

## **CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE GAMBIA**

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### **Abstract**

*Several theories and conceptual issues surround global education-democracy connection. Such issues include those relating to the impact of formal education on democracy in developing countries. In contributing to the growing literature on these issues, this paper argues that education for democracy can strengthen democratic structures in the Republic of the Gambia and that developing knowledge skills in democratic education among teachers could play a significant role in developing democratic awareness. The paper addresses the basic question of whether the prevailing political culture in the Gambia is supportive of the Western model of democracy, and if not, what brand of African democracy could be adopted by African education to facilitate productivity in the society. How can African learning be structured to support democracy? The paper finally discusses the contributions of gender and age in the Gambia to democracy and democratic education, as well as how they could strengthen the development of democracy in the Gambia.*

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## Challenges of Education for Democracy in the Gambia

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social science researchers have shown increasing interest in the nexus between education and democracy, as well as the question of the role of formal education in political modernization, and its contributions to democratic development and the development of democratic citizenship in different societies. Several theories and conceptual issues appear to surround education-democracy linkage, including issues regarding the impact of formal education on democracy in developing countries. While social research has attempted to resolve some concerns, others remain largely unresolved and still lingering in many nations.

It is often assumed, for instance, that formal education can significantly impact on people's understanding of democracy and support for democratic regimes. It has also, however, often remained an issue whether this is true for new fledgling democratic regimes in most parts of Africa with low levels of education. In the context of education-democracy linkage theory, and the ongoing debate in literature on its relevance to Africa, this paper argues that education for democracy can strengthen democracy in the Gambia, and developing knowledge and skills in democratic education among teachers, could play significant roles in developing democratic awareness. The paper, further, seeks to address the basic question of whether the prevailing political culture in the Gambia is supportive of western model of democracy; if not, what brand of African democracy (or perhaps modified western model incorporating traditional African democracy elements) towards which African education can work or whether formal education can be structured to positively add to the development of democratic political culture, according to African standards. Another related study question for education in the Gambia is whether teachers teach students to question or conform to national ethics and norms. This issue, therefore, is essentially a matter of which form of education is possible, and how can African learning be structured to support African democracy? This paper equally discusses the contributions of gender and age to democracy and education for democracy; and sought to understand how these process can strengthen the development of democracy in the Gambia.

### Conceptualizing Education for Democracy

What do we mean by education for democracy or democratic education? These two concepts are often used interchangeably because they serve the same or similar purposes, though the later appears to refer more appropriately to a form of education. Education for democracy describes the processes, structures and content of learning directed at spreading democratic awareness. Democratic education involves the dissemination of concepts and practices that result in integrated democratic awareness essentially through public outlets, and so it takes place at public and official levels, as well as among the ruling elites (Abdulghani, 2008).

Democratic education is about knowledge, about democratic awareness, about what people believe and established, regarding their relationships to the political system of governance; their relations, for instance, with the legislature, institutional structures and legal system. This knowledge enables them to understand how they actually relate and should relate with political objects, issues and events around them, and to accordingly adjust their behavior to

realize democratic purposes and good governance. It is, thus, more of critical rather than passive learning.

Democratic education provides the framework for shaping political cultures, itself, an integral part of the shared culture of society. It is aimed at producing a democratic culture consisting of principles derivable from philosophical and ethical themes within an integrated system of thought that extols such values as human and public freedoms, and social justice. Public freedom which democratic education teaches is about human and civil rights and the right to political participation; while social justice which it reaffirms, also reechoes the themes and principles of universal adult suffrage to achieve democratic purposes of equal 'citizenship' and faith in rule of law. These are themes commonly found in the western model of democracy, in most liberal democracies, and representative majoritarian democracy model.

However, in order to examine the nexus between democracy and education for democracy, and in order to assess the relevance of education for democracy in the Gambia; it becomes necessary to specify the meaning of democracy and education for democracy for this discourse. In other words, what is democracy? And what does education for democracy (or democratic education) mean for this study: what is education, or more precisely, what is the principle behind the African/Gambian education or learning system?

Democracy has come to mean several things to several people. What does democracy mean for Africans? What form of democracy can we fashion towards which African education can work? If western model of democracy appears not to work for Africans, what alternative democracy model would be appropriate? Generally, political scientists hold that democracy is a governmental form in which public decisions are ultimately controlled by all adult members of society, while this popular sovereign power is exercised on behalf of the people by their representatives in public offices.

