

*Towards True Education and Sustainability in Africa: Teaching Africa's Philosophies and Promoting
Indigenous Knowledge for Posterity*

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the need to foster true education in Africa. The paper argues that education systems in Africa have been westernized and designed along European languages and curricula undermining Africa's indigenous knowledge systems. In addition, the paper posits that Africa has a rich and long history of knowledge systems and practices that can be effectively harnessed towards ensuring quality education for Sustainable Development. The paper notes that westernization of education in Africa undermines the quest for true and quality education by alienating Africa's indigenous knowledge systems. In light of this challenge, the paper proposes reforms in Africa's education systems towards teaching Africa's philosophies and promoting indigenous knowledge for posterity.

1.0 Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in fostering Sustainable Development. It has been correctly noted that education is a key human right, a powerful driver of development, and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving human well-being by promoting health, gender equality, peace, and stability¹. Education empowers people with the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviors that are vital for economic development, social cohesion and environmental conservation towards sustainability². For instance, education is vital in creating awareness and developing solutions to the

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¹ World Bank Group., 'Education' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/overview> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Education for Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

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major challenges affecting humanity including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution³. It has been argued that education equips individuals of all ages with the knowledge, skills, values, and ability to tackle challenges that undermine both people and planet⁴. Education enables individuals to make informed decisions and take action, both individually and collectively, to change society and protect the planet towards Sustainable Development⁵.

Fostering quality education is therefore a prerequisite for Sustainable Development. By enhancing access to quality education for all, individuals and communities are empowered to reach their full potential towards building more inclusive and equitable societies, and paving the way for a sustainable and flourishing future for generations to come⁶. For individuals, education enhances access to employment, decent livelihoods and health while also strengthening poverty reduction efforts⁷. In addition, for nations and societies, education drives long-term economic growth, spurs innovation, strengthens institutions, and fosters social cohesion towards peace and prosperity⁸.

The United Nation's *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁹ recognises the fundamental role of education in fostering sustainability. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities

³ Ibid

⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'What is Education for Sustainable Development?' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education/need-know> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/fieldoffice/daressalaam/expertise/educationandlifelonglearning#:~:text=Embracing%20lifelong%20learning%2C%20empowers%20individuals,%2C%20innovative%2C%20and%20sustainable%20society> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

⁷ World Bank Group., 'Education' Op Cit

⁸ Ibid

⁹ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

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for all in order to promote Sustainable Development¹⁰. SDG 4 puts education at the centre of Sustainable Development and recognises that education is the key that will allow many other SDGs to be achieved¹¹.

Further, African Union's *Agenda 2063*¹² also acknowledges the importance of education in fostering development and sustainability in Africa. Agenda 2063 notes that a key driver of Africa's development agenda will be its world class human capital developed through *quality education* focused on achieving 100 per cent literacy and numeracy, and clear emphasis on science, technology and engineering¹³. It requires African countries to invest in education across all levels including early childhood education to primary, secondary, technical, vocational and higher education for sustainability¹⁴.

At a national level, the *Constitution of Kenya*¹⁵ recognises education as a fundamental human rights and a key driver of development. The Constitution stipulates that every person has the right to education¹⁶. It requires the state to foster the right to education for specific groups including children who have the right to free and compulsory basic education¹⁷; persons with disabilities who are entitled to access educational institutions and facilities that are integrated into society to the extent compatible with their interests¹⁸; the youth who the right to access relevant education and training for their development¹⁹;

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ United Nations., 'Goal 4: Quality Education' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/#:~:text=Education%20is%20the%20key%20hat,and%20to%20reach%20gender%20equality> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

¹² African Union., 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-framework_document_book.pdf (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Constitution of Kenya., 2010., Government Printer, Nairobi

¹⁶ Ibid, article 43 (1) (f)

¹⁷ Ibid, article 53 (1) (b)

¹⁸ Ibid, article 54 (1) (b)

¹⁹ Ibid, article 55 (a)

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and minorities and marginalised groups who are entitled to special opportunities in educational and economic fields²⁰.

Fostering quality education for Sustainable Development is therefore a key priority at all levels. However, realising this ideal continues to be a challenge globally. For instance, millions of children and the youth all over the world lack access to quality education undermining efforts towards Sustainable Development²¹. In addition, education systems are not fully inclusive with marginalized groups and minorities including the poor, girls, indigenous communities, persons with disabilities, and people of colour facing discrimination in access to quality education²². Further, out of the thousands of languages spoken globally, it is estimated that only about 350 languages are used in schools²³. Consequently, millions of learners are being taught in languages they do not fully understand undermining their ability to learn effectively, express themselves and reach their full potential²⁴. It has also been argued that Westernization of education systems in developing countries including the African continent has led to the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems and practices²⁵. Tackling these challenges is vital in ensuring quality education globally for Sustainable Development.

