Indigenizing civic education in Africa: Experience in Madagascar and the Sahel

Carrie Antal, Peter Easton *

College of Education, Florida State University, 114 Stone Building, Tallahassee, FL 32306, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In Africa, as in many countries of the South, democratization is sometimes perceived as a process modeled upon outside – and specifically Northern – experience. Formal civic education programs in those countries arguably reflect the same bias and have not always been notably successful. Yet there are rich patterns of civic involvement and democratic process in African culture and in the myriad ways in which it has adapted to development challenges, often more successfully reflected in non-formal and informal education endeavors. This article reports on a comparative study of related experience in Madagascar and Sahelian West Africa and draws conclusions regarding ways to draw inspiration for school-based civic education from such ground-level sources.

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In Africa and throughout countries of the "South," democratization is frequently perceived as a process modeled upon outside – and specifically Northern – experience, if not one principally promoted by Northern-allied interests and international donors (Carew, 2006). The process has of course its defenders (e.g., Lindberg, 2006), who point to the effects of elections on liberalizing developing country regimes in the last two decades, but the "rootedness" of democratic reform in relevant African conditions and traditions remains an issue of contention.

Civic education programs and initiatives on the continent have arguably reflected this external bias to a considerable extent (Ayers, 2006). But if "democracy" is understood more generically as socio-political configurations that serve to ensure broad participation in decision-making and to express the vox populi, then it is equally clear that there are related traditions within African cultures. Civic education and democratization initiatives that take these resources into account arguably have better chances of success due to such factors as increased legitimacy and accessibility. The issues are parallel in many respects to those posed by greater use of "indigenous knowledge" in other fields of development, like health and agriculture, which have received increasing attention over recent years (Sillitoe, 2007; World Bank, 2004) and where persuasive demonstrations of the benefits to be derived from fuller respect and incorporation of indigenous knowledge have been made (Dyer et al., 2004; Briggs et al., 2003).

There are in fact plentiful examples of programs and activities that draw on the reserve of democratic experience in African culture to serve as grist for this reflection, though little literature is found on their implications for civic education. In the following pages, we begin by considering the backdrop of civic education activities in Africa and reviewing summarily several bodies of related literature. We then examine in some detail two such experiences in separate areas of the continent that demonstrate ways in which traditional institutions or practices have contributed significantly to popular understanding of civic issues and increased mastery of political skills: the *hiragasy* in Madagascar, a musical performance tradition that has served civic education functions in that country throughout the political changes of the past several hundred years; and the development of rural producers' organizations in Sahelian West Africa, where traditional patterns of social governance have informed a "modern" institution in significant ways. Triangulation from these related but disparate African experiences, one growing directly out of a long-standing cultural tradition and the other exemplifying the infusion of a more westernized business model with existing social mores, will provide a means of exploring the possibility of grounding civic education more firmly in its indigenous roots and the benefits that might be realized from doing so.

2. Civic education, political socialization and democratization in Africa

2.1. Broadening the notion of civic education

What do we mean by civic education? How does one parse and interpret the different terms used, which include in addition

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 850 6448165; fax: +1 850 6446401.
E-mail address: peaston@fsu.edu (P. Easton).

"civics" and "citizenship education?" While all have been employed interchangeably, there are nuances: "civics" carries the notion of academic theories of governance and the comparative study of institutions (and so school classes devoted to these topics), whereas civic and citizenship education, though accomplished both through and beyond schools, give added weight to the practical dimensions of learning how to be responsible citizens.

All these activities, however, represent sub-species of a broader notion – *political socialization* – defined by Renshon (1974, p. 5) as "the learning process by which the political norms and behaviors acceptable to an ongoing political system are transmitted from generation to generation." When framed in such general terms, the process obviously denotes a universal concern, one as relevant to the survival of monarchies and dictatorships as it is to democracies, and a subject of debate at least since Plato's *Republic* (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Research and publication on political socialization were much in vogue from the 1950s through the early 1980s, focusing in particular on childhood effects; but the agenda went into decline thereafter. It experienced something of a rebirth in the 1990s, spurred in part by the "animus" for democratization and the increased interest in civic education for adults as well as children that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Recent research on the methods and effects of democratic civic education in industrial countries (Niemi and Smith, 2001; Milner, 2002), in contradistinction to the investigations of school-based efforts in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Langston and Jennings, 1968), has demonstrated that certain forms of civic education are more likely than others to be successful in developing the propensity to engage in civic behaviors and positive attitudes regarding the political process. The bulk of the evidence, discussed later in this article, suggests that the most effective formal civic education programs are those that seek to align medium and message by employing program practices and teaching methods that are themselves more democratic in inspiration and use a learner-centered and participatory pedagogy. As a consequence of an improved ability to assure its effectiveness and the international drive for democratization, civic education has become once again quite a marketable and popular activity (Buk-Berge, 2006; Ruget, 2006).