Western democracy model is built around this major attribute of democracy. However, studies of African democracy demonstrate that most post independence African states tended to adopt their former colonizers' democracy model (Mazrui, 2008; Good, 2002; Duignan and Jackson, 1986) and experiments with democracy in these states have remained largely faulted. However, in the Gambia the prevailing political culture is characterized by political complacency, uncritical support for the political leadership, particularly by the youth, youth political ignorance, and generally, political socialization tends to create awareness and knowledge of values of obedience to the state, civic obligations supportive of the establishment and, on the whole, a culture of unquestioning support, as well as tailored demand inputs to the political system.

Evidently, this culture is not supportive of western model of democracy, and the Gambia, therefore, needs an African model of democracy towards which its learning must work. Some scholars have, nevertheless, suggested as an alternative the development of some kind of home grown democracy model for Africa that takes in some positive elements of traditional African political institutions and conceptual foundations such as consensual decision making structures and spirituality or theocratic inclinations of kingdoms since the wholesome transfer of western democratic values, instruments and goals appears to have failed in most of Africa ( Stromberg, 1996; Osabu-kle, 2000; Birch, 2002).

Their argument appears to be that modern African states could benefit from their past colonial experiences by harmonizing the civil and political aspects of life which colonialism failed to harness in Africa. Nevertheless, in the search for what form of democracy for Africa and therefore, for the Gambia, this study suggests, as the author has stated in a previous study,

the strengthening of western model of representative democracy by building into its mainstream 'some kind of institutional changes that blend with the spirituality of the past and African's spirit of compromise' (Ozor, 2009: 319).

In this study I have argued that 'rather than seek a fundamentally variant type of democracy in the search for a home tailored democracy model- that is, a democratic framework that basically departs from basic principle of democratic representation- Africa can draw from its strength in compromise of the past and achieve legitimate consensus in proportional representative system that recognizes, permits and incorporates minority interests and expression of minority views and concerns' (Ozor, 2009: 328-9). This would mean institutionalizing the role of interest groups as important players in the political process beyond merely seeking their inclusive group interests. It would mean also the institutionalization of democratic spirit (which was not borrowed as Africa borrowed other democratic structures) achieved through integration of African spirituality in governance and African tradition of compromise.

Spirituality in governance describes the link that existed between rulers and the ancestral spirits of Africans, where public office holders were assumed to be representatives of ancestral gods in secular matters and were expected by the ruled and the gods to demonstrate public justice, probity, public morality and accountability in their administration of public affairs (Orizu, 1944:198-212). African tradition of compromise derives from African traditional social philosophy. Though there may have existed some elements of consensual governance in African traditional society (Stromberg, 1996; Birch, 2002), I do not claim that traditional African systems were based on consensual governance as Africa, indeed, had its share of war lords and autocrats who ruled by coercion, not by consensus, but the idea is to highlight how some long surviving elements in traditional African societies could be incorporated in ways to contribute to debate on how to strengthen democracy in Africa. The paper, therefore, argues that though African history may be replete with accounts of autocratic rulers and war lords, the fact remains that compromise is a social concept embedded in the spirit of most Africans and this tradition can be revived not necessarily in its substance but in its spirit.

The merit of this democracy model lies not only in popular sovereign power but also in the democratic values and themes of tolerance of opposing views and opposition concerns, basic freedoms and liberties, and importantly in the democratic spirit, which it embodies. This spirit of tolerance (in the governors and the governed) has all important and obvious implications for providing enabling milieu for democratic education in Africa. The model of democracy towards which Africa education must work is expected to create a platform 'where all stakeholders are institutionalized entities and legitimate actors in the political process, capable of articulating their views, making possible decision-making through discussion of issues, consensus and unrestricted registration of preferences by all adult members of society'( Ozor, 2009: 317). It allows for all points of view, both majority and minority views, and therefore, recognizes and extols the democratic theme of tolerance of political opposition and of popular critical participation in political decision making process.

