

HUMANISM AND EDUCATIONAL RECONSTRUCTIONISM IN THE PEDAGOGY OF TAI SOLARIN

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Abstract

Humanism and educational reconstructionism are ideas that may be invoked from the educational theory and praxis of Tai Solarin, but very few have been able to extrapolate and expound on this, hence the onus of the present research. Through the method of philosophical analysis, this study argues that the contribution of educational reconstructionism and educational humanism, which Western prominent scholars such as Theodore Brameld and John Dewey merely theorized over, was applied by Solarin with astounding results. This is the second motivation for this research. The application of educational reconstructionism and humanism, this research, submits is important for nation-states like Nigeria that is engaging the problems of neo-colonialism with a curriculum that seems anti-thetical to people-centered development. A revival or invocation of same, this research, maintains has the capacity to initiate results that will effectively speak to national development.

Keywords: Educational Reconstructionism, Humanism, National Development, Pedagogy, Tai Solarin.

Introduction

There is no doubt in the fact that the late Tai Solarin, even several years after his demise, continues to wield strong influence in the minds of those who have been

able to learn or understand his reflections. It is for this reason that Oladele Abiodun Balogun, while describing his understanding of Solarin's thoughts relays that the educational philosophy of Tai Solarin¹ can be aptly described as *existential-pragmatic*.² When Tai writes about his own moral and philosophical ideals, his true humanism is well revealed. "I believe in man," Tai declares, "by 'man' I mean man, woman and child. I believe that my duty to man is total service....outside man I owe none else any duties."³ He asserts that "anything that man wants to do must be done by man himself. Anywhere he wants to go, he must, himself, aggressively propel himself in that direction."⁴ These are true humanist ideals, echoed by secular humanists the world over. Tai teaches that prayer is useless, and that it is better to teach people how to solve their problems, and to give them the power and freedom to act. "I do not want to be seen giving alms to the poor," Tai once wrote, "I want to be seen teaching the poor how to live creatively by making use of his hands and feet."⁵

The foregoing is indicative of the humanism that is redolent in the reflections of Tai Solarin. This is especially true since humanism is undergirded by existentialism, scholars such as Oladele Balogun, has found similar links between these ideals in Solarin. A critical assessment of his attitude toward pedagogy however shows that he was concerned with similar questions that notable Western scholars such Theodore Brameld and John Dewey pondered over,

¹Tai Solarin He was born in Ikenne, Ogun State in Western Nigeria on the 20th August, 1922 and died in July 1994 at the age of 71. He was a renowned Nigerian humanist, social activist and columnist in leading Nigerian Newspapers. He was one of the most prominent educationists in the history of the country, and was at the vanguard of criticism of not only the social, political and economic policies of the nation, but also of the structure and practices of its education system. Tai Solarin bagged a Bachelor of Arts degree in history and geography from Manchester University and a diploma in education from the University of London. Although fondly called Dr. Solarin, he did not further his education to doctorate level; he was only awarded honorary doctor of letters by Alma College, Michigan State. But he was no doubt a deep, logical, critical and constructive thinker. Tai Solarin wrote consistently for the *Daily Times* since 1958 and the *Nigerian Tribune* since 1967, and he has contributed to numerous other papers in Nigeria like *The Guardian*. He is the only known Nigerian columnist to have a continuously running column lasting over twenty years, and he routinely wrote well over thirty articles a year. Tai himself could proudly say that there are people in Nigeria who have eagerly read his column for ten straight years or more. Besides his writing, which included several books, Dr. Solarin often joined in public talks and symposia at schools and colleges all throughout Nigeria (cf. R. Carrier, P.O. Akinsanya,, T. Solarin, D. Babalola and O.A. Balogun).

²O.A. Balogun, "A Philosophical Comparison of the Educational Thoughts of Obafemi Awolowo and Tai Solarin" in *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)*, Vol.1 No.2, December 2009, pp.61-72.

³T. Solarin, "What I Believe In: Man," *Daily Times*, 25 June 1965, reprinted in *Timeless Tai*, Akinbayo Adenubi, ed., F & A Publishers Ltd., Marina, Lagos, Nigeria, 1985, p.168.

⁴T. Solarin, *Towards Nigeria's Moral Self-Government*, Mayflower School, Ikenne, 1959, p. 70.

