



ADULT EDUCATION AFRICA

Traditions of Adult learning and Education: BENIN

Vincent HOUÉSSOU



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Foreword

Adult Learning and Education (ALE) is a much misunderstood sector. Historically, it has been treated as a sub-sector of education, one that comes at the bottom of most government's lists and receives little budget allocation. But ALE practitioners know that ALE cuts across all sectors and is an essential cornerstone of national development. Reading and writing are fundamental skills that one needs at least a rudimentary knowledge of in order to go on and acquire other diverse abilities. However, in short, ALE is whatever adults want and need to learn.

Most adults do not have the luxury of spending years acquiring education that they may or may not use in the future. Many adults want to acquire practical skills quickly that they can apply quickly in order to improve living conditions for themselves and their families. For those who have more time and those wishing to gain equivalencies to the formal education system, these paths should be available too. While education can be uplifting and transformative, for many people it is foremost a question of subsistence and survival.

Any learning that adults engage in is by definition ALE. Therefore, we need to expand our definition of adult education. We need to go beyond reading and writing and realise that ALE takes place and is essential in all sectors. From health to agriculture and finance to digital approaches, adults are learning every day. However, the ALE sector has been historically burdened with a very narrow definition that prioritises (or only includes) literacy and numeracy. As long as we remain within these confines and work in our individual silos, we will miss the myriad opportunities that await us in many sectors.

By looking back at where we have come from, we can better navigate where we are going. Therefore, this article explores the historical influences on ALE in Benin and poses the question - *where is ALE headed?* This publication focuses on Benin but the different genres and eras of ALE identified may resonate with many African countries that share similar colonial and post-independence experiences. We hope that this article enriches discussion and debate on African ALE and goes some way to valorising the rich history and traditions (and future) of ALE that are to be found on our doorstep. We thank the writer for sharing his thoughts and insights with us.

David Harrington
Project Director, African Continental Project, DVV International

ABSTRACT

This article offers an analysis of traditional approaches to adult learning and education (ALE) in the Beninese context, from a historical, didactic, and forward-looking perspective. Drawing on qualitative data from document reviews and interviews, it is grounded in a clarification of the concepts of adulthood, tradition, endogenous or indigenous knowledge, as well as Yves Chevallard's didactic triangle.

In terms of thematic content, the article begins by identifying and describing the main educational traditions that have shaped ALE in Benin, particularly in religious, artisanal, and community spheres. Accordingly, the analysis traces the emergence and evolution of these traditions, their target audiences, educational purposes, teaching practices, as well as their successes and limitations.

Then, through a categorisation based on parameters such as prevalence in practice, degree of institutionalisation, and compatibility with national priorities, the article distinguishes dominant traditions from those considered recessive, justifying their respective status in the current social and political context. On this basis, it outlines the profile of a recommendable ALE tradition for today – one capable of integrating local cultural values while meeting contemporary learning demands, with the aim of maximising the effectiveness of adult education efforts.

Finally, the article explores possible mechanisms for combining traditional approaches with information and communication technologies and proposes a strategy for enhancing and sustainably embedding these practices within a dynamic of endogenous and inclusive education.

Keywords: *adult education – endogenous knowledge – educational traditions – hybrid approach.*

Introduction

Adult education in Africa – and more specifically in Benin – is not merely a modern creation driven by postcolonial states. It is deeply rooted in a centuries-old history shaped by oral traditions, specific community structures, spiritual practices, and endogenous knowledge.

Benin, a space where various civilisations (Aja, Baatonum, Fɔn, Yoruba, etc.) and religious beliefs (Vodou traditions, Islam, Christianity) coexist, offers a particularly revealing example of this educational diversity. Its history shows a succession – and at times, coexistence – of different educational traditions: precolonial community-based education, structured around oral transmission, apprenticeship, and initiation; colonial education, externally imposed with utilitarian and acculturative aims; and finally, post-independence education, marked by a desire for emancipation, functional literacy, and a pursuit of modernisation.

In a context of social, cultural, and digital transition, a nuanced understanding of these traditions not only enables the valorisation of indigenous practices but also opens the door to possible synergies with modern technologies, toward a learning model better suited to the real needs of adult populations. This article is thus devoted to a crosscutting, critical, and constructive reading of these approaches, grounded in a structured didactic framework, a qualitative methodological approach, and a forward-looking aim: to outline the contours of a sustainable, inclusive, and culturally rooted tradition of adult learning and education (ALE).

1. Clarification of Key Concepts

In order to better understand the issues related to traditional approaches to adult learning and education (ALE) in Africa – and particularly in Benin – it is essential to clarify certain fundamental concepts. This step establishes the theoretical and semantic foundations necessary for a clear understanding of the subject.

1.1. Adult

According to Afsata Paré Kaboré and Rasmata Nabaloum-Bakyono (2014, p. 28), an adult is “an individual whose physical development is complete, capable of reproduction, and socially integrated.” In this sense, an adult is “any person recognized as mature by their community, based on physical criteria (biological

development), sociological factors (completion of initiation rites and/or marriage), legal status (fulfilment of legal attributes), and intellectual capacity (psychologically and cognitively prepared to meet the expectations of society regarding an adult member)."

In the context of education, an adult is generally defined as a person who has reached the legal age of majority but is above all socially recognised as autonomous and responsible. Beyond age, an adult is someone who is outside the initial formal education system, possesses life experience, and whose learning needs are often linked to practical purposes – whether professional, civic, or social.

