro Society and become a member. The period of initiation varied from two months to a year or more according to the boy's ability to absorb the teachings of the society. These societies had their quarters in the country where a portion of the forest was set apart for the teaching and other activities. The chiefs sometimes inaugurated and managed the initiation schools. Circumcision was practiced and instruction was an important part of the system. Admission was obtained by careful and elaborate sacrifices to the ancestral spirits. Each boy was assigned to a qualified young man to tutor him. The camp of the society was run by several leaders specialized in different fields of African culture. These teachers acted as parents to the boy during his initiation period. Here he learned the arts and crafts of his tribe. The mysteries of nature and life, tribal relationships, the ways of the gods, history, tradition, war, and astronomy were taught. He learned the art of singing, military and festive dancing, and the tactics of house building. He was also given instruction in matters of sex. Sometimes, he had to lie down for one or two weeks without any exercise, during which time he received the marks of tribal affiliation. Often, the boy was deliberately mistreated to develop and test his manly attitude. He was graduated from these societies or higher schools after a period of vigorous training. He was then expected to have mastered the principles of endurance, and the observance of customs and traditions.

The last stage of instruction in these societies was the climax

and the most difficult process of native education in West Africa. Very much was required of the boy who reached this stage, and the fact that there was no mode of writing—everything had to be committed to memory—made it a difficult process. When he passed through this stage, he was ready to assume leadership and responsibility in the tribe and to go out into the world and battle on his own. Organizations of the nature I have described existed throughout Africa and have been a great social force in tribal development.

Let us now consider a girl's education in the Nzima tribe on the Gold Coast of West Africa. In clans which have a patriarchal system, for instance, children were taught to revere their ancestors. The girl's attitude to her father and his relatives had to be respectful and reverent, but she had to be affectionate and familiar with her mother and her maternal relatives. Each girl had her own special niche in the social system and there was no such thing as an unwanted child among the Nzimas. There was no orphanage in West Africa. For ages infant welfare was the basic characteristic of West African primitive education. There was no need for the establishment in Upper Guinea of such institutions as the French have had to organize in France, such as the French Society for Nursing Mothers which was founded in 1776, the crèches which originated in 1844, and the Société Protectrice de l'Enfance, established in 1865 to encourage maternity nursing.

Moral training included physical punishment for naughtiness. A child was beaten for telling lies or stealing. Mothers liked the children to shed tears when reproached. This was considered a sign of sensitiveness. The mental training of the Nzima girl was carried out by her mother. Arithmetic was taught by counting games, often of considerable complexity. The child did not use numbers without representing them with concrete objects. She might have employed fruits or seeds with which to count, and called these fruits and seeds her children. Primitive tribes had no proper system of reading and writing, but they made tattoo characters or magical designs on sculptural objects, or made notches on the barks of trees. This enabled them to read tribal marks and to record farm and grazing transactions. Many lessons were taught through folk tales recited around the hut fires by night, or through proverbs, riddles, or enigmas. Most girls had musical training from babyhood. They were taught to sing and appreciate music.

All Nzima girls practiced mothercraft with dolls made from carved woods. These dolls were called the girls' children and were carried on their backs like real babies. There was even a naming ceremony and it was a serious matter if a girl broke a doll belonging to another. She had to pay the owner for it. Every girl also was trained to be a nursemaid. One often saw children carrying about babies almost as large as themselves. Their duties were to wash and dress the baby, and keep it clean and quiet.

For the African girl, nature study was a matter of absorbing interest. She had names for every bird and animal that haunts the bush, and was eager to learn the life history of her own food plants and the insects which prevent their growth. Almost as soon as she could run about herself, she was taught to pick the leaves of plants and to name them. When she was four or five, she was taught to shell ground nuts, to pound maize, and to bring water to a boil. Later, she was taught pottery-making and basketry by fashioning very small editions of the articles her mother made. Thus the African girl followed unconsciously the method of learning through living. On attaining pubescence she was initiated into the Bundu Society. During the initiation period she was taught the duties of wife, mother, and housekeeper. She learned all there was to be known of tribal home economics and everything pertaining to womanhood. During the initiation period girls often took new names and were taught a secret language. They also underwent a number of tests of physical endurance and courage. None of these "mysteries" was to be revealed.

Lastly came physical training. Most instruction was accompanied by singing and rhythmic action. A child would sing as she pounded her grains of corn keeping time with her pestle. Girls attended dances for grown-ups and danced before warriors in a war dance. Among the Ashantees of the Gold Coast sex instruction was given by means of carved wooden figures and biological symbols representing a man and a woman, the figures being the vehicles of the ancestral spirits.

It is true that in West Africa today "the old order changeth yielding place to new." The education of primitive West Africa, to some extent shrouded in superstition, will be tested by future African leaders to determine whether or not the end justified the means. Education in the old order, however, gave efficient preparation for the activities of life and so it fulfilled its purpose.