LITERACY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

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Literacy for Sustainable Development in a Knowledge Economy

Essays in honour of

PROFESSOR RASHID ADEWUMI ADERINOYE

edited by

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Revitalizing Folklore in Contemporary Practice of Adult Education

C. O. Omoregie

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Introduction

Folklore refers to traditional stories and songs that have cultural meaning and transmit the values of a community. It is an aspect of the traditional African system that embodies aesthetic and social values. Since writing is not original to Africans, this paper explains the value of folklore and how it can be used to improve the knowledge of values in educational practice. The extent to which it can be used is discussed, taking into consideration the challenges of contemporary educational practice occasioned by atomized living and globalization. While globalization has provided increased access to education through information and communication technology, this paper answers the question of whether the age-long practice of folklore imbued with promoting societal values is still relevant in contemporary society. It recommends a renewal and integration first into adult education programmes and subsequently into the formal school system.

Indigenous education refers to traditional contents and methods of creating and transmitting cultural heritage and value system. Indigenous education was part and parcel of the culture of African communities. Without culture, there was no education and without education there was no culture and community in African society (Bassey, 1999). The mutual relationship that ought to exist between education, culture and African communities was not recognized by the colonialists. When the British, Portuguese and French colonized Africa, they brought with them their educational systems. The content of these Western curricula neglected African indigenous and cultural ways of life but rather

promoted values, beliefs, practices, norms and socio-political institutions of their home countries (Magagula and Mazibuko, 2004). Folklore as an element of indigenous education resonates the enduring values of indigenous communities eroded by colonialism. The conflict of values faced by people who did not learn and internalize their cultures calls for a discussion of the possibility of integrating folklore into our educational system.

Concept and Practice of Folklore

Literature shows that most cultures have one form of folklore or the other. The concept can be traced to William Thoms, who used folklore as a term for what was called popular antiquities among the British. He coined the term from his Germanic background for the Germans inhabiting England in the medieval period. Hence, earlier civilizations of the Romans, English and Germans have evidences of folklore. Like these Western civilizations, African societies also have their folklore.

Folklore are a set of traditional practices comprising music, dance, song, legends, tales, jokes and oral history handed down from one generation to another aimed at moulding the behaviour of people, especially the younger generation. It grows out of the experiences and imaginations of the people (folks). Folklore spreads from one country to another through trading, slavery, war, travelling and colonization (Sutherland and Arbuthnot, 1991). There are several categories of folklore, namely: tales – cumulative tales, humorous tales, realistic stories, religious tales, romance tales, tales of magic; artifacts; and describable and transferable entities. Songs, proverbs, incantations, fairy tales, myths, legends, superstition, festivals, rites, traditional games, arts, and dance are all part of folklore (Ogundare, 2001).

Hove (1997) captures the practice of folklore among the Shona people of Zimbabwe:

> It is early evening after the evening meal. Darkness is already engulfing the solitary village, abandoning it to the ogres and witches which swell the night. According to the traditional beliefs of the village, the old woman awaits the coming of the children to beg her: 'Please tell us a story. Tell us the story of Hare and Hornbill when they went to look for women in another village,' the children cajole the old woman. Later in the night, she is performing the tale, with the children harmoniously repeating the

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> chorused refrain of their participation. The bodies of the children and the old woman sway to the music that accompanies the tale. Many more moral tales will be told in that same evening. Tales of how to be a dignified boy or girl, how to respect the weak as well as the strong, how to work hard for one's self and the community.

The Yoruba, like other peoples in Africa, have used folklore as a means of transmitting values from one generation to the other. This usually takes place in the evenings after each day's work. The elder in the clan expects the children to gather round him for stories that have didactic meanings. The storyteller, who is believed to be wise by the experiences he has had in his lifetime or what his dead grandparents told him, relays to the children and even young adults, what the cultures are and the reasons why there are norms and taboos in the community.

In one of his classical books, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole*, Fagunwa tells the story of a hunter's expedition in the forest of a thousand demons. The story teaches bravery, truthfulness, endurance, contentment and loyalty among others. Also there are other stories that have been written which show social and moral values in the Yoruba culture. Apart from the stories that have been written, there still exist numerous short stories that were meant to be passed on from one generation to another. Some of the stories were even reserved for those who were found 'trustworthy'. Many of such stories have been lost since the elders did not pass them on before they died. When an elder dies in Africa, a library has been lost forever. While appreciating the values of reading, writing and numeracy that have promoted information preservation, the merits of oral tradition need not be neglected. In the traditional African society, folklore preserved the people's identity.

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Relevance of Folklore in Contemporary Nigeria

Folklore is a truly African pattern of education that reflects the history and cultural value systems of African people. Folklore prepares children and young people for functional adult life which includes respect for human life, the spirit of communalism and promotion of cultural heritage. In stories, folklore usually shows a reward for moral value, honesty and fellow feeling. It encourages children to engage in participatory education through ceremonies and rituals, and practical works such as weaving and farming. Folklore promotes the cognitive

aspect of education. It takes active memory to recall stories and recite poetry. Through folklore, children and young adults learn how to tell stories and recite poems. These activities sharpen the memory.

Folklore also has recreational values such as singing and dancing. Through folklore, the learners are entertained while they learn. More importantly, folklore can also be used to strengthen the social ties in the society (Cornell, 1993). Folklore creates opportunity for people to recall past experiences and draw lessons that can mould lives when learnt. There is either a story or song that one remembers when faced with the option of doing good and avoiding bad or avoiding good and doing bad.

