ORAL TRADITION AT BASIC LEVEL FOR INNOVATIVE EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT: SURVEY OF TEACHER UNDERSTANDINGS, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

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Abstract

Oral tradition continues to attract the interest of researchers and scholars because of its enduring aesthetic appeal and relevance. It reflects community life, the spirit of our ancestors and the process of development in our society. We believe there are important traditional information or knowledge which are not available in the classrooms and books. They are embedded in the hearts, minds and memories of individual artists, traditional healers and community leaders who are not just in touch with rural realities in their communities but also the changing dynamics in the modern society. These are waiting to be reactivated towards a better understanding of ourselves. The more we do this, the less we are likely to recklessly ape foreign cultures. There is therefore the need to teach oral tradition in schools to bring learners back to their roots, to remind them of who they are, the African in them and the tradition to which they belong, thereby handing over the heritage of liberation as left by our forefathers. This paper therefore attempts to provide some insights into 'what it is like' to do this particularly concerning space in the curriculum, teacher and students' subject knowledge and personal interest in oral tradition. It emerges that the understanding and opinions of the surveyed teachers are generally in line with policy prescriptions and curriculum guidelines. However, what is at issue is the implementation. The paper concludes with some suggestions as to what might enhance understanding and popularization of oral tradition and implementation of the curriculum.

Key words: Oral Tradition, Basic Education, Curriculum, Teachers, Pupils.

Introduction

The National Policy on Education which provides guidelines for the curriculum at all levels of education emphasizes the consolidation of kindergarten, primary and junior secondary education to a 10-year basic education in line with UBE and its establishment Act. A major provision of the document is the endorsement of oral tradition which states that:

> "measures shall be taken to ensure that the culture of the nation is kept alive through the teaching of creative and cultural Arts and visits to museums"
> (National Policy on Education, 2013 Section 2 page 28)

There is little debate about the importance of oral tradition, orature or oral lore in the cultural arts. It characteristically encapsulates the history, tradition, culture, wisdom, values and beliefs of the society where it exists. It was prevalent in traditional African societies and it provides a means through which the people transmitted their tradition, culture and taught their children desirable values. It has however been observed that the culture of oral tradition is gradually disappearing in the African society. Parents' obvious preference for English language for communicative and educational purposes has resulted in the abandonment of our cultural values and heritage. The culture of watching the television and internet browsing has taken the place of moonlight story telling in the urban areas (Okebukola, 2012).

As noted by Kolade (2015) oral tradition stands at the summit of African creative, cultural and scholarly decision and realism. It is the store house of African wisdom and scholarly decision and realism which students should maintain and use adequately for academic excellence. According to Jegede (2008) oral tradition is an instrument for cultural and national orientation in this era of globalization in which urbanization as well as technological innovations have contributed to

making this art form unpopular to the detriment of development of Africa as a continent.

Indeed, the study of oral tradition is intimately a study of the African people both traditional and modern life. It comprises of the specialized verbal forms such as proverbs, riddles, chants, epigrams, liturgies, adages, lyrics, poetry, tale, myths, legends and epics through which African society have ensured cultural continuity as the repository of a community's core value, philosophies, mysteries, rituals and most importantly memory. Finnegan (1970) set off the most intriguing controversy on the status of oral tradition when she concluded in her book 'Oral Literature in Africa' that Africa has no epic.

It is true that not every aspect of a people's history can be recorded. It may also be true that some of the most interesting aspects of history may be overlooked by writers of history even in literate societies. In such cases, we must depend on the history keepers of the community who are referred to as the custodian of the people's culture. In the case of predominantly oral cultures, oral tradition is an indispensable source of history, indicator of deep thought, and transmitter of cultural and religious values. For example, a discussion which centres on Yoruba oral tradition requires an understanding of the history and identity of the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. Our knowledge of Yoruba history is derived from oral tradition, and Yoruba identity is owed to the combined force of its past history and contemporary realities. We get a sense of Yoruba history, culture and identity, from its historical and mythical legends, folktales and verbal arts. This is not surprising since oral tradition is used to construct history, legitimize cultural values and pass judgments on contemporary political realities.

