BOOK REVIEW

African traditions that enhance philosophical ideologies

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Abstract
Waghid’s book, African philosophy of education reconsidered: On being human (2014), makes a case for an African philosophy of education to develop in a rational, principled and stimulating context in order to ultimately to produce realistic solutions to African problems. The book addresses the paucity of conversations in respect of a particular African philosophy of education that integrates reasonableness, culture and emotion, including the empowerment of African women to address cultural and societal marginalisation, as part of an African philosophy of education. Firstly, the reviewer espouses the point that an African philosophy of education discourse is meant to move beyond a mere discussion of culture and tradition to being an innovative, scientific practice aimed at resolving dilemmas on the African continent. Waghid’s book uses ubuntu as an instance of African philosophy of education to do pragmatist work in resolving educational and societal problems on the continent in relation to justice, including equality for all. Secondly, the reviewer is mindful of Waghid’s assertion that an African philosophy of education necessitates rational debate in order to achieve a coherent understanding of the manner in which age-old traditional thoughts may be incorporated into an innovative African ethos. Ultimately, Waghid advocates that teaching and learning should provoke attitudes of openness and criticality, but he also takes care to encourage those who guide to be aware of student diversity as acknowledged by African philosophers.

INTRODUCTION

The following quotation forms the essence of Waghid’s (2014, 68) thought-provoking book entitled African philosophy of education reconsidered: On being human that invites academics and researchers in the field to re-consider and re-engage critically with a conception of an African philosophy and its implications for education:

We require an educative restoration of the self and its wholeness – a spirituality that will lift one up and move one to be a better person in relation to others and their
otherness. After all, human beings bear an internal relation to all others ... In a way, education holds the promise of a fuller human flourishing – one that can rescue people collectively from a deep disorder in their lives.

In seven chapters, spanning from an African philosophy of education in practice, towards a different understanding of African metaphysics and epistemology, to exclusion on the African continent, the author deliberates upon both the complexity of the ‘lived experiences’ of African individuals, and how these are manifested in communities – with sometimes adverse effects. The book resonates with the idea that an African philosophy of education discourse ought to develop in a rational, principled and stimulating context in order to produce realistic solutions to African ‘poverty, hunger, famine, unemployment, political oppression, civil wars, colonialism (imperialism) and economic exploitation’ (ibid., 8). To my mind, Waghid alludes to the reliable analysis of basic African circumstances via the classification of an essential acceptance of African traditions to enhance philosophical ideology within an African context.

As a result, African transformation will benefit from the incorporation of revived cultural and societal principles in keeping with the Africanisation discourse – and further, ubuntu – to foster long-term goals in keeping with global targets. Ubuntu – situated in the practice of the Africanisation of education – exploits rationalisation and logic to deliberate issues that are intended to steer the path of knowledge assimilation and sharing (Venter 2004). Waghid recognises that an African individual forms an inextricable part of the community where the spirit of ubuntu as a collective asset is intended to ensure that there is human engagement for advancement. It is my perception that ubuntu requires an integrated allegiance by an individual in an African community to achieve common goals where the community dictates how a person is identified. Waghid (ibid., 65) states that

acting with both hospitality and hostipitality invariably requires that people act with a sense of ubuntu – that is, that they act with a dignified humanness towards others and treat them with care; and that they cultivate in themselves and others an antipathy towards dystopias that might confront them.

He thus acknowledges Benhabib’s (2011) arguments that the definition and application thereof is a challenge for African education. However, as Waghid acknowledges the significance of recognising ‘the other’, he uses Appiah’s (2006, 97) ‘notion of living together’ as well as Nussbaum’s (2000, 1) capabilities approach to give emphasis to human dignity, tolerance, freedom of expression and access to education. For collaborative consultation among the African groups that vary in terms of their social, ethnic, cultural, racial and religious attitudes and beliefs, the humane context ensures that a ‘cultural anchor’ achieves ‘communally accepted and desirable ethical standards’ of selflessness and caring (Venter 2004, 156). Venter (ibid.) further suggests that the process of emancipation of African people from colonialism must
give attention to social upliftment; yet also concedes that the attainment thereof in the reconstruction of African philosophy will not be without challenges. Hence, the realisation of the spirit of ubuntu depends on deference and acceptance of the views of others for the general benefit of the entire African community. As such these arguments for African philosophy set a firm foundation for the motivation that ubuntu ought to be the basis of higher education transformation where individual philosophies work in conjunction with universal philosophies.

