

YORUBA FOLKTALES: AN INSTRUMENT FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRATIC SETTING

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Abstract

Before the advent of western education, different cultural groupings in Nigeria and indeed Africa had practiced one form of cultural education to another, which however was not documented. Such education assisted them in the past to maintain law and order in their societies. This type of education embodied elements or features of folktales, one of the instruments creatively employed for the purpose of achieving a balanced society in Africa Tradition. It is against this background that this paper sets out to discuss an ethical oriented concept tagged “Socio Cultural Education” using the instrument of folktale from the Yoruba perspective. The paper finally concludes and recommended that “Socio-cultural Education” should be inculcate into the primary and secondary curricula and the same made compulsory. By so doing, the Nigerian child becomes exposed and prepared for a sound ethical orientation aimed at nation building at an early childhood age.

Introduction

The title of this paper suggests the explanation of two striking concepts – folktale and socio-cultural. The third concept, democratic setting or democracy, will be submerged in the first and second concepts as the discussion unfolds. From the view point of history, there exists three kinds of literature, literature of the high culture, literature of the popular culture and folk culture. The concern of this paper is on that folk culture vis-a-viz folk literature. The reason for this is that folk culture embodies folktales more with its moral and value unadulterated.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that will be used for analysis of this study is socio-cultural theory by Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1986). The tools of this theory will be use to analyze the socio-cultural education in Yoruba folktales. The theory suggest that social interaction leads to continuous step-by-step changes in children thought and behaviour that can vary greatly from culture to culture. The theory suggest that development depends on interaction with people and tools that the culture provides to help form their own view of the world. There are three ways a cultural tools can be passed from one individual to another, the first one is initiative learning, where one person tries to imitate another. The second tool is by instructed learning which involves remembering the instruction of the teacher and then using these instruction to self-regulate. The final way that cultural tools passed on to others is through collaborative.

Yoruba Folktales

Basically, we have two types of folktales in Yoruba language. We have the riddles which we called (Alo Apamo): Riddles have a structure of question and answer which stimulates critical and analytical thinking in the child before response.

Apart from being a source of night entertainment, riddles introduce the child to nature's study at early age and prepare him or her for future challenges. For example:

Narrator: Aalo o
Listeners:- Aaalo
Narrator: Mo fi oko ti kii se oko
pa eye ti kii se eye
lori igi ti kii se igi
Narrator: Kin ni oko ti kii se oko?
Ki nii eye ti kii se eye,
Kin ni igi ti kii se igi?
Meta laa paa meta laa mo – on, omo aba lailo
Ta lo mo – on o
Kike: Emi mo – on o
Narrator: Kike so o fun wa o
Kike: Oko ti kii se oko ni oguluntu
Eye ti kii se Eye ni Adan
Igi ti kii se Igi ni Afomo.
Narrator: O gbaa o
E patewo fun

Translation

Narrator:- I used a stone that is not a stone
To kill a bird that is not a bird
On a tree that is not a tree
We ask in three, we answer in three, the princess of Lailo.
Narrator: Who knows it?
Kike: I know it
Narrator: Kike tell us
Kike: The stone that is not a stone is mouldy stone
The bird that is not a bird is Bat
Tree that is not a tree is mistletoe
Narrator: Correct
Clap for her

Socio-Cultural Education in the Riddles

The socio-cultural education in the above riddles are many, according to Vygotsky (1896) socio-cultural theory which says that development depends on interaction with people, mental and psychological alertness is also developed. This is mostly found in the inculcation of the art of riddles tales which encourage discussions or formal interactions with people seated together.

Hence Yoruba riddles brings mental, physical and psychological alertness to the learners because of that interaction with their peer, narrator and the immediate environment. The interaction promotes tolerance, cordial-relationship and unity because people gathered for riddles are from different family, religion and statutorial background. Also, it will develop their communication skills, creativity and critical thinking because whosoever stands up to answer the riddles must have critically thought about the answer before raising his/her hands up to answer the question.

