

African Riddles and Their Pedagogical Values: The Yorùbá Example

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ABSTRACT

The National Policy on Education (2013) as well as the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) has brought to the fore the need to use Nigerian languages for national discourse and development. This is to begin with the employment of the language of immediate environment for the teaching-learning exercise at the early stage of primary education and the recognition of Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá as National languages to complement English in the future. Early education acquired through the medium of the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment is capable of enhancing better understanding and developing the pupils' curiosity and love for education, their environment and the nation at large. Early level educators in mother tongue and parents understand the place of native riddles, folktales and rhymes both as sources of education and means of getting the learners set for learning new concepts. Unfortunately, these important mores are going into extinction as elders and/or parents no longer have time to tell stories and perform folktales for the children. Besides, there are overwhelming numbers of private primary schools where mother tongue is not even used in teaching pupils at any class. This development contrasts sharply with the past practice by the traditional Africans and more precisely the Yorùbá who imparted their amiable cultural values to their younger ones through poetic or narrative riddles, folktales and other cultural practices designed to impart knowledge, wisdom and understanding from generation to generation. Against this backdrop, this paper demonstrates the need for a reversal. Four different kinds of narrative riddles purposively selected from Raji's (2002) *Àrò Jijá* constitute the data. These are: (1) *Ikún Ni Òun le Sọ Èpà Méfà di Egbéfà* (The Squirrel Boasts that he could Turn Six Groundnuts to One Hundred and Twenty Naira), (2) *Àkàsàtì Ògiri* (The Wall and the Ladder), (3) *Apètèbí* (*Apètèbí*) and, (4) *Kinni n Jé Ewẹ* (What is Ewẹ?). The data is analyzed via the theoretical frame work of Cultural Theory. The paper finds out that riddles satisfactorily teach children distinct cultural and educative values aimed at maintaining serenity and tranquility in the society and foster their growth and development into enviable future adults. It concludes that extinction of riddle has grave implications on the nation and recommends that it is employed to educate the children for future felicity.

Keywords: narrative riddles, cultural theory, educative teachings, moral lessons, future.

Introduction

The precolonial, colonial and post-colonial educational materials given to us in Africa (Nigeria) were not drawn from our cultural values and ethics which explains our inability to develop in all ramifications. This is the contention of Ogbogbo (1997) who avers that 'the main part of philosophical training of contemporary African scholars has come to derive from foreign sources; the consequences that the foundation of African philosophy is not rooted in African historical experiences and thus

the findings of its practitioners are of little relevance to the task of charting paths out of the African quagmire'.

The above could be stressed further that the colonial era witnessed in Nigeria employed a curriculum characterized by foreign concepts and did not reflect the needs and aspiration of Nigerians. Its main objectives according to Eze (2004) were to evangelize Africa through their local language and to produce clerks, bible preachers, instructors, interpreters etc. By this, the culture and aspiration of Nigerians for whom the

curriculum was developed were equally ignored by the colonial educators.

This paper is interested in the early childhood education with the argument that in many traditional African society, early childhood education is based on orature which is an offshoot of the folklore. The paramount concern of this paper *African Riddles And Their Pedagogical Values* dwells under the big umbrella of folklore and oral tradition. Riddles are categorized into two aspects of poetic and narrative. Poetic riddle could be said to be simplified and oneword answer. It is mostly relayed at the beginning of a folktale.

Narrative riddle our focus in this paper is historical, in form of storytelling which could be myths, or legends. Folktales and riddles are very close in presentation. The only demarcation between folktale and riddle is that while folktale incorporates songs, there are no songs in riddles, they are pure story telling. Afolayan (2021) expresses that riddle is a puzzle-breaking narrative and a deeper aspect of *alo* folktales. Narrative riddle could also be called chained poetry owing to its tenet of chaining items to conjure a mystery which is expected by the children to unravel during the moonlight story telling session. Riddle which is call *àrò* among the Yorùbá is believed to be carved out of Ifa divination. It emerges from ifa literary corpus rendition chanted for a client but which the client forgot before getting home and decided to narrate the corpus in his own way missing certain parts. This assertion is supported by Raji (2004) and Afolayan (2021).

