



**THE FUNCTION OF FOLKTALES AS A PROCESS OF
EDUCATING CHILDREN IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A CASE
STUDY OF IDOMA FOLKTALES.**

Halima I. Amali

Division of General Studies,
University of Maiduguri,
Borno State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The value of folktales in traditional society cannot be overemphasized. This very important genre of traditional literature plays a significant role in imparting educational, traditional, cultural, religious and social ideologies of the society to growing children. Also, modern written literature is believed to be borne out of the traditional oral genre, one of which is folktales. Folktales serve as a source for creative inspiration that leads to the emergence of several works in modern literature. However, despite these sterling qualities of folktales, it is endangered with extinction. The need therefore arises for an interface between the folktale genre and the media where the latter intervenes in the promotion of the genre for its sustenance in society.

This study examines the function of folktales as a process of educating and preparing children for 21st century challenges. It is observed that children stand to benefit from lessons derivable from folktales. Idoma folktales have various lessons imbibed in them. Some of these lessons include discipline, moral uprightness, hard work and courage. There are also lessons which teach the child to stand against vices such as theft, rudeness, hatred, wickedness and dishonesty.

Keywords: Idoma folktales, education, literature, African oral genre

INTRODUCTION

Folktales are an integral part of the African oral society. They usually relate to, and elucidate the various cultural and traditional aspects of a society from which they evolve. Folktales perform salient functions of serving as sources of entertainment, enlightenment on cultural orientation and traditions of the people, educating the young of the various aspects of society. Since folktales portray the values and traditions of a society, where the young and adults alike learn through the events conveyed, the function of this traditional oral genre of folktales can therefore not be over emphasized. The practice of folktale telling was common in traditional societies in the past, where parents and other members of families told stories to young ones, usually after the evening meal. It is a lively process, which, as put by Samson-Akpan (1986:67), can be “likened to an integrated classroom. Children, teenagers and adults attend and participate in it”. In the past, the telling of folktales was a common practice in primary schools, where some class periods were dedicated to this activity.

This paper elucidates Idoma folktales and the various educational values and functions derivable from them in preparing the child for the 21st Century. It is an aspect of traditional education from which children imbibe some of the needed lessons they should acquire from the society, which a traditional form of education seeks to achieve. Fafunwa (1974:13) observes that:

The aim of traditional African education is multilateral and the end objective is to produce an individual who is honest, respectful, skilled, co-operative and conforms to the social order of the day.

Educational aims and objectives, either in the traditional or modern fame, prepare a child to rise, develop and operate according to societal dictates and expectations. Idoma folktales contain educational orientations and events, which are useful for a child’s educational developmental process. Therefore, such issues which direct the mind for good and acceptable societal lifestyles and behaviour are contained and demonstrated in the folktales of the Idoma people. Exposing children to these tales should educate them in what the society expects of its members. By education here, this researcher is referring to the complete circle of a child’s training process, which next to reading and writing, includes the building of character, behaviour, social attitude, and intellect.

The paper also analyses Idoma folktales and the functions of the tales in educationally preparing the child towards the 21st Century. Folktale narration has been a traditional art in human societies since time immemorial. It is an art that offers very important functions in the traditional society in which it is practiced, and can also be applied in the present day situation in the education of the child.

Idoma folktales perform didactic, entertainment, enlightenment and educative functions, among others. Life and societal activities are imbibed in and mirrored in the folktales of the people, capturing the norms and values of people who own the tales. Mbiti (1966:31) observes that:

Stories are to a certain extent the mirror of life; they reflect what the people do, what they think, how they live and have lived, their values, their

joys and their sorrows. The stories are also a means of articulating man's response to his environment.

