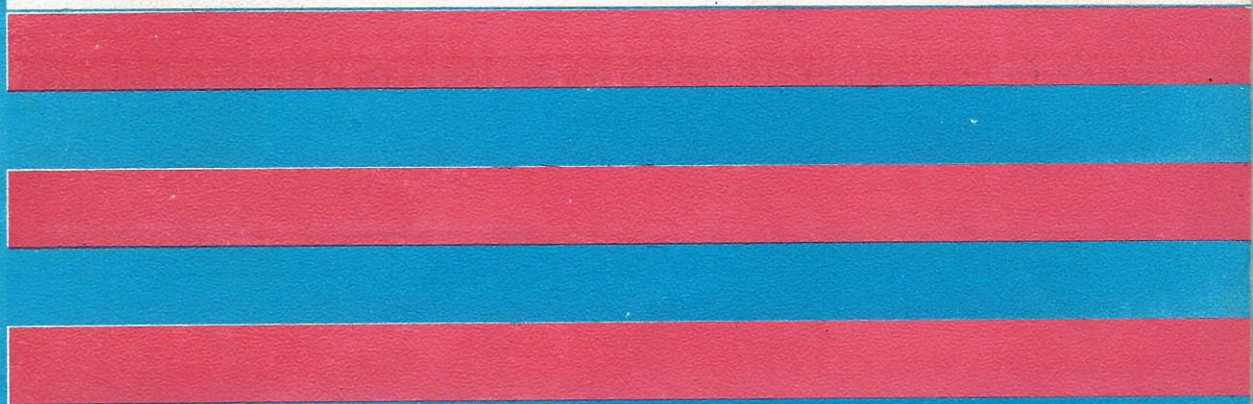


**NIGERIAN
JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND PRODUCTION**

ISSN 1596-6615

NIJOREP

Volume 1 No. 3, September, 2002



**A JOURNAL OF THE NIGERIAN RESEARCHERS
FORUM**

**NIGERIAN
JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND PRODUCTION**

ISSN 1596 - 6615

PROPERTY OF:-
'LAYO OGUNLOLA
Date 10-06-03
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Maiden Issue

Volume 1 No 3, September, 2002

Published by
Nigerian Researchers Forum

YORUBA ORAL LITERATURE AND THE TRAINING OF GOOD CHARACTER: A CASE STUDY OF YORUBA FOLKTALE AND YORUBA PROVERBS

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Abstract

In the first part of this article, an effort was made to show how the foreign authors derogatorily described Africans as people without a literature of their own. The second part examines what literature is and tries to establish the fact that Africans do have their own literature, and their ways of doing things even before the advent of the whitemen. The third and final part explained the role which Folktale and Proverbs (which are types of Yoruba oral literature) play in the training of good character consequent the effects of such training in the life of the child in particular and the society in general.

Introduction

Over the years, various authors and writers (mostly Africans) have debunked the erroneous notions of the white literate that Africans in general have no literature of their own. For instance Ogunlola in Nigeria Magazine No. 143 (1982:28) refers to Reverend Leo Taylor in one of his public lectures as saying that "no culture can come without art of painting and sculpture. We see no music, we see almost nothing but debased and frivolous dance, turns of literature how much? As you are in the position of having no life of your own, English is the only literature to be adopted".

Since this position has been extensively argued, this paper intends to examine the role of the people's literature in the overall development of the society especially the area of good character training which was the focus of the indigenous system of education in general. We would however limit ourselves to the Yoruba Oral Literature. Other aims of this paper include among others:

1. To advance reasons why the use of Yoruba Oral Literature should be encouraged world wide starting from individual homes because charity begins at home.
2. To free our society of "bad eggs" because when every member of the society imbibes good character, they become useful citizens and the society is made peaceful.

Literature is more than anything reduced into writing as most, if not all foreign authors believe. Bayo Ogunjimi and Na'Allah however gave a simple definition of Literature as "the study of man and his environment within a creative mode". This means that literature entails the study of the entire ways of a man's life, and the Yoruba Society is no exemption.

The Yoruba literature is divided into two major parts namely Oral and Written, the earlier preceding the latter with both explaining the Yoruba way of life because no literature can be divorced from the society that owns it as

Ogunsina affirms. It explains their ways of doing things, such as socializing, political administration of the people the education of their young ones, etc. which Awoniyi (1978) refers to as Traditional or Indigenous Education which has its pattern and is flexible enough to conserve and transmit the culture, tradition and experiences of the particular society. This type of education had been with the Yoruba and it was as old as the Yoruba society itself. It proved adequate enough to transmit the cultural heritage from one generation to another through the use of language (i.e. mother tongue) which is the manifestation of traditional education per se with its sole objective mainly embraced in the concept 'Omoluabi' – GOOD CHARACTER.

