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Indigenous Educational Practices in East Africa: Typologies of Maasai Pastoralists' Indigenous Instructional Methods and Learning Approaches

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Abstract:

The Maasai pastoralists of East Africa are among the societies that still practice indigenous education, which is founded on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). The pastoralists have distinct indigenous instructional methods and learning approaches that enable them to transact and transmit IKS to their learners. In Maasai society, all people are instructors with the parents and grand-parents taking the lead. Data for this study was collected through interviews of the Maasai elders, Chiefs, Head teachers, youth as well as focus group discussions with secondary school students and direct observations by the researcher. The study established that indigenous Maasai instructional methods include: Telling/listening, imitation, observation and participation. Learning approaches include: Self-directed and interactive approaches. Instructional methods of learning approaches are employed singly or concurrently during lessons. The study further established that Maasai instructors evaluated learning outcomes through observational changes and competencies as well as listening to narratives and expressive skills by the learners.

Keywords: *Indigenous education, Maasai, east Africa, indigenous knowledge systems, indigenous instructional methods, indigenous learning approaches*

1. Introduction

Indigenous educational practices are still practiced by some societies in East Africa though with varying degrees of intensity and commitment. The Maasai Pastoralists are some of the people of East Africa that engage in a system of indigenous education that is founded on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). The Maasai resides in a vast arid and semi-arid land that straddles the Kenya-Tanzania border in East Africa. Indigenous educational practices of the Maasai society are based on intricate webs of epistemological and pedagogical structures. These structures have frameworks of IKS knowledge entities and instructional strategies as well as learning approaches.

IKS of the Maasai pastoralists are classified according to functional attributes and structures. Such a classification categorizes knowledge as realities that are experienced by the people. The subject realities mustered by IKS denotes the Maasai people's perception of their culture and nature (Ronoh, 2008).

The strands of indigenous Maasai Knowledge are categorized into three broad subject domains, based on their functional attributes and structures. According to Lowton (1987), reality, which is both man-made and natural, can be put into distinct kinds of conceptual networks called disciplines. The three subject domains into which Maasai IKS can be classified are: Firstly, Social-and-recreational knowledge; Secondly, Economic-and-productive knowledge; and thirdly, ecological-and-environmental knowledge (Ronoh, 2008).

Indigenous social-and-recreational knowledge describes such experiences as social conduct, various ceremonies and rites, games and other forms of entertainment as well as oral literature. The second subject domain consists of economic-and-productive knowledge of herding and auxiliary activities. The third domain is made up of ecological-and-environmental knowledge of environments such as vegetation, wild animals and environmental factors such as weather, climate, soils and physiographical features like mountains, lowlands, valleys and water courses (Ronoh, 2008).

The Maasai Pastoralists have distinct indigenous instructional methods and learning approaches which they use to transact and transmit the various indigenous subject domains. Such methods are used singly or in combination so that effective teaching may take place. Learning approaches are used in such a way that they lead to gainful learning. The typologies of the instructional methods and learning approaches in indigenous Maasai society are addressed by this study. To gauge the effectiveness of instructions and learning outcomes indigenous Maasai educators have specific evaluation procedures.

1.1. Literature Review

There are some studies that have been carried out in the fields of instructional methods and learning. However, many of the studies focused on instructional methods and learning in schools and not under indigenous educational settings. The studies have observed that instructional methods and learning approaches are cultural and ideological constructs. In support of this, Marshall (1984) noted

that according to Jarome Bruner, cognitive growth is greatly influenced by the culture in which the child is reared and that different cultures provide different influences at different times in a child's life.

According to Darkenwald and Merrian (1982), the experimentalist Jean Piaget established that instrumental/operant conditioning is a sequence of behaviour patterns that emerge as offshoots of reflexes and habits. They added that perception of the environment resulted in a behaviour which was dependent upon the meaning that a given situation established. In view of this, Dembo (1991) maintained that human beings have a natural desire to learn. Therefore, one may ask as to how the Maasai society of East Africa conducts its instructional and learning processes within their indigenous educational practices. This study attempted to answer this question.

The subject matter that is transmitted by indigenous Maasai instructors is of significance to the Maasai societies' quest for survival. Indigenous knowledge and skills of this society have immense utility. For example, Wandera (1979) asserted that it is important to realise that Indigenous knowledge have useful values, ideas and practices and practices which it could offer to school-based education. However, as Mettrick (1993) observed, "...scholars have become concerned that indigenous knowledge will be displaced by the prestige and arrogance of formal science" (p. 25). Earlier, Castle (1968) had voiced the same fear.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Instruction and learning are key features of the indigenous educational practices. These aspects are combined in ways that lead to effective learning of society's IKS. Maasai people's indigenous instructional methods and learning approaches are complex and intricate. This study has attempted to discern this complexity. The study therefore analyzed and explained the characteristics and uses of various instructional methods and learning approaches used by indigenous Maasai educators and youngsters to teach and learn respectively.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

To conduct this study, the researcher pursued the following objectives:

- a. To examine the typologies and characteristics of various indigenous instructional methods used by the Maasai pastoralists of East Africa.
- b. To identify and explain the typologies and uses of two major indigenous approaches to learning and evaluation procedures in Maasai society of East Africa.