²⁰ Ibid, article 56 (b)

²¹ Kuppens. L., 'Quality Education Means Empowerment' Available at <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/quality-education-means-empowerment> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

²² United Nations., 'Goal 4: Quality Education' Op Cit

²³ United Nations., 'International Mother Language Day: 21 February' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/mother-language-day#:~:text=Ensuring%20that%20education%20systems%20support,engagement%2C%20and%20critical%20thinking%20skills> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Nwauwa. A.O., 'Western Education and the Rise of a New African Elite in West Africa' Available at <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-282?p=emailAULjLfSA2ouM&d=/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-282> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

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This paper critically examines the need to foster true education in Africa. The paper argues that education systems in Africa have been westernized and designed along European languages and curricula undermining Africa's indigenous knowledge systems. In addition, the paper posits that Africa has a rich and long history of knowledge systems and practices that can be effectively harnessed towards ensuring quality education for Sustainable Development. The paper notes that westernization of education in Africa undermines the quest for true and quality education by alienating Africa's indigenous knowledge systems. In light of this challenge, the paper proposes reforms in Africa's education systems towards teaching Africa's philosophies and promoting indigenous knowledge for posterity.

2.0 Westernization of Education in Africa

The current system of education in Africa can be traced back to the arrival of Europeans in the continent. It has been pointed out that early Christian missionaries in Africa took the lead in introducing Western education as an indispensable tool for effective evangelism²⁶. By the end of the 19th century, before the arrival of Christian missionaries in the continent, most Africans adhered to traditional religions and Islam²⁷. However, the subsequent arrival of missionaries in the continent in the late 19th century and early 20th century saw the rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa at the expense of traditional religions²⁸. It has been pointed out that western (formal) education was a key aspect in missionary conversion strategies and therefore education became firmly connected to Christian missions in Africa²⁹.

²⁶ Nwauwa. A.O., 'Western Education and the Rise of a New African Elite in West Africa' Op Cit

²⁷ zu Selhausen. F.M., 'Missions, Education and Conversion in Colonial Africa' Available at <https://www.aehnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/AEHN-WP-48-1.pdf> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

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Christian missionaries were the first to introduce western education in sub-Saharan Africa before the advent of colonialism³⁰. Mission societies expanded into territories in Africa before the arrival of colonial powers and used education among other tools to convert Africans into Christianity³¹. Consequently, many mission schools were established throughout Sub-Saharan Africa with the goal of converting people to Christianity and spreading western ideologies and practices before the arrival of colonial powers³². For instance, in Kenya, mission schools were established at Thogoto, Mang'u, Kambui and Kaimosi among other areas in order to support mission work³³. It has been argued that the main focus of mission schools was on learning to read the Bible and translating the Bible into local languages in order to spread Christianity throughout Africa³⁴.

From the foregoing, it is evident that Christian missionaries and missions played a pivotal role in the development of education in Africa before and during the colonial period. For instance, they introduced western education, which was a stark contrast to the traditional African education that was largely informal and based on oral tradition³⁵. Mission schools taught reading and writing, arithmetic, geography and history among other subjects and therefore played a vital role in introducing formal education and literacy to many Africans³⁶. It has been argued that by teaching Africans to read and write, missionaries believed that Africans would be able to read the Bible and understand

³⁰ Mission education left an uneven legacy: an analysis of 26 African countries., Available at <https://theconversation.com/mission-education-left-an-uneven-legacy-an-analysis-of-26-african-countries-166315> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

³¹ Ibid

³² zu Selhausen. F.M., 'Missions, Education and Conversion in Colonial Africa' Op Cit

³³ Strayer. R.W., 'The Making of Mission Schools in Kenya: A Microcosmic Perspective' Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1186971> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ How did Christian missions impact African educational systems?., Available at <https://www.tutorchase.com/answers/ib/history/how-did-christian-missions-impact-african-educational-systems> (Accessed on 28/06/2025)

³⁶ Ibid

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Christian teachings thus enabling them to convert to Christianity³⁷. Consequently, religious instruction was a significant part of the curriculum in mission schools³⁸. This had a profound impact on African societies and indigenous knowledge systems, leading to the spread of Christianity and the erosion of traditional African religions, practices and systems of knowledge in favour of western-based systems³⁹.

Following the introduction of western education by missionaries in Africa, subsequent colonial governments used education as a means of consolidating colonial rule in Africa⁴⁰. For example, it has been argued that during the colonial era, western education produced 'educated hybrids' who were alienated from their own peoples and cultures and who collaborated with Europeans to firmly entrench colonialism in Africa⁴¹. Further, it has been pointed out that the purpose of education during the colonial era in Africa was to introduce Africans to the allegedly 'superior' western culture⁴². The need for skilled native labour for economic development and eagerness to spread Christianity caused colonial powers to use education as a tool to achieve social control over Africans⁴³.