**UBUNTU**

Waghid’s (2005) deliberation is useful in that it clarifies the position that an African philosophy of education discourse is meant to move beyond a mere discussion of culture and tradition to being an innovative and scientific, that is, key to resolving African dilemmas. Here, Waghid (ibid., 83) extends his assertion from a previous work where he stated, ‘African philosophy of education aims at contributing to the transformation of educational discourse’. It is my assumption that the capacity of African education to allow individuals to form strong African identities impacts upon the more comprehensive, long-term assignments allied to an African philosophy of education that addresses African problems such as higher education restructuring. Being potent from a reconstructive/deconstructive perspective, Waghid’s book is based on an African philosophy of education that speaks to the philosophical inferences, congruent with ubuntu. These inferences also pertain to African knowledge, belief and value systems, socioeconomic situations and customs handed down from generation to generation to be incorporated and modified to suit modern perspectives and communal practices. I find that the writing satisfies (to some extent) my interest in two particular aspects that carry considerable weight, namely, the transformation, equity and diversity challenges that South African universities grapple with, as well as the individual, communal, educational and professional roles of women. Nevertheless, Waghid does bear in mind that the place of the woman in African societies is changing at a moderate pace where African women are being allowed the privilege of more liberal gender roles. Waghid’s discussion of African feminism allows that women exemplify and promote ubuntu and humanism as their own agents of change while they still battle to achieve equality on intellectual platforms despite recent strides to correct the gender imbalances.

In relying on Wiredu’s (1980) arguments, Waghid demonstrates that he is mindful of the need for a reasonably culture dependent conception of African philosophy of education to achieve a coherent understanding of the role of age-old traditional thoughts within an innovative African ethos. Waghid further relies on the thinking of Assié-Lumumba (2005) to justify his stance that the ‘redefinition’ and re-construction of an African philosophy of education ought to aspire towards maintaining an African way of life and African ‘mode of knowledge construction’. In this regard, he also refers to the work of Horsthemke and Enslin (2005), but questions their notion of promoting the individual as being distinct from the collective as he draws attention
to his claim that the individual’s roles and activities are inextricably interconnected with the communal component. Aligning himself more closely to Hountondji’s (2002, 255) view of ‘conscious rationality or reasonableness’, Waghid concedes that merely yielding to the opinions of others is wrong as it does not bode well for African development.

Alternatively, the book demonstrates Gyekye’s (1997, 29) contention to affirm his own claim that an African philosophy of education discourse, although reasonable, may not be conducted in the same way that Western interchanges generally dictate. To demonstrate his own hypothesis, Waghid uses Gyekye (ibid., 19–24) as an authority to emphasise that ‘African reasonableness is a critical, re-evaluative response to the basic human problems that arise in any African society’ (Waghid 2014, 26) and each challenge necessitates original African solutions after meaningful evaluation. Waghid points out that for him greater success is possible if African communities have access to a unique form of ‘educational development’ so as to deal with their unique problems rationally. It is Waghid’s (ibid., 9) view that critical and reasoned arguments within reasonable, responsible spaces where ‘the other’ is heard are essential to meaningful deliberation:

To my mind, listening to what the other has to say, even though this expression may be unimportant or inarticulate justifications, allows the voices of people who would otherwise have been muted or marginalised to come to the fore.

The above line of reasoning is especially relevant in the teaching and learning context where ‘deliberative pedagogical activity’ (ibid., 12) focuses on policy needs to solve practical issues and where there is room to speak freely. Hence, the realisation of the spirit of ubuntu depends on deference and acceptance of the views of others for the general benefit of the entire African community as individual philosophies impact upon philosophies of life. Waghid advocates that the African spirit of Ubuntu promotes ethical caring, reasonable questioning, analysis and interpretation where respect among individuals is not lost. As a formative structure of this discussion of an African philosophy of education, the book seeks to clarify a similar point that Ramose (2010, 295) makes in the statement: ‘Aristotle’s idea that happiness is the end or purpose of all human conduct does have implications for moral education’. In formulating my own definitions of ubuntu I sanction Waghid’s explanations that the concept embraces the sense of happiness derived from personal caring, sharing, hospitality, forgiveness, compassion, empathy, honesty, humility and cooperativeness that culminate in collaborative goodwill and harmonious human relationships. Further, I accept that Waghid (2014, 83) is correct in referring to Nussbaum’s (2004) work to explain that being human entails the ability to behave such that there is no sense of disgust or shame. He does so in order to stress the fact that these two negative characteristics challenge ‘the quest to be human – that is, to enact ubuntu’ (Waghid 2014, 83).
TEACHING AND LEARNING