1.4. Research Methodology

This study was a qualitative research. It was multi-method in focus (Sambili, 2000) and was conducted as part of larger research project between 1999 and 2008. It obtained its data by employing three data collection techniques, namely: interviews, focus group discussions and direct observations. Interviews were conducted on samples derived from Maasai elders, Chiefs, head teachers and youths. The respondents were selected on the basis of their resourcefulness as far as the study problem was concerned (McMillan 1992). Secondary school students formed focus groups, whose information and views were obtained through discussions based on a structured guide. Being quasi-ethnographic, this study employed direct observational technique. Through observations the researcher captured the Maasai people's socio-cultural activities as well as instructional methods and learning approaches in their natural settings.

2. Study Findings and Discussions

2.1. Indigenous Maasai Instructors

In the Maasai society of East Africa, indigenous learning and training activities are the responsibility and obligations of all people. It is a communal activity and every member of the society has a stake. According to all respondents and focus groups, parents take the lead as their children's instructors. Ronoh (2008) stressed that it is the primary responsibility of Maasai parents to educate and train their children in the ways and the cultural life of their society. Also actively involved in indigenous instructional processes in the Maasai society are grandparents, all other adult members of the society as well as older children and peers. Each of these instructors teaches children about various aspects of the indigenous Maasai knowledge and skills.

The Maasai employ distinct methods of instruction and learning approaches during their indigenous pedagogical processes. Maasai instructional methods are used concurrently and/or consecutively and most of them are learner-centered and activity-based. They give learners opportunities to actively take part in the teaching processes. These indigenous Maasai methods of instruction can be typologically categorized as: Telling/Listening, Imitation, Observation and Participation. Such methods are designed in such a way that they lead to gainful learning.

2.1.1. Telling/ Listening Method

This method requires maximum use of the hearing sense to capture curricular contents of the learning session. The instructors convey the content orally while the learners listen attentively. By using the oral mode, indigenous Maasai instructors taught attentive children and youth at home or in the field. The instructors did this by informing, describing, illustrating and elucidating certain concepts, principles, skills or values of particular knowledge or groups of knowledge drawn from the Maasai culture and nature. According to respondents and focus groups, Telling-Listening Method is very pervasive in Maasai people's instructional system. The method is applied repeatedly until learners mentally establish a connection between the subject matter and the values, skills or attitudes, which such subject matter envisage enhancing.

This study found that among the Maasai Telling-Listening Method is commonly used while teaching about riddles, proverbs, myths, legends, folklore as well as herding and domestic chores, among others. In indigenous Maasai instructional system, this method often preceded other methods of instruction. Most other methods of instruction like imitation or observation often waited upon the Telling/Listening Method to take course before they are introduced into the instructional process. Telling/Listening Method is comparable to the Lecture Method used in schools, though the former is less formal and more flexible unlike the latter.

2.1.2. Imitation Method

This study established that learning by imitation is one of the methods by which Maasai children and youth learn. This finding was also noted by Castle (1968). He observed that traditional African children learnt by imitating elders. Imitation method includes such activities as role playing, dramatization and mimicry. It employs sensory and auditory senses as well as empathy and psycho-motor skills. This study found that Maasai children learn by imitating the roles of the parents and other adults. Most respondents and focus groups maintained that in Maasai society, learning takes place through the activities mentioned above. For example, on one hand, boys imitated adult livestock herders by taking objects like Sodom apples and stones to represent livestock, which they pretended to be herding. In this way, they learnt the skills of herding vicariously. On the other hand, girls moulded clay into *babies* or *utensils* and used them to play the role of mothers or womenfolk.

Imitation method may evoke amusement yet it is highly effective. It liberally uses materials, gestures and spoken words in the course of teaching and learning. The method leads to experiential learning that is vicarious or indirect. Whereas Imitation Method is used to teach and learn a variety of subject matter, drama, its counterpart in schools, is used to convey selected subject matter mostly in the languages.

2.1.3. Observation Method

Observation method occupies a central position in instructional processes of indigenous Maasai society of East Africa. This method employs visual sensory perception to interact the subject matter with instructional processes. A number of respondents and focus groups stated that visual experience was an important avenue for learning within the indigenous Maasai knowledge

Most respondent and focus groups noted that while herding livestock or hunting, Maasai boys and young men observe and learn the names and utility of various plants, animals and geographical features. Girls on their part, learn a lot by observing women at work at home and field.

