

PROMOTING INDIGENOUS CHILDREN'S SONGS AND FOLKTALES AS A MEANS OF PRESERVING AFRICAN LANGUAGES AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

The age-long tradition of impacting and preserving indigenous languages and traditional cultures, norms and values through oral tradition is gradually disappearing with the advent of urbanization and globalization, exposure to foreign media communication, influx of alternative entertainment and social media platforms. Whereas we secretly crave for our children to embrace our traditional values, the means of transference has perpetually eluded ever busy career-driven urban parents who themselves hardly enjoyed the lore of oral tradition. This paper tries to examine the reawakening of Indigenous children's songs and folktales as a means of preserving African languages and culture and therefore propose a bridge of Oral tradition to inculcate this art in our educational system in order to reawaken this vanishing art in our cultural rich society.

Culture encompasses the entire gamut of a people's way of life, which is reflected in a socio-politico-economics system of such people. Ngugi (1972) sees Culture as a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavor to live and come to terms with their total environment. It is the sum of their art, their science and all the social institutions, including their system of belief and rituals. More so, Cultural Heritage is the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. Cultural heritage manifest itself in diverse forms, from mega-structures, like pyramids, medieval cities, monastic complexes and museums to languages and dialects, songs, art, folk stories, customs, practices and dances.

Children's songs and folktales are still largely oral, they are messages that are transmitted orally from one generation to another. The messages maybe passed down through speech or songs and may take the form of folktales and fables, epic histories and narrations, proverbs or sayings, and songs. Oral traditions makes it possible for the society to pass knowledge across generations without writing, they help people make sense of the world and are used to teach children and adults about important aspects of their culture (Ahmad, 2008). The aesthetic satisfaction that comes from literary endeavours, is today still realized primarily, through participation in such oral forms as oral narratives, songs, performances, traditional displays, festivals, riddles and proverbs. Children songs and folktales in a particular language makes it possible for children to acclimatize themselves with the language for the continued existence of the language and culture.

Children's Folktales

Ruth Finnegan (2012) in her book *Oral literature in Africa* devotes chapters 12 and 13 to the genre of folktale or what she calls "prose". The first of the two chapters examines the theoretical issues connected with the scholarship of folktale. She observes that "so much has been written and published over many years, this field of study has been particularly subject to vicissitudes of

anthropological theories and has reflected only too faithfully the rise and falls of fashions and interpretations of African cultures”, adding that “...so much is based on unquestioned assumptions and so little is said about many topics in which a student of literature would naturally be interested, like, for instance, the art or originality of the individual composer, the nature of the audiences reached, the local assessment of the relative worth or seriousness of stories against other forms, or the position of the story-teller himself” Darah (2013) in *Nigeria Journal of Oral Literatures*. The changing context of oral literature production and performance in Africa compels us to ask certain questions: who tells folktales now? Many of the manifestation of the genre analyzed by scholars and pedagogues were obtained from field work done decades ago. Whereas other folk forms such as proverbs, songs, music, folk drama/ theatre, and various juvenile materials are still practiced, the folktale appears to have withered away. Studies have shown that there is a dearth of knowledge in songs and folktales among the present generation of children, who have lost touch with their culture as a result of urbanization (Moseley 2009). Robert (2004) opines that culture is essential to human beings since it is a key for people to identify themselves and fit into groups. The dearth of knowledge in songs and folktales among the present day children can be traced to the inadequate attention not given to this aspect of oral literature in school curriculum that does not feature children’s songs and folktales. The rural communities that practice the art are still there in Africa but most of them do not have the kind of stable socio-economic situation that generated and utilized folktale. Urbanization has shifted critical audiences away from the agrarian hearths to new communities. In this new setting the concept of “moonlight tales” has lost its aesthetic significance.