The Hausa extempore praise singers, their oral historians and their social commentators, for instance, are both secular and religious in their subject matter. The belief system of the Hausa people especially their myth has a lot to do with phenomena things, plants and animals such as cow, the desert, the baobab tree,

etc. whereas while the myth of baobab tree concerns the Hausas, that of Iroko trees concerns the Yorubas. More so, those who live by the coastal water, rivers, lagoons, sea etc., who are mostly fishermen will base their oral tradition mainly on things like fishes, the sea goddess etc. In Africa in those days, all arts depended on the metaphorical, poems, songs, idiomatic expressions, proverbs and tales and at other times it is obtained through imitation. As diverse as oral tradition remains, it serves as a foundation for the traditional literature especially folk songs.

Thus, orature as an institution in especially non-illiterate cultures assumes a prominent role and often functionally serves as a central feature in the transference of collective cultural memory. But like all knowledge on information transfer in oral societies, the process is inherently unstable. From one person to the next, the rendition and corpus of the information is altered. It is this structural leakage in information transfer in oral societies and the inability to effectively and immutably deposit or store knowledge which makes orality basically unstable and inferior to literacy-based transfer of knowledge. It is again this structural inadequacy which makes the development of science and technology as a sustained and cumulative process unattainable in pre-eminently orally based cultures and social systems. Prah (2009) argues that for education to develop beyond a technologically rudimentary stage, literacy as a dominant socio-cultural feature is necessary. And certainly in our times, in Africa, it is unthinkable that the journey forward to modernity can be accomplished without a socially expanded literacy. To him these factors are fairly incontrovertible.

As noted by Prah (2009) orality does not favour knowledge production and consolidation on a continuous basis. However, what most scholars currently suggest is that orality and literacy as social systems are not polar opposites. Sociologically they interpenetrate and overlap. They are not totally separate categories distinctly black and white, there is much grey in-between (Prah, 2009).

Finnegan (2005) also posits that there is not just one relation between the performed oral and the textual written neither is there a clear distinction between them. She argues that writing can interact with performance in many different ways. Such possibilities of interaction include dictated transcription, performance score, memory cue, hearing aid, notes for a speech, printed version of a memorized poem, tool for helping audiences understand a performance as it develops and script for recreating and remembering a past performance among others. This underscores the importance of the study of oral tradition as an embodiment of literacy practices for preservation.

Teaching oral tradition in schools serves as a medium of information dissemination so it requires an objective based education system which guarantees the methodology, exploration and implementation of the art in our various communities. The knowledge of oral tradition will therefore help curriculum planners to produce sound, informed and enlightened students conscious of societal needs. It will bring on the splendor and information that are relevant to the teaching-learning process at the basic level of education in Nigeria as well as the preservation of our cultural heritage. Literature review reveals sparseness of studies in this area of study; hence, it remains an area for department in research.

The teachers of oral literature are central to this revolution. They have a responsibility, not only to develop passion for the subject themselves, but also to ensure that their pupils/students are central to the cultural revival. The young and potential scholars should be made to see their true essence in their oral traditions. It is with this at the background that this study investigates the extent of the inclusion of oral tradition in the curriculum and its implementation at the basic level of the Nigerian school system as well as the attitudes and knowledge of teachers and students to their cultural heritage.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the conduct of the study:

1.   To what extent does the study of oral tradition feature in the basic education curriculum?

2.   What is the extent of the implementation of the curriculum in regard to oral tradition?

3.   What is the knowledge base of the teachers and pupils of oral tradition?

Scope of Study

The study is limited to prose and poetry genres of literature in which oral tradition such as riddles, tongue twisters, rhymes, songs, proverbs, drum language, myths, legends, stories, folklore and mimic are given priority in the Basic Education Curriculum and part of the culture of the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. The choice is based on the recognition of Yoruba as one of the major Nigerian Languages (NPE, 2013).

Population/Sample

All teachers and pupils enrolled in Lagos State public (government owned) basic schools constitute the population for the study. The sample consisted of 36 English studies and literature teachers and 100 pupils in 12 public basic schools from central and outlying school districts of Lagos State. Two schools were selected from each of the six educational districts. 36 teachers were selected from the 12 schools with a teacher representing each of the three classes selected (7 – 9). All the teachers are professionally qualified with teaching experience ranging from 10-25 years. The average class size of the mainstream classrooms of the teachers sampled was 60 pupils with ages ranging from 10-15. Such large classes at this level would be indicative of the general lack of funding and resources in the Nigerian public school sector.

Instrumentation

The following instruments were used for data collection:

1. Coding sheet for the inclusion of oral tradition in the curricula of four-subjects including Cultural and Creative Arts specified by the National Policy on Education,2013).