Who Is An Omoluabi?

Awoniyi (1978) ^{pg. 2} says: "To be an Omoluabi is to be of good character in all its ramifications". An Omoluabi in the Yoruba context is he who is of good behaviour (Character), honest in all things, has respect for parents and local traditions, ready to work, devoted to duties and so on. These and many others constitute the qualities of an Omoluabi. Ojo (1978) also agrees with this claim when he writes:

^{pg 18}
Omoluabi, eni to ko gbogbo iwa rere po ti o si je
eni ti elegbe afojugba ka si ojulowo eniyan.

^{pg 401} Abimbola (1975) is not left out. He writes that "Iwa is the most valuable thing among all other things in the Yoruba value systems". He quickly added however that, "good character may be difficult to have as an attitude but without people who have it the world will be a very difficult place to live in". ^{pg. 400}

The belief is further emphasized by Afolabi Ojo who says when good character eludes a nation, bad behaviour replace it and it over-shadows good character.

This in essence is to say that to be a useful member of the society, one has to develop good character "Omoluabi" and this is the main objective of the Traditional Yoruba System of education as earlier mentioned.

It is better pointed out here that it is not only the highly educated, the popular or the rich people who are referred to as 'Omoluabi' rather anyone who combines varied good characters is so described by the society.

Training Of Good Character

The training of an 'Omoluabi' (good character) is the joint responsibility of the society. It is not singularly done. No wonder then why the Yoruba say "Enikan ni I bimo, Igba eeyan nii wo o". That is: only one person gives birth to a child but the whole society helps to bring the child up.

The training of good character in a child starts from the womb. The news of pregnancy is greeted with great joy. The expectant mother is given special care, she is prevented from doing any hard task, she is warned to obey the society's myths and taboos all in a bid to ensure safe delivery and the birth of a child is applauded. This is so because the Yoruba attach great importance to

children as the fathers/mothers of tomorrow. This is borne out of the saying that:

Iná kú, o feérú bojú
Qgèdè kú, ó fómọ rẹ rọpò
Bí a bá kú tán
Qmọ sẹni ní wolé@de ni.

Fire dies, the ash covers it
The banana tree dies of it
replaced by its younger ones
When we die it is our children
That look after the home for us.

According to the Yoruba belief, "Qmọ nì gbẹyìn qlà, bí a bú ni lẹyìn bá ò sí nilé' qmọ ẹni a rò fún ni". That is: the child is the end product of one's wealth. If somebody is insulted in his/her absence, it is the child that informs him/her. We should be reminded that this belief about child bearing is not peculiar to the Yoruba alone.

The training of good character starts as the child begins to observe the habits of his/her parents or elders and he/she is given specific instructions in the mother-tongue.

The training in discussion is however best achieved through the use of Folktales (story-telling), proverbs, traditional songs, praise names, myths and legends etc. which are all forms of Yoruba ORAL LITERATURE, the first two being our focus in this paper. They all combined to stimulate the child's emotions, quickens his perception of his society, broadens his outlook, shapes his behaviour and makes him fit well into his society.

Folktale

It emphasizes both the physical and natural world. Awoniyi (1978) describes it as 'The cornerstone of Yoruba oral literature'. But before we go into the discussion, let us examine a few definitions of Folktale. Encyclopedia Britannica Vol. 12 defines Folktale as: "a traditional trail containing beliefs about ancient times or natural events, imaginary persons or things which is generally accepted by the community". Olajubu, O. (1978) defines folktale as: "a story in the traditional beliefs of a community. Such beliefs include respect for elders, hard work, honesty, patience and so on". In a similar language, Olabimtan (1982) defines folktales as: "a story handed down from the past such stories are based on the tradition and history of the people".

From the foregoing, we may conclude that the popular opinion about folktale is that "it is full of lies", "Iro lo n je alo". Even if this is so the fact remains that a number of lessons are learnt from folk stories with the sole aim of instilling good character (Omoluabi) in a child.

Characters in folktales include man and all the forces below him, animate, in-animate objects like trees, rocks and waters. Folktale manifests regular interaction between the world of imagination and that of reality.

In the past the Yoruba elders assembled their young ones after each day's work to tell them stories in the form of folktale.

There are categories of tale namely: The Dilemma, the moral and the fairy tales, the moral tale being our focus in this paper.

The moral tales teach nothing but morals. Such tales stimulate the mental, social and physical development of the child.

