

Research article

The role of folklore in African society

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ABSTRACT

What happens to us from the day we are born to the day we die is what Castle (1966) terms education. This involves relationship between a person and society, things and ideas. It is the transmission of knowledge, skills, ideas, attitudes and patterns of behaviour. For a society to be harmonious, certain codes of conduct have to be adhered to. Cultural practices are unique in different societies, but there are always some common values that run across societies. Desirable and abominable behaviour is always held the same the world over. These upheld values form a total person's 'ubuntu' (humanness). The aim of education is to produce a good citizen fitting in society with acceptable characteristics in society like good neighbourliness involving responsibility or helpfulness. Oral education is achieved through transmission of cultural and societal values generationally through folklore. Formal education is transmitted through institutions while culture is transmitted through among things, music, dance, drama, folktales, legends, myths, proverbs, idioms, riddles and rhymes. Through folklore, values, beliefs, traditions and history are taught and preserved from one generation to another. In Africa, oral modes of cultural transmission continue to have validity wherever group life is sustained. Most African countries have made their educational policies to recognise indigenous languages as official languages in their countries. This paper aims to present oral education as vital in people's lives as it forms the gist of humanness since the absence of it has led to the degeneration of morals. **Copyright © acascipub.com, all rights reserved.**

Key words: oral education, culture, folklore, values, transmission, generation

Introduction

'What happens to us from the day we are born to the day we die' is what Castle (1966) terms education. He further states that education deals with persons, society, things and ideas. The aim of education is to produce a good citizen

with acceptable characteristics in society like good neighbourliness involving responsibility or helpfulness. Formal education is achieved through institutions while informal education of what is valued and preserved in a cultural society is transmitted through generations in the folklore form. Datta (1984) affirms that both formal and informal processes are utilised for the transmission of knowledge, skills, ideas, attitudes and patterns of behaviour. To support the affirmation, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1978) defines folklore as the scientific study of all the knowledge, beliefs, habits, etc, of a racial or national group, still preserved by memory, or in use from earlier and simpler times. Culture is defined in the same dictionary as the particular system of art, thought and customs of a society; the arts, customs, beliefs and all the other products of human thought made by a people at a particular time. From these definitions we discover that culture is transmitted through oral tradition which includes among other things music, dance, drama, folktales, legends, myths, proverbs, idioms, riddles and rhymes. Through folklore, values, beliefs, traditions and history are taught to the people 'tradere (noun) or traderer' (verb) which literally means to transmit, to hand over, to give for safe keeping. Traditional values usually tend to be conservative and accept patriarch as normative. Traditions can change over time through many generations. In Africa, the oral modes of cultural transmission will continue to have validity wherever group life is sustained.

Folktales

They are a way of bringing a message to the people in a community/society. Elders preferred advising people instead of categorically saying 'do this' 'don't do that'. It becomes more effective when a lesson is illustrated than when it is stated. Some folktales were performed just for entertainment and teaching history without any moral lesson.

Finnegan (1970) says tales are presented as a kind of mirror image of respectable human society reflecting normally approved or expected behaviour. The wisdom of the past is communicated to the present through performances on tradition as observed by Scheub (1975:88) in his study of the Xhosa Ntsomi when he says:

She (the performer) is recreating the world in an image that has roots in the past; she gives order, organisation and an ethical frame to that world. Reflecting as they do the broad ethical framework of the society and stressing proper conduct and social relationships, the ntsomi images have had their impact.

From the above quotations, one may deduce that tales are performed in in order to educate the children and adults on their social ethics, the approved and disapproved forms of behaviour in society. Therefore, choosing between evil and good behaviour is highly influenced by tradition, customs and the community at large as Scheub (1975) puts it. This can be said of all African nationalities' folktales. Tales have to do with how to live and act. There is need for order in human community. Once there is a disruptive element to this order then the conflict created should be resolved.