Among the Yorùbá, most oral literature and traditional oral performance were presented during moonlight; the issue of bone fire does not necessarily occur. The performers which mostly men of honour were not strangers, they live in the society, and are familiar with the audience mostly children of the community. With this, the children that formed the audience were free and relaxed to participate and contribute accordingly to make the riddle session lively and interesting. The performer would start by saying ‘*Mo járómojárò*’ (I have a puzzle breaking, a mystery for you children to unravel tonight) and the audience would chorusilyrepond ‘*Àròmo já opátí* (we are ready to unravel the mystery). Let us sound it clear here that presentation of a riddle is to conjure a mystery to be unravel by the audience, testing their intelligence. Mostly, the audience found it difficult to unravel after which the performer would unravel to impart certain societal value.

Four (4) main narrative riddles that are Ifa literary corpus related and their attendant moral values which are always didactic are presented, explicated and analysed in this paper. The riddles are (1) *Ikínniòun le sọ ẹ̀pà méfà di ẹgbẹ̀fà* (the squirrel boasts that he can turn six groundnuts to one hundred and twenty naira) 2. *Àkàsòàtiògiri* (The wall and the ladder) 3. *Apètẹ̀bí* (Apetebi) 4. *Kinni n jẹ́ẹ̀wẹ* (What is ẹ̀wẹ) shall be explicated and analysed. Explication and analysis of these riddles are intended to entertain the children and impart in them certain Yorùbá cultural values by provoking the intelligencials in them. Each of the four riddles teaches distinct separate knowledge that will assist the child to imbibe the principle of standard and acceptable behaviour of the society, which in turn enhances peaceful co-existence and fosters growth and development.

Theoretical framework: Cultural theory

Part of what cultural theory stipulates is that it reviews and analyses history and the mores of a given country or society. Cultural theory reviews and analyses cultural heritage. It also analyses believes system, philosophy, religion, folklore and cultural practices employ to impart the society knowledge, wisdom and understanding to the children and the younger ones. Cultural theory defines and describes what culture is, how it works, functions, flourishes and its impediments and also discusses the growth and development of individual and society at large.

Of several authors who worked on cultural theory, this paper adopts Opefeyitimi's (2014) description of culture as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, laws, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society. Out of numerous items mentioned in the description of culture, employing culture to imbibe or teach moral to the younger ones catches this paper's attention. Narrative riddles are packed and relayed by the elders as part of the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria cultural milieu to impart knowledge, wisdom and understanding which enhances serenity and foster growth and development in the society.

African Oral Traditions and Their Pedagogical Values: An Overview

Irele (2007) notes that oral tradition continues to function as a fundamental reference of African expression as the matrix of the African imagination. He proves that:

‘there is obvious sense in which it can be considered as the true literature of Africa because it is the literature that is still the most widespread and with which the vast majority of Africans even today are in constant touch and it represents that form of expression to which African sensibility are mostly readily attuned’.

The above is an extant prove that can be sustained as making African oral literature (riddles) a point of pedagogical tool in the present dispensation of education and learning as Irele further argues that ‘despite the impact of literacy, orality is still the dominant mode of communication on the continent and it determines a particular disposition of the imagination of different order from that conditioned by literacy’.

Finnegan (1977) believes that oral poetry which is an integral part of oral literature is circulated through oral rather than written, that, its distribution, composition or performance are by word of mouth and not through reliance on written or printed word. The point that emerges here is that since they were not lettered, traditional Africa (the Yoruba) did not rely on written or printed means to impart their enviable values to their younger ones. Coker (2021) is of the opinion that oral tradition and folklore remain fertile sites exploring the consciousness of the continent. He quotes Finnegan to have commented that ‘the study of oral traditions and verbal arts has moved from earlier preoccupation with origins and the old to more recent emphasis on meaning, structure and contemporary dynamics.

