

Pedagogical Aspects of Riddles: A Critical Examination of Igbo Riddles

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Abstract

This paper is based on a critical examination of pedagogical aspects of riddles among the Umuokirika community of Mbaise Igbo. The study posits that riddles play an important role in the education system of not only children but also in adults. Focusing on riddles from the Umuokirikrika community and contending that riddles have various functions to play in society such as cultural, social and historical, the study interrogates pedagogical values embedded in riddles.

Primary data for analysis was obtained from a field work conducted among children and adults purposively sampled from the Umuokirika community. The researcher engaged participatory and observational approaches in data collection. Anchored in deconstruction theory as its theoretical framework, the paper explores various education values and skills inherent in the riddles and shows that both the riddling process and the riddles embody educational values. In this regard, the author emphasizes that riddles should be embraced as an important teaching and instructional method. It is for this reason that the writer concludes that participating in riddling is not a futile exercise but an educative one based on the pedagogical empowerment in riddles and the riddling process. The study proffers new ways of studying riddles and how they can be

utilized in teaching and learning processes in Nigerian schools for integration purposes.

Key Words: Pedagogy, Riddles, Pedagogical empowerment, Education system, Teaching and Learning processes.

Introduction

1.1 Background to the study of Umuokirika Riddles

Allan Dundes (1964) argues that riddles have all along been marginalized due to various misconceptions that they are childish in nature and when enacted, their primary role is to entertain. Further, this entertainment is understood to be that of eliciting laughter from the participants as well as the audience hence restricting them to the children province. Children in many communities in Kenya and Africa as a whole are considered to be the primary recipients of riddles because riddles form part of the games that they play. The Umuokirika community is no exception. Many of its members view riddles as a source of amusement for children. Ruth Finnegan (1970) reinforces the above argument when she observes that most scholars do not give much consideration to riddles as compared to other genres of oral literature such as proverbs, idioms, folktales and others. This is mainly because riddles are considered to be a type of art form, albeit often of minor and childish interest. Finnegan further demonstrates that riddles, unlike proverbs, are regarded as a preserve for children and a kind of marginal activity presented at special times rather than a universal aspect of human activity and

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communication. Indeed it is rare for people to incorporate riddles in their daily discourses. Okumba Miruka (1999) defines riddles as word puzzles in which familiar objects or situations are referred to in figurative terms for us to decipher what is actually meant. This definition points to how riddles are rich language and meaning. In his earlier publication, Miruka (1994) observes that riddles presents peculiar characteristics of a concept whether those characteristics are physical, behavioral or habitual and requires the unraveling of the concealed literal reference.

According to New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English language . Encyclopaedic edition. 2004, riddle should be treasured because it is the bedrock of cultural transmission from parents to children. Riddle is a puzzling question or command around anything ambiguous or puzzling. The puzzle process poses a high task to the brain and as such any one that is brought up in the environment of the riddle, puzzle or axiom is endowed with high IQ quotient.

1.2 Scope and Delimitation

Riddles collected from the Umuokirika community of Mbaise constituted the primary source of data for this study. In our analysis, we focused on pedagogical aspects embedded in the riddles that would be of benefit to both children and adults alike. Features of style evident in the riddles were analyzed insofar as they informed and/or influenced the pedagogical aspects that formed the subject of this study

1.3 Classification of riddles

Okebalama (2003) sees riddle not only as a minute type of literary genre which is usually played as a game, that it is not specifically metaphoric though it has a type known as metaphoric riddles. He goes on to say that the act of riddle as a game must be played by two individuals or two groups. Okebalama (2003) made five classifications of riddle.

For Mbah and Mbah (2007) riddles are not just for entertainment but also play important part in oracles and divinations. They opined that most oracles communicated to individuals by means of riddle. They cited Ibi ukpabi of Arochukwu of having communicated to the

people through riddles, where enigmatic questions or coded messages which litigants are expected before he the oracle can act. Also in *dramatis personae*, it is the duty of riddle to provide the main conflict. It is the difficult task which heralds some good rewards at its solution. In their own classification, Mbah and Mbah (2007) provided ten types of riddles.

Ogbonnaya and Onuoha (2017) made use of Nwadike (2003) in their own classification of riddles where they have five types of riddle. We shall now look at the various classes of riddles as it concerns this paper. This is specifically going to depend on the functions of the said riddles. Meanwhile some riddles have no handy meanings, they do not portray anything or image at all. These category of riddles are going to form our first class of riddle which we herewith call onomatopaic riddles.