Among the Maasai, many instructional and learning activities engendered observational learning process. As stated by various respondents, experiential learning through observation is regarded as an effective pedagogical process in Maasai society. Although observation is used in schools in a formal way, in indigenous Maasai society it is not as formal. While this method is used when teaching individual school subjects like sciences, Geography, among others, in indigenous Maasai society a learner can observe a wide variety of subjects concurrently while learning takes place.

2.1.4. Participation Method

In indigenous Maasai society of East Africa, Participation Method is used concurrently with other methods of instruction. Many respondents and focused groups observed that after being taught using other methods of instruction, Maasai children and youth are encouraged to actively take part in the activities that lead to learning. For instance, they participate in riddling, dancing, singing, story-telling, cooking, milking or herding. In most cases, Maasai learners achieve profitable learning outcomes after watching older children or adults perform some tasks and by participating in the same tasks.

Writing about engagement in Participation Method with respect to dancing among the Kikuyu of central Kenya, Kenyatta (1938) observed: 'Children merged insensibly into the dances of later years, and it is amazing to see how a small child can capture difficult rhythms which have been learned by merely watching their elders...' (p. 104). Participation method is therefore an effective instructional device in Maasai society.

2.2. Indigenous Maasai Learning Approaches and Evaluation Procedures

Sometimes in indigenous Maasai society, learning may take place without the congruence of instructional methods. To accomplish this, two learning approaches appear popular among Maasai children and instructors. These approaches are identified as: Self-Directed Learning and Interactive Learning. To gauge the effectiveness of learning, indigenous Maasai instructors have specific evaluation procedures.

2.2.1. Self-Directed Learning Approach

In Maasai society, children and youth sometimes learn without being deliberately instructed by older persons. This individually initiated and conducted learning may be referred to as Self-Directed Learning Approach. According to most respondents and focus groups, self-directed learning occurred mainly during games, or after observational sessions.

Using this approach to learning, it was established that Maasai children on one hand, undergo the process of cognition and expression while trying to reconstruct the elements of their natural and socio-cultural environments. On the other hand, the process of expression assists them to re-construct the self-discovered elements either physically or socially. In these cases, therefore learning outcomes take the forms of cognitive and expressive processes.

The above processes provide suitable bases for thinking, for knowing, for creativity and for overt expression of talents. Through the Self-Directed Learning Approach, Maasai children and youth acquire cognitive and expressive problem-solving strategies, which are

appropriate to their environments. In indigenous knowledge, self-directed learning is more relaxed and less threatening unlike academic homework which school children have to go through at night and over the weekends instead of resting after a busy day or week.

2.2.2. Interactive Learning Approach

The Maasai society of East Africa does not leave their children to wholly direct their own learning. Instead, Maasai instructors have designed a learning approach that encourages learners to interact with themselves, the contents and the general environment. This approach maybe called Interactive Learning Approach and it employs oral techniques of telling, explanation, illustration, and demonstration. These methods provide avenues for dialogue between the instructors and the learners, leading to interactive learning. The fusion of Interactive Learning Approach and methods of instruction occurs in a unique way. It takes place when Maasai instructors begin the learning sessions through oral methods and/or demonstration as is the case during lessons on environment or curative arts. Thereafter, the instructors allow the learners to interact with them, amongst themselves as well as with the subject matter. This approach does not compare well with the ways in which school teachers invariably inhibit dialogue with their learners by assuming a know-it-all position and reducing them to passive recipients of the subject matter.

2.2.3. Evaluation of Learning in Maasai Society

This study established that outcomes of learning experiences of indigenous knowledge of the Maasai society of East Africa are evaluated through certain distinct procedures. Most of these learning outcomes lead to exhibition of particular behavioural changes and display of competencies in certain tasks. Most respondents stated that indigenous Maasai instructors use observational techniques or procedures to determine the effectiveness of learning activities in the society. They keenly observed the portrayal of behavioural changes or competencies after learning processes for example, the effectiveness of indigenous animal husbandry lessons is evaluated by observing how male learners look after livestock as well as their skills of managing water and pasture.

Alternatively, indigenous Maasai instructors listen to their learners as the former narrate or express aspects of what they have learned. By carrying out these evaluative procedures, the instructors would then determine the degree to which the learners have learned the materials in question. In schools however, most evaluative procedures rely on tests and sparingly on observation of the learned competencies of the child.

3. Conclusion

Instructional methods and learning approaches employed in indigenous Maasai society of East Africa are discernible. The methods include: Telling/Listening, Imitation, Observation, and Participation. Learning approaches consists of Self-Directed Learning and Interactive Learning approaches. Their typologies and characteristics have been examined and explained.

The methods and learning approaches are distinct yet in many instances they are used concurrently during pedagogical processes. Both methods and approaches ensure the Maasai children and youth experience and receive gainful knowledge, skills and attitudes. To gauge the effectiveness of learning, indigenous Maasai instructors use evaluation procedures such as observation and listening.

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