

Black Societies in Cuba as Educational Platforms: Lukumi Home Schools

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Before getting into the subject of this article, I would like for us to reflect upon the concept of education proposed in 1952 by the twentieth century's most renowned scientist, German physicist Albert Einstein:

“It is not enough to teach a man a specialty. Through it he may become a kind of useful machine but not a harmoniously developed personality. It is essential that the student acquire an understanding of and a lively feeling for values. He must acquire a vivid sense of the beautiful and of the morally good. Otherwise he – with his specialized knowledge – more closely resembles a well-trained dog than a harmoniously developed person. He must learn to understand the motives of human beings, their illusions, and their sufferings in order to acquire a proper relationship with the individual fellow-men and to the community... It is also vital to a valuable education that independent critical thinking be developed in the young human being, a development that is greatly jeopardized by overburdening him with too much and with too varied subjects. Overburdening necessarily leads to superficiality. A community of individuals molded using one same

form, lacking their own originality or goals, will be an impoverished society unable to evolve. The best educational method has always been one in which pupils are urged to realize concrete tasks. A man's value should be judged according to what he gives and not by what he receives.”

Africa's oldest educational systems shared two things in common: they taught religion and preserved community traditions. A system of moral education and instruction begins at the very moment a person is born. Precisely three days after birth, the child's parents are informed about what his or her individual pattern of behavior and social function will be, after consulting a seer. In the Yoruba tradition, as in other African cultures, the birth of a child is a shared, collective concern. Yet, despite the fact that responsibility for that child falls principally on the newborn's family, Ifá priests also play a great role.

What profession is best for someone, and what is the connection between it and his or her contribution to society? It is this question that makes an Ifá priest evaluate a child with regard to his or her vocational tendencies, because this represents the most important

thing about someone as a citizen and social being. The balance, development and harmony of all societies depend on this. The child, him or herself, has an innate temperament that can develop according to parental design. It is they who have an idea of the model they should impose in the “home school” for their new child. That ensures that they do not lead him or her towards a profession different from what the heavens have already chosen, which would lead to perpetual failure and frustration.

Lebanese poet and painter Khalil Gibran said: “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday.”

The success of every living being depends upon him or her pursuing the profession that his or her spiritual double (Egbé) left uncompleted in previous incarnations, and perfecting this work on earth. If not: “he – with his specialized knowledge – more closely resembles a well-trained dog than a harmoniously developed person,” as Einstein posited.

In our Ifá system, it is corroborated that no mortal or academic school of higher education or deanship are considered conferrers of degrees: the degree is already decided in heaven, before one comes to the world. It is there within the person when he or she is born akin to the way animals are born with instincts, according to species from the moment

they leave their mother’s womb. In people, this is ratified according to their Ifá sign.

Dr. Wánde Abimbóla, a philosophy professor and observer of Ifá ritual worldwide, asserts in his book *Ifá Enmendará Nuestro Mundo Roto* [Ifá Will Amend our Broken World]: “Those of us who have gone to school know that lots of people learn more on the streets, by talking to folks or interacting with them. I am against this dichotomy in literature, pre-literature or illiterature, in which a person who is illiterate is assumed to be stupid. This is an idealist idea, and I don’t believe it to be drawn from the well of wisdom. If a person doesn’t know how to read, it does not mean he or she is an imbecile... Perhaps human beings could learn more from a less academic society.”

Ifá proposes the same thing within the home school, so that these teachings later be systematized and acknowledged by public schools. The innate conduct of human beings should be recalled via the teaching of parents and Ifá guidance. We should not create an imposed vocation. The balance and harmony between what is innate and the natural world is the essence of human perfection. The basic materials that sustain the “Lukumi Home School” reveal the core of its curriculum to be a predetermined mission, the examples of the eldest, traditions, proverbs and Ifá mythology.

Nearly every mythological story contains an explanation of man’s origins. All myths speak of things that happened, or were supposed to have happened at some time. They can all be found in our foundational book that contains the scientific thought of the ancient Yoruba world. Despite the fictionalizing nature that characterizes these myths, and the incredible nature of their stories, myths can come to be perfectly rational explanations

when translated. Their specific dialect offers an ample vision of nature's deepest secrets. These may be paradoxical, but they represent a voyage to the unknown. Different African religions have suffered a stigma, sometimes unwittingly, other times due to premeditated treachery. They are accused of representing primitive thinking, lacking rational logic with regard to knowledge and understanding natural phenomena. There are events in certain myths that seem disconnected from all reality, and yet they could be the key to a brilliant idea.

It is astounding when upon deciphering these myths one discovers messages that totally fit in with today's technological world. For example, the Yoruba creation myth (Odù Bábá Èjìogbè) reveals how the world was created. Other Yoruba myths narrate how Òlódùmarè (The Creator) moved through space like a spiral, like a nautilus, and after producing a scream that echoed in the emptiness, the universe in which we live emerged. Comparatively, our galaxy spirals with bands that revolve around a central bulge. Furthermore, a theory about the universe's formation after a great explosion—the Big Bang—has been scientifically proven today. In the Inàngarewo rite, which is for 'reading' one's destiny, all followers spin around a special recipient in which the captive spirit of the Sun is believed to be. They sing chants that declare that our ancestors knew that the planets and other celestial bodies in our solar system orbited around an astral king. It was not till 1543 that any systematic explanation of planetary movement around the Sun was proffered by Polish astronomer Nicolai Copernicus. The myth of the tortoise, in the small Odú, Òsá Ògúndá, explains how it traveled somewhere very far in the sky, and upon returning, all its younger family members were older than it.