1.2. Tradition

The term *tradition* refers to the set of practices, values, beliefs, and knowledge passed down from generation to generation. Due to its long-standing origins, *tradition* carries a sense of antiquity and habitual use. From this perspective, tradition can be understood in two ways: in the literal sense, it refers to what is endogenous or intrinsic to a community; in the figurative sense, it simply denotes what is customary or habitual.

In this article, we adopt the figurative sense of the term in order to allow for the inclusion of both indigenous and foreign approaches to adult education and learning in the Beninese context, where their coexistence is accepted.

1.3. Endogenous Knowledge

The concept of *endogenous or indigenous knowledge* refers to knowledge that is locally produced, often outside official academic systems. It emerges from collective experience and is adapted to the realities of the local environment. In the field of adult learning and education (ALE), this knowledge is expressed through traditional crafts, agricultural practices, forms of community governance, traditional medicine, and more.

Beyond professional domains and the organisation of social life, endogenous knowledge also plays a role in the educational sphere, as will be explored later in this article.

Following this brief clarification of key concepts, it is necessary to present the analytical framework in order to complete the theoretical foundation of our discussion.

2. Analytical Framework and Methodological Approach

As can be seen, this article is rooted in the thematic field of education. This naturally leads us to base our reflection on didactics, whose “main areas of investigation,” according to Yves Chevallard (1985), as cited by Saïd Tasra (2017, p. 4), are: the study of the curriculum (Teacher–Content relationship), the study of teaching (Teacher–Learner relationship), the study of learning (Learner–Content relationship), and the interrelations among these three domains.

In this perspective, our interest lies less in the relationships between these three poles than in the poles themselves—namely, knowledge, the teacher, and the learner—which together form what Yves Chevallard (*ibid.*) calls the didactic triangle.

This analytical framework allows us to describe the different ALE traditions identified in Benin, while highlighting the specific characteristics and dynamics of traditional learning systems, as expressed through:

- a) the “knowledge to be taught” (Chevallard, 1989, p. 39);
- b) the learner, who in this context is an adult; and
- c) the teacher, who is seen as the bearer of knowledge.

In other words, for each educational tradition discussed in this paper, we aim to provide answers to the following questions:

- What type of knowledge is being transmitted?
- Who is the target group?
- What is the mode of transmission?

To achieve this, the methodological approach primarily involves data collection, presentation, and analysis. Data were collected through document review and personal experiences. The data are presented by type of ALE tradition, structured around the three poles of the didactic triangle, and are supplemented—both upstream and downstream—with contextual information regarding the emergence of each educational tradition and their respective successes and limitations.

As for the data analysis, it was carried out in three phases: categorising the identified ALE traditions, distinguishing between dominant and recessive traditions, and finally suggesting a currently recommendable ALE tradition.

3. Traditions Present in Adult Education in Benin

Adult education in Benin, as in many African countries, is structured around several educational traditions. These are not mutually exclusive but are often complementary or in competition, depending on historical, political, and sociocultural contexts. This section presents the main identified traditions, emphasising their emergence, target groups, purposes, transmission mechanisms, and limitations. To do this, we will begin with the historical context of the emergence of these educational traditions, focusing primarily on the following forms of education: pre-colonial community education, adult education under colonial influence, and post-independence adult education.

3.1. Pre-colonial Community Education

3.1.1. Emergence

This form of education, which predates colonisation, encompasses indigenous practices of knowledge transmission. It stems from collective experience driven by the need to meet survival needs, preserve culture, and maintain social cohesion. It is adapted to the realities of the environment and is passed down from generation to generation. Despite modernisation, this tradition continues to persist across Benin to varying degrees, especially in rural areas where access to modern schools is limited.

3.1.2. Target Groups

Pre-colonial community education in Benin has several variants, such as religious education, education for social life, vocational training, and education for nature preservation. Regardless of the specific form, the target group typically consists of young people or adults who are already members of a given social group (family, local community, professional guild, or esoteric group), or those who are expected to become members.

One important clarification should be made here: while an individual can choose whether or not to join a professional guild, family membership is determined by birth, and the individual is therefore exposed to everything that takes place within it – including educational actions carried out by elders. This is how certain families are identified as custodians of particular artisanal or other skills – for example, blacksmithing in the Hountondji family of Abomey (Southern Benin), or the divination art known as Fa in the Guèdègbé family of Abomey.

Similarly, vodou convents – recognised as places for the transmission of esoteric knowledge – do not accept just anyone, because, as Hounkpè Adjignon Débora Gladys (2022, p. 4) states, “entry into the convent differs from enrolment in modern school, as one must hear the call of the vodou.” According to Augé, cited by Hounkpè (ibid.), “these calls often manifest through illness, and it is only after consulting the Fa oracle that the *bokonon* (diviner) reveals the origin of the illness. The patient is then directed to the convent where their presiding vodou resides.”

From the above, we can identify the main purposes of pre-colonial community education based on its target groups.

3.1.3. Objectives and Curricula

Pre-colonial community education in Benin – and more broadly in West Africa – aimed to shape individuals to be useful to their community, respectful of norms, responsible, and in harmony with the living world. In this regard, the main objectives that guided the choice of educational themes included:

- The development of spiritual awareness and respect for invisible forces considered to be guardians of social and cosmic order;
- The cultivation of dignity, social cohesion, respect for elders, intergenerational solidarity, and civic responsibility;
- The transmission of technical skills necessary for individual survival and economic self-sufficiency;
- The development of ecological awareness, based on harmonious coexistence with nature and respect for all living things.