I agree with Waghid – as Venter (2004) also points out – that teaching and learning should provoke attitudes of openness and criticality thus encouraging those who guide them to become aware of student diversity as acknowledged by African philosophers. This may be especially so in the African context where students’ capacity to engage in critical dialogue may be affected by their historical disadvantages or background. While Waghid (2014, 12) interrogates the significance of ‘respect (as) a condition for deliberative pedagogical activity’, he centres his validation thereof on the critical need for considerate rational ‘human engagement’ within the teaching and learning experience in a transforming African philosophy of education. In keeping with the theory of engagement and what Waghid refers to as ‘a communitarian spirit’, the argument in the book is that relevant others are to be acknowledged and heard. Waghid (2014, 12) claims that ‘intellectual rigour and honesty or moral sensitivity and wisdom’ can provoke imaginative action and renewed consciousness of possibility among all students as well as teachers. He therefore submits that to be human and personalise responsibility and justice, people have to exemplify the basic attributes of ubuntu that are enmeshed within educational transformation in an African context. My interpretation of what Waghid envisages as the practice of ubuntu is that the concept alludes to a practical means of inculcating – on a pedagogical level – humanity in others and ourselves, openness and criticality, awareness and tolerance of individual capabilities. I realise that the assumption may be that once students are provoked to imaginative action and renewed consciousness they will be better able to appreciate African or indigenous philosophies such as ubuntu. As suggested in this review, the implications for pedagogy in terms of ubuntu are that a strong sense of responsibility needs to underpin student guidance towards justice and humanness. I therefore admit that in the pursuit of rationalisation and deliberation, education within the broader context may be constituted by meanings of philosophy of education. Accordingly, the ideal for me is the cultivation of communities of learning that encourage students to work cooperatively through debate, sharing and engagement. In line with Waghid’s contention, my inferences are that students will be successful in attaining their academic goals should there be a functional community of learning. Subsequently, if it is assumed that Waghid’s arguments are justified, a responsible and reasonable network of interaction, support and collaboration will demonstrate efforts at creating ubuntu within an African philosophy of education.

AFRICAN ‘ETHNOPHILOSOPHY’

Without any disrespect to the contributions and influences of Western philosophical influences, such as those of Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein and Dewey, Waghid (2014, 17) considers instead, the possibility that African ‘ethnophilosophy’ can work hand-in-hand with what he refers to as the ‘methods and claims of other traditions’. Drawing on Appiah in Hountondji (2002, xiii), he asserts that an African philosophy of education has to project a combination of that which is truly African together
with that which is philosophically compelling. For those who prescribe a rigorous scientific inclination for an African philosophy of education, Waghid (2014, 20) stresses that the discipline ought to illustrate ‘fundamental questions of truth, value, and meaning’ in terms of what is ‘communitarian’ in a modern context. At the same time, as a transformative process, an African philosophy of education may be instrumental in facilitating reconstruction that overcomes the complexities of diversity and promotes moral values in keeping with the communalistic worldview without ignoring the legacy of oral traditions.

By challenging the popular western construction of African people being pagans with inferior beliefs, Waghid (2014, 44), in Chapter 3, ‘Religion, ethics and aesthetics in African cultures’, explores the unique way in which African religion is practised by stating that it is ‘always an expression of a relationship between individuals and God’. Citing the work of Taylor (1991, 58–59), Waghid (2014, 44) states that the realisation of the self cultivates ‘a radical anthropocentrism’ and is ‘an instrumental stance to all facets of our life and surroundings’ including religious beliefs and God. Subsequently, my interpretation is that a person who believes in being separate from the rest of society without being answerable to anyone produces a disjuncture that impedes the creation of communal respect and human welfare that are ‘the basis of ethics in African society in relation to situating the self authentically in community with others’ (Waghid 2014, 46). Hence, his reference to Derrida’s (1995, 282) account of ‘the individual and the collective responsibility of the group or community’ and his claim:

In other words, in the African sense, an individual does not act in opposition to the group to which he belongs, but rather, by virtue of his membership to the group, and as an extension of the group, exercises his or her individuality in the interest of the community of which he or she is a member ... Metaphysically speaking, the African person always acts responsibly as an individual and simultaneously exercises his or her responsibility towards the community (Waghid 2014, 36–37).