1. Onomatopaic riddle: According to Mbah and Mbah (2007) in this type of riddle, the question part describes the sound made by an object in terms of its characteristic sound using appropriate onomatopoeia while the answer part provides the name of the object thus described.

Examples:

- Gwa m, Gwa m Gwa m, Gwa m dum, Gwa m yom... **ike nkwu na igu nkwu.**
Tell me tell me, tell me dum yom...head of palm fruit and the palm fronds
- Gwa m gwa m gwa m, gwa m kpararam n'elu anughi yokom n'ala... **akwukwo kporo nku**
Tell me tell me, tell me kpararam on top of the tree but noiseless on the ground...dry leaf
- Gwa m, gwa m, gwa m, gwa m tighalaghati... **i tigha aki n'ogwe**
Tell me, tell me, tell me tighalaghati... are you cracking palm kernel.

2 Song riddle: This form of riddle comes in song form. It can also be called Special riddle. According to Ogbonnaya and Onuoha (2017) in this puzzle, one person especially the poser of the riddle sings the song while the audience responds. The song leader asks questions on creatures or things that share similar features or characteristics. The leader will from time to time bring in odd or incompatible answers. Usually someone will opt for the incompatible

answer and such a person will be laughed at as soon as the poser announces that he/she has failed the puzzle..

Examples:

- Nne onye, nne onye...Nne m
Whose mother, whose mother...My mother
 Nne onye, nne onye...Nne m
Whose mother, whose mother...My mother
 Nne onye na-aga ahia...nne m
Whose mother goes to the market... My mother
 Nne onye na-eghu iri... Nne
Whose mother cooks food...My mother
 Nne onye mara mma.. nne
Whose mother is beautiful ... My mother
 Nne onye wu onye ohi...???
Whose mother is a thief...???

- Onye koo ji... mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 Who will guess yam, mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 Onye koo ji... mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 Who will guess yam...mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 Ugochi koo ji...mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 Ugochi guess yam...mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 Ugochi koo ji...mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 Ugochi guess yam...mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 O wu ji okom...mgbawara egede,
 Is it *okom* yam... Mgbawara egede ewu nnwa mu o wughi ya...mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 Oh my child, it is not it... mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 O wu ji igwe...mgbawara egede
 Is it *igwe* yam...mgbawara egede
 Ewu nnwa mu o wughi ya mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 Oh my child it is not it...mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 O wu ji igbeguru...mgbawara egede,
 Is it *igbeguru* yam... mgbawara egede
 Ewu nnwa mu i maghi ji mgbawara egede mgba mgba
 Oh my son you do not know yams ...mgbawara egede mgba mgba.

The above song riddle tests the people's knowledge of various types of yam by identification. The poser raises a particular yam

and invite anyone within to identify that particular yam. The person will start guessing by calling all the names of yams he knows. He keeps guessing until he gets the correct name.

3. Unexpected riddle: According to Nwadike (2003) in this class of riddle, both the question and the answer has nothing in common. They are not related in any way at all. If peradventure a maiden is mentioned in this riddle in the question part, the answer will not be a maiden rather it can be a plant or a farming crop.

Examples:

- Gwa m, gwa m, gwa m, gwa m nwaagbogho, kpuru ara n'afo, luo di n'afo, laa n'afo... **oka**.
 Tell me, tell me, tell me the bride that matures in a year, marries in a year and dies in a year...**Maize**.

As we have mentioned above, the child whom the above riddle is posed to, will hardly relate the answer to a crop. The child's psyche is tasked, he will start thinking of the answer.

As a matter of fact, it is the maize only that is planted in the same year and it grows the same year, flowers the same year, fruits the same year and eventually harvested the same year. It is not like many other crops one can harvest and the crop is expected to produce again even the next year. This riddle has taught the child the planting and harvesting nature of the maize.

- Gwa m, gwa m, gwa m, gwa m ihe kuru aka kpam, maba ime ohia...**ugbakala**
 Tell me, tell me, tell me that thing that clapped and vanished into the forest...oil bean lobe. The clapping sound of the oilbean is usually in the dry season (when the lobes had been dried by the scorching sun) and never in the rainy season. The lobes break and the seeds speedily scatter into the surrounding forests and anyone can pick the seeds at this point. This continues to happen until the owner discovers that the lobes are dried and ready to be harvested then he climbs the tree and cut of all the dried lobes.