This asserts the sterling qualities of folktales, which accord opportunities for the young and the old to interact, and the young learn from the events of the tales. These functions derived from folktale, can therefore be applied in the present day situation in the education of children. The paper reviews the various categories of folktales with particular reference to the Idoma example. The functions of folktales are also explored, with examples from selected Idoma folktales analyzed in this paper.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Various research has been carried out which relate to the present study, some of which are presented in this segment of the paper. Bersgma and Ruth E. (1969) in their work *Tales Tiv Tell* present Tiv folktales written in the English language. It is one of the pioneering publications on Tiv Folktales which opened up their folktale genre to the world. This is unlike the Idoma case where their folktales are yet to see the light of day in such a published collection.

The conference proceeding and *African folktale* (1972) edited by Dorson contains articles relevant to this study, particularly those by Dan Ben Amos, Harold Scheub, Lee Haring and William Bascom. Dan Ben Amos presents an analysis of two Benin storytellers, while Bascom highlights the important aspects of African folktales. Also contained in Dorson's work is Haring's paper which examines certain literary features and characters of the African folktale in general, and which this researcher finds applicable to Idoma folktales.

A valuable book in the genre of African Oral literature is Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa*. Some sections of this book focus on folktales. The scholar examines literary issues which relate to the performance of folktales in traditional Africa. The various categories of African folktales are analyzed.

Skinner's Anthology of Hausa Literature (1980) highlights this group's tatsuniya (folktales) and other oral genres of the Hausa people. He observes that the performance of folktales in Hausaland, is told in the evening hour. Children are expected to listen attentively and learn from the lessons contained in the tales. The traditional Gbagyi people of Abuja, like the traditional Idoma people of lower Benue, have strong ties to traditional practices, one of which is folktales performance. This is the focus of discussion in a study by Amali (1986), where he reviews the impact of storytelling practice among the Gbagyi people. He observes folktale telling practice to have significant status in their traditional lifestyles. He further observes that folktales are employed for interpreting and analyzing their cultural values, as well as playing the function of promoting and instilling moral discipline among the youths for the purpose of building moral uprightness and standard.

In his work, Samson-Akpan (1986) analyses the impact of folktales in Education. The paper observes that folktales and folktale telling sessions imbibe dramatic and educative elements. These educative elements as presented in the paper include the structure and form of folktales, which arouse interest in the children and encourage group participation and mental alertness. The children learn of existing issues in the human and animal world as reflected through folktales.

A paper by Fayose (1989) holds that written literature was borne out of the oral genre such as folktales, myths and legends. He reveals that folklorists are good entertainers while the tales inspire writers in the present day.

Examining the functions Yoruba of folktales in educating children, Adeyemi (1997) focuses on the traditional methods employed in their training, specifically as may be inculcated through folktales. However, he asserts that the “incursion of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the Nigerian cultural life has altered the relevance of Yoruba folktales in training children. (p.118)”. Adeyemi is however optimistic that there could be a turn-around for folktales to once more become a common tool in training children if educational planners focus on exploring their functions in the educational process.

In Amali’s research on Idoma proverbs (1998), he pays attention to the relationship between Idoma proverbs and folktales. In the work, he observes that the relationship between proverbs and folktales is a lively one in which both genres are interwoven by each complementing and enhancing the quality of the other to give the desired effects. Proverbs are employed in the training process of children by imparting lessons or correcting them on errors they may have committed.

The relevance of an Idoma folktale narrator is the focus of Amali, H. (2003). In this study, she examines and analyses the tales as well as the themes and stylistic approach employed by a great folktale narrator Omaludo Igwu in the rendition of his tales. Similarly, in 2014, she carried out a study on meaning, function and performance of Idoma folktales. The work analyzes the various folktale types in Idomaland, the meanings and the functions derivable from the tales. From the foregone review of related literature, it can be observed that folktales are an integral part of traditional African society. Various functions are derivable from folktales as highlighted by the scholars here. It is therefore a fact that folktales form part of the educational tools in the training process of the child, in the traditional setting, and can also be applied in modern educational processes. This paper highlights the potency of applying folktales in the education of children by an analysis of the functions of this important traditional oral genre.

