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Review

Mburu, Elizabeth W. & S. Trevor Yoakum, *African Pedagogy: A Fusion of Orality, Higher Education, and Pastoral Formation*. Carlisle: Hippo Books, 2026. ISBN 9781786412232, 216 pp.

Reviewed by Dr Ryan Faber[1]

European missionaries brought not only Western theology to Africa, but also Western theological education. Their pedagogies are not always relevant or helpful in the African context. That makes Elizabeth Mburu and Trevor Yoakum's *African Pedagogy* a welcome publication. Mburu, a Kenyan New Testament scholar, and Yoakum, an American theological educator with over twenty years' experience in West Africa, do not propose a completely new pedagogy, but 'an already existing pedagogy that is adapted in such a way as to be better suited for African learners' (3).

Mburu and Yoakum describe Africans' dominant learning style as concrete and relational. Traditional methods of instruction include songs, proverbs, and stories. These

> reflect a style of learning that is global rather than sequential, that considers the whole more than the collection of parts, and that is generally more concrete than abstract. (21)

It is markedly different from Western teaching and learning methods that tend

> to favor abstract reasoning over more concrete expressions of thought […] [examine] subjects by dividing them into their

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> constituent parts […] [and follow] a linear sequential process of reasoning. (21)

After surveying five 'classic pedagogies' – constructivist, collaborative, integrative, reflective, and inquiry-based – Mburu and Yoakum propose an alternative for African theological education: a concrete relational pedagogy. This pedagogy 'prefers learning that is concrete instead of abstract' and considers the relationships of the learner to the teacher, to fellow learners, and to all of life (65). As the book's subtitle suggests, its pedagogy relies on N'Dri Assié-Lumumba's concept of fusion – 'a creative blend of African traditional educational practices with those that are generally understood to be from Western education' (98). The traditional education methods that Mburu and Yoakum integrate into their pedagogy relate to orality. They highlight three specific practices: narrative, role playing, and proverbs.

Mburu and Yoakum note that Western pedagogy often relies on Bloom's taxonomy of learning, which categorised learning in 'the ascending categories of remembering, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation, and creativity' (90). The hierarchy reflects an inherent Western bias or assumption of Western normativity that privileges abstract thinking. It is not readily applicable to concrete relational learners. Mburu and Yoakum observe that the way in which Africans do analysis, evaluation, and creativity – the higher levels of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy – are not readily recognised by Western pedagogies. Mburu and Yoakum note that

> whereas Western civilization advances propositions in the form of logical abstractions, Africans use the traditional proverb as the means of conveying the abstraction in a concrete form. (156)

'Indeed, use of traditional proverbs can operate along the levels of analysis, evaluation, and creativity' (159).

Mburu and Yoakum argue that their diverse backgrounds enrich the book. In anthropological terms, Mburu, an African, offers an emic (insider) perspective, while Yoakum, an non-African, offers an etic (outsider) perspective. Unfortunately, the book draws its practical examples from only Yoakum's

experience. While his experience is diverse in terms of educational setting, including a formal institution offering graduate degrees, a Bible institute training at a secondary level, and an oral Bible school whose students are non-literate, it is limited to West Africa and to Yoakum's academic discipline, practical theology.

More examples from Mburu and Yoakum's differing academic specialisations would have enriched the book, especially given their stated goal of not only explaining but also demonstrating their ideas (1). The book's most detailed examples are drawn from a single course, 'Great Religions and Cults', that Yoakum teaches. Readers are left wondering how Mburu and Yoakum's proposed pedagogy, especially its fusion with orality, can be applied in other disciplines, such as biblical studies or courses in the biblical languages, Mburu's specialisation. Examples from a wider variety of theological disciplines would strengthen the volume.

Greater clarity about the book's intended audience would also strengthen it. Mburu and Yoakum describe the book as

> a university textbook primarily for education majors who wish to expand their understanding of pedagogy and how to improve education quality in Africa (1)

but their intended audience seems to be theological educators. For that audience, the volume's lengthy, complex, and, at times, confusing philosophical section on theodramatic critical realism and speech-act theory, and its lengthy overview of orality, which includes numerous non-African examples, will be a distraction. A shorter, more focused, more accessible handbook on African pedagogy, with practical examples from a wider range of theological disciplines, would serve Mburu and Yoakum's intended audience better. One hopes a revision will be forthcoming, because the fusion of orality into an African pedagogy has great potential for the future of theological education in Africa.