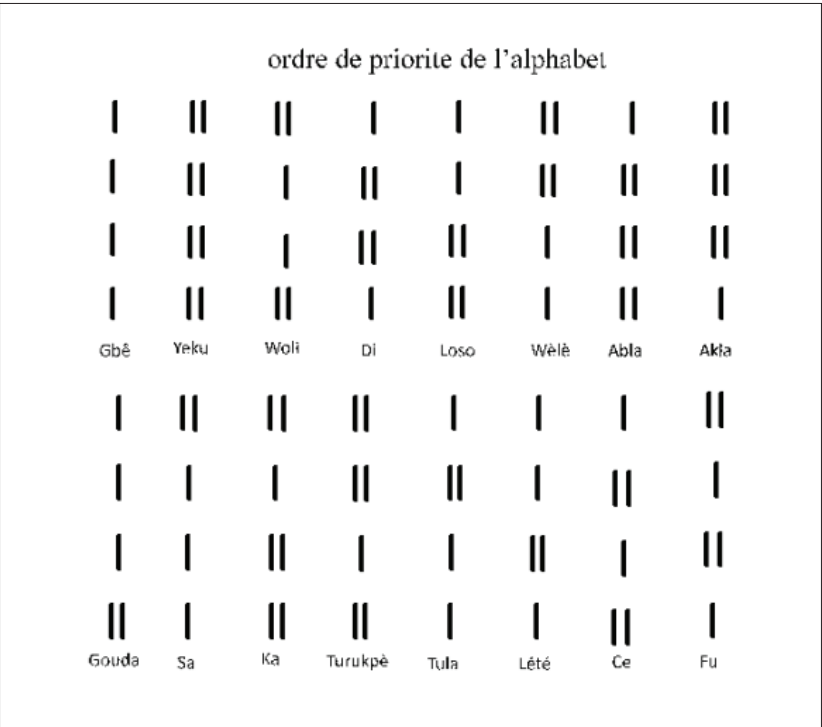
It is important to note that pre-colonial education in Benin primarily sought to provide holistic training of the person, including intellectual, moral, spiritual, manual, social, and ecological dimensions. To achieve these goals, various mechanisms of transmission were employed.

3.1.4. Mechanisms of Transmission

In general, pre-colonial community education was based on intergenerational transmission through example, oral tradition, ritual, and active participation. The use of written materials was almost non-existent, except in the case of teaching, learning, and practicing the Fa divination art. In this practice, the signs revealed by the oracle are transcribed onto a physical medium – such

as a piece of calabash – using a stick-figure writing system regarded by practitioners as an alphabet (see figure¹ below).

Figure 1: Writing system in the practice of Fa



This figure shows the 16 signs of *Fa*. The appearance of each one during a consultation carries a message that only the *bokono* (*Fa* priest) can interpret.

Due to the dominant role of orality in pre-colonial community education, it does not follow a formal curriculum written down on physical media, as is the case in classical (modern) education.

1. Source: <https://www.lafleurcurieuse.fr/culture/le-fa-une-geomancie-divinatoire/>

Depending on the intended objective, the theme and pedagogical method are determined. For example:

✓ **If the goal is the development of spiritual awareness and respect for invisible forces**, the pedagogical approach is focused on:

- Initiation into cults (Vodou, ancestor worship, metaphysical entities);
- Transmission of rituals, sacred chants, and taboos;
- Training for sacred roles (priests, diviners, healers);
- Rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood.

In this context, the “teachers” (knowledge holders) are Vodou priests, initiated individuals, and other elders well-versed in indigenous knowledge.

✓ **If the goal is the cultivation of dignity, social cohesion, respect for elders, intergenerational solidarity, and civic responsibility**, the pedagogical approach is focused on:

- Learning roles based on age, gender, and social class;
- Mastery of codes of politeness, symbolic language, customs, and personal care;
- Participation in community life (festivals, public discussions, mutual aid, customary justice).

In this case, the “teachers” (knowledge holders) are generally parents and relatives, both biological and extended family members or members of the local community. Storytelling sessions (under the moonlight), riddles, and songs were widely used for these purposes.

✓ **If the goal is the transmission of technical skills necessary for survival and the individual's economic autonomy**, the pedagogical approach is focused on:

- Training in trades such as agriculture, fishing, hunting, crafts, and commerce;
- Learning through imitation, repetition, and apprenticeship (often within the clan);
- Developing a sense of effort, precision, and self-sacrifice.

In this case, the “teachers” (knowledge holders) are parents, elders, master artisans, and others.

✓ **If the goal is the development of ecological awareness, based on harmonious coexistence with nature and respect for all living beings**, the pedagogical approach is focused on:

- Transmission of hunting techniques and protection of sacred forests;
- Teaching about medicinal plants, natural cycles, and seasons;
- Ritual practices to appease or thank the spirits of nature.

In this context, the knowledge holders are parents, elders, initiates, and others.

In either case, the teaching/learning process revolves around a master and a learner who share a common knowledge to be passed on. Often, the master is an elder, a craftsman, or an initiate depending on the context, while the learner is the younger, less experienced, or layperson (non-initiated). The knowledge to be shared or transferred is deeply rooted in lived experience, drawn from the profound sources of the master's expertise.

Since pre-colonial community education was dominated by orality and lacked a structured plan, teaching and learning took place through action, observation, imitation, participation, and storytelling – all supported by interpersonal verbal communication. In this regard, it is important to highlight the power of oral textual genres (such as stories, songs, proverbs, etc.) in transmitting educational messages.