By participating in the tales, the child acts as the audience. He/she takes part in folksongs (as in *àlọ̀ àpagbè*), and in question and answer (as in *alo apamo*). He/she was also happy because he had the opportunity to interact with his/her play-group.

The *àlọ̀ àpamò* (Riddles and jokes) preceded the *àlọ̀ àpagbè*. This can be likened to mental sums in arithmetic (Mathematics). It involve questions and a one-word answer or a very short sentence. It prepare the listener for the *Alo apagbe* which involves story telling, singing, entertainment.

Other functions of folktales include the following:

- i. Introducing the children to the Yoruba views about the world around them and to develop the sense of communal responsibility.
- ii. It gives children, the knowledge and skills on how to solve instant problems and riddles of life and this becomes a functional part of the children themselves.
- iii. It exposes children to the physical phenomena of their environment to become a functional part of the children themselves.
- iv. It introduces children to the cultural practices of their society, in the areas of customs, institutions and beliefs of the people.

There are two types of moral tales (a) the tortoise the (*alo Ijapa*) and (b) the co-wife tales (*alo Olorogun*) both teaching the consequences of good and bad behaviour in order to guide the child's behaviour.

In the tortoise tale (*alo Ijapa*) the main character (the tortoise) is known for his craftiness, deceit, dishonesty etc. In most of the tales, the tortoise exhibits these behaviours and in most cases, he regrets his actions and he is punished for it.

We hear of a tale where *Ijapa* (Tortoise) and *Igbin* (Snail) were tight friends. The hard-working *Igbin* fed his lazy friend *Ijapa* with his farm produce yet *Ijapa* was not satisfied but wanted to get rid of '*Igbin*' (his friend) in order to inherit the friend's farmland.

The King of their village (*Osin* by name) had an *Abuke* very precious to him and would always want to protect the *Abuke* named "*Abuke Osin*".

One day rumour came to the King that *Abuke Osin* (the King's beloved) had been killed by an unknown person and the King ordered his subordinates and Chiefs to find out the perpetrators of such action. They were on this when *Ijapa* surprisingly went to the palace to inform the King that *Igbin* (his friend) was responsible for *Abuke Osin*'s death knowing fully well that his friend would be killed.

Igbin was arrested but *Igbin* advised the *Kabiyesi* and his Chiefs to do him a favour by making him a hero dressed in good attire, put on a well-dressed Horse and dancing round the village singing praises for *Igbin* for killing the Oba's *Abuke Osin*. The Oba agreed and when *Ijapa* saw this, he was disappointed. He went back to tell the Chiefs that he killed the king's *Abuke* and

not Igbin and that the honour given to Igbin should be his. He was there and then arrested, tried and killed.

Also in co-wife tales, (Alo Olorogun), there is always the story of two of three co-wives of the same husband who are often jealous of one another, the result often is that the jealous wife gets her reward while the other wife gets her own reward too.

These are just a few examples of such tales and we can still talk about many others, all teaching morals. The story teller often ask the children what lesson(s) they could learn from the stories.

What we are saying in essence is that through folk stories, children are able to differentiate between good morals approved by the society and bad ones and this no doubt guide them in their day-to-day behaviour. Each time they want to behave contrary to the societal norms, the parents and elders remind them of the tales they have heard before or told them a new one that relates to such behaviour.

The Yoruba Proverbs

Proverbs embrace the philosophical and socio-cultural value system of the people. They point to the individual, domestic and collective life patterns of the society from which they are derived.

In other words, proverbs adopt materials from people's cosmological and social environment. It's function include among others:

- i. It shows the depth of knowledge and wisdom of the people and so the speaker commands respect from the society.
- ii. It exposes and explores the socio-cultural realities and literary culture of the society.
- iii. It serves as warning, rebuke, praises, suggestions and advise etc.

Proverb is a very popular means of transmitting and inculcating moral values among the Yoruba. Proverbs are "the Sayings of the Elders". No wonder then why the Yoruba say "enu agba lobi i gbo". Meaning that it is the elders that tells whether the kola is ripe or not. So where a young person says a proverb, he recognizes the presence of the elders by saying "Toto o se bi owe, enyi agaba" and the elders in turn appraise him by saying "o kaare, waa pa omiran" that is, "very good of you, you will have many more to say".

It is unfortunate however that despite its importance, today, it is either proverbs are not said at all or when they are said, they are mutilated. Ask even a university undergraduate what is wrong or why this is so, the likely responses one should expect shall include among others:

That the informal education system of our people has been overtaken by the formal school system and so the pattern of existence in the African family settings such as the extended family (agbo ile) are no more in existence and so the forum for such practice has been eroded away.