2.2. Democracy and democratization

In societies that are concerned with developing a democratic citizenry, the challenge of political socialization acquires some additional dimensions, with important consequences for civic education, though the nature of both the change and the implications depends to an often unappreciated extent on cultural and historical context. We wish to consider four implications of democratic orientations for civic education that are widely treated in the literature: the role of an active citizenry; the importance of civil society; the expansion of government to "governance"; and the social learning process involved in democratization.

It is important first, however, to acknowledge variation both in the meaning of the word "democracy" and in the degree to which any ideal definition is realized by existing political regimes. Though a relatively standard version of liberal democracy, which marries free markets to civil liberties, has been purveyed by United States government-supported institutes during the democratization campaign that followed on the collapse of the Soviet Union, in fact, the concept and the practice of democracy have taken quite different forms historically – Isakhan (2006), for example, traces related habits back before the Greeks to Egypt and Mesopotamia – and they have varying meanings today. To liberal democracy might be added deliberative democracy, monarchial democracy, indus-

trial democracy, social democracy and a host of others (Dahl et al., 2003). Recent advocates of the liberal version, like the National Endowment for Democracy and Freedom House, tend to prescribe a series of steps necessary for the "democratization" of previously authoritarian regimes, usually including the institution of free markets and strict respect of private property. Critics (e.g., Abrahamsen, 2000) point out that there are plentiful examples both of free market regimes that are anything but democratic and of states eschewing liberal economic arrangements that nonetheless have pronounced democratic characteristics. The debate about the meaning and process of democratization, however, and the accompanying assessments of the respect of liberties under different governments at least have the virtue of making patently clear that, even supposing one knows what it is, perfect democracy does not yet exist, the notion is probably plural rather than singular, and all known governments claiming the title are still working out numerous imperfections in their own political systems.

2.2.1. An active citizenry

In the standard Western view of democracy, the citizenry is to a large extent the depository of sovereignty. A democratic state ideally governs by the consent of the governed, who have rights as well as responsibilities and who must be as active in defense of the former as they are in accomplishment of the latter. Rights in fact must be exercised in order to be preserved: "use it or lose it," to quote the American aphorism. In Western history, at least since the Magna Carta defense of rights has meant placing constraints on the prerogatives and exactions of government, in effect delimiting its sphere of activity, to conjure the ever-present danger of tyranny (Malcolm, 1999).

At the same time, rights are balanced by the responsibility to support communal governance, defend the collectivity and contribute to its sustenance and operations. As a consequence, under some forms of democratic government citizenship entails not just regime loyalty and a certain level of knowledge about political institutions, but in addition the ability required to preserve rights and carry out civic duties, via levels and types of political behavior that scale up from voting to varieties of association, lobbying, legislative initiative and self-government. Citizens must therefore acquire some level of political *skill* in addition to relevant political *knowledge* and *attitudes*. These skills, attitudes and types of knowledge need to be learned, whence the importance of effective types of civic education—a theme to which we will return below.

2.2.2. Civil society

The skills of citizenship cannot be either learned or exercised in a vacuum. An active citizenry supposes, supports and is supported by a countervailing sphere outside government, a public space where people may organize to defend their rights and carry out their affairs, which has come to be called "civil society." Civil society, Wiarda (2003) claims, is alone capable of holding a government accountable to its people and countering its potential abuses:

> [Civil associations] serve as transmission belts for conveying private interest concerns to government decision makers and back down again as implementers of public policy, help to mediate between state and citizen, and serve both as expressions of popular sentiment and as limits on arbitrary government. (p. 21)

Formal groups such as non-governmental organizations, community- or school-based associations, cooperatives and