The second tale type in Yoruba is called (Alo Onitan) Alo Onitan which is story telling is generally simple in plot construct, involving characters and a simple action that proceed from the beginning to the end of the story without complication. The incidents in the story themselves do not have to be realistic, for instance, human beings may be living with animals or dead people living or marrying living human beings. The characters in Yoruba folktales live in a fairy world in which fact and friction are buried and the supernatural is common as natural.

What is expressed in Yoruba folktales find practical applications in real life. Even though animate and inanimate objects constitute the characters of folktales. They are symbols of different kinds of people in the physical world. Thus, the message or themes in Yoruba folktales are meant for all and sundry. Yoruba folktales generally introduce children to the values of the society. Children learn the societal values and virtues of patience, honesty, obedience, humility, hard work and generosity. They also learn about such vices as greed, disobedience and lies as well as their consequences. (Irapuchin,2011) for example, A MAN AND HIS THREE SONS

Narrator: Aaalo ooo

Listeners: Aaalo

Narrator: My folktale centred on one man which had three sons. One day, the man sent one of the sons to the farm to fetch firewood, on getting to the farm, the boy saw a disabled woman with a long breast struggling with a load of firewood desperately looking for help from the boy. The boy did not help the woman instead he started singing abusive song against the woman thus:

Narrator: Olomun roro maa wole

Listeners: Tere mona jalankato

Narrator: Baba re nko? Iya siko?

Listeners: Tere mona jalankato

Narrator: The long breast woman how are you?

Listeners: Teremona jalankato (Not translatable)

Narrator: How is your father? What about your mother

Listeners: Teremona Jalankato (Not translatable)

As he was singing mocking the old woman, the old woman followed the boy and swallowed him alive. The father of the boy waited for hours without seeing the boy, he sent the second son and what happened to the first son happened to him and finally, he sent the third son who also followed the footsteps of his brothers. The father has to go to the farm himself to meet the old woman. The man pleaded for mercy and woman was gracious enough to vomit the three sons but they were all died. The attitude of the three boys in this story seems to support the Aristotle's definition of women. To him, women are "mutilated males". And that femaleness is a departure from type and women have proper death.

The social cultural education in the above second tale type in Yoruba are many just like the first tale type. The virtue of disobedience is greatly discouraged while the virtue of obedience and service to humanity are greatly encouraged which will make the listeners to develop in their day-to-day activities in the society because of their interaction with people. (Vigostsky,1968). In this tale type, the second cultural tools which is instructed learning can be used. This involves remembering the instruction of the teacher and then using these instruction to self – regulate. The third tools is the third way that cultural took passed on to others is through collaborative which shows that human beings were not an island and we cannot have in isolation you have to interact with people.

The Concept of Socio Cultural Education

By this we mean using history, literature (oral or written) or any of the narrative arts to advance the course of ethical revolution in the society. It is also advocated a careful inclusion into the school curriculum, such historical facts, oral traditions, folklore and other creative arts that have the capacity to inculcate into the Nigerian child the desired ethical orientation. Such education should have its primary aim, the inculcation, hard work and patriotism. African folktales are functional in the sense that they express socio-cultural issues that determine what is acceptable or unacceptable, cultural coherence in cultural deviance cherished and dignifying achievement's or undesired and undignifying achievements that can make one socially or culturally identify with the entertainments function of folktales. Capitalizing on this particular function of folktale. Finnegan (1970:378) remarks "African folktales were not created and tale to serve any other role besides entertainment, a kind of primitive past time".

A close examination of Yoruba folktales prove Finnegan wrong in the sense that each category of tales reflects a line of thought in human practical wisdom and learning. The theme takes cover range from initiation rites, marriage, religion, government, economy, history, trade and commerce, agriculture to themes of general advice and oratory. These are what Ikeowu (1996:5) refers to as element of cultural education. The story of origin of day and night illustrates the tale type and its instrumentality to socio cultural education. The story is attributed to the impatient barren woman whom the medicine man asked to exercise patience because good breed of children had exhausted.