Performances portray social issues like marriage, whereby we find conflicts between a husband and his co-wives and children in a polygamous setup. What results from polygamy is bitterness, tensions and plot between co-wives

that affect the children and torment the husband as Nondo (unpublished) puts it. This is clearly in the tale of daughters who went out to fetch firewood and one of them got stuck on a rock and was left there by her sisters. On a serious search, she was never found but later was brought home with a baby. On seeing this, the co-wife's daughter, moved by jealousy and her mother's influence, pretended to be stuck on the rock but never behaved like the former daughter. She was rude and disrespectful and for her misbehaviour she was brought home dead. Tales therefore, are used to inculcate good morals.

Stinginess is condemned as portrayed in the tale of a man who was given bags of corn by his in-laws for his family during a severe drought that he hid in the bush and used to prepare meals for himself alone in the bush while his family was starving at home with nothing to eat except 'delele' (the slippery bush vegetable) which he refused to eat himself when offered at home. When he was found out, the family took all the food in order to share it at home.

Tricksters like Hare are a reflection of cheats in life, and, therefore, people are warned to watch out for such people. Laziness is condemned as in the tale of the Rock-Rabbit that asked the other animals to bring him a tail from the Creator which was never brought and became tailless.

Political issues are also depicted as in the case of a tale of 'Nananabosele' (frog like creature) who managed to eliminate 'Sondonzima' (elephant) the oppressive king of all animals who did not want his actions to be questioned by his subjects. He swallowed all those that tried to question his authority and she did so after he had swallowed her and her daughter. She displayed her wisdom and intelligence by coming up with a useful plan of cutting his intestines that led to his death although she was of a despised stature. The moral lesson is not to despise people because of the way they look for they may solve the problem that would have bothered the majority.

Myths

A myth is defined in Wikipedia the free encyclopedia as a traditional or legendary story usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation especially one concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practical rite, or phenomenon of nature. It is also said to be any invented story, idea, or concept. Or still an imaginary or fictitious thing or person. Lastly as an unproved or false collective belief that is used to justify a social institution. In folklore, such traditional stories are common as historical events that serve to unfold that part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief or natural phenomena experienced by the people.

Proverbs

Many scholars have defined proverbs as short and pithy sayings that express some traditionally held homely truths in terse language as a way of transmitting cultural heritage to the children. They are usually metaphorical and often, for the sake of memorability, alliterative. Wikipedia the free encyclopedia states that nothing defines a culture as distinctly as its language and the element of language that best encapsulates a society's values and beliefs is in its

proverbs. A Ndebele proverb 'Okuvuthiweyo kubolile' (what is ripe is considered rotten) encourages children to be generous with food and not to be stingy. 'Ibele lendlela kalivuthwa' (Corn planted by the roadside doesn't ripen) encourages girls to respect and look after themselves until they decently get married. The following examples of Ndebele proverbs have been categorised according to the messages they carry:

a) Proverbs that advise:

'Inxeba le ndoda alihlekwa'

Literal translation (L t) A man's wound is not laughed at.

Meaning: Sympathise with one unfortunate for tomorrow it may be you.

'Okuvuthiweyo kubolile'

(L t) What is ripe is rotten.

(M) Give people available food or else it will rot.

'Isihlahla kasinyelwa'

(L t) A tree is not defecated on.

(M) Don't mistreat one who has helped you.

b) Those that encourage:

'Olubambayo ngoluzulayo'

(L t) The eagle that caches is the one that wanders.

(M) S/he who seeks diligently finds.

'Akunkwali yaphandela enye'

(L t) No bird ever pecks for the other.

(M) No person works for another.

'Ingane engakhaliyo ifela embelekweni'

(L t) The baby that doesn't cry dies on its mother's back.

(M) Express your need in order to get assistance.

c) Those that give stern warning:

'Hamba juba lami bazakuchutha phambili'

(L t) Go my dove they will pluck your feathers where you are going'

(M) You will come to realise the truth at the end.

'Uzaqoqwa yikuhlwa'

(L t) Darkness will gather you.

(M) The situation will discipline you.

'Sizoyicela sivuthiwe'

(L t) We will ask for it when it is ripe.