3.1.5. Successes and Limitations

The main success to highlight for pre-colonial community education is its resilience over time despite the growing influence of modernity. This success is due to several factors, including:

- Its cultural grounding through the use of indigenous frameworks, as “the best possibility for a people to evolve effectively comes from within themselves, from their deep roots, their connection to their land and culture” (Adandé Alexandre S., 1990, p. 25; quoting Jean Gray);
- The emphasis on practical experience through the predominance of action and hands-on involvement at the core of knowledge transmission;
- Contextualised learning through the development of themes that are useful and directly applicable to the learner's daily life;
- The enhancement of memorisation capacity through the use of oral textual genres, which are inherently engaging due to their stylistic and artistic forms.

Related to this last point, singer-songwriters are assigned a fundamental role as educators and consciousness-raisers, although some among them act contrary to this role.

Let’s take, below, an example of a chorus in the Fɔn language from Southern Benin, taken from the repertoire of a famous Beninese singer named Vincent AHEHEHINNOU:

Table 1: Song in the Fɔn language

Text in fɔn language	Literal Translation in English	Literary Translation in English
Mɛɖɛ wi ehh !	Self-dignity, ehh!	Dignity!
Mɛɖɛsu wɛ nɔ ba mɛɖɛ wi bɛ nɔ nyɔ.	It’s good to seek dignity for oneself.	Personal dignity through personal effort.
Awɪ wɛ nyɛ ada bo dɔn kɔ sudo,	It’s the cat that covered its excrement with sand after defecating,	Like a cat, having relieved itself, covers its excrement with sand.
Mɛ wɛ nɔ ba mɛɖɛ wi bɛ nɔ nyɔ.	It’s good to seek dignity for oneself.	It’s better that dignity come through effort.

Such a song aligns well with the educational goal of fostering a culture of dignity. And since it is a song, every time it is hummed, it provides an opportunity to recall the lesson or pass it on to others.

Despite this success, pre-colonial community education has its limitations, including the lack of a formal training plan, the absence of written materials, the absence of a standardised evaluation system, the lack of formal certification, and the exclusion of certain groups (notably women in some contexts).

3.2. Adult Education Under Colonial Influence

As in the previous case, the points of description will be: emergence, target groups, objectives and curricula, transmission mechanisms, successes, and limitations.

3.2.1. Emergence

Adult education during the colonial period in Benin took the form of a fight against illiteracy that began “as early as the mid-19th century with the efforts of Catholic missions (the Society of African Missions – SMA) and Protestant missions, which used the teaching of reading and writing in Beninese languages as a basis for accessing the biblical message” (Baba Moussa, op. cit.). This occurred within the context of the French colonial administration.

Thus, far from the missionaries’ goal of democratic access to biblical texts, the colonial administration aimed instead to train a workforce suited to the needs of colonisation and to establish a socio-political order aligned with Western values. Adult literacy was driven by both Christian missions and the French colonial administration. This shaped the tendency to use either local languages or French as the language of teaching and learning.

3.2.2. Target Groups

Colonial adult education targeted several categories, such as agricultural workers, railway labourers, plantation workers, port workers, and others. It also addressed auxiliary civil servants such as interpreters and clerks, as well as former soldiers from colonial wars who needed to be reintegrated or disciplined. Catechumens² and converts within the framework of religious missions were also part of the target groups.

Thus, it is clear that the target of adult education during the colonial period was divided between two main programmatic fields: the French colonial administration and the evangelisation mission supported by Catholic and Protestant Christians. This reflects the underlying interests of these two initiators in this form of adult education at the time, as expressed through its objectives and curricula.

3.2.3. Objectives and Curricula

As previously highlighted, considering the dual interests related to adult education during the colonial period in Benin, two types of objectives with associated curricula can be distinguished.

First, there is the objective related to evangelisation, which involved acculturating the population to Christian beliefs. The aim was to have the Dahomean people at the time assimilate the divine precepts contained in

2. The term “catechumen” refers to a person who is undergoing basic religious training in the Roman Catholic faith with the aim of receiving the sacraments.

the Bible, hence the choice to teach adults literacy in national languages to overcome the language barrier, which was the main obstacle to such a project. In this perspective, the curriculum primarily included reading, writing, arithmetic, and Christian morals.

Second, there is the objective related both to the training of a subordinate elite capable of serving the colonial administration and to the training of a workforce to serve the colonial economy. In this context, national languages were not welcomed for this objective. French thus became the language of teaching and learning, with a curriculum mainly comprising reading, writing, arithmetic, agricultural techniques, and manual trades useful to the colonial economy.

3.2.4. Transmission Mechanisms

To achieve the objectives mentioned above, evening classes were organised both in villages and urban centres. Similarly, alongside catechesis, missionary schools for adults were established. Regarding the development of technical skills, on-the-job training was organized in workshops, construction sites, or experimental farms.

The approach was vertical and authoritarian, based on repetition and memorisation. It could not have been otherwise given the type of transformation aimed at for the population: to become servants of the gospel and/or the colonial administration.



3.2.5. Successes and Limitations

The first notable success of adult education during the colonial period was the introduction of alphabetic writing into educational practices in Dahomey, present-day Benin. This is particularly significant as it became a source of pride and a means of opening up to the world for literate adults. It also led to the formation of a literate elite – composed of clerks, interpreters, catechists, and others – who would later play a leading role in anti-colonial movements.

However, the main limitation was the utilitarian and instrumentalised orientation of education in service of the coloniser, which resulted in the devaluation of indigenous knowledge in favour of imposed Western models. After independence, however, a new era began for adult learning and education in Benin.

3.3. Adult Education Post-Independence

To enable a comparative view of adult learning and education traditions across successive periods, we will maintain the same approach, presenting the following aspects: emergence, target groups, objectives and curricula, transmission mechanisms, as well as successes and limitations.