Western education system introduced in Africa since independence appears unfit to teach these democracy values of tolerance of opposition seems too alien and ill-designed to develop democratic spirit/culture, critical political participation, recognition and respect for human rights and of social justice, themes which our democracy model extols. Rather 'undemocratic culture' seems to characterize most African political systems. I, therefore, argue that African education must necessarily seek to teach and create awareness of African democratic values, especially values of political tolerance and cooperation.

African learning needs to be re-engineered, if it must serve as a veritable and pragmatic means of creating awareness of these democracy values. African education must borrow from positive aspects of indigenous African learning and on carefully chosen new ideas, methods and technology from abroad. Africans need to ground the framework of their education on the positivity of indigenous education and thought while borrowed western education ideas and technology must be placed within African cultural and conceptual framework (Tedla, 1996). The education system which we must fashion should be able to benefit from positive elements of African traditional social philosophy and in pragmatic ways contribute to development of African democracy. Conceptually, it is specified in this study as a re-engineered African learning organized around those democratic structures and themes that permit critical learning for teachers and learners, that permit tolerance on the part of educators, allow teachers to listen to and prepare themselves to be heard by learners and so teach the democratic value of listening to others/tolerance, avoid teaching authority dependence, allow educators to understand the learners, know their world and the language with which they relate to and combat with their world and which appreciates African experiences, particularly experiences that seem to work.

African learning must be able to overcome the pitfalls of imported western education system that tended to produce African educated elite who either ignored or despised African way of life and which perpetuated the marginalization of the weak, political dis-empowerment of minority interests and, through ignorance or mis-education, the exclusion of majority of 'rural' people from political decision making process. It must make use of tolerant, not arrogant but progressive educators who must encourage learners to think freely and democratically. Teaching and learning, therefore, must necessarily be a democratic process to be able to promote development of democracy because, as Freire (1998:40) argues, authoritarian education system will at times cause children and students to adopt rebellious positions, defiant of any limit, discipline, or authority. But it will also lead to apathy, excessive obedience, uncritical conformity, lack of resistance against authoritarian discourse, self-abnegation, and fear of freedom.

African learning to be democratic must be developed around the philosophy that majority of the people must be able to think freely and be thought to imagine better ways of relating to their political system and of improving their circumstances. It calls for the progressive educator who must subordinate class differences and haughtiness, practically demonstrate democratic spirit of tolerance and humility that allows him to listen and understand the needs of learners, and encourage learning through discussion and reflection.

African democratic education can benefit from positive and rich aspects of indigenous African learning and thought by drawing on the strength of informal educational framework. This can enable teachers to create democratic awareness in more or less informal class sessions in which wisdom teachings of African ancestors are thought and in which African folklore may be employed to teach democratic values and beliefs. Such values and beliefs which necessarily constitute the bedrock of African democracy are derivable from and sustained by some indigenous African social concepts as those of mysticism, asceticism, contentment, compromise, right to revolution, individual freedom, and happiness as end of life. African mysticism is rooted in self-discipline which removes all selfishness in social relations. Asceticism, a basic African social concept, demands subduing the emotional self to discipline in order to achieve a good and enriched life. Contentment in African social philosophy is the belief that happiness derives from the African simplicity mode of life, not either materialistic or necessarily primitive- happiness results from enjoying what one has and not seeking that which one has not.

Another source of happiness in African social philosophy is the capacity to give up ones maximum demands and to accommodate some of other peoples' demands, in cases of sharp

conflicts of interests. This spirit of compromise has significant political implication as it translates to one of the basic values of African democracy model, a value not copied in the African imitation of the Westminster democracy model, but which can be recreated through a new African learning. Also, found in African socio-politico philosophy is the right of the people to bring down and replace a government if it fails to perform its basic functions. The essence of life in African social philosophy is located in the freedom of the individual, and this includes, economic, social and religious freedoms. There is the belief that happiness is the most valuable goal to be sought, and that all desires and man's actions must not negate this important purpose of human existence.

These social concepts show how indigenous African politics, rooted in ethics and religion, can provide valuable sources from which African education can draw material for creating democratic awareness. It, further, highlights the possibility of recreating and utilizing informal educational structures that were the traditional mode of education, and the principal traditional means of political socialization. Within formal educational systems informal platforms could enable teachers and learners to share knowledge about their political system and increase democratic awareness through interactive sessions where State/community stories, folktales, and ancestral wisdom sayings that portray values and messages of democracy may be shared. The assumption is that African education will impact on democracy by increasing understanding of democracy concepts by means of providing knowledge, skills and values associated with African political culture that support democracy.

