

**HARNESSING ADULT AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE
PROMOTION IN NIGERIA'S EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES.**

Kabiru Suleiman Abdullahi

Department of Adult and Non-Formal Education

Federal College of Education (Technical) Bichi

kabirusuleimanabdullahi@gmail.com

08069729737

Maryam Hamisu Bichi

Department of Adult and Non-Formal Education

Federal College of Education (Technical) Bichi

And

Balaraba Musa

Department of Adult and Non-Formal Education

Federal College of Education (Technical) Bichi

Abstract

This paper explores the critical role of adult and non-formal education in promoting and preserving indigenous knowledge within Nigeria's educational framework. Indigenous knowledge, deeply rooted in local customs, practices, and ecological wisdom, is often marginalized in formal education systems dominated by Western paradigms. However, adult and non-formal education characterized by its flexibility, community-based orientation, and responsiveness to local contexts offers a viable platform for integrating traditional knowledge systems into national development strategies. The paper examines current Nigerian educational policies to assess the extent to which they accommodate indigenous epistemologies and evaluates programs and practices that successfully utilize non-formal avenues for cultural preservation and community empowerment. It argues that embedding indigenous knowledge in adult education curricula not only supports cultural identity and sustainability but also enhances lifelong learning, rural development, and social inclusion. Policy recommendations are offered to strengthen institutional support, curriculum development, and capacity building for a more inclusive and culturally relevant education system.

Keywords: Adult and Non-Formal Education, Indigenous Knowledge, Educational Policies and Practices.

Introduction

Education has always been central to human survival and development, serving as a vital tool for transmitting knowledge, values, and skills across generations. From the earliest human societies, education was never an isolated or abstract enterprise but a lived experience embedded in daily life and communal practices. Long before the establishment of formal schooling systems—often traced back to the Greek civilization about 3,000 years ago—communities across the world relied on indigenous adult education as an effective means of preparing individuals for meaningful participation in family, community, and societal life (Ihejirika, 2007). This traditional form of education was holistic, practical, and community driven, addressing not only intellectual growth but also moral, cultural, and vocational development.

Indigenous adult education refers to the transmission of local knowledge, skills, values, and cultural practices developed outside formal institutions (Adekola & Oyebamiji, 2010). It encompasses the totality of a people's way of life, largely free from external influence, and emphasizes both the preservation of cultural heritage and the acquisition of practical skills necessary for daily living. Unlike formal education, which is structured around classrooms and curricula, indigenous adult education was experiential, context-based, and lifelong. Learning in pre-colonial societies was largely informal, taking place through observation of elders, participation in initiation ceremonies, engagement in storytelling, riddles, and proverbs, and active involvement in communal and family responsibilities. These methods were not only intellectually stimulating but also socially transformative, reinforcing values such as unity, respect for elders, honesty, cooperation, and loyalty—qualities essential for social harmony and collective survival.

The aims of indigenous adult education went far beyond the simple acquisition of knowledge. They included the cultivation of character, vocational training, leadership preparation, cultural preservation, and active contribution to community development (Fafunwa, 1974; Nzeneri, 2014). Its functional orientation meant that learning was always linked to life and survival. Adults were equipped with relevant skills in farming, fishing, hunting, blacksmithing, weaving, trading, traditional medicine, and environmental stewardship (Ohia, 2011). At the same time, moral instruction was interwoven into every aspect of training, instilling discipline, fostering conflict resolution strategies, strengthening kinship ties, and promoting social responsibility. In this way, indigenous adult education played a crucial role in sustaining community life, ensuring the transmission of cultural identity, and maintaining social stability across generations.

In contemporary Nigeria, however, indigenous adult education has been overshadowed by the dominance of Western-oriented formal education systems introduced during colonialism. This shift has contributed to the erosion of cultural values, the weakening of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and a growing sense of alienation from indigenous knowledge systems. The neglect of indigenous educational practices has also been linked to rising moral decline, youth

restiveness, unemployment, and slow-paced community development. Yet, the relevance of indigenous adult education to modern challenges cannot be overstated. Its contributions to skill acquisition, moral development, environmental management, conflict mediation, and social cohesion remain indispensable for building resilient and sustainable communities.

This paper therefore explores the concept, aims, and contributions of indigenous adult education to sustainable community development in Nigeria. By revisiting its historical significance and practical relevance, the study underscores the urgent need to revitalize and integrate indigenous adult education into modern educational frameworks and community development strategies. Such integration would not only bridge the gap between tradition and modernity but also enhance national development by fostering self-reliance, promoting cultural pride, and strengthening community solidarity. In an era of globalization, where many societies grapple with issues of cultural erosion and identity crisis, revalorizing indigenous adult education presents a pathway toward holistic development and a more inclusive vision of education for sustainable progress.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to:

1. Explore the concept and philosophy of indigenous adult education in Nigeria.
2. Examine the aims and contributions of indigenous adult education to community development.
3. Analyze the relevance of indigenous adult education in addressing contemporary challenges of skill acquisition, moral decline, and cultural erosion.
4. Recommend ways of revitalizing and integrating indigenous adult education into modern educational and community development frameworks.