3.3.1. Emergence

Borrowing from Baba-Moussa (op. cit.), we note that after the wave of independence movements in the 1960s and various international conferences focused on the development of newly independent states, a movement in favour of functional literacy in national languages was launched—particularly following the 1965 Tehran Conference (Iran), organized by UNESCO.

The Dahomean state (present-day Benin), now sovereign, took responsibility for popular education with the goal of mass education, sometimes drawing on pan-Africanist or revolutionary ideologies, especially during the 1970s–80s under the Marxist-Leninist regime.

Within this movement, adult education – centred on literacy – became a tool for national development in Benin, reflecting the desire to address the shortcomings of the colonial system and reduce illiteracy, which hindered civic participation, economic empowerment, and national unity.

3.3.2. Target Groups

The target group was primarily composed of illiterate adults, especially in rural areas – mainly farmers and agricultural workers seeking to improve productivity. Special attention was given to women, who were often marginalised in the formal school system. Likewise, out-of-school or never-schooled youth were also targeted by literacy programmes.

3.3.3. Objectives and Curricula

As reflected in the previous paragraphs, post-independence adult education aims to reduce illiteracy and strengthen civic participation. It also seeks to empower communities, promote gender equality, and develop technical skills to support local development.

To achieve these goals, training curricula include instrumental knowledge (reading, writing, and basic arithmetic) applied to practical contexts. They also cover life-skills-related content such as health, hygiene, citizenship, decentralisation, and family planning, as well as content aimed at developing technical and practical skills in areas like agriculture, crafts, agro-processing, management, and more.

3.3.4. Transmission Mechanisms

To achieve the established objectives, various programmes were implemented – both by the state and by civil society organizations (NGOs, religious institutions) – with support from technical and financial partners (TFPs), the main one being Swiss Cooperation “since 1968” (Ministry of Culture, Literacy, and the Promotion of National Languages [MCAPLN], 2009, p. 44). Adult literacy centres were established for the benefit of both men and women, offering instruction in national languages.

According to the MCAPLN (*op. cit.*, pp. 46–48), several approaches/methods have been or are still being used, including:

- the “**Mixed Method of Paulo Freire**”;
- the “**New Method**” inspired by the Tintua method;
- the “**Text-Based Pedagogy (PdT)**”, which focuses on education quality and learner empowerment;
- the “**Potal Men NGO Approach**”, aimed at helping grassroots communities take charge of their own development;
- the “**REFLECT Method**”, which seeks to “make literacy a support activity for local development projects/programmes.”

Each of these approaches/methods includes the use of written materials for both learners and facilitators (literacy instructors). In general, the teaching/learning methods are participatory and hands-on; they adhere to **andragogical principles**, taking into account the specific needs of adult learners.

3.3.5. Successes and Limitations

The successes of adult learning and education approaches are varied. In terms of territorial coverage, there has been a steady increase in the number of literacy centres established, reaching more areas. This has led to a rise in the number of literate individuals, largely thanks to the strong involvement of the state and civil society organisations.

Initiatives in adult learning and education are supported by structured training programmes aligned with broader education policies and strategies, with strong commitments expressed by government leaders. Special attention has also been given to the inclusion of women in programmes that promote their empowerment. The training opportunities contribute to fostering civic awareness and support the emergence of an alternative (so-called “non-formal”) education system that complements formal schooling.

However, some limitations must be noted. Chief among them is the lack of sustainable funding that matches the ambitions expressed, due to heavy reliance on external partners. This limits the long-term viability of literacy centres, especially in remote areas. Additionally, there is a shortage of qualified trainers and appropriate teaching materials. Another challenge is the underdeveloped literate environment in national languages, which reduces the chances for newly literate individuals to consolidate and apply their skills, increasing the risk of relapse into illiteracy.

In summary, post-independence adult education in Benin has aimed to promote social emancipation, economic development, and national cohesion. Despite significant progress, it still faces structural challenges, particularly in terms of financing, equitable access, and institutional recognition.

3.4. An Emerging Tradition: ICT-Based Adult Education

In the chronological development of adult education in Benin, the emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) falls within the post-independence era. However, their influence is now gradually spreading across all previously discussed traditions of adult education, especially in their modern forms—that is, as they evolve beyond their original frameworks. In this context, ICTs play a major role in knowledge acquisition and skills

development. Thus, a new, cross-cutting tradition of adult education is emerging, interfacing with the three earlier models and supporting their adaptation to contemporary challenges such as mobility, digital inclusion, democratisation of knowledge, and employment.

In relation to the precolonial, community-based tradition, ICT manifests primarily through radio and audiovisual programmes addressing everyday life themes such as hygiene, social harmony, moral values, customs and traditions, herbal medicine, and farming techniques. Some radio programmes are interactive, making their educational component community-oriented and participatory, much like traditional precolonial ALE.

In connection with the colonial-era tradition, particularly its residual “evangelisation” dimension, this emerging ICT-based tradition is also evident through radio and audiovisual content, as well as on social media. The main goal is to strengthen religious faith and moral values – Christian and Muslim – and to guide community and civic life in accordance with biblical and Quranic principles. Accordingly, the topics addressed are rooted in teachings from the Bible and the Quran.

Applied to the post-independence tradition, ICT-based ALE appears through the use of digital tools such as calculators and mobile phones in literacy and apprenticeship training centres. While the integration of such tools in literacy programmes is still at an early stage, calls from stakeholders are growing louder for their prioritisation in these programmes.