### **Democratic Education Research in The Gambia**

Education in the Gambia is getting better than in the past years during the government of Dr. Dawda Jawara who ruled the country for 30 years with relative stable democracy among an illiterate population. According to Obiozor (2007), the Gambia has been classified among the least developed countries with an alarming number of illiterate citizens. The UNICEF (2006) report reveals that women make up about two thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate adults, and this includes women from the Republic of The Gambia. The UNICEF report also disclosed that 65 million of the 121 million children in the world who are not in school are girls. In Sub-Saharan Africa, which The Gambia is part of, 24 million girls were out of school in 2002. UNICEF reports that 83% of all girls out of school live in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific.

In the Gambia, as in most parts of Africa, school organization and teaching approaches appear to be autocratic and tend to relate towards authoritarianism, as students end up possessing political values that keep them passive participants in the political process. Schools tend to be authoritarian institutions and teaching methods grounded on more or less a 'copy-copy' approach without regard to the students previous knowledge and the need to encourage ability to investigate knowledge on their own (Christie, 1992; Du Bey et al, 1979; Mbilinji, 1979; Harber, 1997; Davies, 2001). The author's five years teaching experience at both secondary and tertiary levels in the Gambia education system, and more than ten years at similar levels in Nigeria, supports this view.

Besides, research survey carried was out by the researcher using random samples drawn from six centers: Banjul, Brikama, Jarra Soma, Fatoto, Basse, and Farafanni. The study used samples randomly drawn from the target groups of basic, secondary and post-secondary/tertiary school teachers, students and university undergraduates, and officials of state education departments in the Gambia.

A total of 300 structured questionnaires were administered to participants out of which 84% were successfully retrieved. The primary data were collected and statistically tabulated. While descriptive statistics is used to present data in a statistical format to facilitate initial data analysis, inferential statistics is introduced to make statistical inferences about the population from which the sample is drawn so that important patterns, relationships and analysis become more meaningful (Bailey, 1994). The analysis involves the use of non-parametric tests utilizing binomial methods.

**Table 1**

Teaching methods in the Gambia educational system being authoritarian  
(n=252)

	Frequency	%
Yes	198	78.6
No	54	21.4
Total	252	100

Table 1 shows that 78.6% of the respondents believe that teaching methods are authoritarian as taught by the teacher, the students learn, and the principal is considered the all powerful commander while the school system tends to be a bank from where students come and take knowledge.

**Table 2**

Possession of knowledge, skills and concepts of African democracy among the teaching force  
(n=252)

	Frequency	%
Yes	79	31.3%
No	173	68.7%
Total	252	100

Table 2 indicates that only 31.3% of the teaching force in the Gambia possesses knowledge, skills and concepts of African democracy, specifically democratic concepts of tolerance and of a good/democratic citizen as an active political participant with a sense of social justice and who develops critical attitudes towards authorities and demonstrates allegiance to the community of the people, not one that imbibes and displays unquestioning obedience and loyalty to the abstract state. On the other hand 68.7% believe that democracy is all about obedience to the state and nation building. A binomial test produced a highly significant result ( $p < 0.001$ ) for misinterpretation of 'African' democracy among the Gambia teaching force.

The implication is that learning encourages uncritical allegiance to the state, teachers teach students to conform, and citizenship education, simply, is about nation building in line with neo-liberal educational models which are destructive of democratic purposes, for instance, such purposes that essentially seek to liberate citizens' critical minds, encourage active political participation and guarantee or protect basic rights and liberties (Reid, 2002). Mc Cowan (2006), in a case study in the local municipality of Pelotas, Brazil, argues that good citizenship does not mean unquestioning allegiance to the abstract state but to the community of people of a state; and so schools do not need to develop conformity to policies that promote the glory of the nation but one that develops a sense of justice and of critical participation in the political process.