IDOMA FOLKTALES IN THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

Education is a life activity, which entails passing through learning processes and acquiring knowledge and other skills for positive development. Folktales are generally known to be a source of entertainment; however, as this researcher has observed above, the folktale genre performs other functions, one of which is education of children. This view similarly held by Tshiwala-Amadi (1980:92) who claims that:

Folktales serve many functions in African society. In addition to providing entertainment, they have certain didactic qualities. They are used to educate the young; they help to establish social norms.

Several functions are therefore derivable from this oral genre as observed by Adeyemi (1997:115) in her reference to Yoruba folktales where she observes that folktales:

can be used to inculcate in the children of pre-school age virtues such as humility, gratitude, respect for elders and constituted authority,

perseverance, conformity to societal norms, co-operation, hospitality, truthfulness, honesty, willingness to take advice, patriotism, courage and love, loyalty to one's fatherland, hard work and the fear of God.

Folktales are categorized into types and themes. Themes in folktales focus on particular lessons in the tale for the listener to learn from. Functions in folktales on the other hand refer to the lesson one stands to gain from the events of the tale and the impact of this oral genre in instilling societal and educational values to its listeners.

In line with the above on functions of folktales, Paul (1992:19) observes that:

Oral tales help to sooth the children's nerves at the end of a full day of activities. This sends them to a nice sleep that enables them to wake up early the following day both in mind and in body.....Oral tales also serve as an instructional medium. Tales give the listener the opportunity to understand the thought, ways and general history of his people. The tales also teach a moral. They try to inculcate in the listeners some moral concepts on why it is not good to be greedy, lazy, wicked, plan evil against one's neighbours.

For the purpose of this paper, three categories of Idoma folktales are analyzed to elucidate their functions in the education of the child. Each of the categories analyzed, states the functions derivable from them, as contained and reflected in the sample tales used in the analysis.

IDOMA MORAL TALES

These are folktales which focus mainly on instilling moral behaviour. Moral tales point to attitudes and effects of behavior. They demonstrate that good behaviour is positively rewarded and bad behaviour is punished. Paul (1992:13) asserts of moral tales to be:

Tales told to show that good must be rewarded while evil does not and cannot go undetected and unpunished. They teach on why it is not good to be disobedient, greedy, lazy etc.

This category of folktales aims at good upbringing and acceptable behavior of children, and also checks indulgence in societal ills. This accounts for why in Idoma moral tales, issues such as acts of wickedness, theft, stinginess, unfaithfulness, dishonesty, hatred, and the like are accordingly punished. Children are encouraged to imbibe good attitudes such as honesty, sincerity, love, generosity, kindness, faithfulness, helpfulness, and the like. Some events in the tale highlight good character, which demonstrates such attitudes and which is clearly rewarded. To buttress this point is Achufusi's (1986:3) comment that moral stories:

teach lessons about social life-lessons of morality. Some of them teach or demonstrate that greed, stubbornness and laziness are reprehensible in African societies: that cleverness and devotion to duty are prized qualities: that kindness and hospitality should prevail in one's relationships to strangers or visitors.....

In the same vein, Adeyemi (1997:114), refers to moral tales as:

The tales in this category have their main theme the exhibition of some vice or wickedness such as treachery, theft, greed, cruelty, ingratitude, envy, lust and drunkenness. The purpose of the tale in each case is to show a character guilty of this vice.

Idoma moral tales can therefore direct the mind of children which should educate them to shun societal vices. Listening to the stories and being guided in the narrative process to learn direct their minds to absorb the morals taught in the lesson. This point is highlighted in the words of Achufusi (1986:1-2) as she holds that these folktales:

serve as a means of enforcing conformity with social norms; of validating social institutions and religious beliefs and they help to provide psychological freedom from some society-imposed restrictions.