⁵T. Solarin, "What I Believe In: Man," *Op. cit.*, p. 169.

concerning education. In other words, Solarin's ideas are suggestive of educational reconstructionism and it is in this light that the present study wishes to establish his (Solarin's) contribution toward Nigerian pedagogy. Hence, in the next section, we employ the method of critical analysis to analyze the ideas: reconstructionism and humanism. This is important to allow us to have a firm grasp of each of these ideas and how they were lived by Solarin. The third section of this work dedicates to unearthing Solarin's educational reconstructionism, when the fourth focuses on his educational humanism.

Educational Reconstructionism and Humanism: An Exercise in Conceptual Articulation

In this section, the essential task is to focus on the meaning of educational reconstructionism as a philosophy of education, on the one hand, as well as the idea of humanism as existentialist contention, on the other hand.

Commencing with the former, it crucial to understand that the philosophy of reconstructionism contains two major premises: first; that society is in need of constant reconstruction or change, and the second; such social change involves both a reconstruction of education and the use of education in reconstructing society.⁶ Generally speaking, the reconstructionists advocate for an attitude toward change that encourages individuals to try to make life better than it was or is. Reconstructionist theory of education affirm that educational systems must be design in such a way that it will equip people with the necessary skills to achieve social changed as well as overcome social oppression. The Reconstructionists believe that planning and thinking about the future is a good way of providing alternative societies for people to consider and they feel that this kind of thinking should be promoted in schools where teachers can encourage students to become future oriented.⁷ Thus, the role of Reconstructionism as an educational theory is that it helps students in the acquisition or development of analytical ability that is critical thinking and problem-solving oriented. This is main contention of John Dewey, one of the foremost proponents of the theory.

Thus, for Dewey, in developing a curriculum, the emphasis should not only be on what to offer learner to make him adjust or fit into the society, but what the students, having gone through specific programmes, can offer the society to

⁶H. Ozmon, & S. Craver, *Philosophical Foundations of Education*. (Ohio: Merrill Publishing Co., 1990), p.162.

⁷Ibid. p.170.

bring about desirable change.⁸ John Dewey strongly believes that method of teaching must be child-centred, that is, take into consideration the needs, interest and ability of the child that will lead to self-reliance.

Humanism on the other hand, is committed to all things, ideas to be human-centered. Interestingly, Humanism first began as a revolt or protest against the idea of personal immortality of Christianity; it is a call to man to make the best of life in this world, delight in earthly achievements and build a better life here on earth. It maintains a morality or ethics that grounds all human values in this earthly existence and experience. Man has no conscious survival after death. It enjoins us to place our hopes or aspirations in this world.⁹ Humanism is a philosophy in which man, his nature and problems are the central focus. It maintains an attitude towards the universe that considers all forms of the supernatural as myth and regards nature as the totality of being.¹⁰

African Humanism was developed by Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia. Humanism as seen by Kaunda is a means to an end. The end is pure socialism. For Kaunda, man is at the center of everything.¹¹ This notion is not Western, it is originally African. Damachi comments on this, thus: "Humanism is supposed to be derived from the traditional African culture..., the African society was progressive and human, and present generation of Zambians must bear this in mind in all its political, economic, social and cultural activities."¹² Kaunda not only sees man as being at the centre of everything but the essence of everything. According to Minogue and Molloy, this notion of man centered African society is beautifully put by asking these essential and soul searching questions:

Why is a house built? Not to give man shelter and security? Why make a chair at all? Why build a factory? Why do you want a state ranch? For what else would there be need to grow food? Why is the fishing industry there? ... the simple and yet difficult answer is MAN. ... We in Zambia intend to keep our society man-centered. For it is in this that what might be described as African civilization is embodied and indeed if modern Africa has anything to contribute to this troubled world, it is in this direction that it should be.¹³

⁸G.E. Igbiwu, *Basic Philosophy of Education*, (Agbor: Krisbec Publications, 2004), p.40.

⁹G. Azenabor, *Modern Theories in African Philosophy*, (Lagos: Byolah Publishers, 2010), p.111.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.112.

¹¹B. Ozoigbo. "African Theories of Development and the Reality of Underdevelopment" in *International Journal of Development and Economic Sustainability*. 2016. 4(4) p. 17.

¹²U.G. Damachi, *Leadership Ideology in Africa*. (New York: Praeger Publishers 1976), p.7.

¹³ M. Minogue & J. Molloy, *African Aims and Attitudes*. (London: Cambridge University Press 1974), p.103.