Consequently, the paper argues that the teaching force must necessarily develop appropriate knowledge, skills, concepts and attitudes around which 'African' democracy must necessarily be built while citizenship education in the Gambia has to be redesigned in ways that teach African democratic values which empower citizens to defend their rights, actively participate politically and to develop critical attitudes towards authorities and allegiance to the people rather than the nation. Developing knowledge and skills in democratic education among teachers can, therefore, play a significant role in developing democratic awareness.

Existing data analysis, further, supports the view that authoritarian and 'copy-copy' teaching methods prevail in the Gambia in spite of espoused government education policy goal which 'is based on the principle of inclusive education, where every person, child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs' (World Conference on Education for All, 1990). These needs, include, knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to equip the individual for survival, develop their full potentials, improve the quality of their lives, make informed decisions, and participate fully in development. The espoused policy, therefore, encourages student participation and learning through critical thinking.

However, public education practice in the Gambia rather appears either to ignore, or is incapable of addressing, the twin needs of education for democracy, namely the need for sharpening understanding through critical learning as well as raising the level of democracy awareness among teachers and of designing appropriate public education curricula, or more precisely appropriate content of means of public dissemination of democracy concepts, values and attitudes. A major challenge for effective education for democracy in the Gambia, therefore, certainly tends to arise from local interpretations, if not misinterpretation, of democracy particularly among teachers. Because formal schooling have immense potential to develop democratic culture and build democratic citizenship, the requisite democratic skills, values and knowledge need to be developed within the teaching force before these can be inculcated in the young (Schweisfurth, 2002). However, these local interpretations of democracy among teachers in the Gambia tend to stray away from 'African' democracy concepts and values of tolerance, critical popular political participation and social justice. They tend to reflect support for citizens'

loyalty to the state and greater concern for civic obligations, and so democracy for them is all about passive popular participation in the political process. This, therefore, calls for re-engineering of the Gambia learning in order to equip teachers to become effective vehicles for democratic education.

Moreover, the content of means of public dissemination of democracy values as embodied in the social and environmental studies curricula appears ill designed to work towards African democracy model for the Gambia. Content analysis of social and environmental studies curricula in the Gambia show that Social Studies program translate more to civic education while displaying certain contradictions and tensions surrounding the content of such studies at all levels of lower and upper basic education systems. The Gambia is one of the 17 African Social Studies Program (ASSP) countries (Hawes, 1979; Merryfield, 1985). ASSP articulated three areas where social studies could make a contribution: "national integration," "problems of rapid economic development "and" the promotion of self-confidence and initiative based on an understanding of one's own worth and of the essential dignity of man".

Social studies can help children to be capable of coping with social change without despising traditional values and institutions, and in the long run to be a veritable tool for democratic education. Social studies must be taught through inquiry, with students learning to ask and answer questions and solving their own problems (Report on a Conference of African Educators, EDC and CREDO, 1968, p. 6-9). Where the method and content are appropriate, skills and attitudes which develop through social studies teaching are those required by citizens in a free and democratic society. These skills, include, those of discovery, critical thinking and problem-solving and of listening to others in social interactions. The attitudes expected of citizens are considered to be respect, appreciation, cooperation, compassion, tolerance, and team spirit. Of particular importance to democracy and democratic education are the values and attitudes of tolerance of opposing views and positions of others as well as cooperation. Cooperation is necessary because politics is not all about conflicts.

It is necessary because politics is also about consensus. Students can only develop these skills and attitudes by participating in experiences that call for their use. Therefore social studies must be taught in the Gambia through inquiry, with students learning to ask and answer questions and solving their own problems and above all through discussion and reflection. However, because the subject matter of social and environmental studies in the Gambia displays contracting values of loyalty, obedience, tolerance, social harmony, critical learning and citizens' active participation in decision making process, it presents a daunting challenge for teachers to implement ASSP values literally in a context where formal instructions in social studies program is all about civic obedience, where knowledge of my concept of 'African' democratic values, themes and practices remain largely uncertain even among teachers.