According to the medicine man "all I have now are devilish children/babies and I do not want to bring a curse to you, wait for the good ones to come". But the woman insisted on having them like that. So, the medicine man gave her the devilish baby. This child grew up and killed his parents including everybody in the village, however, there was only a duo-spell casting, whenever the old woman cast her spell, there will be a darkness while that of the boy showed a blazing light. As the battle raged on, each resultant effect of their cast lasted for twelve hours at a time and thus came to have day and night which could no longer be reversed by their charms because the two died in the process. This folktales serve as socio-cultural education of warning against impatience child its likely consequence.

Explanatory tales or stories such as "why woman do not grow beard" are however effective lesson on honesty, fair play, uprightness and the repercussion of converteousness. In another story of why women no longer grow beard today is because of one woman's converteousness

over the king's ring. The king ordered for immediate scrapping of the beards of all the women in his kingdom. In addition, this woman's act of selfishness placed a curse on all women till today. The third category of the trickster stories are those that are often admitted the tortoise as apogee character of this motif is always admired for his intellectual tricks. It is necessary here to point out that what is admired is not the product of trick itself, but the practical wisdom, ability and ingenuity to come up with a trick that could save the situation that ordinarily seems hopeless. The tale of the feast got to the Tortoise and he developed interest in attending the gathering. The gathering was meant for birds, how the tortoise was to attend the gathering was the biggest question that has been disturbing him. He finally decided that he would go and borrow feathers from other birds to enable him fly to heaven.

Luckily, some lent him feathers together to form wings with. He sewed the feathers to make up wings on that day, he also flew to heaven to attend the gathering and to participate in the feast. Before the gathering could commence, tortoise called all the birds together and told them that they must give themselves names. The birds gave themselves names and when it came to the turn of Tortoise he said his name was "Gbogbo yin" meaning for all of you. He further told them that when food and drink were served, it has to be shared according to names given here in heaven.

The birds foolishly accepted the suggestions without given it a second thought. At noon, the conference began; after a long session, they got exhausted and their host brought food for them. Tortoise quickly asked the usher "whose food did you bring?". The usher said "Gbogbo yin" (for all of you) and Tortoise ate all of it. Few minutes later, drinks were brought and Tortoise asked the same question and the attendant gave the same answer. He ate and drank until he was satisfied. Other birds waited for food and drink but none came to them. They had to eat the crumbs left by the Tortoise.

When the meeting ended, the birds that lent Tortoise feathers collected their feathers back. Tortoise was left without any wing and early in the morning the following day, all the birds left one after the other to the earth. At last only the dove was left behind. When the dove was about leaving Tortoise begged it to go and tell his family to bring all soft materials outside and place them in the centre of the compound. The dove refused but after some persuasions it agreed to go.

When the dove reached earth, he went straight to Tortoise's house to deliver the message but changed the content of the message. It told Tortoise's wife to bring out all the sharp and hard objects in the house to the centre of the compound. Later, tortoise saw his family bringing items into the centre of the compound, the distance was too far for him to see exactly what was brought outside. When it was evening time, Tortoise jumped down from the heaven and hit himself on sharp and hard irons. He got broken into pieces, the wife came and packed the broken pieces to a blacksmith who soldered them together. This is why tortoise has a cracked shell. It also means a lesson for a greed and conveteousness.

Socio-Cultural Education In Yoruba

It is convenient to state that Nigerian folktales are replete with inherited wisdom, social, personal and moral. According to Camara (1978:95), "African stories are neither a record of reality, nor

pure fantasy. Although they are stories that happened at the beginning of time, they describe things as they happen today”. They also interpret the experiences of the ordinary person from birth to death and beyond. The major forms of Nigerian tales serve as a form of entertainment. It is common place to see in traditional Nigerian setting that, after the day’s hard work in the farms, herding cattle in the forest, scouting for firewood in the bush and fishing in the rivers, people gather in age group and family settings to ‘kill’ boredom, and the women tell stories to entertain the people, thus using such situations for relaxation.