2. Interview Guide for Teachers and Pupils.

3. Questionnaire on teachers' and pupils' attitudes and interest in the teaching and learning of oral tradition.

Coding Sheet

This was designed to assess the preponderance of the different categories of oral tradition across the levels of basic education (basics 1-9). The curricula of Yoruba Language, Religion and National values, Cultural & Creative Arts and English studies/Literature were examined. Elements represented are marked with a tick [√] while [O] marks the non-representation of items. This provides quantifiable methodology to look for the elements of oral tradition within the curricula in order to understand usage. The data collected is then interpreted in order to understand its meaning and the underlying relationship with the dictates of the National Policy on Education. Inter-coder reliability yielded 0.69.

Interview Guide for Teachers and Pupils

In order to obtain a complete picture of the teachers and pupils background, domains of Language use and awareness of oral tradition and its preservation, an extended interview was arranged with the 100 sampled pupils. It took the form of a structured discussion based on issues listed above and others relating to the questions raised in the study.

Reliability was obtained by interviewing sample (n = 10) of the pupils with similar characteristics as the sample of the study. The interview was conducted twice

within two weeks. The responses on the two interview sessions were subjected to test – retest reliability using Pearson procedure. This yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.70. The interview guide was validated by two teachers of English Language and Literature in English.

Questionnaire for Teachers and Pupils

This was designed to find out the teachers and pupils' views on oral tradition, its inclusion in the curriculum and their attitudes to its teaching and learning in the context of the National Policy on Education (2013). Copies of the initial questionnaire were sent out to 10 senior basic school teachers. Feedback was taken on board and changes implemented where necessary. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to test the reliability and this yielded 0.71.

The senior teachers of each of the 12 schools selected were circularized explaining the nature of the study and seeking their cooperation in completing the questionnaire. Each dispatched questionnaire was coded to allow for one reminder to be sent if questionnaires had not been returned by the required date. The completion and return rate was 94% (n = 94) of the 100 surveyed teachers.

RESULTS

Inclusion of Oral Tradition in Basic Education

Coding sheets I – IV provide the results of the assessment of oral tradition in the curricula of:

- Yoruba Language
- Religion and National Values
- Cultural and Creative Arts
- English Studies/Literature

Coding Sheet I – Assessment of the inclusion of oral tradition in the Yoruba Curriculum

Categories	Basic 1	Basic 2	Basic 3	Basic 4	Basic 5	Basic 6	Basic 7	Basic 8	Basic 9
Riddles	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Tongue Twisters	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Poems & Rhymes	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Songs	√	√	√	√	√	–	√	√	√
Games	–	–	–	–	√	–	–	–	–
Proverbs	–	–	√	√	√	√	–	√	√
Drum Language	–	–	√	–	–	√	–	–	√
Myths	–	–	√	√	√	–	√	√	√
Legends	–	–	–	–	–	–	√	√	√
Stories	√	√	√	√	√	–	–	√	√
Folklore	–	√	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Mime	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

Source: Field survey ,kolade, 2015.

Coding Sheet II –   Assessment of the inclusion of oral tradition in Religion and National Value Curriculum

Categories	Basic 1	Basic 2	Basic 3	Basic 4	Basic 5	Basic 6	Basic 7	Basic 8	Basic 9
Riddles	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Tongue Twisters	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Poems & Rhymes	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

Songs	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Games	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Proverbs	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Drum Language	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Myths	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Legends	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Stories	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Folklore	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Mime	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

Source: Field survey, kolade 2015.

Coding Sheet III –   Assessment of the inclusion of oral tradition in Cultural and Creative Arts

Categories	Basic 1	Basic 2	Basic 3	Basic 4	Basic 5	Basic 6	Basic 7	Basic 8	Basic 9
Riddles	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Tongue Twisters	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Poems & Rhymes	√	√	√	–	–	–	√	–	–
Songs	√	√	–	–	–	–	√	–	–
Games	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Proverbs	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Drum Language	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Myths	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

Legends	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Stories	–	√	√	–	–	–	–	–	–
Folklore	√	√	√	√	–	–	–	–	–
Mime	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

Source: Field survey, kolade 2015.

Coding Sheet IV –   **Assessment of the inclusion of oral tradition in English Studies/ Literature Curriculum**

Categories	Basic 1	Basic 2	Basic 3	Basic 4	Basic 5	Basic 6	Basic 7	Basic 8	Basic 9
Riddles	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Tongue Twisters	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Poems & Rhymes	√	–	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Songs	√	–	–	√	–	–	√	√	√
Games	√	√	–	–	√	–	√	√	√
Proverbs	–	–	–	–	–	–	√	√	√
Drum Language	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Myths	–	–	–	–	–	–	√	√	√
Legends	–	–	–	–	–	–	√	√	√
Stories	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Folklore	√	√	–	–	√	–	√	√	√
Mime	–	–	–	–	–	–	√	–	–

Source: Field survey, kolade 2015.