Kaunda's conception of humanism has egalitarianism enshrined in it. The equality of man should be maintained in everything despite all accidental inequalities that abound here and there. For him, all people have a moral right to equal opportunities. Speaking of African humanism, Azenabor writes:

African humanism is an adaptation of humanism to the concrete situation of the African. It attempts to identify values and life practices indigenous to African peoples, which distinguish them from others. African humanism sets the pattern of African thought and defines its style, methodology and terms of expression. It bears on the problem and welfare of Africa and Africans. African humanism is the belief in and theory of the worth and possibilities of the African. Its emphasis is on the African man, his dignity and culture, rather than on science and technology per se. African humanism, as an African thought system, stresses relationships among people in society that is, *interdependence*, rather than bold descriptions of individual events in human experience or *individualism*.¹⁴

African Humanism shares the same line of thought with the existentialist philosophy that lays emphasis on individual concrete experiences and conditions. However, African Humanism deals with the aspirations to dealing with African human problems. It is the finding of purpose and meaning in the African life and existence. So African Humanism enables us to appreciate the significance of philosophy within the context of African life; which is geared towards positive development, solidarity and fellowship.¹⁵

Apart from Kenneth Kaunda, another African philosopher that made great contribution on the theory of Humanism was Sophie Oluwole. Her theory of Humanism is contained in her article: "*The Africanness of a Philosophy*."¹⁶ Humanism according to Oluwole, should create a sense of authenticity which never despises new ideas nor destroys the ancient. To this end, humanistic philosophy is not concerned with analysis of concept or abstract thinking, but dedicated to finding purpose and meaning in life and existence. Humanistic

¹⁴G. Azenabor, *Modern Theories in African Philosophy*, Op. cit., p.115.

¹⁵Ibid, pp.115-116.

¹⁶S.B Oluwole: "*The Africanness of a Philosophy*" in *Readings in African Philosophy*, S.B. Oluwole (ed.), (Lagos: Masstech Publications, 1989), pp.207-231.

philosophy is therefore, an art, and as an artist, the philosopher becomes a creative person.

With the two crucial terms that inform the need to revisit and revive the pedagogy of Tai Solarin, already given a thorough analysis, the next task is then to examine the way these ideas were exemplified in the ideas of Solarin. The next part of this discussion focuses on Tai Solarin's educational reconstructionism.

Tai Solarin and Educational Reconstructionism

We have already established the core contention of reconstructionism in the preceding section and shown how Dewey exemplifies it better. In this section, we concern with how Solarin's ideas not only parallel's Dewey's but shows his theory of education as reconstructionist.

Like John Dewey, Tai Solarin injects instrumentalism and pragmatism into the Reconstructionist theory, he also sustained and retained the inner kernel of the theory, which is social change. Solarin matches education with society. Balogun avers that Solarin provides a very comprehensive philosophy of education, which is sensitive to both the school and the wider society. He believes that the gateway to societal transformation is the transformation of the school system itself:

It is impossible for a country to change, if the education of that country is not undergoing a change. A change no matter how infinitesimal is only possible with the education of the people.¹⁷

Similarly, Enoh finds that there is also a clear pragmatic thrust in Solarin's philosophy - a system of thought which stresses the human being's use of intelligence to overcome problems that confront him/her in his/her interactions with the environment.¹⁸ The implication of this is that the inculcation of self-reliance through problem-solving skills ought to be central to education. Solarin observes that among Nigerians, the spirit of self-reliance and resourcefulness has given way to indolence, parasitism and the attraction of anything foreign. Tai Solarin shares the same educational ideas with his contemporary Julius Nyerere (1922-1999), first, on foreign education. In the words of Patrick Akinsanya:

Solarin and Nyerere would appear to have the same training and philosophic disposition, for their proposals on the system and

¹⁷T. Solarin, *Conscience of the Nation: Profound Thoughts of Dr. Tai Solarin, Compiled by Yomi Mamora*, (Ibadan: Famload Books, 1992), p.20.