A good example of an Idoma moral tale is the one about a father's wife and his son from a previous marriage. The son lives with his father and step-mother, who has no children of her own. The step-son is hated by the father's wife who one day plans to get rid of him. She decides to send him on an errand to a land of "no return" to fetch her water. Nobody goes there and comes back alive. She directs the boy to leave very early in the morning for the river. He obliges and goes to his father's door to tell him he was leaving. The boy sings as he leaves. He meets some spirits along the way. They frown at his guts to dare be on that path. He cries and explains why he dares come the way to the land of "no return". This action causes the spirits to sympathize with him and they help him fetch water. They, however, give him some magical powers, which he puts in the pot of water. It is to teach the stepmother a lesson. Then the boy is instructed to break the pot in front of his stepmother as soon as he gets home. He walks home with the pot of water on his head. As he moves he sings along. When he is close to the house, the stepmother hears his voice and jumps out in surprise. She thought that the stepson would have been killed, but here he comes back, with the pot of water on his head. As soon as the boy gets to the step-mother, he lets down the pot of water and it breaks into pieces. Every piece of the broken pot turns into a wild snake attack the woman. She dies from the snake bites.

The moral lesson from this tale is for us to be kind rather than wicked. It also encourages love for one another, and that punishment awaits all evil acts. Furthermore, it demonstrates that an innocent person always finds a rescuer when in danger.

IDOMA AETIOLOGICAL TALES

Aetiological tales give explanations or reasons for events which are conveyed in the tale, highlighting why certain events take place or why other things are what they are. Paul (1992:12) defines Aetiological tales as:

Tales that explain the origin of man, his ancestors, his religion, his life, death etc. They give answers as to why and how certain things happen or came into being.

This category of tales therefore gives historical reasons on issues witnessed in the present, such as is the theme the Idoma folktale on “Why the hare no longer lives in houses”. In this tale, Tortoise is interested in becoming the king of their land while the members of the community decide to enthrone the Hare.

Upon appointing the Hare, he is expected to be enthroned. A date is fixed for the coronation. This displeases the Tortoise, who decides to make an evil plan against the Hare. He suggests the coronation must not be done before constructing a new palace for the Hare. The Tortoise suggests that the Hare-king should be seated in the house while it is being erected. So the Hare, dressed in his kingly regalia, sits in the house as it is being built. Since the block is not dry and the roofing is heavy on the walls, it collapses on Hare, who narrowly escapes death. As it was a scary event for Hare, he then collects his family and runs off into the bush, out of fear of being harmed. Until today the hare and his family live in the bush. It is a deliberate plan by Tortoise to get Hare killed so that he can ascend the throne, but fails in his bid. Though the Hare has run away, the kingship is not handed down to the Tortoise.

He is scared about living with people. The tale importantly demonstrates the selfish and wicked attitude of Tortoise. These should be seen as negative attitudes, which are of no benefit to anyone because in the end the Hare is saved and the Tortoise fails to achieve his wicked ambition. A major lesson here is that doing evil does not facilitate achievements, rather deters it.

IDOMA DILEMMA TALES

Dilemma tales pose problems to the listeners who should offer solutions. This category of tales also demonstrates actions that encourage and convey acts of good behaviour. It encourages the listener to intellectually examine the issues raised. These may be questions unanswered or issues unconcluded. They also provide moral education and are didactic in nature for instilling good moral training and discipline in children. Achufusi (1986: 3) in her definition of dilemma tales states that:

This constitutes a large, diverse and widespread group of very lively tales. Like Other African folk stories, they are didactic in content, and form an integral part of morals and ethical training in many African societies.

As observed above, the dilemma tale also has didactic functions, and evolves intellectual discourse among the listeners. There are questions as to what should happen to an erring character, or what and who should be positively rewarded.

Dilemma tales may involve human or animal characters that engage in adventures, competitive acts such as possessing a beautiful wife, and acquiring wealth or other material things. In this process, room is created for a dilemma to evolve, thereby gingering the listener-child into intellectual thinking to untie the riddle.