Proverbs perform educative functions by providing guidelines, codes of conduct and patterns of behaviour with which people can make the society

function with ease.

What we are saying in essence is that proverbs inform and educate people on the norms, ethics (etc) of the socio-cultural settings of the people but let us add here that it does not make only the society but individuals also to function in line with the society.

To explain this, let us examine the following few proverbs:

i. Hardwork

- a. "Agboju logun fi ara re fosi ta

(He who relies on parents' inheritance may subsequently succumb to poverty)

This teaches self-reliance because the Yoruba believe in hard-work in order to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. So, when a child plays away his/her time because the parents are wealthy, he/she is advised to work so that he/she will not succumb himself/herself to poverty in future.

There are hundreds of proverbs that teach self-reliance. A few other examples include:

- b. "Atelewo eni ki tan ni je" "One's hand does not betray one".
c. Bi ole yoo ku e je ki o ku, kiku at aiku ole ko da nnkan fun ni".
"Let a lazy man die if he wants to die, his death or his being alive is of no benefit".

ii. Respect for Elders

The Yoruba value respect for elders and they seriously frown at disrespect and so they have proverbs that stress the need to respect elders. They include the following examples:

- a. A i fagba fenikan ni o je kaye o gun.

Failure to give honour to the elders who deserves honour, makes the entire world wobble

- b. Omode to a aja too soo ni tagaba mase dajudaju ikoko ni yoo pa aja naa je.

A boy who buys a dog and names it may the words of the elders not come to pass knows very well that it is the fox that will devour such dog.

iii. Backsliding

This is not encouraged in Yoruba Society. It is seriously condemned among the people. When one backslides, one is told the following proverbs:

- a. Ofofo o gbe gbaa ibi ope lo mo

Backsliding does not earn you five kobo rather you take only thank you.

- b. A soro kele boju wo gbe, a se buruku, e ku ara fifun.

He who backslides, and look into the bush, he who does evil is full of suspicion.

iv. **Stealing**

It is not only among the Yoruba that stealing is condemned, but rather it is the world over. The Yoruba believe that anyone whose child steals does not have a child. A thief is a disgrace to his family, and his society and so, they have no place in the society.

We have proverbs such as the following condemning the acts of stealing.

- a. "Eni to jale lojo kan, to ba daso aran bora logun odun, ole naa ni yon máa jẹ". "He who steals one day if he wears aran cloth twenty years after, his name is still a thief".

v. **Disobedience**

When child disobeys instruction or advice, such a child is called bad names. He is warned and assured of future regret.

There are several proverbs that teach obedience either towards elders, norms, rules, taboos, myths (etc.) of the society.

- a. "Eni a wí fun, oba je o gbo". "May God help the advised to listen".
- b. Bi a wi fomo eni a gbo ori okere koko lawo "if a child is advised, and he doesn't listen, the head of the bush rat sounds in the soup plate".

Generally speaking what we are saying is that through proverbs, the Yoruba teach good morals that makes everyone in the society become an "Omuluabi". It is generally believed that "a word should be enough for the wise" and this is what proverbs imply because most proverbs contain few words short sentences but 'pregnant' with meaning, probably this is why it is compared with "the ogidigbo" drum" which only the wise dance and the intelligent ones know the meaning.

Some of the moral lesson taught through proverbs are rendered in songs or poems such as this

Mura sise orece mi
Ise ni a fi ndeni giga
Bi a ko ba reni feyinti
Bi ole laa n rí
Bi a ko ba reni gbekele
A tera mo se eni
Iyaa re le e lowo lowo
Ki baba lesin leekan
Bi o ba gboju le won
O te tan ni mo so fun o

Be serious with your work my friend
it is work that makes one great
if we don't have someone to rest on
we are like a lazy man
if we don't have someone to rely on
we put effort on one's work
your mother may be rich
and your father has horses tied down
if you rely on them
you are shamed I tell you (etc).

This poem teaches us to be hard-working and not to rely on parents' wealth for anything.

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to explain the wrong notions about the African literature generally. We explained that like other Africans, the Yoruba have their own literature which is reflected in their culture, myths, education, taboos and their ways of life generally.

We recognise the fact that Yoruba literature is divided into oral and written forms, the former preceding the latter.

We then went further to say that the major objective of the Yoruba traditional systems of education is to develop individuals into "AN OMOLUABI" i.e. people of good character and that one of the ways of doing this by the use of oral literature.

In the last part of this work we to explain (extensively) how folktale and proverbs (which are examples of Yoruba oral literature) are used as a means of moral training. We gave series of examples. With this it is believed that more light has been thrown into the Yoruba use what is theirs to develop their society's moral even before the advent of the white man into Africa.

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