It is worthy of note here that in as much as anyone can pick the oilbean seed when it breaks on its sun, no one other than the owner can climb the tree unless the person does that with

the owner's permission, otherwise it amounts to stealing.

4. **Descriptive riddle:** Okebalama (2003) sees this type of riddle as one in which the question or puzzle seems to describe the nature of man or behaviour of a particular things, the answer to the riddle is a name that suits the description thus given.

Examples

- Gwa m, gwa m, gwa m, gwa m e rime, e nyetu nnwa... **anwuru**
Tell me, tell me, tell me the food when being eaten is not given to a child...**snurf**
In Igbo land, the parents are known for sharing edible things with the children, a mother particularly will remain a small piece of whatever food she eats for the children. This is not true with the snurf. The snuff is food exclusively for the aged. The aged take snurf in order to strengthen their arteries and veins. The snurf induce sneezing in the person that takes it. This sneezing usually quakes the entire system of the body which the little child will not be able to withstand. Meanwhile, the sneezing serves as exercise for these old people since old age invariably makes them weak. Therefore the child who is still young and agile does not need snurf for any reason.
- Gwa m, gwa m, gwa m, gwa m ihe cheghere nwata aka mgba n'inwhu mma ya...**apitiri**
Tell me, tell me, tell me that thing that poses to wrestle with the child in the presence of the mother...**mud**.
The child is not beaten in front of her mother in the Igbo culture, it is seen as an abomination. Here that particular thing that is strongly willing to fight with the child is powerful and daring. The mud is not afraid of the mother of the child.

Another riddle that closely relates to this is that which beats the child in the presence of the mother... the answer is hunger. The mud was ready to fight or wrestle with child but in the case of hunger, it has beaten the child already. Nevertheless this particular riddle is peculiar to

the infants who cannot talk, but only express their feelings of hunger and other discomforts through crying..

5. **Enigmatic riddle:** An enigma is a problem in which the solution is expressed metaphorically. In trying to solve a puzzle in this category, one really has to think carefully about the riddle. Okebalama (2003) plainly calls this type of riddle metaphoric riddles. He goes on to say that Igbo people have so many riddles under this type.

Examples:

- Gwa m, gwa m, gwa m, gwa m mmadu abuo gaje n'uzo, mmiri na-ama otu onye, o maghaha ke ojo...**nwanyi di ime**.
Tell me, tell me, tell me two individual walking on the road, one is drenched and the other is not...**pregnant woman**.
The solution to this riddle poses a serious battle to the mind. The psyche is tasked with the quest for the solution of this riddle. In the Igbo traditional setting even globally, the pregnant woman is expected to take walks from time to time for easy passage of the child during delivery. In those times, it could suddenly start raining, and this pregnant woman will surely be drenched for she is not expected to take any umbrella.
- Gwa m, gwa m, gwa m, gwa m ihe kuru mmiri ria elu...**akibekiri**
Tell me. Tell me, tell me that which hangs up with water... **coconut**.
The coconut tree is the only tree whose seed grows on top of the tree with a lot of sweet water being encapsulated inside it. Again this puzzle calls for a racking of the brain before an answer is derived.
- Gwa m, gwa m, gwa m, gwa m nchemmiri ohia... **ero**
Tell me, tell me, tell me the bush umbrella.... **the mushroom**
This puzzle gets one in a deep thought for him to figure out this particular umbrella in the forest. It is evident that the mushroom has the shape of an umbrella. It surely serves as a covering to some small sized plants in the forest as well as ants.

- Gwa m, gwa m, gwa m, gwa m
nwagboghobia oma, agha riri... **udara
diiri na nshi**
Tell me, tell me, tell me the beautiful
damsel that became a victim of war...
**three star leaf (fruit) that fell inside
feaces**

It a known fact that victims of war are usually sacrificed, (killed). In the context of the above riddle, the udara fruit that fell inside feaces is likened to be a victim of war. No one touches it again no matter how beautiful and ripe the fruit looks. It is gone and gone forever. The very war that caught the udara captive is the faeces. We note that even a mad person cannot pick the udara. The researcher personally tested this out and confirms it.

6. **Dilemma or Tale riddle:** This is the type of riddle that has its answer embedded in the tale. Nwadike (2003) calls this type of riddle **deep thought riddle** while Ogbonnaya and Onuoha (2017) term it **super intelligent/ complex riddle**. This riddle comes in form of short story which contains one or more problems. Among all other types of riddle, this type is the hardest. One finds it so difficult to proffer a solution. One finds himself in a state of dilemma, not being able to find the line to toe. However the nut is eventually cracked after a very strenuous struggle.

