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JOURNAL

OF

THE ASSOCIATION OF  
NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

TEACHERS

(JANLAT)

No. 3, 2006

# JANLAT

*Journal of the Association of Nigerian  
Languages Teachers*

No. 3 (2006)

Goke Alamu P.hd  
*Editor*

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National Institute for Nigerian Languages  
P.M.B. 7078  
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## **The Relevance of the Yoruba Folktale in the Education of the Nigerian Child**

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### **Abstract**

*The essence of education is the overall development of the individual and the general improvement of the cultural values of the human society. Any education system that alienates a people from their cultural milieu robs them of their identity, values and ethos. The burden of this paper therefore is to examine an aspect of Yoruba oral literature: the folktale with a view to identifying its importance to the education of the Nigerian child, implications of its absence in contemporary Yoruba homes and what could be done to reunite the Yoruba child with that aspect of his or her culture that inculcates good morals, entertains, and contributes to intellectual development.*

### **Introduction**

Literature by its nature reflects man in his entirety. It studies the artistic expression and way of life of a people through a specialized use of language. Literature could be in the oral or written form. Folktale in this paper is an aspect of oral literature and it is pertinent to note that oral literature is an aspect of folklore. Folklore according to Toni-Duruaku (2004:98) was first coined in 1846 by the British Columbia Folklore Society and according to him, folklore has the potential of bringing out the best of humans who allow their expressions flourish when tradition connects communal wisdom with innovative inspiration. Myers and Simms (1989:116) opine that folklore originates from the German word *volkskunde* and the Anglo-Saxon English words 'folk' (people) and 'lore' (learning or creative expression).

The word folklore according to Okpewho (1992:4) implies much more than literature and in some quarters underplays the literary aspect of what the folk do. According to him, oral literature which comprises riddles, puns, tongue-twisters, proverbs, recitations, chants, songs and stories represents only the verbal aspect of folklore. Folklore could be categorized into four main divisions:

- (a) Social and folk custom (customary lore)
- (b) Oral literature
- (c) Occupational folklore and
- (d) Material culture (Toni-Duruaku, 2004:99)

As earlier indicated, folktale is an aspect of oral literature. Folktale is the generally accepted way of describing tales of the oral tradition and it is also known as the oral narrative (Okpewho 1992:181).

There are various categories of folktales. Using the characteristic quality of the tale as the basis of classification, we have the following:

- (a) **Trickster tales:** These involve trickery, deceit and a breach of agreement which could lead to chaos and separation among parties involved.
- (b) **Dilemma tales:** These are stories that bring the protagonist to a state of dilemma of choosing one of available options with every option having its grave consequence and implications.
- (c) **Historical tales:** Subclasses of these include genealogical tales, war stories, legends and epics.

If we look at the context or occasion for telling the stories in classifying them, we could talk on moonlight stories, divination tales, hunters' tales and so on. It is important to note that every ethnic group in Nigeria has its own form of oral literature.



### Relevance of Yoruba Folktales to the Education of the Nigerian Child

There are more than enough moral lessons that the Nigerian child could gain from Yoruba folktales. One of the functions of folktale is that it entertains. Folktales involve story telling, and this involves the storyteller and the audience. The characters in tale could be human beings, spirits, animals or inanimate objects. As the storyteller tries to present such stories through mimicry, imitation of such animals and characters involved, the story becomes interesting, enjoyable and amusing. The audience laughs, clap their hands, raise their hands and legs and sometimes they weep or express sadness depending on the nature of the story.

Folktale is also didactic. It is a veritable tool for teaching moral lessons and culture of a society. It is essentially a principal means of disseminating values and ethos of the people. Unacceptable human conducts and vices such as deceits, promiscuity, wickedness, greed, inordinate ambition, pride, drunkenness are denounced while virtues such as respect for elders and constituted authority, kindness, chastity, patience, honesty, love, loyalty to the cause of the society, tolerance, dedication etc. are emphasized for emulation.

Another function of Yoruba folktale is the language development of the child. A child trained to be a good listener as he listens to the stories and when he or she responds in songs and answering of questions as well as requesting him or her to retell the story or tell his or her own story, he is trained to demonstrate speaking skills.

In spite of the proliferation of schools and religious institutions in contemporary Nigerian society coupled with the highly sophisticated knowledge in modern technology, it is pertinent to note that Nigeria is still bedeviled with a lot of problems like bribery and corruption, armed robbery, ritual killings of human beings, political killings, wanton destruction of public property, disregard for the rule of law and others innumerable to mention. The contemporary society is alienating its people from their cultural environment and practices thereby making them almost strangers in their own land (Okwechime, 2004:112).

In many homes today, parents hardly have time to interact with their children. There is no room for telling them those traditional tales which could enrich them linguistically, teach them good morals and make them good citizens. Toni-Duruaku (2004:98-101) observes that the loss of our cultural values could be traced to factors such as the quest for white collar jobs which brings about rural-urban migration, quest for money to cater for the needs of the family by both the fathers and mothers to the utter neglect of the development of the child and the craze to be part of the western world while relegating our traditional culture to the background. Today, it is a common thing to see young girls going about in provocative attires, young boys plaiting their hair and adorning themselves to look like ladies. The most unfortunate thing is that parents and adults seem to have lost the moral obligation to see that the young ones are brought up in the path of rectitude.