This comment speaks volume of the paper’s intention of giving an aspect of folktale (riddles) a facelift and gain more popularity in its collation, description and presentation as a pedagogical tool for children in pre-primary and primary school because of their (riddles) potent means by which intelligent quotient of a child could be provoked for further intelligent breakthrough dispositions. A child with the knowledge of his/her societal value drawn from the riddles are more cultured, educated, social and experienced.

Nanda (1984) notes that folktales are told mainly for entertainment, although they often have important educational functions. Most folktales and other verbal arts such as riddles and proverbs have a moral. Oral traditions are thus important in the socialization process of every society and especially societies without writing. She concludes her argument, expresses that ‘folklore can tell us much about the cultural values of a society because it reveals which actions are approved and which are condemned. Awoniyi (1975)

corroborates this assertion, notes that oral literature means rich corporate texts derivable from folklore, proverbs, poems, songs, and so on presented in spoken form for the purpose of informing and influencing the behaviour of one another in a speech community. This means that Africans hold their folklore in high esteem such as employing it as basis of learning, guidance and right sense of judgement.

Afolayan (2021) avers that most of African early childhood education was realized through telling of tales and riddles as well as alerting the children to societal taboos which are used to inculcate values and develop children’s cognitive skills in the Yoruba context. He comments further that by virtue of folk etymology, *alo* is a loaded concept in Yoruba. It implies among others something that is twisted, turned, transplanted and narrated. In essence, a puzzle, a riddle, utterances, twisted and that required unknotting; ‘it is the act of twisting. Whether in the form of *aloapamo* (brainteaser, sort of) or *aloapagbe* (responsorial tale rendition, sort of), *alo* implies something that triggers the brain and challenges the audience’.

what could be inferred from this point is that *alo* or *aro* as called in this paper is more than mere entertainment. It is out to teach certain lesson or value.

Wabande (2021:22) on oral narrative is a guide and reference point. He writes that:

oral narrative in traditional settings were mostly performed by matriarch and/or patriarch in the community who naturally command respect and reverence owing to their age and status. It was largely felt that woman were in charge of moral and upbringing of the children in the society. They therefore taught the young children about the community value. The men on the other hand were charged with the role of inspiring the young men in the society to emulate the great deeds of their forefathers and also preserve the community history; thus the men focus on telling legends and myths.

Wabande concludes on the note that oral narratives are an important component of informal education, occupied a unique position. The oral narrative performance space was not only an entertainment space but also a classroom where lessons were drawn from the story. Adejumo and Oyebamiji (2021) dwells on the collection of oral African folklore from its being intangible to being tangible through the collection of its various forms for documentation and preservation. The work believes that if the documentation is transcribed it

will form a text of African folklore which may be used for analysis for the main purpose of teaching African values.

Other relevant works that believe that African folklore (riddles in this context) is passed down from generation to generation employing to impart the African values as embedded in the culture to teaching knowledge, wisdom and understanding to the children and the younger ones include Adesina (2021) Nyanmwange (2021), Kapanga (2021), Omidire (2021) Opondo (2021).

Data Presentation and Analysis

The first data that is taken for explication and analysis is *Ikúnniòunlesòèpàméfà di ẹgbẹ̀fà*, 'The squirrel boasts that it can turn six groundnuts to one hundred and twenty naira'. The riddle goes thus:

Ikúnlòilèànarè

O níòun le sòèpà méfà diẹgbẹ̀fà

Ikúngbinèpà

Àparòtánán

Àparò yéyinmèjì

Erin tè ẹfó

Erin tòsódò

Èrò ọ̀nà ńbù mu bù wẹ

Èrògbèpolékùkùtẹ

Kùkùtẹdeponù

Kùkùtẹhulú

Abiamọ̀tulú

Abiamọ̀ponmọ̀lódìlódì

Akòpẹ̀rì

Akòpẹ̀gòkèlódìlódì

Ayabadébẹ

Ayaba múowóẹgbẹ̀fà ógbé e fúnakòpẹ.