The coding sheets provide evidence that oral tradition is spread across the curricula of four subjects offered at the basic level of education with preponderance in Yoruba curriculum. This is not unexpected since the vehicle of thought to the usages of oral tradition is language and it is the candidate for resolving the puzzle which surrounds knowing who the Yoruba people really are. If our knowledge of Yoruba history and identity is derived from its oral tradition and oral tradition is transmitted in a language that is uniquely identifiable with the people, it would seem right that the Yoruba curriculum provides the avenue for teaching it. However, it is worthy of note that many elements of oral tradition are not provided for in the curriculum namely – riddles, tongue, twisters, and mime while games, drum language and folklore are given very little attention in Basics 2 and 4.

The curriculum of Religion and National Value gives no credence to oral tradition as none of the aspects is included.

The curriculum of Cultural and Creative Arts (coding sheet III) reveals the exclusion of oral tradition as only poems and rhymes, songs, stories, folklore appear very sparsely in basics 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7.

It is worthy of note that the National Policy rightly prescribes the inclusion of oral tradition in Cultural and Creative Arts curriculum as an integral part of the nation's cultural heritage. Coding Sheet IV assesses the inclusion of oral tradition in English Studies/Literature Curriculum and reveals that many aspects are neglected in almost all the levels – Riddles, tongue twisters, Drum Language, mime (only basic 7) while songs, games, proverbs, myths, legends, and folklore appear only at the upper basic classes (7-9). Only poems/rhymes and stories are represented at all levels.

Teachers' Attitude to the Teaching and Learning of Oral Tradition

Table 1: showing Teachers Attitudes to the Teaching of Oral Tradition

S/N	Statement	SD	D	NS	A	SA
1.	It is important to teach oral tradition at the basic level	2%	8%	4%	57%	29%
2.	Oral tradition is an indispensable aspect of culture	1%	3%	3%	33%	60%
3.	Children should be exposed to oral tradition early in life	2%	2%	0%	17%	79%
4.	Oral tradition equips pupils with the ability to read and understand	1%	3%	1%	38%	54%
5.	Pupils do not develop naturally and incidentally through context with oral tradition	33%	59%	0%	5%	2%
6.	Pupils contact with oral tradition should be delayed until later in life when they are assumed to be matured enough	10%	48%	5%	19%	18%
7.	It is important to include oral tradition in a single curriculum rather than spread it across different subjects	1%	3%	4%	33%	59%
8.	Oral tradition cannot be successfully taught in multi-cultural classrooms	33%	18%	1%	58%	33%
9.	A variety of concrete materials should be provided in the classroom to enable the child develop concepts necessary for learning	0%	3%	3%	43%	51%
10.	Consistent testing of pupils' knowledge and skills in oral tradition is important to evaluate their progress generally	0%	3%	3%	43%	51%

There was widespread acceptance (83%) among surveyed basic school teachers that it is important to teach oral tradition at this level and that it is an indispensable aspect of the Nigerian culture (92%) overall, statements 1-5 display a strong consensus that oral tradition provide reading readiness skills and its inclusion in the curriculum equip pupils with the ability to read and understand. This opinion is supported by research. Okebukola (2012).

A disposition towards oral tradition development and learning can also perhaps be gauged from the responses to statements 6-10. Opinion was divided among respondents with respect to the delay of the teaching of oral tradition until later in post basic classes when they are assumed to be mature enough, a practice which is strongly advocated in the curriculum. With 58% disagreeing with this view and maintaining the value of introducing oral tradition formally in junior classes, widespread implementation would seem unlikely. This is also illustrated by the fact that teachers felt that oral tradition is not adequate in the school curriculum (78%) and that its spread over different subjects would indicate attitudes and practices in flux with strong elements of traditional pedagogy interspersed with practices more akin to a curriculum – endorsed balanced approach comprising the different aspects of oral tradition. This is also supported by the view that most classrooms settings are multicultural which can constitute a bane to the spread across subjects.

The last two statements indicate a strong consensus among respondents on the importance of the provision of concrete materials (92%) frequent assessment of progress (92%) and frequent effective development of oral tradition at the basic level.