ANALYSIS

There are lots of educational benefits derivable from folktales, a traditional oral genre. This attests to the potency of the folktale as an educational tool. With the current technological gadgets available for use in collection, documentation, dissemination and promotion of folktales, today's children have abundant opportunity to access this oral genre. Folktale telling sessions can be presented to the child through television and radio programmes.

Through whatever medium the child accesses folktales, the lessons derivable from the tales are of important benefit in his educational training and upbringing as “men have used folktales for educational purposes for centuries. It had proved useful” (Samson-Akpan 1986:73). A major challenge with Idoma folktales is that they have not found or enjoyed the needed attention in documentation, dissemination and promotion. The folktale genre, is considered “the most popular genre of oral literature which serve several purposes” (Nwaozuzu 2007:322).

Among the Idoma people of the Lower Benue, their folktales, like those of other parts of Africa, consist of themes which project the society's norms and values. They are entertaining as well as didactic. In this regard, Nwaozuzu (2007:322) further asserts that folktales.

Serve as a window through which social norms and values are mirrored. The reason for this is that a people's folktales are woven around their world view experiences, expectations and achievements.

This writer observes that folktales go beyond mere entertainment. They are an aspect of the people's traditions which have existed from one generation to the other and “embody values which they cherish and vices which they condemn”. (Mireku-Gyimah 2010: 532). In them are to be found, salient functions of educating children to be a good citizens who can stand and work towards successfully achieving their life goals. Furthermore, they learn of the traditional norms and values of their community. The authorities concerned therefore may exploit the golden opportunity of harnessing our traditional folktales in the training process of children. Education entails a systematic instruction development of character or mental powers. Folktales possess educational potentials. Adeyemi (1997:114) attests to this assertion by stating that folktales:

can be used to inculcate in the children of pre-school age virtues such as humility, gratitude, respect for elders and constituted authority, perseverance, conformity to societal norms, co-operation, hospitality, truthfulness, honesty, willingness to take advice, patriotism, courage and love, loyalty to one's fatherland, hard work and the fear of God

Bearing all the above in mind, exposing children to the folktale oral genre creates positive impacts on them. The main problem that may be encountered in this process may be the lack of adequate documentation of folktales. Most people seem to consider it a traditional part time art. This accounts for why children rather watch movies on television, play and listen to pop music, play video games and pass time on the computer than listen to folktales being told. However, there is hope in reverberating the genre.

CONCLUSION

Three categories of Idoma folktales, namely moral tales, aetiological tales and dilemma tales are analyzed in this paper. Characters in folktales may be representative of the animal or human world. They portray the various events which relay societal norms and values. The events in the tales teach morals, discipline, societal traditions and they inspire mental alertness. Easily available technological gadgets in the present day facilitate the collection, documentation, dissemination and promotion of this traditional genre for easy access to all. The need arises for concerted efforts by all stakeholders concerned to facilitate this documentation process. Idoma folktales perform salient functions in educating children if they are utilized for such purpose. Adeyemi (1997:120) asserts that folktales can be promoted as he states:

All is not lost, if the government, the parents, educational planners, publishers and teachers work together to halt the emergence of pop culture ravaging our nursery schools, Day care centres and individual homes nationwide.

The involvement of all stakeholders in standing up to the utilization of folktales in the education of children is germane. Folktales are globally recognized to perform significant functions in the society as asserted by Adeyemi (1997:113) thus:

Among the Chaga of East Africa, Ogres, tales are used in the discipline of very young children and lullabies are sung to put them in a good behaviour. In Finland, folktales have been collected, and restructured to serve as their national literature for the purpose of teaching their young ones. Folktales in incorporating morals are introduced to inculcate general attitudes and principles such as diligence and filial piety, and to ridicule laziness, rebelliousness and snobbishness.

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