More so, the successful introduction of Christianity and Islam affected the entire culture of the African people. Christianity encouraged the creation of a new elite class, whose members believed that western education needed to be in power and have a mind of what progress is in the contemporary context. The children now have other forms of folk art to entertain and edify themselves, since “Modernization and Globalization” continue to sweep through our environments, the art of storytelling and songs of our culture has been relegated to the background.

Darah (2013), states that the folktale is a delectable verbal art form that has charmed humanity through the ages. The etymology of the folktale indicates that it is a conflation of two ideas, namely, folk (meaning the people/community) and tale, a narrative or a story. Although the art of folktale has been with us in Africa from time immemorial, African scholars of the genre were inducted into it from European traditions of cultural and folklore studies.

The preservation of indigenous children’s songs and folktales for modern day readers and researchers is of uttermost priority, in Nigeria during the early 19th century, the interest of songs and folktales by children cannot be over emphasized. This was so because in many rural areas and a couple of urban settlements, the introduction of alternative source of electricity generation had not become wide spread, therefore in the evenings after the days work, parents and children would sit right in front of their houses, as the moon gave them light to see, usually children gather and sit constituting the audience as an elder narrate folktales to them. Animal tales are one of the most common manifestation of folklore and they can tell much about the traditions, values and history of the time and place of their occurrence. In the same vein Akporobaro (2001) submits that the folktale is one of the commonest and easily the most popular form of oral literary expression in many African societies. It is an imaginative narrative (story) in prose form. The story that constitutes a folktale may have a basis in real life but generally the story is an imaginative recreation of a memorable experience

that is intended essentially to entertain rather than record history or social experience. Generally, however, they are considered to be untrue stories and hence not objects of serious belief.

The folktale is a big subset of folklore which is one of the most important means of expressing African culture. Various views have been expressed on the value of folklore in the African experience and development. Barbara *et al* (1961) writing on Nigerian folktales have asserted that in spite of the growth in formal education and, "... despite a marked increase in the literacy rate, the oral tradition is still very strong..." Cowley (1971) in an open lecture at the University of Ghana, Legon, also emphasises that "... folklore, i.e. orally transmitted tradition, is not at all limited to the illiterates in a literate society, but rather can be found at virtually every level in every society, and is in no danger of *dying out*."

The folktale is one of the most functional aspects of the traditional verbal art, and through it the beliefs, mores and social attitudes of the people are transmitted from one generation to another. So powerful is this medium that it survived the destructive influence of missionary activity and colonialism. The irony, however, is that in contemporary Africa there is a dearth of official patronage of this cultural means of expression, especially, as an academic area of study and investigation. In view of this, one cannot say with any measure of equanimity that the highly educated segment of our people knows and gives it worthy notice. Hence, Sutherland (1976) describes as „unfortunate“ the necessity to encourage our playwrights to acquire more knowledge of their own indigenous games in the first place. She explains that

... the necessity arises because of the dreadful history of how these games have been discouraged, or virtually banned by educational policy; neglected or regarded with disdain in educational institutions. Why have traditional games been discouraged and virtually denied by officialdom? Intellectuals concerned about the deliberate desecration of African culture and who are also concerned about the need to reassert African values ought to remember that for one thing, the mission of the West to Africa after the partitioning of the continent was largely a cultural one.

Children's Songs/Music

Children's songs are songs sung by adults for children like lullabies and as these children grow to be adults, they sing it for children again. A song makes it easier for children or people to personalize as well as internalize the message of the song whereby its preservation and transmission of its message to succeeding generations becomes easier. It could be a song teaching morals, a song of instruction, caution, rebuke or a song for games or moonlight songs for play, there are also songs for praise for a hero, admonition and teaching children will build their morals, no wonder, God Almighty knowing the importance of songs in preserving the tenets of the Christian faith asked Moses to "write ye this song..., and teach it the children of Israel: put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness... For it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed:.. Deut 31 vs 19 and 21.