Such learning context ill-equips teachers to interpret and mediate over such procedural values as tolerance, open-mindedness, fairness or justice. Besides, even ASSP acknowledges a problem of social studies that stem from the innate sensitivity of the social studies subject matter. For instance, education in citizenship, politics, and population, and even the teaching of a nation's history, has demonstrable political implications and ramifications in contemporary Africa (and therefore in the Gambia) where opposition may be perceived with apprehension. A course on civics may become extremely controversial as leadership changes, a one-party state emerges, or coups d'état refashion the government (ASSP, Nairobi, 1985). Because students can only develop democratic skills and attitudes by participating in experiences that call for their use, social studies must be taught through inquiry, with students learning to ask and answer questions

and solving their own problems. This is, because, as my research findings show, teachers in the Gambia basically teach students to conform, but not to question issues of national concern to the citizens.

In this regard, if teachers teach for conformity, if the teaching force misinterprets democracy and lacks requisite 'African' democratic skills, values and knowledge, if the education system or more precisely, formal educational programs such as social and environmental studies in the Gambia cannot work towards African democracy, what must be done? Education for democracy in the Gambia, thus, faces daunting challenges. Consequently, it becomes necessary to reform the education system to permit learning through inquiry, discussion and reflection, to equip teachers with appropriate skills, attitudes and knowledge of democracy concepts, to recreate and utilize informal structures, which were the traditional mode of education, in interactive class sessions. But where must the initiative for this change come from?

Because the political leaders are in control of public schools which are the principal means of political socialization, and because empirical evidence suggests that African political leadership tends to obstruct democratic transition (Ake, 1996; Good, 2002), the initiative for educational change is less likely to come from top leadership. The demand for change in the education system and the demand for 'African' democracy model must necessarily come from the people—from private individuals, the 'think tank', the academia, political interest groups, professional interest groups such as organized teachers' interests, the church, NGOs with educational interests, and student bodies. Much like basic human rights democracy must be earned. For instance, Ake (1996, p. 36) argues that 'like development, democratization is not something that one person does for another.

People must do for themselves, or it does not happen'. Policy process and policy change are essentially political and so these groups in the Gambia can mobilize for political action to bring about the required education policy outcome and democratic political structures. For instance, they may demand for a policy change in teachers' education which is capable of producing a teaching force with a fuller appreciation of democracy concepts, values and beliefs. Another is a demand for policy change that enables the design of education curricula, especially formal social studies program, which supports and sustains democratic education in the country. However, issues around democratization cannot be pursued further here because the focus of the paper is on democratic education, stressing that democratic education can contribute in creating democratic awareness.

### **Youths and Democratic Education in the Gambia**

The bottom-top dialogue and negotiation for change in the education policy process first calls for mobilization of political demands by the more articulate and active leaders of such groups as students' and teachers' associations in the Gambia. Youth political mobilization geared and spirited from the bottom can serve the dual purpose of contributing to bringing about change in the Gambian learning through more effective input in public decision making as well as increasing democratic consciousness among the youths. However, youth political mobilization in the Gambia appears to fall short of the requirements and expectations of African charter of AU States while existing platforms for youth mobilization such as Youth Parliament merely provide opportunities for youth training in leadership skills, group decision making and service to the nation. They fall short of sharpening democratic consciousness among the youths, though however 'parliamentary debates' have been free and in few instances critical youth opinions were known to have caused the sack of some Secretaries of State. Youth political mobilization in

the Gambia appears to be warranted by the fact that there are discernible generation gap in electoral participation between the old and young. As Rageau (2007) has argued this generation gap in voters turn-out in West Africa, and so in the Gambia, is partly explained by the fact that the younger generation does not have sufficient political efficacy as well as not being registered to vote out of either ignorance or neglect.

Nevertheless, in addition to the state platforms for youth mobilization such as the Youth Parliament, a complimentary approach would be for grassroots involvement to take advantage of education strategy of the state to mobilize for democratic awareness. This policy strategy included setting up pilot schemes for local ownership of educational activities and community based literacy education programs using grassroots experiences that seek to address practical needs essentially economic and survival needs of the population ( The Gambia Report,2000). Such community based activities involving community teachers/educators, leaders of social and cultural groups, and local party organizations, could serve as useful platforms for mobilization and creating democracy awareness among community folk and to create and sustain social structures that help to develop youth democratic culture.