The system of education introduced by missionaries and maintained by colonial powers is still widespread throughout Africa. The introduction of western education in Africa undermined traditional African education systems that had been practiced in the continent for many centuries⁴⁴. It also fueled the idea that western cultures are superior contributing to the deterioration of Africa's culture and knowledge systems⁴⁵. It has been argued that colonial education undermined the belief the people of Africa in their names,

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Nwauwa. A.O., 'Western Education and the Rise of a New African Elite in West Africa' Op Cit

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Mart. C.T., 'British colonial Education Policy in Africa' *Internal journal of English and literature* Vol. 2(9), pp. 190-194, December 2011

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

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in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves⁴⁶.

Westernization of education in Africa has undermined the quest towards true and quality education in the continent. For instance, it has been pointed out that education systems in most African countries are still adapted to western cultures and lifestyles and reflect Euro-centric curricula⁴⁷. Further, most learners in the continent are taught in European languages including English, Portuguese and French⁴⁸. Due to westernization of education in Africa and other developing regions of the world, it has been pointed out that many learners are taught in languages they do not fully understand undermining their ability to learn effectively, express themselves and reach their full potential⁴⁹. It is estimated that approximately 37 per cent of learners in low- and middle-income countries are not taught in the language that they best speak and understand with this figure rising up to 90 cent of learners in some countries⁵⁰. In light of these concerns, it is necessary to teach African philosophies and promote indigenous knowledge systems in Africa towards true education and sustainability.

3.0 Towards True Education in Africa

It is imperative to teach Africa's philosophies and harness indigenous knowledge in order to foster true education and sustainability in Africa. Westernization of education in Africa has undermined traditional African education systems, values and practices and led to the spread of the notion that western education and culture is superior⁵¹. However,

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Available at <https://www.msingiafrikamagazine.com/2022/01/the-history-and-development-of-education-in-afrika/> (Accessed on 29/06/2025)

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ United Nations., 'International Mother Language Day: 21 February' Op Cit

⁵⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Make languages count for Sustainable Development' Available at https://articles.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2024/12/imld-2025-cn-en_0.pdf (Accessed on 29/06/2025)

⁵¹ Mart. C.T., 'British colonial Education Policy in Africa' Op Cit

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this is not the case. Before the introduction and spread of western education in Africa, communities in Africa had their own unique and rich indigenous education systems, philosophies and practices⁵². Education in African societies was based on oral literature that took various forms including folktales, myths, proverbs and songs⁵³. Further, some African societies had their own formal education systems. For instance, Timbuktu in Mali was a hub for education where students were taught literature, philosophy, religion, medicine and science among other disciplines⁵⁴. Timbuktu became a major center for education attracting scholars from Africa and beyond⁵⁵.

Further, it has been pointed out that Egypt was the center of the body of ancient knowledge and wisdom and their religious, philosophical and scientific knowledge spread to other parts of the world⁵⁶. The Kemet knowledge system has been identified as one of the greatest sources of knowledge and education to have ever existed⁵⁷. It has been pointed out that Kemet was the center of most, if not all, ancient learning⁵⁸. Its curriculum focused on core African values and philosophies including responsibility, leadership, peace, harmony and cooperation⁵⁹. Students from all over the world came to study the secrets and mysteries of Kemet which was a learning center of medicine, science, astronomy, mathematics, and other subjects taught by African master teachers⁶⁰.

⁵² The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Op Cit

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Timbuktu: A Lost Center of Education and Trade., Available at <https://fountainmagazine.com/all-issues/2017/issue-117-may-june-2017/timbuktu-a-lost-center-of-education-and-trade> (Accessed on 29/06/2025)

⁵⁵ Revisiting Human Revolution, a Journey Back to Timbuktu., Available at <https://scholarmedia.africa/africa/revisiting-human-revolution-a-journey-back-to-timbuktu/> (Accessed on 29/06/2025)

⁵⁶ Bozdogan S., & Rabbat. N., 'The Kemet Cultural Influence on Ancient Greek Philosophy' Available at <https://web.mit.edu/4.288/Students/diop/term.html> (Accessed on 29/06/2025)

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Zulu. I., 'The Ancient Kemet Roots of Library and Information Science' Available at <https://www.jpanafrican.org/edocs/e-DocAKRLIS.pdf> (Accessed on 29/06/2025)

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

4.0 Conclusion

Westernization of education in Africa has led to the misguided belief that western education systems and culture are superior. However, Africa has a rich history of education including Kemet and Timbuktu among other traditional African education centres and knowledge systems⁶⁶. Africa's education philosophies focused on cooperation, compassion, responsibility, leadership, peace and harmony with nature⁶⁷. Therefore, through teaching Africa's philosophies, promoting indigenous knowledge systems and including African languages in education, it is possible to foster true education and sustainability in Africa.

⁶⁶ Bozdogan S., & Rabbat. N., 'The Kemetic Cultural Influence on Ancient Greek Philosophy' Op Cit

⁶⁷ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Op Cit

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