More so, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh submits that music/songs is the universal language of the soul and the music of oral literature flows from the core essence of a people's existence. Here it becomes a way of expression intricately tied to their social, cultural, economic and political aspirations and to a great extent becomes the determinant of the peaceful co-existence of the society of people that spawn it. Ordinarily, traits of music/songs in the oral literatures of different people have been instrumental to the establishment of links and bonds between societies of people and affirming relationships between people now widely separated in spatial, historical and cultural terms. She further opined that traditional songs are avenues through which morals and societal etiquettes are imbued to the younger

generation. Religious beliefs and didactics are also spread and fostered through traditional and cultural songs. These songs fosters unity, promotes cordiality, cultural and peaceful co-existence between people of the same culture. It stands as a societal medium for emphasizing and re-echoing the nature of relationships between man and his environment.

Children songs and folktales as a virtue of morals

The songs and folktale are generally sung and told in order to epitomize a virtue and teach moral lessons. In fact, this art of story-telling can be referred to as indigenous sermonizing! The end of a folktale is marked by a restatement; this is especially so in a tale with an announced thesis at the very beginning of the story. The restatement may be summed up in a proverb or it could be a descriptive summary of the narrative's moral. The constant attachment of morals to tales is significant because it reveals those attitudes, the ethos and mores of the African culture, which are largely preserved and transmitted through the indigenous language. However, it is noteworthy that such morals, to which high recognition were accorded in the traditional society, have become neglected with the advent of "civilization". In the traditional African society, credence was given to being truthful, honest, respectful, tactful, and diligence, etc. Consequently, with the simultaneous use of English and Indigenous languages, these morals can be harvested and published in a bilingual leaflet and serve as a veritable source of teaching both English and indigenous languages.

Currently, the language situation in most African nations are wholly exoglossic, that is, the languages used in formal, official situations are languages that are not indigenous to those societies, which has a high influence in the fading African culture. It is necessary to mention the fact that the Nigerian nation has always been multilingual, with a conservative number of about 450 different languages. However, the English language enjoys greater use because of its international recognition as well as the influence of globalization. It has also been argued elsewhere that there is no political will to promote some language (s) in the country to the level of national language (Babalola, 2002a). Presently in Nigeria, the preference is for English for many people when they are confronted with a choice between their indigenous languages and English in many domains of language use, even when it is apparent that they are deficient in the latter (Adegbite and Babalola 2008).

Children are taught not to speak in their own local languages and are sometimes even punished for doing so in the schools. The English language is even believed to be more prestigious and seen as a mark of "superiority and class". If this attitudinal trend continues among people of all levels, there is no way of ensuring that the indigenous languages will survive. If these languages are allowed to die due to neglect and non-use, then there lies the danger of losing the rich indigenous folktales, cultural ethos and consequently the sources of identity as a nation. Thus, what is the veracity of the nation's claim to greatness: a force to be reckoned with in the black race? The linguistic and cultural diversity in existence is being increasingly threatened as a result of the adoption of more technological advancement, which inevitably encroaches on the cultural front.

Salawu (2006: 6) says of the situation that "it has already been settled that Africans, especially the educated (Western), do not seem to appreciate their languages as being fit for serious matters of education, business, governance etc.; as such, they do not patronize it." In the same vein, Sonaiya (2007: 18) confirms this notion when she points out that:

. . . what continues to be of great concern to many in Africa is the fact that even after independence not only are European languages still being maintained within the educational system, but very little is being done to develop African languages which had suffered over a century of neglect. This state of affairs is what Djite (2004: 1) refers to as "the most painful and absurd interface between Africa and the rest of the world". The fact is that Africa is the only continent in the world in which language-in-education is largely exogenous to the society it seeks to serve".