Although its institutionalisation is not specific to adult education alone, ICT-based ALE has become a national priority. This is illustrated by the launch of a project under the supervision of the Ministry of Secondary Education, Technical and Vocational Training (MESTFP), which oversees literacy, to strengthen the synergy between literacy, vocational training, and ICT. The project is currently at the curriculum development stage, focusing on two pilot trades: building electrics and agro-food processing.

Additionally, following its first annual session held in August 2024, the Consultative Assembly of the National Education Council (CNE) issued 18 recommendations, one of which states:

“Ensure the development and implementation of an adult literacy strategy and a digital safety education programme for learners.”

4. Categorisation of Identified Adult Education Traditions

To better understand the educational landscape of adult education in Benin, it is essential to categorise the different traditions identified using criteria that help assess their scope and current relevance. Three main criteria have been selected:

- Prevalence in practice
- Degree of institutionalization
- Compatibility with national priorities

4.1. Prevalence in Practice

This criterion measures the frequency and scope of implementation of an educational tradition within the social realities of Benin. From this perspective, **traditional community-based education** ranks first due to its widespread presence, especially in rural areas, because of its dominant characteristics: orality and practical application.

Indeed, within family contexts, it is used to transmit **indigenous knowledge** related to customs and traditions, family or local history, and social morality. At the ethnic level, it accompanies **rites of passage** and the transmission of cultural values. Moreover, it continues to govern the **learning of manual trades**, as workshops still rely heavily on practice-based methods. Referring to Baba-Moussa Abdel Rahamane and Sidibé Bangaly (2017, p. 93), *“professional skills are acquired through action.”* In this sense, the entire apprenticeship cycle is based on a combination of **learning by watching** (observation-based learning) and **learning by doing** (hands-on practice).

In second position, regarding this criterion, is the **colonial-era educational tradition**. Although now confined mainly to Christian spheres – since the colonial administration no longer exists – it remains widespread due to the proliferation of **Christian churches across the country**, despite some regional disparities. It is mainly practiced through **catechism classes and preaching** during Christian worship services. The following statistical data reflects the extent and frequency of this educational tradition’s implementation.

Table 2: Distribution of the Beninese Population by Religion and by Department

Religion	Bénin	Alibori	Atacora	Atlantique	Borgou	Collines	Couffo	Donga	Littoral	Mono	Ouémé	Pla teau	Zou
Vodou	11,6	0,5	6,3	12,1	1,0	5,9	56,5	0,4	1,6	33,1	6,0	7,4	20,1
Catholique	25,5	8,6	20,7	39,3	15,0	37,2	5,9	11,9	51,2	20,6	34,6	24,6	26,6
Protestant Méthodiste	3,4	0,5	1,8	3,3	1,2	8,0	2,2	1,0	3,7	2,4	7,8	5,6	3,1
Autres Protestants	3,4	0,4	2,4	3,5	1,7	2,2	5,6	1,1	2,1	4,1	7,7	3,8	5,0
Céleste	6,7	0,2	0,8	11,0	0,7	6,6	5,7	0,2	5,7	6,2	17,4	10,0	10,8
Islam	27,7	81,3	26,9	4,4	69,8	16,3	0,9	77,9	16,9	1,5	12,1	18,6	3,5
Autres Chrétiens	9,5	0,9	1,6	15,0	2,8	10,5	15,2	1,8	12,2	14,7	8,3	15,8	16,5
Autres Traditionnelles	2,6	1,8	18,0	0,8	1,3	1,2	1,4	1,8	0,3	1,2	0,6	3,3	1,9
Autres Religions	2,6	0,4	1,2	4,1	0,8	4,1	2,6	0,5	2,7	4,5	2,3	4,0	4,6
Aucune	5,8	3,5	19,0	5,5	4,3	7,1	2,9	2,4	2,8	10,5	2,3	5,7	7,0

Source : RGPH-4, 2013

According to this table, in 2013, almost half of the Beninese population (48.5%) was reached by Christian education inherited from the colonial era, with rhetoric mainly centred on biblical precepts.

In third place, there is **post-independence popular education**, which is less widespread than the first two due to the significant resources it requires. Indeed, organising a literacy campaign can only be decided when there is budget availability to cover costs related to designing teaching materials, their reproduction, training actors, paying facilitators, monitoring and evaluation, etc. However, so far, the enthusiasm of successive governments for this form of education is not reflected in the allocated financial resources (less than 0.1% of the national education budget). Initiatives based on this educational tradition are therefore carried out intermittently, with unequal territorial coverage. This is explained by the scarcity of the necessary financial resources and the disparity of interests guiding NGOs and technical and financial partners who support them.

4.2. Degree of Institutionalisation

This criterion refers to the level of integration of the educational tradition into public policies, formal educational structures, and regulatory frameworks. In this regard, post-independence education ranks highest due to the transition, into the hands of the leaders of independent Dahomey (now Benin), of the leadership of the national education system. Institutional management of this sub-sector of education has manifested in various ways over different periods. As an example, based on the Ministry of Culture, Literacy, and Promotion of National Languages (2009, p. 17 ff.), one can cite, among others:

- a) the creation in 1974 of the Directorate of Literacy and Rural Press (DAPR);
- b) the holding in 1976 of the first national seminar on literacy in Benin, during which the choice was made to promote mass literacy and functional literacy as a development lever;
- c) the creation in 1980, for the first time, of a Ministry of Literacy and Popular Culture;
- d) the holding of a seminar to redefine literacy objectives and strategies in June 1992, aimed at developing more integrated offers adapted to the specific educational needs of adults, women, producers, etc.