(M) We will wait to see the end result.

d) Those that deal with thankfulness.

‘Ngiyokuhlabisa inyoka’

(L t) I will slaughter a snake for you.

(M) I will thank you with a big thing.

‘Ukwanda kwaliwa ngumthakathi’

(L t) Increase is not appreciated by a wizard/witch.

(M) Thank you very much.

e) Those that say you reap what you have sown:

‘Umzenzi kakhalelwa kukhalelwa umenziwa’

(L t) The offender is not sympathised with but the offended.

(M) You reap what you have sown.

‘Uzigwaze ngowakhe’

(L t) He stabbed himself.

(M) Self-inflicted problem.

Proverbs are meant to produce morally upright individuals. Proverbs and folktales help children to develop healthy attitudes and self-acceptance. Phenix (1961) observed that children and adolescents get to adulthood with unresolved emotional problems, worries, anxieties, fears, grievances and feelings of guilt and self-reproach resulting in delinquencies and crime. He attributes all this to education which tends to teach children all other things (impersonal) other than themselves. Folklore, therefore, tries to address educating the children for self-understanding in order to be socially integrated as they relate with other people in life. Their life is interdependent so they ought to behave well toward each other in a manner which is socially approved.

Idioms

There is a very thin line between a proverb and an idiom. A proverb is a complete sentence that does not go through morphological changes or take various tenses but remains in the original form while an idiom changes in form according to the user's wish. For example, Proverb: ‘Ungena ngenxeba njengempethu’ (S/he takes advantage of the situation). It will always remain as it is whether it is used in the past tense or future tense. Idiom: ‘Phosa ilizwi’ (Say something) it can change to ‘Waphosa ilizwi’ (S/he said something) or ‘Uzaphosa ilizwi’ (S/he will say something). Both are figurative speeches which need to be explained. To the one who is not familiar with the Ndebele language they will be at sea with such utterances. These figures of speech are meant to enrich the language. Here are a few more examples of idioms:

‘Uzakhala zome’

(L t) You will cry until tears dry up.

(M) You will cry until you realise it is of no use crying.

‘Wadlula zisengwa’

(L t) You passed through people milking cows.

(M) You are insane.

‘Ukhasel ’eziko’

(L t) You are crawling into fire. (like a baby)

(M) You are gradually getting into trouble.

‘Ukumncweb’ indlebe’

(L t) To pinch someone’s ear.

(M) To share a secret.

‘Ulesandla’

(L t) S/he has a hand.

(M) S/he is a thief.

It is good to preserve the culture of a people through their language usage because it is their mark of identity.

Riddles

Wikipedia; the free encyclopedia defines a riddle as a statement or question or phrase having a double or veiled meaning put forth as a puzzle to be solved. Riddles teach their listeners how to track two or more meanings at once in a single semantic situation. (Exercise of cognitive skill). They provide satisfactory metaphors. Through the performance of riddles, the children are tested on their judgment. For example, the Ndebele riddle, ‘Ngikulibha ngebhiza lami eligijima lize liphele umsila’ (I riddle you with my horse that runs until its tail finishes). The children have to be analytic and imaginative in order to come up with the answer to the riddle. The answer is a threaded needle. Another English example of a riddle is, ‘What is black and white and red (read) all over?’ The answer is a newspaper. The engagement of such activity sharpens the children’s cognitive development as they train themselves to think fast and bring up solution to a puzzle.

Dance

A dance is a type of art involving movement of the body at times in rhythm with music. It can be performed as a form of emotional expression or social interaction. African dance has a message that it conveys to the spectators. It can be performed for entertaining audiences in a ceremony, celebration or competition. It can be performed in

absolute or may be accompanied with music and musical instruments. Different cultures have their peculiar dances which they preserve through transmitting them to their next generation.

Conclusion

African people have cherished their culture and have preserved it through passing it to their generations in the form of folklore. Although modernization has threatened tradition, it still remains central that culture is preserved across nationalities. The role of folklore in African society is recognised and cherished because it carries a lot of good in maintaining order and unity in society as people share the same values.

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