¹⁸A.O. Enoh, *Main Currents in Nigerian Educational Thoughts*, (Jos: Midland Press, 1996), p.165.

educational philosophy were to a large extent identical. Education-for-reliance reverberates through the nooks and crannies of their books and experiments. While Nyerere simply used his position as the president of Tanzania to experiment his educational theories and assumptions, Solarin had no platform *ab initio*. When he was made the principal of Molusi College in Ijebu-Igbo in 1952, he tried introducing some innovations, but such were met with stiff oppositions from board of directors of the school and parents. It was his daring move to establish his own school which later gave him a unique opportunity to set his educational ideas on the altar of experimentation.¹⁹

Nyerere states colonial education “was not designed to prepare young people for the service of their own country; instead it was motivated by a desire to inculcate the values of the colonial society and to train individuals for the service of the colonial state.”²⁰ In the same vein, Solarin was from the very beginning opposed to “white collar” education, believing that children should learn to get their hands dirty by mastering practical crafts, alongside their regular education.²¹ “We go all out to tackle the problems of life,” Tai explains, “instead of spending several hours of the week explaining the significance of the deity.”²² Thus, Solarin major problem with inherited education (western) given to Nigerian citizenry at his time was its disconnection of academics from vocational acquisition.²³ As Akinsanya further states:

Mayflower was thus established in 1956 to confront the legacies left behind by the colonial masters in the realm of education. Solarin saw colonial education as a tool used by the British to subjugate the psyche of the Nigerian child into believing that nothing was valuable in his people's food, clothes, ceremonies, language and the entire way of life.²⁴

Tai Solarin also shares with Nyerere on self-reliance education. Martins Monomiye states that “Tai Solarin, a social critic and educator extensively

¹⁹P.O. Akinsanya, *Philosophizing About Education*, (Lagos: University of Lagos Press and Bookshop Ltd, 2015), p.116.

²⁰J.K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism: A Selection from Writings and Speeches 1965-1967*, (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.269.

²¹Walter Schwartz, *Nigeria*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, NY, 1968, p.50.

²²Norm R. Allen, Jr., “An Interview with Tai Solarin,” *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1993/1994, p. 37.

²³P.O. Akinsanya, *Op. cit.*, p.117.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p.117.

advocates for Education for Self-reliance.”²⁵ What is self-reliance education? Self-reliance education is an ideology or orientation based on the realization of oneself. Kola Ogundowole defines it is a set of purposive activities directed toward Self-Realization.”²⁶ It is a guiding principle for activities of states. Self-Reliance involves the reasonable choice of priorities from available alternatives; the ability of a nation to determine without external control what is best for it. Self-reliance is the principle or philosophy of “do it yourself!” According to C. B. Okoro,

Education for self-reliance simply means education for youth enlightenment and empowerment. It is a system of education intended to free the African child from alienation and reinstitute in him/her self-esteem and a sense of value within the confines of African culture. It is education for mass reorientation intended to post Africans into a new dawn.²⁷

In this case, education as a vital instrument for national development involves acquisition of fundamental knowledge and essential developmental skills needed for technological breakthrough and socio-political development which accelerates economic growth. Which is why Barnes, posits that the task of education is to nurture in students inherent and proactive habits of thoughtful discernment of tested beliefs of creative thinking skills from mere assertions, guesses, and opinions which discourages self-development.²⁸

Education should help people to recognize their oppression and then participate in its transformation. Thus, Solarin sees education as a vital instrument for national development which involves acquisition of fundamental knowledge and essential developmental skills needed for authentic human development, technological breakthrough and socio-political progress which accelerates economic growth.

Tai Solarin and Educational Humanism

There is no doubt in the fact that Tai Solarin was clearly a humanist – a fact he avows. He dropped Christianity for Humanism. He said his religion was service

²⁵ M. Monomiye, “Tai Solarin and Education for Self Reliance” Available online at: https://www.academia.edu/8749037/Tai_Solarin_and_Education_for_Self_Reliance?overview=true Accessed on 3rd June, 2020.

²⁶E.K. Ogundowole, *Self-reliancism: Philosophy of a New Order*, (Lagos: John West, 1988), p.52.

²⁷ C.B. Okoro, “Political Leadership in a Pluralistic Society ” in *Financial Standard*, Tuesday and Wednesday edition, 2009, pp.40-42.