Examples:

- Otu nwoko phu eghu, agu na ji na-eme njem, mgbe o garuru na mmiri, iwu wu si o ga-ewefecha ihe ndia o ji agaje n'otu n'otu. O maghi ihe o ga-imeni ka eghu hafu iri ji nakwa ka agu hafu iri eghu.

A particular man embarked on a journey, taking with him, a goat, a lion and a tuber of yam. As he got to a river, it is expedient that he crosses these items one after the other so as not allowing the goat eat the yam nor the lion eating the goat.

In this tale, the respondent will have to solve the riddle by all means. For the traveller to be successful with his three items without anyone eating the other, he will take the goat and the yam first, he

will drop the yam, return back with the goat, leaving the goat behind, pick the lion across, leaving the lion with yam since the lion cannot eat the yam for the lion is a carnivorous animal and finally returns to cross the goat and he moves on his journey having successfully transported all his three items across the river intact.

- Okuko yifutara akwa, okuko sikwe n'ime akwa futa ma okuko vuo akwa. Ugbua, okuko na akwa, olee nke bu ibe ya uzo yo uwa.

The fowl laid the egg and a fowl came out from the egg when hatched. Now between the fowl and the egg, which one came out first.

Here the answer is difficult to pick, but nevertheless there must be an answer. We can say it is the fowl since the fowl laid the egg. The egg did not come out on its own. And after all, it was the fowl that God created at creation and never the egg. It was the commandment of multiplication which God gave that produced the egg.

3. Findings of the study.

Riddles contain in them certain characteristics that ought to be studied in order to reveal their richness in terms of style, language and embedded knowledge. Therefore, the study of Umuokirika Igbo riddles is a worthy course since it will add on the existing knowledge on riddles in oral literature and pedagogy. The best way for everybody to study riddles is to simply have a notion that he is what he is because of what he acquired in childhood. It is the experiences we acquired from riddle and other minor literary genres that shape our lives in adulthood. Some of these experiences include the riddling process which is common among children in their early days of growing up. Consider the dilemma riddle above. In this regard, riddles must be seen as a part and parcel of every person's life more so because they could have experienced them at some point in their life and might have acquired certain skills through riddling which they have inculcated in their

daily life. In this regard, riddles should be seen as an integral part of everybody's life both the young and the old alike.

The research has demystified the notion that riddles are childish and reserved for children by showing their richness not only in style and meaning but also in pedagogy which can be utilized in the teaching and learning processes in Nigerian schools. The researcher has established pedagogical values that accrue from riddles and the riddling process in the society

4. Recommendation

The present study did not go into aspects such as the use of language in riddles, the influence of the environment in the crafting of riddles among others are not also examined. The study therefore recommended that more studies on riddles should be carried out to cover these aspects.

This paper further recommends that there is need for both the young and adults to get involved in riddling since it is also a skilful endeavor but will also improve one's language power more especially when our own particular dear Igbo language is heading to extinction due to low speakership. This will give one a grasp of the immediate environment and social and pedagogical values entrenched in them

5. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that learning is overtly and covertly an adjunct to the riddling process among the Igbo and many other African communities. Didacticism in riddles relies in the knowledge that can be acquired directly or indirectly from the riddles. These heavily rely on analogical and inferential skills of both the questioner and respondent(s) as we have stated above. The researcher has also shown that riddles are based on critical observation of the cultural environment. These include the physical environment, the human society, its organization and how that society operates, how animals and other living organisms behave among others. (In the case of lion and goat) All these spheres form important aspects in the learning process among both children and adults as they can gain more knowledge from either the riddle precedent or the sequent. In this

regard, the author has shown that riddles play an important role in not only imparting knowledge but also in improving one's memory and reasoning ability. This observation concurs with Gelfand (1979) who, while commenting on the role of riddles among shone children, rightly notes that "riddles helps the young to learn about the existence of social values and equips him with yardsticks to measure them". Therefore riddles are essentially crucial in sharpening the mind and the thought processes of the participants. It is evident that through riddles, people learn important truths about life though disguised as a game. Participating in the riddling process helps one to learn more about life and the social surrounding and in this way, one is able to develop a sense of intellectual satisfaction. Therefore, riddles have a pedagogical role to play in the life of a people in society.

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