The point being emphasized here is that, any serious country seeking to improve holistically its fortune and that of its people must accord the indigenous languages in which the majority of its people conduct their day-to-day affairs a pride of place in its developmental plans; be it in education, economy, politics and even entertainment. The continued exogenous language policy need to be reviewed to accommodate the indigenous languages, and the nation's policy makers, scholars and leaders of thought must look inwards and harness the rich cultural diversity of the country which is preserved in these languages. The rich songs and folktales of the indigenous languages can be exploited to teach morals, change attitude and inculcate the spirit of self-sufficiency and prudence in the citizenry and this can galvanize the country into a leading exporter of cultural ethos as is the case with some Western nations whose ways of life, both positive and negative, are being blindly aped around the world.

Children songs and folktale to the rescue

Wajuppa and MacDonald (1996) believe that, to preserve and revitalize the use of local languages and cultures, songs and storytelling remains the answer as it is believed that it possesses spellbinding magic and power over both the listeners and the tellers. Storytelling is always enjoyable for people of all ages, and through it, the language, literature, and rituals inherent in the use of the language would be maintained. Children could learn to read, write and comprehend their indigenous languages and literature while maintaining fluency in speaking the exoglossic/"imported" language(s). Folklore has many cultural aspects, and can also serve to validate a culture, as well as transmit a culture's morals and values. As a nation formulates educational philosophy, economic policies, political philosophy and religious philosophy, the cultural philosophy through which a nation maintains its national identity is preserved in the languages indigenous to such a country.

And this can be passed on to the younger generation quite effortlessly through folktales, anecdotes and ditties. However, as has been noted that with the present pre-eminence status of English in Nigeria, majority of the people in addition to being largely illiterate in English are also unable to appreciate the indigenous songs and folktales which are veritable sources to teaching morals and cultural ethos of their languages. Thus, we will like to advocate a bilingual approach to the use of the folktales by the people, especially the children. By this we mean that these indigenous songs folktales could be compiled and then translated into English to be introduced to the school children at specific levels of their education. Through this, both English and indigenous language, for example could be learnt simultaneously by the pupils, and the pupils stimulated to appreciate the rich heritage of their indigenous language and culture. By encouraging children to re-tell the stories, in both English and indigenous language, lessons in speech-making and articulation are being imparted. The translated

folktales can also be made available to the adult speakers in the form of pamphlets, dictionaries, etc. It should be noted that these indigenous folktales had existed orally through ages and had always been shared largely in indigenous languages, and that is why many people who now live a kind of western lifestyle are not aware of them or cannot just appreciate them.

Walter J. Ong in his book *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing of the word* (1982), adumbrated the theory of transformation of verbal communication instigated by advancement in electronic technology. He observes that radio, television, telephone, video, and other forms of social media, has discovered extraordinary possibilities in exchange of information and ideas. These days, a song or music rendered and transmitted on radio can reach millions and billions of listeners across geographical and linguistic barriers in the world. The audio-visual are even more tantalizing in their reach and effect. The development of satellite television has opened new frontiers for artists and their patrons. The artist can now perform from a single spot and expect to be heard, seen, and appreciated in all continents of the world. The human voice has been magnified in a manner hitherto thought unimaginable. The performers of the art is now without borders and the magical power of the storyteller, as Okri described in 1997, is even more mythical and enchanting. Welcome to the world of globalization. In this light Victor Olaiya (2014) an old time musician on the National daily in view has this to say that our youths have lost original highlife musical culture as they are just promoting and copying foreign artists instead of developing our own kind of musical culture.

Conclusion

Our children's songs and folktales return our children to the roots therefore African film makers should tell our traditional stories as we have a lot of them to tell. We may not be able to beat Hollywood in their own game but we have things we can offer them, we should offer our culture in our Nollywood to project our African peculiarity (Mlemchukwu 2015).

With regards to these technological developments, songs and folktales can be made to evolve along the various technological gadgets. Songs and Folktales may be read and burnt on compact discs for wider spread. So also they can be made into cartoons, animated films and movies, still retaining the local language and cultural flavour, so that many people can have access to them, restructuring of the primary, secondary and university curriculum by introducing the teaching of oral songs and folktales under the general term oral literature of our traditions in order to reawaken this vanishing art in our cultural rich society.

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