Báyíiniowórìnti ó fi padàsìowóikún.

The squirrel went to its laws

Boasts it can turn six groundnuts to one hundred and twenty naira

The squirrel planted groundnuts

Bush fowls spread the groundnuts

The bush fowl laid two eggs the elephant broke them

The elephant urinated in the river

The passerby made use of the water

The passerby drops a container of oil on a trump

The trump fell the container of oil

The trump grew mucus

A mother fetched from the mucus

The mother backed a child lopsidedly

Palm tree tapper saw her

Palm tree tapper climbed lopsidedly

The king wife got to the spot

And paid the controversial one hundred and twenty naira which was given to the squirrel the Master minder of the plot

This narrative riddle is unequivocally applicable to science and logic for its empirical disposition. Human beings the world over are endowed with wisdom, knowledge and understanding. These are observed based on the cultural environment an individual finds himself. An individual is expected to think deep on how certain problem could be solved. How life could be more meaningful, how his/her welfare could be more enhanced and security guaranteed.

The narrative riddle is informed by the mathematical projection it underscores, logic and critical thinking it anchors. The elders and proponents of narrative riddles believe that many problems could be solved by critical thinking. Many life achievements could be enhanced. It is believed that most technological advancement and new inventions are made through critical thinking from local African technology such as system of housing, health care delivery, means of communication, gold smith, blacksmith, farming and hunting implements and general moral education are all offshoots of critical thinking.

Like we have remarked in the introduction, narrative riddles are properties of the elders. Elders are the proponents and or/presenters while they asked children to unravel the mystery behind a riddle. One could therefore say that riddles are told to enrich the younger ones to be wise, knowledgeable, cultured and educated and easily understand their immediate environment, solving their problems themselves and acquire capacity to think of new inventions. The Yorùbá would say that *Ìròníjìn lẹ̀nì sẹ́atọ̀kùn fún ipilẹ̀ ọgbọ́n àṣẹyọrí*, 'critical thinking is the brain behind successful wisdom'. The developed nations were able to overcome most of their problems through critical thinking. Manufacturing of engines, machines, aeroplane, train, ship, cargoes and auto engines are all products of critical thinking and observations. The mechanized farming popular nowadays the world over, health care delivery, and communication technology to mention but a few are all products of critical thinking. To this end, narrative

riddles that have to do with critical thinking, applicable to the children and the youth is sacrosanct to the overall development of the child.

The next riddle is *Akasoatiogiri* (The ladder and the wall)

Òrúnmìlà ló di àkàsò

Baba lo di ògiri

Òrúnmìlàni ta niàkàsò

Baba ni tániògiriàkàsò

Njémo jéwò ọ̀bùn

Baba dásoró mi

Òrúnmìlàni ẹ̀dàalààyèniàkàsò

Òrúnmìlàni Olódùmarèniògiri

Óni biògiri bá wó

Àkàsò ágbènu sánlèni

Ọ̀bàtálàni ọ̀unniògiri

Àwọ̀naájẹ̀ounniàkàsò

Óni biòunògiri bá wó

Àwọ̀naájẹ̀oun ágbènu sánlèni

Bẹ̀ẹ̀ni Ọ̀gún, Sàngó abbl sọpéàwọ̀nniògiri

Àwọ̀nolùsìnàwọ̀nniàkàsò

Biàwọ̀n bá wọ̀àwọ̀nolùsìnàwọ̀n á gbènu sánlèni

Òrúnmìlàni iróni

Óni bí wọ̀n bá wó

Àwọ̀nolùsìnwọ̀n ágbàibòmíràn lọ

Òrúnmìlà (the Ifa Deity) says on to the ladder

Baba says on to the wall

Orunmila asks who is the ladder

Father asks who is the wall

Òrúnmìlà says human beings are the ladder

Orunmila says Olódùmarè God is the wall

He says that if the wall falls

The ladder would fall

If God dies

The human beings perish

Ọ̀bàtálà claims he is the wall

His adherents are the ladder

He says that if he dies his adherents would perish

So Ọ̀gún (god of iron) and Sàngó (god of thunder)