### **Gender and Democratic Education in the Gambia**

Finally, what is the contribution of gender to democracy and education for democracy in the Gambia? Gender imbalance in political participation in the Gambia tends to spillover from gender inequality in educational opportunities. The paper argues that increasing educational opportunities for women in the Gambia could increase the level of their democratic awareness and consequently enhance their contribution to democratic education. In other words, while it is generally granted that the education of women is in fact the education of a whole nation, democratic education for women in the Gambia has limitless potential for democratic education for all. The culture of the people places women in a central role to do so. Consequently, education for the older female folk other than girls must go beyond numeric studies and reading and writing to include social and environmental studies that equip them with necessary pedagogic skills and critical knowledge about political realities around them.

Democratic education for women in the Gambia could enable them first in informal platforms to foster political socialization of the children in ways that prepare them to be useful citizens and critical participants in their national politics. It is also possible that the new generation of youths in the Gambia with a sharper sense of political efficacy would mature into various occupations and professions, some of them politicians and teachers, to further straighten the path and process of democratic education and with time build a sustainable democratic culture.

It is pertinent to note that, there are some cultural tensions and barriers to female democratic education in the Gambia. While gender imbalance in the education system and political participation in Africa presents a real challenge, it is prevalent in the Gambia. Grey-Johnson (2003) as captured by Obiozor (2007) lamented on this ugly situation in the Gambia when he argued that the small tourism nation has a status that presents special challenges for her development, which centers primarily on the education of its citizens, especially on bridging the gender gap for manpower and increasing girls' enrollment in public schools. The girl child in The Gambia benefits from the universal primary education offered by the government for every primary schoolage child (Department, 2004), but after primary education, most of these girls drop out of school and do not proceed to acquire secondary education; in most cases, parents are blamed or accused of sponsoring their son's schooling at the expense of their daughters (S. Taal

in Obiozor (2007), personal communication, January 12, 2007). This revelation was confirmed by Winslow (1999) in his studies stressing that the girl child enrollment was low due to poverty and sociocultural factors which influenced parents' decisions not to send girls to school.

Furthermore, there have been evident attempts in recent years to narrow the gender gap in educational opportunities and raise female participation in the political process in the Gambia. In recent years the government education policies were vigorously implemented to improve girls' education status in the Gambia, and the outcome has been greater female political participation as women continue to gain greater relevance in politics. Mrs Fatoumata Jahumpa Ceesay was selected speaker of the national assembly in January, 2007, Mrs Isatou Njie Saidy the vice-president. Increasing gender spread or equality is now found in many professions and occupations including the police and the army, while female voting turn-out is increasing since 2001. Though however, such policies and programs as Girls' Friendly School Initiative to sensitize communities and encourage setting up of Mothers' clubs to foster greater female school enrolment and retention in schools, the Fast Track Initiative for similar purposes, The Scholarship Trust Fund for Girls to address cultural setbacks to female education, and Poverty Reduction Strategy to generally support female education and reduce gender disparities in basic and secondary education all may have recorded some limited success, but the fact remains that democratic education particularly for girls still appears to suffer major setbacks from socio-cultural and religious sources.

Teenage girls are often married out when they would have been in school and even many that were able to complete basic and/or secondary education have to contend with socio-cultural forces that impel them to early motherhood. Moreover, the religious obligation for muslim female students to wear hoods while in school may prevent some, particularly the core religionists, from attending non-muslin but perhaps better equipped schools where they could take fuller advantage of more qualitative education than otherwise may be available in muslin schools of their choice. Non-muslin female students may also suffer from similar constraints. Because state education policy permits Muslin schools to enforce the wearing of hoods in their schools while non-muslin schools are allowed by law to ban such practice in their schools, a non-muslin student, for instance, compelled to do so may be psychologically ill disposed to benefit from the learning process.

Table 3  
Gambia Population figures, 2007

Area Name	BOTH SEXES									
	Total		1-2	3-4	5-6	7-14	15-49	50-59	60+	NS
Country/LGA/District/Village	1,360,681	30,260	74,269	89,392	84,490	292,830	654,861	53,560	68,719	12,300

Area Name	FEMALE									
Country/LGA/District/Village	Total	<1	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-14	15-49	50-59	60+	NS
	689,840	14,824	36,633	44,884	41,665	146,292	341,250	24,716	34,097	5,479

Besides, descriptive analysis of demographic data from Table 3 reveals a female dominance (50.70% female) of the Gambia population. And given the prevailing polygamous marriage system in a society where most male members, particularly the uneducated tend to characteristically demonstrate either weak economic leadership of their families or inadvertently relegate responsibilities for care of their off springs to women, opportunities for educational improvement for women appear to be further limited. Demands of child care and responsibilities for even of whole nuclear family, and sometimes for the extended family as the case may be, have often meant that women are constrained by social forces from taking full advantage of opportunities provided by the government gender-balance education policy initiatives.