This trend of institutionalising the tradition of Adult Literacy and Education (ALE), which began in the first decade after independence, has continued to this day and is reflected by various signs including:

- a) the inclusion of literacy and adult education in the post-2015 Sectoral Education Plan (PSE), aligned with the Government Action Programme (PAG);
- b) the operational management of this sub-sector entrusted to three central bodies: the Directorate of Literacy and Promotion of National Languages (DAPLN), the Pedagogical General Inspectorate of the ministry (IGPM), and the Fund for Literacy and Promotion of National Languages (FAAPLN);
- c) the establishment of an official teaching framework comprising a Competency Framework, a Literacy and Adult Education Programme, learner manuals, etc.

In short, post-independence ALE benefits from a relatively clear institutional framework compared to those of the precolonial and colonial eras.

Regarding this criterion of the degree of institutionalisation, we can place the colonial ALE tradition in second place, considering its use by Christian religious institutions that maintain it. These religious institutions, whose authorisation for establishment is approved by competent state institutions, oversee the definition of programmes and training curricula.

Traditional community education, although culturally rooted, is not institutionalised: it operates outside official structures.

4.3. Compatibility with National Priorities

This criterion expresses the extent to which each identified educational tradition responds to the major political orientations in education, as defined by strategic documents such as the Government Action Program (PAG) and the post-2015 Sectoral Education Plan (PSE).

The post-independence Adult Literacy and Education (ALE) tradition, as already mentioned, is strongly institutionalised. The direct consequence of this institutionalisation is the constant, even increasing, effort to align ALE programmes with national priorities. To illustrate this, promoting literacy and adult education is included among the actions of the fifth Strategic Axis of Pillar 2 of PAG 2, which covers the period 2021–2026. Although, paradoxically, this action has no projected budget, its clear mention in this development policy document is crucial, since the PAG serves as the official compass for all development interventions in Benin.

In this perspective, Strategic Option 7 of Strategic Axis 1 of the National Strategy for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (MESTFP, 2020, p. 29 ff.) is dedicated to the development of specific vocational training programmes for out-of-school and/or early school dropout individuals. This strategic option is broken down into three priority actions:

- a) the gradual transformation of literacy programmes into initial and continuing vocational training programmes;
- b) the establishment of a framework for integrating literacy into Vocational Training and Apprenticeship Centres;
- c) the development of vocational training based on synergy between literacy and ICT.

From the above, we see the deep rooting of the post-independence ALE tradition in national priorities, which is not the case with the precolonial and colonial ALE traditions. Certainly, they respond to practical and utilitarian needs (sometimes identity-related), but they are not systematically guided by national objectives such as reducing illiteracy, empowering women, social inclusion, etc.

Faced with this situation, there exist very scattered but commendable initiatives to organise literacy courses for adults faithful to endogenous or foreign religions. Within this framework, the programmes used are aligned with the official literacy programme.

The table below presents a summary of this attempt to categorise the three identified ALE traditions according to the three chosen criteria.

Table 3: Categorisation of the main ALE traditions present in Benin

Traditions	Preponderance	Institutionalisation	National Compatibility
Tradition of ALE – pre-colonial	Strong	Weak	Weak
Tradition of ALE – colonial	Medium	Medium	Medium
Tradition of ALE – post-independence	Weak	Strong	Strong
Tradition of ALE –based on ICT	Weak	Medium	Strong

5. Identification of Dominant and Recessive Traditions

Based on the previous categorisation, it is possible to identify the traditions that currently dominate the adult education landscape in Benin, as well as those that, although present or historically important, occupy a marginal place.

5.1. Dominant Traditions

“Dominant” traditions are considered those that, while being largely institutionalised, align with educational policies and correspond to current national priorities.

In this sense, in light of the table, the post-independence ALE tradition stands out as the dominant ALE tradition. It benefits from institutional support, government backing – particularly through functional literacy programmes – as well as support from technical and financial partners. It targets priority objectives such as the fight against illiteracy, civic education, and the improvement of employability. Interventions in this area are often highly publicised, and the results are capitalised on and integrated into strategic education planning to improve practices.

However, it remains dependent on external funding, which weakens its ability to provide educational coverage across the national territory.

Secondarily, although the emerging ALE tradition based on ICT is still limited in scope, its relevance within the framework of digital transformation and continuing education objectives is recognised. Indeed, its potential in terms of accessibility, personalised learning, and global connectivity makes it strategically important in the medium term.

5.2. Recessive Traditions

Recessive traditions are those whose practice remains strong in certain contexts but are neither valued nor supported. The main example is traditional community education from the precolonial era, which, despite its deep historical roots and persistence in rural communities, remains outside institutional frameworks. It is little recognised in public policies and current ALE approaches, which limits its transmission and modernisation. However, it shows great resilience over time thanks to its strong anchoring in local cultures.

Sections 3, 4, and 5 were devoted to presenting the existing ALE traditions in Benin, focusing on their description, categorisation, and classification into dominant and recessive traditions. Section 6 aims to look forward by outlining a proposed ALE tradition in light of the previous analysis.

6. Recommended Type of ALE Tradition

In light of the information provided about each presented ALE tradition, it is clear that each has strengths that should be leveraged in order to develop a hybrid approach based on what already exists.

6.1. A Contextualised Hybrid Approach

Currently, the best direction we see for adult education in Benin is the adoption of a hybrid approach, combining the richness of community educational traditions with the contributions of modern technologies and institutionalised methods.