Claim to be wall and their adherents, ladder

Òrúnmìlà negates Ọ̀bàtálà's impression that if he dies

His adherents would find their sustenance elsewhere

The above riddle is a religious precept on the understanding and having the knowledge of the Most High and Superior God. In the riddle, the deities claim to be the wall while their adherents are the ladder and that if they fall their adherents would also fall. But Òrúnmìlà who is the sage and a soothsayer negates their erring and ignorant impression of superiority and power. Orunmila then unveiled somewhat hidden scenario, opened the minds of the gods that they should stop deceiving themselves in that if they fall, their adherents would find their way elsewhere. The gods were confused and asked Orunmila to unravel the mystery for them. Orunmila then gave a convincing explanation of the riddle that Olodumare God Almighty is the wall while creatures are the ladder.

All creatures lean against God for their survival on earth. They look unto God for their feeding and protection. Human beings and other creatures depend on God for their live and livelihood. If they err, they seek His forgiveness. It is generally believed that God owns the lives of all creatures. Creatures are alive and die at the instance of God Almighty. According to the narrative riddle, if God stops His mercies, love, protection on its creatures, creatures would perish instantly.

To this end, the riddle emphasises the superior power of God upon his creatures unlike the lesser gods in that if the lesser gods stop or claim to have stop their 'provisions' and 'blessings', the adherents would still live by changing their god and find other means of survival or sustenance elsewhere. The riddle admonishes the children and the younger ones to know and worship the true God right from their infancy, the culture that is believed would shape their thinking and be engendered by looking unto Him for their total survival and sustenance in life, holding Him as Ultimate and Superior Power.

The next riddle for explication and analysis is *Apètẹ̀bí* (Apètẹ̀bí)

IfániApètẹbí paléẸdú
 TabíkòpaléẸdú
 Wón niApètẹbí paléẸdu
 Ifáni tóbá paléẸdúS
 Yóonigùrùkàn-inú
 Ọrúnmilàniyòyúnnigùrùkàn-inú
 Ifáni tóbá paléẸdú
 Yóonigùrùkàn-ẹyìn
 Ọrunmilaniòmogùrùkàn-ẹyìn
 Ifáni tóbá paléẸdú
 Yóonigbérùmí-sòmí
 Ọrúnmilàniẹrùniẹgbérùmí-sòmí
 Ọrunmila asks whether or not Apètẹbí
 Tidied the Ẹdu's room or not
 They report that Apètẹbí has tidied up the Ẹdu's room
 Ifa deity says that if she has tidied up Edu's room
 She would be pregnant
 Ifa deity says if she has tidied up Ẹdu's room
 She would have children
 Ifa deity says if she has tidied up Ẹdu's room
 She would have slaves and attendants

Ordinarily, one of didactic tenets of oral literature (riddle in this context) is that it teaches mastery of language use. Ability to speak fluently enhances more understanding. This is the more reason tongue twisting is taught and leant as an aspect of oral literature. As pointed out in the introduction of this work, the essence is to finding meaning to a new vocabulary. In the riddle, strange and/or difficult words are foregrounded. If these difficult words are not explained, children that are just learning the language would not understand. It is then become prerogative of the elders to unveil and explain the strange words.

The three strange words in the narrative riddle are *gùrùkàn-inú* meaning pregnancy, *gùrùkàn-ẹyìn*, child bearing and *gbérùmí-sòmí* which connotes possession of slaves and attendants to send on errands. Most people pray to have the three in life. The main focus and tenet of the riddle is to teach the children language use,

fluency and understanding of certain life aspirations. The African value taught or leant in this riddle is that nothing goes for nothing. One is expected to use what he has to get what he does not have.