If the aforementioned claim holds true, then a communalistic ethos will invariably impact upon transformation of African teaching, learning and research output endorsing an ethic of caring. Waghid chooses to apply Benhabib’s (2011) stance to make the point that, in the process of change, individuals who form part of the innovations will accomplish the overarching goals if there is distinct evidence of democratic process, justice and inclusion of ‘the other’. In applying this claim I consider that there are divergent subcultures within multi-faceted large higher education institutions (HEIs) – hence individuals will want to establish and maintain unbiased identities without being prejudiced. It stands to reason that a network of support and collaboration will demonstrate efforts at creating ubuntu and communalism as well as human responsibility and respect. The arguments in the book espouse my call for a compliant informative postgraduate community of learning that can contribute to more confident students who are able to adhere
to timelines, achieve their academic goals and enhance learning strategies. As a consequence of Waghid’s assertions, an African philosophy of education discourse promotes the idea that HEIs ought to advocate a strong sense of responsibility and justice that caters for Africanisation within a human welfare agenda. Waghid alerts the reader to the fact that in keeping with the spirit of *ubuntu*, individuals ought to be advised and guided appropriately to fulfil their personal goals within a communal context. Personally this can apply when making postgraduate students feel ‘at home’ within any institutional culture, taking cognisance of *ubuntu* together with selfless acknowledgement of humanity in others. The exigency is that there is an inherent sense of belonging that encourages the exchange of knowledge while it remains open to the new and unexpected. It is in this regard that I recognise the relevance of Waghid’s (2014, 68) words: ‘An *ubuntu* discourse, therefore, is not so much about how well we attach ourselves to the others, but rather to which extent we honour our consciousness by valuing our social imagination’.

In his discussion of the application of such concepts in the South African educational context, Waghid (ibid., 70) is critical of the Department of Basic Education (DoBE) (2008; 2011) that has not defined ‘sufficiently plausible ways for how democracy and citizenship ought to be taught in classrooms’. He maintains that a recent ‘practical guide’ outlining the manner in which public school teaching and learning ought to approach the development of ‘responsibility and humanity’ has not made the grade as it does not engage in discussion of ‘democratic citizenship education since the release of the Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy in 2001’ (ibid., 70). Therefore, he advocates that there is an urgent need for a more school-friendly version that will promote issues such as, citizenship and democracy.

I consider that Waghid accentuates the significance of *ubuntu*, justice, human values and human respect in the African pedagogic situation. If it is assumed that Waghid is correct, a new practical guide should foster meaningful, respectful and responsible human engagement between teacher and student so as to promote active conversation and debate while achieving the ultimate goal of teaching and learning about democratic citizenship. Although I concur with Waghid in the assessment that teacher education within a humane-based context will enrich the teaching profession, I am somewhat sceptical about whether the present teaching and learning conditions – particularly in South African schools – will allow the spirit of humaneness to prevail without recognition of ‘the other’. Besides the suggestions Waghid advocates, there will have to be various structural modifications, such as in terms of the school culture and the policy regarding access points, for students to allow for the goals of human respect, caring and welfare to be fulfilled. It is my view that the attainment of public school goals in this regard can culminate in a domino effect whereby there will be subsequent upliftment of higher education objectives as well as a truly African philosophy of communitarianism on a social and democratic level. Eventually, according to Waghid (2014, 92), social ordeals such as ‘extreme poverty, marginalisation and underdevelopment, as noted by Shivji (1999, 260)’ may be mitigated.
THIRD WAVE AFRICAN FEMINISM