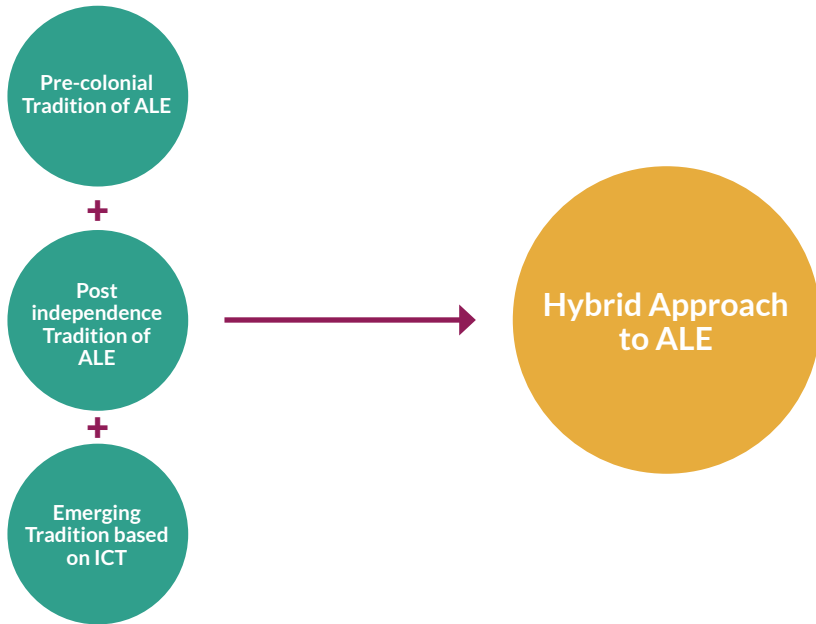
Local educational traditions carry meaning, practical knowledge, and community values. They are often individualised and contextualised. These qualities are compatible with modern learner-centred pedagogies. Integrating them into modern frameworks allows for the enhancement of intangible heritage while ensuring better social acceptance of programmes.

Such an approach makes it possible to meet national objectives of literacy, vocational training, and digital inclusion, while adapting to local specificities.

6.2. Mechanism for Combining into a Hybrid Approach

With the aim of achieving the envisioned hybrid approach, the combination could be carried out as indicated in the figure on the next page.

Figure 2 : Profile of a Recommended ALE Approach



This figure shows the strengths to be drawn from existing approaches (ALE traditions) in favour of the recommended hybrid approach.

From the precolonial community education tradition, it draws on, among other things, the cultural anchoring that could be reflected in the inclusion of proverbs, tales, songs, as well as other indigenous knowledge, etc. It would also draw on the use of national languages, which are the best codes in learning situations, especially when dealing with learners who are unschooled or early school dropouts. Learning by doing, a contextualised type of learning, is also an element to be taken from this existing tradition.

From the post-independence ALE tradition, the envisioned hybrid approach borrows conformity with national priorities through reference to the overall education goals and, by extension, development objectives. Consequently, it draws on strategic and operational planning techniques that involve the use of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms aimed at documenting interventions and capitalising on achievements.

From the emerging ICT-based tradition, it takes the use of digital tools through various multimedia formats such as text, image, audio, and video, usable on simple devices such as mobile phones and community radios. This implies, among other things, the collection and digital archiving of stories, artisanal practices, educational songs and tales, as well as the creation of bilingual digital resources (national languages and French) integrating indigenous knowledge.

Although its basic components come from existing ALE traditions, the proposed hybrid approach remains innovative because of its structure. Therefore, it is hoped that its promotion will receive particular attention to ensure its implementation.

6.3. Strategies for Promoting the Hybrid ALE Approach

The first strategy for promotion consists of actions aimed at increasing the visibility of this hybrid approach: aligning the elements drawn from existing ALE traditions within a reference document. Such a document should highlight the added value of this hybrid approach, particularly regarding the consideration of contemporary challenges such as the development of technical and professional skills, access to knowledge and social skills related to peace, coexistence, citizenship, financial empowerment, and so on. Subsequently, it is desirable to communicate about this approach by encouraging its implementation (experimentation) through adult learning and education projects/programmes.

However, to ensure the success of this progressive endeavour, it is necessary to be aware of certain risks that require mitigation measures. These include, among others, the Eurocentrism of intellectuals and a mistaken conception of the impact of education on development.

The first risk encompasses all forms of resistance from Beninese intellectuals (and African intellectuals in general) who believe only in European development models to the detriment of indigenous knowledge. Among them are even those who consider African languages unsuitable for conveying modern knowledge, or scientific knowledge in general.

The second risk relates to the attitude of Beninese officials (including authorities) who confuse education with construction and public works by expecting immediate returns on investments. This stance is often expressed and turns into resistance when it comes to deciding on funding for adult learning and education projects/programmes in national languages.

In the face of these two major risks, it is essential to manage all efforts in favour of ALE in national languages to demonstrate its added value; hence, as an indication, the measures mentioned above for promoting the hybrid ALE approach.

Conclusion

The examination of adult learning and education traditions in Benin highlights the richness, diversity, and evolution of educational practices over time. Whether community-based, colonial, or post-independence, each of these traditions presents strengths and limitations that deserve recognition and reassessment in light of contemporary challenges.

The hybrid approach proposed in this article, based on the complementarity between indigenous knowledge, institutional frameworks, and technological contributions, appears to be a promising path. It offers a contextualised, inclusive, and sustainable response to the learning needs of Beninese adults while valuing local cultural and educational heritage.

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The African Continental Project – MOJA

9 Scott Rd. Observatory, Cape Town, South Africa, 7925

Tel: +27 21 4474828

Email: info@mojaafrica.net

Facebook: <https://web.facebook.com/MOJAEducation>

www.mojaafrica.net