Given therefore the positive government policy and concrete steps to support and promote gender balance, how can these gender issues be tackled to increase female democratic awareness? And given the female dominance of the Gambian population, what is the female gender potential to contribute to democratic education and democracy? Again the bottom-top efforts for change must necessarily compliment government gender balance initiatives. The elimination of cultural militating forces that impel preference of boys over girls in providing educational opportunities and religious forces that inhibit learning are all about social change, a social movement that calls for a change in social attitude to, and modification of values placed on women.

The reason for this change already exists in the Gambia as the government's education policies such as Girls Friendly education initiatives, Fast Tract Initiative and Scholarship Trust Fund programs provide the enabling ground. While more intensive public sensitization campaigns need to be mounted to address these cultural issues that lead to early marriages and pregnancy among girls which keep them away from school, nuclear families and other existing social and community structures such as Mothers' Clubs could in fact contribute to change in basic social attitudes, beliefs and values about women in the Gambia. The potential for female contribution to democracy and democratic education is enhanced by the absolute female dominance of the Gambian population and their central role in socializing their off-springs.

### Conclusion

In concluding, the paper recommends a model of African democracy towards which Gambia learning must work, a proportional representative system which allows for representation of all shades of opinion and political convictions and which incorporates some practical aspects and elements of traditional African political structures and philosophical concepts – the spirit of consensus and compromise as the bedrock for developing a democratic culture. This spirit of tolerance both in the governors and the governed, not borrowed as African borrowed other features of western democracy model, can support and sustain representative democratic structures in Africa and the Gambia.

Because teachers do teach students to conform, learning must be structured to permit critical thinking, de-emphasize authority dependence, create greater informality incorporating some features of traditional African learning, allow educators to understand the learners, know their world and the language with which they relate to and combat with their world and which appreciates African experiences, particularly experiences that seem to work. It must make use of tolerant, not arrogant but progressive educators who must encourage learners to think freely and democratically; it must encourage learning through discussion and reflection. Teaching and learning therefore must necessarily be a democratic process to be able to promote development of democracy

African and the Gambia can benefit from positive and rich aspects of indigenous African learning and thought by drawing on the strength of informal educational framework. This can enable teachers to create democratic awareness in more or less informal class sessions in which wisdom teachings of African ancestors are thought and in which African folklore may be employed to teach democratic values and beliefs. However, a major challenge for effective education for democracy in the Gambia appears to arise from local interpretations, as it is misinterpretation, of democracy particularly among teachers which tend to reflect support for citizens' loyalty to the state and greater concern for civic obligations. Teachers must be equipped to become effective vehicles for democratic education. The teaching force must necessarily develop appropriate knowledge, skills, concepts and attitudes of 'African' democracy while citizenship education and social and environmental studies programs in the Gambia have to be designed in ways that teach African democratic values which empower citizens to defend their rights, actively participate politically and to develop critical attitudes towards authorities and allegiance to the people rather than the nation.

If teachers teach for conformity, the teaching force misinterprets democracy and lacks requisite 'African' democratic skills, values and knowledge, and the education system in the Gambia cannot work towards African democracy, the thrust for change must necessarily come from private individuals, professional interest groups such as organized teachers' interests, the church, NGOs with educational interests, and student bodies. Youth involvement in this change process becomes necessary as youth mobilization can serve the dual purpose of contributing to bringing about change in the Gambian learning through more effective input in public policy decision making as well as increasing democratic consciousness among them.

In looking at the contribution of gender to democracy and education for democracy in the Gambia, I argue that increasing educational opportunities for women can increase the level of their democratic awareness and consequently enhance their contribution to democratic education. Efforts of the government to attenuate the social and cultural limitations on the female gender through public sensitization can be supported by complimentary contributions of nuclear families and other existing social and community structures such as Mothers' Club towards change in basic social attitudes, beliefs and values about women in the Gambia.

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