### **Examples of Yoruba Folktales**

As indicated earlier, characters in a folktale could be humans, animals, inanimate objects or spirits. The animal used to portray wisdom or trickery is the tortoise, among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. Among the Akan people of Ghana, it is the spider, while the hare is the animal character among the Tiv people of Nigeria. According to Toni-Duruaku (2004) the animal characters are used to depict weaknesses in behaviour but the vices being criticized are those of human beings who are expected to take note and mend their ways. This means that the animal character is "every man".

Ophewho (1992:181) reports a Yoruba folktale about how the tortoise thievishly eats a meal prepared by a medicine man which is meant to make the tortoise wife pregnant. The tortoise ends up being pregnant itself. It is meant to teach children the consequence of greed and disobedience.

Another example of Yoruba folktale is the story of a house-boy and the cherry tree. The house-boy is subjected to maltreatment. He is poorly fed with the soup that remains in the wooden spoon (ipon) and the pounded yam that remains on the pestle. One day, he goes to the farm to work as usual, where he suddenly stumbles on a cherry seed. He



size. After the clearing, Kin-in-kin comes in the night with this magical song to make the bush grow again:

**Oba Alaran-an Bewe (King Alaran-an begged for assistance)**

Lílé (Leading): Oba Alàrán-án bẹwẹ	King Alàrán-án begged for Assistance
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílé (Leading): O bẹ kéré eye	He called the little birds
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílé (Leading): O bẹ kéré eye	And other birds
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílé (Leading): O da Kìn-ìn-kin si	But never invited Kìn-ìn-kin
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílé (Leading): Ewé oko ẹ dide	Bush leaves, arise
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílé (Leading): Èrùwà dide	Ye grass of the bush, arise
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílé (Leading): Ká relé Oba	Let's go to the King's palace
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílé (Leading): Ká lọ jó bàtá	To dance to the bàtá (drum) ensemble
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílé (Leading): Bí bàtá ò ró	If the bàtá (drum) does not sound Well
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílé (Leading): Ká lọ jó bàtá	To dance to the dùndún (drum) Ensemble
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílé (Leading): Gbọngú dú gbọngú dú gbọn	r: m: m: r: m: m: r: *

Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílẹ̀ (Leading): Gbongúdu gbongúdu gbọn	r: d: d: r: d: r: *
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílẹ̀: Pokítí pokítí po	r: m: m: r: m: r: *
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílẹ̀: Pokítí pokítí po	r: d: d: r: d: d: r: *
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílẹ̀: N ladin, n ladin	m: r: r: m: r: r: m: r: r: *
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin
Lílẹ̀: N lade, lade lade ponlá	m: d: r: d: r: d: r: m: m: *
Ègbè (Refrain): Kìn-ìn-kin	Kìn-ìn-kin

\*Sounds produced by the drums using the Yoruba tones solfa

(Source: Anonymous but cited in Makinde, 2004)

The trees, grass and weeds dance to the magical song and remain stationary. The king was surprised and tries all sorts of means to unravel the mystery behind the strange happening. Eventually the Kìn-ìn-kin bird is discovered and is summoned before the king. He defends himself that he resorts to that when the kìn fails to recognize him. The king apologises and sends Kìn-ìn-kin to lead the others to work in the farm. That brings an end to the problem. The story teaches that we should not look down on anyone, or take them for granted.

From these examples, it could be seen that there are a lot of benefits and lessons the Nigerian child could gain when exposed to Yoruba folktales.

### Recommendations and conclusion

The following are therefore suggested to salvage our traditional values from dwindling into extinction:

- (1) Charity begins at home. Parents should ensure that they find time out of no time to tell bedtime stories to their children bringing out moral lessons. Parent should



partake effectively in the education of their children by teaching them tales they would tell in their schools whenever they are called up to tell their own stories.

- (2) Primary school and junior secondary schools should have story telling periods in their timetable. Every child should be made to present his or her own story.
- (3) The electronic media houses should do more in collecting and recording folktales from Yoruba towns and villages and from other ethnic groups in Nigeria and then give enough slots to folktales in their daily programme.
- (4) Libraries in Nigeria should embark more on the collection of folktales all around them through video recording, transcription and make these available on their shelves. They should also create story-telling periods and space in the libraries especially school and public ones.

There is no doubt that the loss of an indigenous language will eventually lead to loss of traditional values. Our indigenous languages must be effectively taught and used in schools according to the stipulations of the National Policy on Education (2004). We as a people must revive and rekindle our traditional values. Folktales and other aspects of our oral literature that are fast-fading, must be revived in order to preserve them for the present and future generations.

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Journal of Association of Nigerian Languages Teachers (JANLAT) No.3 (2006)

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