According to Agovi (1978:123), ‘the true artist entertains and instructs at the same time”. It is clear that, although the apparent and stated purpose of storytelling is entertainment, it is also very didactic. There is a sense of purposefulness in performing folktales in Nigeria. It is appropriate to label story telling as an “enter-educative” art. Abrahams (1998:9) capture the enter-educative functions of folktales in the following words: “Storytelling itself is part of a large performing complex, one that exists not only to provide entertainment for traditional (oral-aural) people, but that is at the centre of their moral lives as well”. Folktale is, therefore, a rich pedagogical resource in the Nigerian educational setting in the light of the dispossession of the country resulting from the unfortunate historical experience of colonialism and its concomitant socio-cultural and political effects. Before the emergence of modern communication technology in Africa, folktales were told around the firesides, in the family compounds, in ceremony settings, in the celebrations of past events, in moral discussions and in praises of great deeds, primarily to entertain.

Bascom (1965:4) further foregrounds the educative function of folktales when he says:

A function of folklores is that which it plays in education, particularly, but not exclusively, in non-literate societies. The importance of the many forms of folklore as pedagogic devices has been documented in many parts of the world. Tales of monsters are used in the discipline of very young children, and lullabies are sung to put them in a good humour. Somewhat later, fables or folktales incorporating morals are introduced to inculcate general attitude and principles such as diligence and filial piety, and to ridicule laziness, rebelliousness and snobbishness.

Majasan (1969) asserts that folktale is an instrument of education among the Yoruba. ontological philosophy and religion are enshrined into the narrative in a highly lucid manner. He further asserts that most Nigerian folktales are replete with belief in spirits, gods, goddesses, and the like. Actually, Nigerian folktales are used to common about the way of life of Nigerians. They are used to highlight the way in which the people share a close bond with the elements of nature – animal life, vegetation, rivers, forest and mountains. Nigerian traditional religious are depicted in most of the tales where the audience encounter traditional religious where God, man and nature are fused, and where people have reverence for all things natural. In this way, nature is immortalized through Nigerian folktales. Moreover, in support of Akporobaro’s (2001:68) submission, in Nigerian folktales, exciting situations are used “to generate pleasurable imaginative episodes in terms of which moral lessons are carried into the heart and mind...moral

lessons are transformed into exciting image patterns, which touch the heart causing fear, sympathy or love of the good and hatred of evil.”

Teaching Moral Values Trickster Tales

Trickster tales are very useful in teaching Nigeria youths some morals. In the main, the trickster figure is a central character (hero) in African storytelling. According to Obiechina (1967:154), he is “a stock character that is often something of a rogue. He manages to extricate himself from intriguing and sometimes dangerous situations by a display of mental ability”. He is represented by a willing and tricky animal that cheats and outdoes the bigger and more powerful ones. Hagan (1988) and Lynn (1999) give the variants of the trickster hero in African folktales as including: Ananse – spider of Ghana; Akan-Asante – trickster of Ghana; the Ijapa (Tortoise) of Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Edo, Itshekiri and Kalabari people of Nigeria; the Gizo of Hausa land, Hlakayana of the Zululand and the Calabar Rat (who bites with a soothing breeze).

The foregoing affirms Adeoti’s (1999:55) assertion that: “Trickster tales are almost a universal element in African thought system. They are borne out of some perceived socialization needs, judging from their encapsulation of societal norms and values, which the child is brought up to uphold”. It should be reiterated that Nigerian trickster folktales teach and fortify; they are moralistic and didactic. Hence, in those tales, the trickster figure plays a vital role in the beliefs and customs of cultures throughout the world. In the main, the trickster character is an allegorical figure used to condemn the vices of selfishness, libidinous, powerful appetites and bodily functions. Trickster figures deceive others, but overreach what they can realistically attain and often become the victims of their own schemes.