Significance of the Study

Revisiting indigenous adult education is significant for several reasons. First, it provides a culturally relevant foundation for education that resonates with local realities and community needs. Second, it equips individuals with practical skills that foster self-reliance and community productivity. Third, it strengthens moral and cultural values necessary for promoting social cohesion, peace, and sustainable development. Finally, by integrating indigenous adult education into modern frameworks, Nigeria can create a more inclusive, holistic, and functional education system that bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, thereby enhancing national progress.

Concept of Indigenous Adult Education

Indigenous adult education is as old as human existence, having served as an effective system of community learning long before the emergence of formal schooling, which dates back to the Greek civilization about 3,000 years ago (Ihejirika, 2007). According to Adekola and Oyebamiji (2010), the term *indigenous* refers to local or traditional knowledge, encompassing the body of skills and experiences developed outside formal educational institutions. In essence, it represents the totality of a people's way of life, free from foreign influence. Indigenous adult education can therefore be described as the processes through which communities transmit their accumulated knowledge, values, and experiences from one generation to the next.

In pre-colonial societies, learning was largely informal, taking place through observation, initiation, and active participation in community life. As noted by Otunga in Adekola and Oyebamiji (2010), indigenous adult education consists of practical ideas and technologies designed to improve the quality of life of those who developed them. Its scope extended across social, economic, political, religious, and cultural domains, enabling individuals to acquire diverse skills for addressing everyday challenges.

Instruction was often embedded in cultural expressions such as riddles, proverbs, and parables, which stimulated critical thinking and sharpened reasoning. Emphasis was placed on unity, love, and peaceful coexistence. Community members were encouraged to uphold loyalty to authority, contribute meaningfully to communal affairs, and live responsibly. Violations of societal norms attracted sanctions or ostracism, which served as deterrents and reinforced fairness and justice (Adekola & Oyebamiji, 2010).

Functionality was a key feature of indigenous adult education (Ohia, 2011). It equipped learners with practical skills such as trading through the barter system, hunting, weaving, blacksmithing, carpentry, architecture, traditional medicine, and boat-making. These skills carried both economic and social value. People were also introduced to religious practices, including the worship of deities such as the *Chi* among the Igbo, where honesty and sincerity were highly esteemed (Daminabo in Adekola & Oyebamiji, 2010).

Environmental education was another important aspect, as community members particularly the youth were taught to care for their surroundings by clearing roads, cleaning streams, wells, markets, and village squares. Systems of measurement, calculation, and numbering also existed, enabling fair distribution of land and resources. For example, ropes or sticks were used for land demarcation, while indigenous counting systems were applied in agriculture and livestock management. Among the Igbo, *otu* means one, while in Hausa, *biu* means two; *iri* denotes ten, and *oghu* refers to twenty.

Recreational activities such as drumming, dancing, wrestling, storytelling, and the study of local history, myths, and legends also formed part of the learning process, ensuring that leisure was productively utilized (Eya, Ugwu & Alu, 2001). As Obanya (in Adekola & Oyebamiji, 2010) observes, indigenous adult education shares fundamental similarities with formal education systems elsewhere, being rooted in philosophy, social organization, and practical application.

Aims of Indigenous Adult Education

Like every form of education, indigenous adult education is designed to achieve specific goals.

According to Fafunwa (1974), the traditional education system sought to:

1. Develop the individual's physical abilities.
2. Build good character and moral values.
3. Cultivate respect for elders and authority figures.
4. Enhance intellectual capacity, provide vocational skills, and encourage positive attitudes toward honest work.
5. Foster a sense of belonging and active participation in family and community life.
6. Promote appreciation and preservation of the community's cultural heritage.

These goals were achieved through a blend of theory and practical experience.

Ihejirika (2007) and Nzeneri (2014) further identified five central aims of indigenous adult education in Nigeria:

1. Fostering Community Unity – Emphasizing loyalty, cooperation, and harmony among members, even during internal or external conflicts.
2. Transmission of Cultural Values – Passing down customs, traditions, and ceremonies such as puberty rites, initiation rituals, and meaningful cult practices that instilled cultural principles in the younger generation (Nzeneri & Nwaiwu, 2016).
3. Acquisition of Common Knowledge – Equipping individuals with knowledge across social, economic, political, health, and mathematical domains through storytelling, games, masquerades, and moonlight plays, thereby empowering them to solve personal and communal problems.
4. Leadership Training – Preparing future leaders through structured processes such as initiation into cults or community practices, ensuring strong and competent leadership for societal stability.
5. Development of Occupational Skills – Providing training in farming, fishing, hunting, trading, weaving, carpentry, medicine, and other vocations essential for economic survival and community protection.