In Africa especially among the Yorùbá, idleness and/or laziness is frowned at, so an individual of moral standard which is the ultimate is not expected to show carelessness, indolence and nonchallant attitude. Apetebe that longed for child bearing was asked to tidy up the Orunmila (who is believed to have antidote for child bearing) spiritual room and promised that if she has tidied up the room she would be pregnant, have children and even slaves and attendants which would all serve her. Aside this, children are definitely tomorrow's elders and leaders. Elders' speech and presentations are always in parable, proverbial and in brevity which they have leant from their metamorphoses from their childhood to adulthood and pass the same to the present generation of children.

For adulthood, general upbringing and total development of an individual among the Yoruba, adequate language mastery and proper presentation of discourse is a *sine qua non*.

The next and the last riddle for explication and analysis is *Kinni n jẹwẹ* (what is ẹwẹ?)

Ọrúnmilàniẹyẹàkòkòniẹyẹgún n nùgún

Ayẹomọkẹkẹrẹkíitíkẹkẹrẹgún

Nítorí tó bítíkẹkẹrẹgún

Àwọnosó, àjékòni jẹkògbádùn

Ẹyẹkẹjiniẹyẹosin

Omọkẹkẹrẹkíitiẹweniòmisi nènìyàn lódò

Tóbátíkẹkẹrẹniòmisi nènìyàn lódò

Àwọnosó, àjékòni jẹkògbádùn

Ẹyẹkẹtaleyẹpépéyẹ

Èmilayé ó yẹ

Ọrúnmilà (Ifa deity) says, the first bird is vulture

Children's life is not at the infantry straightened

Because if his life is straightened

The witches and the wizards would not allow him rest

The second bird is ọsin (water bird)

A child does not have attendants to serving him/her

If he/she at the infantry have attendants to serving him/her

Witches and wizards would not allow him/her rest

The third bird is duck

I am the one that life befits

This narrative riddle is applicable to the Yoruba philosophy and symbolism. The narrator is said to have met three birds on his way to Òrúnmìlà's (Ifa deity) house. He is asked to drop the first two birds he met on his way because if a child picks the first bird *Gúnnugún* (vulture) symbolically and philosophically his/her life would be very peaceful, straightened and be very alright but the witches and wizards will not allow him/her to enjoy his/her life.

One must have rough ways at infantry and as a youth to be successful in life, *ayéòmòkékèrèkìitíkèkèrégún* children's life is never straightened and cannot claim to be successful at infantry. The import of the riddle is informed by the last syllable in the word *gúnnugún*. 'gún' as used in the riddle which means normal or straightened underscores success a child is not expected to enjoy at infantry. The second bird *òsìn* (water bird) symbolises nobility or affluence. The little child is also asked to drop the bird owing to the fact that a child cannot at the infantry be noble or affluent. Little ones are not expected to be served or receive homage from the people, it is other way round. 'sìn' to be served, which is also the last syllable in the second word/bird *òsìn* also symbolizes nobility or in the position of authority or affluence which a child is not expected to enjoy.

The last bird which the narrator is expected and advised to pick is duck *pépéyè* where 'yè' the last syllable symbolizes befit or enjoy. What could be inferred from the three scenarios of birds and/or symbolism is that before the last step could be achieved, the first two should have been carefully observed and carried out. A child that is hoped to live a noble and affluent life should have passed through rough ways and certain difficulties in life. A child by this riddle is taught that life is not a bed of roses, one has to struggle to become successful in life by facing different difficulties and find means of overcoming them and later enjoy the fruits of his/her labour.

Conclusion

The African traditional means of imparting their amiable cultural values to the children and the younger ones which employs oral literature as a potent means for the children as well as the youths to embrace wisdom, knowledge and understanding should not be toyed with. This paper has argued that a child learns fast when the mother tongue of the child or the language of the immediate environment is employed for teaching learning exercise with the service of a close and familiar individual(s) from the community as teacher(s). With the avalanche of moral teachings embedded in the narrative riddles presented and analysed in this paper, the paper concludes that the society (African) should hold African folklore (Riddles in this context) in high esteem and prevent it from extinction.

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