The trickster figures always trick the larger ones in a pretended tug of war and cheat them in a race. At times, the smaller trickster figures deceive the bigger ones into killing themselves or their own relation. In most Yoruba folktales, according to Adeoti (1999), the trickster figure is an extremely cunning animal which regularly outwits stronger, faster, bigger animals. Adeoti (1999) further says that the Yoruba trickster figure is an archetypal figure who demonstrates the realities of human existence. For Okpewho (1992) the trickster signify trickery and breach of faith. It should be affirmed, however, that no African folktales endorses the views of the trickster figures; rather virtues are esteemed, while their vices are condemned, and their follies ridiculed.

Used as Sources of Acculturation

Folktales are also very useful means of acculturation and enculturation in Nigerian societies. Although traditions and norms are passed through many other means, including books, radio, television, the internet, observation and common experience, folktales are still relevant in cultural transmission. It should be stressed that Nigeria and other African countries are rich in traditions and customs. Folktales are effective weapons of transmitting these traditions. Folktales provide Nigerian people with an enhanced view of bewildering amalgam of cultural traditions. They show the culture in the past and in the present, in how people live and relate with one another. Folktales are used to illustrate the coloured heritage of a unique nation. They are tools par excellence for acculturation and enculturation. According to Betthelehim (1975:24), the message of folktales is “to get across to the child in manifold form: that struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, that it is an intrinsic part of human experience.”

Folktales are therefore used in Nigeria to validate traditional ethics and ethos, procedures and beliefs in teaching children and adults. Little wonder, Boateng (1985) calls for a return to traditional education in Africa-rich heritage of oral literature (fables, myths, legends, folktales and proverbs),

Teaching Courage and Endurance

Nigerian folktales also teach the virtues of courage and endurance. Through folktales, protagonists, through a deeper understanding of self (and consequently, the nature of their relationship with others), transcend the mean and oppressive circumstances in which they find themselves. This understanding of self allows the protagonists to create their own roadmaps towards achieving greater self-acceptance and empowerment. This may be in form of evolution from downtrodden to ascendant, and it consequently teaches the virtue of the inextricable link between self-acceptance and achievement of personal happiness.

Oladele (1967:14) also maintains that, “to understand the culture of any part of Africa, one must read or listen to the folktales they illustrates the simplicity and superstition of the rural African peoples, and they reflect the stage of development of a particular society”. Nigerian folktales are also reflective of contemporary lifestyle. These include the strategies of coping with life by attempting to make the best out of present circumstances – coping ability, strengths and endurance. The folktales are always full of characters who struggle with life in poor and oppressed rural communities. However, despite the rural settings, the stories contain elements of material culture that reflect fundamental aspects of contemporary society. The characters struggle against oppressive conditions and are really embittered by the living conditions which frame their lives. Actually, the measure of a folktales is the degree to which it aids the establishment of good life-building.

The virtues of courage and endurance are common motifs in Nigerian folktales. The characters always maintain their struggles with which the contemporary audience can identify (issues like sex, money and love). The characters always avoid becoming victims; instead, they manifest the kind of strength that allows them to discover the fine-line of bearing their oppressive circumstances without accepting them as their lot in life. The characters are required to possess the virtues of patience and endurance to fortify them against the harsh realities of life. At the end of the narrative, they finally get the opportunity to reap the positive seeds they have sown. For instance, in stories involving trickster figures, the characters always eventually transcend the conditions which frame their lives at the opening of the stories. They are compensated for their powerlessness through the use of creative strategies (trickster) “which are employed as they navigate the process of discovering and embracing self” (Betthelehim,1975:25).

Mental/Psychological Function

In Nigeria and in Yoruba setting in particular, mental alertness is also developed through folktales. Which encourage discussions or formal debates. This claim is attested to by Bascom (1975:1) who says: “even when they have standard answers, dilemma tales generally evoke spirited discussions, and they train those who participate in the skills of debate and argumentation”. Dilemma tales raise interesting puzzles that can build the youths mentally.