Discussion of Results and Future Research

This study explores the viability of oral tradition as a tool for innovative education and development with focus at the basic level of education. It aspires to deepen knowledge about its inclusion in the curriculum, teachers' attitudes and implementation procedures.

The findings showed little adherence to the policy in terms of curriculum provisions. It was observed that oral tradition features in the curricula of four subjects tangentially contrary to the policy guidelines that it should be the preserve of Cultural and Creative Arts. Hence there is no adherence in this regard. The teaching is hampered in the four subjects namely: Yoruba language, Religion

and national value, cultural and creative arts and English studies/literature as a result of the multicultural and multiethnic nature of the classroom settings. While these results support previous research (Okebukola 2009). They provide novel insights to be included in the research base on oral tradition instruction in the curriculum.

A note worthy insight is the degree of understanding of the policy and teachers' practices.When asked to define oral tradition, 35% of the respondents indicated an understanding of the concept very much in line with the meaning outlined in the policy which sees culture as part of the creative arts that is worthy of preservation. The difficulty which some teachers expressed in itemizing aspects of oral tradition is evident from the fact they were not taught oral tradition in school. There was overwhelming agreement that oral tradition was 'caught' rather than taught indicating their unpreparedness to teach it. Further responses indicate that there are no textbooks for oral tradition pedagogy. This is supported by the views of scholars that it remains largely unwritten. (Prah 2009)

The study revealed that oral tradition is the preserve of the Yoruba curriculum hence only pupils who are of Yoruba exraction have access to its teaching. Under the condition of a multilingual classrooms as in Nigeria, English seemed to act as a mediating language (Okebukola et al, 2013); that is, individuals who do not share a common L_1 use English to communicate. Teaching oral tradition in cultural and Creative Arts will enable the speakers of other Nigerian languages benefit from the richness of Yoruba oral tradition since English is the medium of instruction from upper basic classes (4 – 10).

This study was not designed to answer the question of why the national policy on oral tradition pedagogy in cultural and creative Arts did not materialize, a topic warranting future research in the schools sampled. However, the findings especially as they pertain to the subjects of inclusion implicated factors in the limited implementation of the curriculum. Also worthy of reflection are teaching

and assessment practices. Teaching and assessment are interwoven. The basis for fair assessment is lost if the task is set in a situation where the teacher lacks knowledge of the subject matter (Okebukola 2013).

According to Nigeria's policy on oral tradition the expectation is that teachers of the four subjects – Religion and National Value, Cultural and Creative Arts, English Language and Literature should be able to teach it but in practice these classrooms present a variety of scenarios from basic 1 to 10, while teachers who have 'caught' some aspects of oral tradition informally in the environment teach only the aspects they know in the curriculum, the others are merely neglected. Future studies need to document teaching and assessment practices, challenges associated with such practices, implications for policy implementation and methodology for equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to implement the policy.

It is instructive to reflect on the provisions of the 2013 national policy on education on the matter of 'Language of the immediate environment' since language is the vehicle for communicating oral tradition. The debate on the elastic nature of this provision persists. Okebukola (2005a,b) argued that the language of the local environment in many urban settings like Lagos, Abuja, Owerri, will be English or Pidgin English. Thus the lower basic classes in these environments will have English as the language of teaching oral tradition.

Fafunwa et al (1989) have argued that the language of the immediate environment is not different from the mother tongue of the learners in a given location. In urban centres, the argument proceeds, the language of instruction in the lower basic classes should be the language that is predominant in the homes of the children in class. Since this is hardly English but one of the local languages, it will be against the national policy to use English to teach oral tradition in basics 1–3. As noted by Okebukola et al (2013), the swing of the argument would appear to be in favour of the former view that choice of language should be the locality of the

school rather than the home, in which case it can be English. In the light of the foregoing, there is noticeable tension in the prescription of national policy and the expected practice in schools.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of this study provide evidence that oral tradition curriculum as espoused by the national policy on education has been developed independent of the realities of implementation. The findings provide insight into how curriculum guidelines play out when they are pronounced and mandated to teachers as the new site of curriculum contestation (Goodson, 2003). This calls for the need for adequate training of teachers to understand, deal with and manage curriculum construction, change and innovation in teacher education programmes. They must be helped to re-construct their own understandings of oral tradition through professional development programmes which allow for reflection and discussion. Such in-service training development in conjunction with improvement in resources and pupil-teacher ratio should go some way towards ensuring more balanced classroom oral tradition pedagogy for all pupils in line with the 2013 national policy on education.

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