This brings to mind Einstein's theory of relativity that time contracts when the movement of objects increases to somewhere close to the speed of light. Many of these traditional rites reveal a deep understanding of our heritage and a firm conviction regarding the existence of an internal code that regulates hereditary traits—biological and spiritual ones—not unlike those expressed in Gregor Mendel's genetic theories. In sum, the whole of Ifá literature consists of countless myths that metaphorically explain many things that have been proven scientifically.

Myths, on the other hand, serve as the foundation of all teaching and moral canons generally derived from observing the behavior of all the elements in our ecosystem. Animal behavior and the evolution of natural sources are fundamental elements that have been used to shape this curriculum. Nevertheless, this ample literature that reflects the essence of proverbs also includes knowledge taken from human behavior, which is almost always connected to man's relationship with nature. There are also those taken from personal stories and experiences strongly focused on ethics. This makes it easier to understand this curriculum's moral content and makes it more applicable to many children in the "Lukumi Home School." Essentially, these are the archetypical models that man should utilize to shape his ethical criteria, and with which he should connect to the hidden or secret, natural world. There are thousands of proverbs about teaching and the shaping of morality in "Lukumi Home Schools." Dr. Teodoro Díaz Fabelo's evaluation of this is that:

"Proverbs appear to be sayings, sentences, adages, expressions; they are the echo of experience, of what has been lived, enjoyed or suffered; they are veritable kernels of wisdom meant to shed light on something,

guide, direct, warn, educate, instruct, teach, govern, normalize. Anyone who learns must internalize their reason for existing, interests, intelligence and culture, in order to be able to knowingly open, interpret and enjoy the wisdom or teaching of a proverb; they express scientific, artistic, philosophical, religious, work-related, moral and ethical principles. One must learn to translate proverbs into modern, contemporary communicative systems. Proverbs are a simple and facilitating expression of obvious comprehensibility, yet they must be interpreted via the imagination and abstraction. The most famous proverbs are essentially an abstraction that offers a degree of knowledge and practice. These degrees are the intellect's basic building blocks. They also teach us to live together, collectively, to respect particular models, other people's individuality, and respect family taboos that contribute to our collective wellbeing, and to society's. Proverbs and riddles transmit codes of conduct, and often reflect an interlocutor's culture."

The eldest of our communities also told children fables, and then taught them the educational messages of those epic narrations. Most often, children would fall asleep, at night, listening to morally charged songs that expressed the life and accomplishments of their legendary heroes. Another way of teaching that enriched the "Lukumi Home School's" curriculum was the prohibition of certain bad behaviors called *eewò*.

In Cuba, the Lukumi system of education was established upon the underpinnings of slavery, during the whole colonial period: in the slave barracoon, cane field, coffee plantation, backyard plot, etc. These teachings were transmitted, most preferably through songs, in all of these marginalized and prohibitive spaces. The Lukumi used this

sung form of instruction to avoid being detected, or to not reveal to the slave-owners the transmission of these teachings—which was prohibited. Many Spanish settlers ended up believing that this singing was a way to move along their arduous and fatiguing work. Yet, today we can confirm that those melodious songs are filled with so many messages, concepts and definitions that each and every one of them is a page from the Sacred Book of our Yoruba Tradition.

This makes it possible for our grandparents to bequeath to us all their traditions and teachings, compiled by the wisest of their communities of origin. This knowledge has no need to envy the Euro-centric way of higher education. It has its own values grounded in philosophy, history, language, literature, social and natural sciences, art, and music, and they have survived in the oral traditions and popular wisdom of African descendants' families. This family oral tradition contains undervalued knowledge that is as necessary to our social lives as is the instruction we receive in public school. Given their marginalization, many of the moral values of these teachings have not impacted the rest of our social milieu.

"Solares" [tenement yards and housing] served as a reminiscence of these first family home schools because in them traditions of African origin were preserved. They were also the site at which the matrix for Afro-Cuban cultural was born. Despite any detriment, patterns of teaching that promoted respect for elders and neighbors, community reciprocity and mutual aid survived. Teachings such as these in the "Lukumi Home School" contributed a prohibition of supremacist or egotistical behavior on the part of its members. I know many people who barely made it to fifth grade, yet can speak and think like

real career academicians, and have a superior view of reality and human philosophy—through their connection with a home school education—since early childhood.

Blessed be those men of History without a History, those predecessors of the “Lukumi Home School,” and those who make an effort—by offering all their experience—so that this educational system remains strong

and serve the future. Let me conclude with a thought from the book *Religión y cambio social* [Religion and Social Change]: “Upon transmitting models of knowledge and influencing feelings and emotions within a social context, religion shapes a believer with psychological characteristics and a disposition for things social.”