Finally, the third wave African feminist paradigm – that dictates to which aspects of literature I generally give attention – allows me to reflect on Waghid’s work positively. Like him, I place emphasis upon justice together with respect and caring, especially in acknowledgement of the other and their divergent defining characteristics. As a post-colonial, third wave feminist, it is my view that Waghid’s arguments are fundamental to the success of an African philosophy of education and the ideals of ubuntu. Revised roles of African women post-1990 ought to clearly define their positions and identities within social contexts. Thus, the new-found sense of power should encourage the African woman to divest herself of cultural and societal domination and marginalisation that she had previously allowed to keep her in check. Waghid (2014) quotes Assié-Lumumba (2007) who deliberates upon the fact that although there have been noteworthy policy changes in many parts of Africa, these have not yet filtered down to the grass root levels they were intended for. Thus, Waghid (2014, 106–107) states that ‘for women, repetition, dropping out and forced-out rates are significantly higher than in the case of men, resulting in lower enrolment and higher attrition rates for women from the primary to tertiary levels of the education sector (Assié-Lumumba 2007, 2)’. As a result Waghid refers to an ‘asymmetrical gender representation’ that eventually has an effect upon the economic and labour dynamics in African countries. He correctly cites Assié-Lumumba (2007, 5) who claims that ‘gender inequality is the most important characteristic of the African economy and its underdevelopment’. His reasoning that the reality of the under representation of women on a social level is perpetuated at HEIs despite the evident value in recognising and rewarding African women for their successes as part of the transformative pedagogical process.

EXPOSITION OF THE CHAPTERS

As I have alluded to in the preceding paragraphs, an African philosophy of education discourse requires open engagement and debate allowing for freedom of expression without prejudice. In keeping with this ideology, Waghid (2014, 99) quotes Rowlands (2008, 101) who claims ‘that most of the evil produced by humans is not the result of malicious intentions but of the unwillingness to do one’s moral and epistemic duty’. Subsequently, Waghid’s discourse rationalises the tradition of an African philosophy of education to act as the basis for acknowledgement and willingness of the group to accept individual ambitions in conducting the communitarian dialogue. Waghid’s vast experience in academia authorises him to reason that the sense of responsibility and accountability ought to pervade ‘critical pedagogy and reflexivity’ to enhance an understanding of democratic citizenship to resolve African problems. Chapter 1 illustrates Waghid’s strong stance in his defence of an African philosophy of education where he holds that if the field is a communitarian, culture-dependent one, there will be a sense of purpose in the steps to expose and mitigate major philosophical problems. Further details regarding Waghid’s contention are provided.
in Chapter 2, where he draws on Derrida’s theory of deconstruction to explain a non-binary stance endorsing the dynamics of individualism that ought to foster the general good of African communities. Chapter 3 attests to Waghid’s interpretation of ‘conversational justice’ but not before he describes the African pedagogic context as diverse and transforming where students are prepared for community engagement. As ideal settings to inculcate African norms and values, HEIs can engender the spirit of ubuntu meant to form the crux of being human within a social and moral sense, according to Waghid in Chapter 4. He engages with democratic citizenship education policy and implementation in South Africa in Chapter 5 to advocate that endorsement of humanity and responsibility are dependent upon institution-based relationships, engagement and knowledge transfer. Waghid’s criticism of African leadership in Chapter 6 argues that the nature of justice, democratic iterations and – conversely – human rights violations are steered to a great extent by the failure to communicate, acknowledge and respect differences. As a result Waghid recognises that the commitment to cultivate cosmopolitan justice needs to take place especially on an educational level. In Chapter 7, Waghid describes a rural South African woman who is excluded as a result of social and cultural impediments. He therefore deliberates upon the state of African women in terms of freedom of expression, social interaction and education. Waghid’s brilliant text culminates in a forceful argument clarifying the term ‘jihād’ while designating the role of African philosophy of education to be to facilitate the creation of a ‘communal language’ that encourages peace and harmony for Africa in a responsible, respectful, human-rights-based manner. The book raises pertinent questions regarding the role of African HEIs in promulgating a rights-based education so as to create inclusive, compassionate, responsible and just societies. Perhaps Waghid may turn his attention more closely to South African school violence and the apparent lack of respect for human dignity and value among the youth in his future writings. Nevertheless, I find the book a must read as it presents an argument for gender equity – also at higher education level – a discussion that I hope Waghid will also expand upon in future works.

REFERENCES


DoBE see Department of Basic Education.