²⁸N.M. Barnes, *John Dewey: Democracy and Education*, (New York: Fordham Press, 1998).

to man, and as charity begins at home, service to Nigerian man, woman and child was the only stepping stone to service to all humanity.²⁹ He was quoted to have said: "I would be flattering myself if I declare I am the only humanist in Nigeria. What I could honestly say is that I am the only Nigerian who declares from roof tops that he is a humanist."³⁰ Thus, Dele Babalola in his work titled: *Tai Solarin: Africa's Greatest Educationist and Humanist*, describes Tai Solarin as a man who lived his life as Africa's greatest educationist, humanist, atheist and one of the foremost social critics of the various government of Nigeria. He was the defender of the defenceless; an ombudsman extraordinaire for the people; a perpetual gadfly goading on the Nigeria government to provide egalitarian social services for the people.³¹

Solarin espouses a secular humanism, which places a high premium on the human being. In line with secular humanism, Solarin saw no logical relationship between religion and morality. His humanism was existential in character. His passion for the human being rather than for any abstract, transcendental principle or belief in nature as the starting point of all philosophizing is consistent with the existentialist dictum that existence precedes essence.³² According to Tim Madigan, executive editor of *Free Inquiry magazine*, Tai Solarin and Kofi Mensah, are now the leading secular humanist in Africa.³³

When Tai writes about his own moral and philosophical ideals, his true humanism is well revealed. "I believe in man," Tai declares, "by 'man' I mean man, woman and child. I believe that my duty to man is total service...outside man I owe none else any duties."³⁴ He asserts that "anything that man wants to do must be done by man himself. Anywhere he wants to go, he must, himself, aggressively propel himself in that direction."³⁵ These are true humanist ideals, echoed by secular humanists the world over. Tai teaches that prayer is useless, and that it is better to teach people how to solve their problems, and to give them the power and freedom to act. "I do not want to be seen giving alms to the poor,"

²⁹P.O. Akinsanya, Op. cit., p.117.

³⁰A.B. Okanlawon and F. Taiwo (eds.), *Tai Solarin: The Making of a Humanist*, (Lagos: Admass Publishing Co., 2000), p.15

³¹D. Babalola, *Tai Solarin: Africa's Greatest Educationist and Humanist*, (Kwill Books, 2017), p. cover page.

³²O.A. Balogun, Op. cit., pp.61-72.

³³Timothy J. Madigan, "Re: African Humanism," electronic correspondence, America Online, 10 March 1995.

³⁴Tai Solarin, "What I Believe In: Man," Op. cit., p.168.

³⁵Tai Solarin, *Towards Nigeria's Moral Self-Government*, Op. cit., p.70.

Tai once wrote, "I want to be seen teaching the poor how to live creatively by making use of his hands and feet."³⁶

It is on this showing that he comes close to existentialism via his doctrine of educational humanism. Existentialism insists on the individual choice or interest because the life experienced by human today is full of business. There is no time for him/her to execute his individual responsibility. So, it is focused on freedom and individual responsibility. One of the major aims of education for Solarin is mental freedom. In his opinion, an educated person is essentially one who is autonomous, reflective, critical, and capable of making choices without undue external influence. To him, a curriculum is only relevant if it grows out of the peculiar circumstances of the living environment in which the school is situated, and in so far as it helps the individual to understand that environment. The school system is therefore society simplified. Thus for Solarin, the curriculum should be made relevant to local needs. Solarin outlines a very detailed curriculum plan for the primary school level based on the principles of validity, relevance to life, variety, suitability and cumulativeness. At the secondary school level, he insists that all students study science and acquire vocational skills.³⁷ Solarin believes that the humanities (religion excluded) should be taught at this level, so as to bring about a broad understanding of the human being on the one hand, and on the other hand, to create a balance between such knowledge and practical disposition towards the betterment of the society. However, a very low place is accorded to sports in Solarin's curriculum proposal.³⁸

Conclusion

Thus far, the objective has been to relay the places of convergence and divergence between the ideas of Tai Solarin, on the one hand as well as the doctrines of educational humanism and educational reconstructionism. It is plausible that some of these ideas could have been originally applied in Solarin's life as well. This is one of the places of departure between him and other prominent representatives of reconstructionism such as Brameld and Dewey. Solarin, on the other hand, was able to apply his ideals in *Mayflower* and many reasonable Nigerians that have been able to contribute their quotas to national development have emerged. It is on this line of reasoning that we submit that for

³⁶Tai Solarin, "What I Believe In: Man," Op. cit., p.169.

³⁷T. Solarin, *Mayflower: The Story of a School*, (Ikeja: John West Publications, 1970), p.94.

³⁸O.A. Balogun, "A Philosophical Comparison of the Educational Thoughts of Obafemi Awolowo and Tai Solarin" in *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)*, Vol.1 No.2, December 2009, pp.61-72.

a holistic development that will inform the masses irrespective of class, educational reconstructionism and its humanistic basis are sacrosanct.

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