The psychological function of folktales, in Nigeria, in line with the theorizations of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, cannot be overemphasized. Folktales perform therapeutic functions in

easing emotional tensions and expressing, dissolving and resolving repressed anti-social passion of anger, hatred and jealousy which currently bedevil the nation. The psychological function of African folktales is illuminated by Agovi (1978:126) when he says: “through his imaginative art, therefore, the literary artist should lead man to forget his daily preoccupation and worries. And, in the process, he should arouse in men the thirst for life, the sudden urge to live, to enjoy and to delight in their existence”.

Nigerian folktales are a quintessential means of affording an enjoyable escape from reality. This is always done by involving the audience in the dramatic activities in a story, including singing whereby the audience join in singing, accompanied by a lot of hand clapping. The audience performs multiple roles when they serve as listeners, active participants, commentators, actors and singers during folktales performances (Finnegan,1970). Thus, to make his tale have psychological importance, the artist should “...create a psychological atmosphere which would enable the audience to participate in the action of the story both mentally and emotionally and, in the process, move his audience out of this world in a ‘beautiful’ way” (Agovi,1978:126).

Teaching Ethical Values

Jean – Paul Sartre’s conception of literature as an ethical challenge is relevant here. The storyteller exposes a world so that the audience might be moved to decision and, consequently, to action. It is, therefore, apt to claim that Nigerian folktales challenge response. According to Sartre, a piece of prose must preserve the freedom of the artist and the audience. It appeals, not directly the way political speeches do, but indirectly, subtly, with due respect to the freedom of the audience. Therefore, Nigerian folktale is a social leveler. This claim supports the view of Opoku-Agyemang (1998:83), who says: “The tale may be seen as social leveler in the sense that during the performance of the tale, barriers that would separate the sexes, classes, and age groups in other social contexts are broken. As a result, one finds children, women and men, the rich and the poor gather at the same venue, to share in this ancient oral literary art”.

Essentially, folktales provide a privileged realm of communication and a public voice for the masses, the womenfolk and youths in the community who do not ordinarily speak publicly. They use folktales to communicate their views on topics which are too sensitive to be treated in other ways. Anyone, regardless of gender and social standing, may narrate, and no offence is taken. In fact, storytelling is a privileged realm of communicating, an avenue or forum for the public airing of community’s problems. According to Anny Wynchank (1998:121), “a society expresses itself through oral tales. These, in turn, reflect that society and its beliefs”. Nigerian folktales are employed to teach virtues, such as endurance, honesty, kindness, diligence and obedience. In Nigerian folktales, miscreants and violators are swiftly punished. Hooliganism, cultism, prostitution, examination malpractices, robbery and the like are condemned with a view to enlightening the youths of the country on the adverse effects of engaging in such vices. Thus Yoruba folktales are antidotes to social vices in the country, and they used to encourage the youths to grow up to become responsible and patriotic citizens. Yoruba, folktales are also useful in assisting the youths to achieve their dreams of becoming great leaders of tomorrow.

Conclusion

Folktale together in any society they exist the directed towards achieving specific objectives in socio-cultural education. They should be geared towards shaping the minds of the child’s world-

view: defending socio-cultural philosophies, encouraging unacceptable socio-cultural norms and encouraging hard work, industry, dedication and perseverance.

In essence, man just like the Tortoise in the story of the elephant, the King and the Tortoise needs the practical wisdom and learning to live a balanced society. Granted this and the fact that the wind of democracy seems to be blowing now, this paper is inclined to making the following assumptions that our country is no longer getting where “might is right”. Therefore, it is the inspiration of this paper to integrate into the primary and secondary school curricula “socio cultural education” and the same made compulsory. However, caution must be taken in seeking and grading materials. By so doing, the Nigerian child becomes exposed and prepared for a sound ethical orientation aimed at nation building at an early childhood age.

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