Ultimately, indigenous adult education aimed to produce responsible, functional citizens who could contribute meaningfully to their society (Fafunwa & Omolewa in Adekola & Oyebamiji, 2010).

Contributions of Indigenous Adult Education to Sustainable Community Development

Indigenous adult education has played a vital role in fostering sustainable community development, particularly in African societies. Its contributions can be highlighted in the following areas:

1. Skills Acquisition

One of the most significant contributions of indigenous adult education is the transfer of practical skills. Through apprenticeship systems, individuals learned trades directly from a —master craftsman or from parents. Skills such as farming, blacksmithing, weaving, drumming, hunting, and boat-making were passed on, ensuring that every member of the community had a means of livelihood. This system minimized unemployment, empowered individuals economically, and equipped communities with the human resources needed for growth and survival (Omolewa, 1981; Ihejirika, 2007; Adekola & Oyebamiji, 2010).

2. Value System and Moral Development

Indigenous education was also central to instilling societal values, which were strictly upheld and transmitted across generations.

- **Respect for elders:** Younger people were taught to honor elders, never addressing them by name or speaking disrespectfully.
- **Honesty:** Trustworthiness was considered essential for community harmony. Agreements such as land leases were sealed by word of mouth without written documents, and yet obligations were faithfully honored.
- **Hard work:** Laziness was condemned, while diligence was celebrated and rewarded.

Dishonest or unearned gains were rejected to promote integrity and productivity.

These values fostered social cohesion, responsibility, and active participation in community development.

3. Promotion of Peace and Justice

Conflict resolution was another important function of indigenous adult education. Disputes, whether personal or communal, were mediated by traditional authorities using established local practices. Justice was pursued to restore peace, ensuring that communities remained stable and united (Ihejirika, 2007).

4. Home-Making and Family Life

Women were trained to manage households effectively, including cooking, hygiene, childcare, and supporting their husbands. Men and women alike were encouraged to be faithful and committed to marriage, while divorce was discouraged. Extended family members often intervened to resolve marital conflicts, thereby strengthening family structures and contributing to social stability.

5. Security of Lives and Property

Indigenous communities organized vigilante systems, selecting able-bodied men to guard borders and protect against external attacks. Crimes such as theft were punished publicly, serving as a deterrent to others and maintaining law and order.

6. Health and Environmental Practices

Traditional medicine, based on herbs, roots, and natural remedies, was widely used to treat ailments such as malaria, abdominal disorders, fractures, and childbirth complications. In addition, indigenous education promoted sanitation, hygiene, and healthy eating, contributing to overall well-being.

7. Use of Leisure Time

Leisure was structured around meaningful cultural activities, including storytelling, music, dance, wrestling, games, and masquerades. These activities not only entertained but also reinforced cultural values and social bonds. Through skills training, moral instruction, conflict resolution, family life education, security systems, healthcare practices, and organized leisure, indigenous adult education created responsible individuals who actively contributed to the progress of their communities. By integrating knowledge, values, and practical skills, it laid the foundation for sustainable community development.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that indigenous adult education programmes such as apprenticeship, storytelling, agricultural training, initiation rites, and health education have long served as vital mechanisms for promoting peaceful coexistence and sustainable community development in Nigeria. The neglect of these indigenous systems has,

however, contributed to rising moral decline and the slow pace of development in contemporary Nigerian society. It is therefore imperative that indigenous adult education, with its rich cultural values and practical applications, be revitalized and integrated into modern educational and community development frameworks. Properly harnessed, it holds the potential to enhance quality of life, strengthen moral standards, and accelerate sustainable community development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the role of indigenous adult education in promoting sustainable community development:

1. **Policy Integration:** Government and policymakers should formally recognize and integrate indigenous adult education practices into national education and development frameworks. This will ensure that traditional knowledge and skills are preserved and applied in modern contexts.
2. **Community Participation:** Local communities should be encouraged to actively preserve and transmit indigenous knowledge systems—such as apprenticeship, storytelling, and traditional health practices—through structured community-based programmes.
3. **Curriculum Development:** Educational institutions should incorporate aspects of indigenous adult education into curricula at all levels. This will expose younger generations to valuable cultural heritage, practical skills, and moral values.
4. **Capacity Building:** Training programmes should be organized for adult educators and community leaders to help them adapt indigenous learning methods for contemporary use, especially in areas such as agriculture, health, and conflict resolution.
5. **Research and Documentation:** Scholars and researchers should document indigenous practices to safeguard them from extinction. This knowledge base can serve as a valuable resource for future generations and for integrating indigenous education into modern systems.
6. **Public Awareness:** Awareness campaigns should be conducted to sensitize the public on the importance of indigenous adult education as a tool for moral regeneration, economic empowerment, and sustainable community development.

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