Folklore in Contemporary Adult Education

The essence of adult education cannot only be to help adults learn. Whatever description is given to who an adult is, the participatory principle of adult education remains the distinctive and quintessential strategy of its delivery. As a method of learning before the advent of the colonialists, folklore can readily be used for adult education programmes. Here, folklore applies to the motif and assumption of adult education programmes. The age-long story of the tortoise can be used in the contemporary era to teach. Hence, Toffler's (1971) admonition that the illiterate persons of the 21st century would not be those who cannot read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.

The tortoise, in traditional Yoruba stories, is depicted as a cunning animal who outwits the other animals. Tortoise gathered all the knowledge of the world, put them inside a calabash and attempted to hide it on top of a palm tree. He was climbing the tree when someone accused him of being foolish to have carried the calabash on his chest instead of keeping it on his back. Having realized his folly and that he could still be corrected, he broke the calabash in annoyance and all the items of knowledge got scattered.

Adult education contends that knowledge can be found in every facet of life, before schooling and outside the school system, until one stops living. There are questions that arise from the story of Tortoise and his attempt to be the repository of knowledge. In what form was the knowledge that he gathered? How could he think he had collected all the knowledge when he had to get them from people and places that were external to him? How would he access the knowledge that was kept in the calabash? Perhaps the knowledge of climbing a palm tree was already inside the calabash. Despite all these questions, the lessons of this story

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that should support the practice of adult education are: learning never ceases until life stops; knowledge has no borders and limits; authentic persons should be open and available for every opportunity and possibility to learn for positive changes in life; life places an imperative on everyone to learn and dispense knowledge at no cost. In the real African understanding of sources of knowledge, it is only the foolish that thinks others do not have something valuable to offer.

African Epistemological Paradigm

Humans are capable of learning through the external and internal senses of vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch and common sense, memory, fantasy and instinct. Scientists and philosophers agree that the external senses are the origin of intellectuality, which is peculiar to human beings. While the idealists hold that intellectuality is received from a superior source, realists suggest that it is a product of human intellect (Orangun, 2001). In the African belief system, there are many supernatural entities which are believed to be responsible for much of the good and evil done in society. These gods are the guardians of human conduct, punishing bad people and rewarding the good; they provide the sanctions for human misconduct, making sure that individuals' actions are in accordance with the values and norms of the society. The African traditional society is an idealist one that holds that intellectual knowledge is derived from supernatural sources.

Community shrines can be found in designated places, such as river banks, the entrances to the community and family compounds, the centre of the town and markets. The gods are involved in the day-to-day living of the people. They are consulted for every individual and communal activity. A person in the traditional African society is not just an individual who happens to live in a society but rather a member of the community. In the African world view, the human being is only a link in the continuous chain of existence, where the dead, the living and the yet unborn form an unbroken family and hence an individual is first and foremost a member of that group before being an individual. From the foregoing, learning in traditional African society aims at transcendence. Transcendence means that human beings constantly strive to go beyond self in thinking, acting and exercising the will. Self-transcendence is that characteristic and exclusive endeavour by humans whereby they constantly strive to surpass self in all they are, wish and have. It can be regarded as the most extraordinary and important aspect of life. Ehusani (1999) says that Western civilization and

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technology cannot grasp the immanence and transcendence of human persons and have often rejected the idea of God and consider absurd the notion of interrelatedness of cosmic realities.

The nature of learning in the African traditional system is directed at the value of human life in relation with the physical, social and spiritual environments. Akinpelu (2006) captures this by saying that:

> . . . in the scale of African values, undoubtedly, the most important is the value of human life; it is of supreme importance. The continuity of the family depends entirely upon the living members, and hence all possible measures are taken to ensure the security of a man's tenure of life – right from birth until old age. The gods are worshipped when a child is born, to solicit their protection and favour, and all efforts are made to ward off any attempts by evil forces to cut short its life. The death of a young man is a serious source of grief which is only mitigated if he leaves an offspring behind to continue his life; by proxy; the death of an old one is celebrated with joy as having been translated into the world of the ancestral spirits to assume the duty of guardian of the family.

Thus learning in African traditional society entails learning to respect and preserve human life, learning to keep the family united as one, learning to please the spiritual elements in human society (ancestors and gods), learning to rear one's children, and learning to care for the aged until death takes them away to join the ancestors. To buttress this, Ochitti (1994) opines that it is wrong to equate indigenous education with child-rearing practices:

> ". . . whereas child-rearing practice is directed essentially at the preparation of children for adult life, indigenous education is much more embracing since it covers the entire lifespan of every individual."

Much more than a child-rearing practice, indigenous education consists of cultural action (language and etiquette at home and peer group in the community), and informal education (spontaneous learning as individuals interact with their social and physical environments in the process of day-to-day living). Informal learning was possible because, in pre-colonial times, everyone played

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more or less the triple roles of learner, educator (to those younger and less knowledgeable), and productive worker. Indigenous education also includes prolonged formal and short formal aspects. Membership of secret cults, for example, lasts for a whole lifetime while acquisition of specialized skills through the apprenticeship system lasts for a specified number of years.

Learning in African culture also occurs through cultural events, proverbs, folktales and songs of the people which usually teach moral values. Modern educational programmes and activities can incorporate elements of the traditional system of education. The practice of folklore should start from home and the society and continue at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. The identity crises and misplaced priority of younger generations show that the quality of instruction at all educational levels and spheres has not inculcated respect for the worth and dignity of the individual, moral and spiritual uprightness in interpersonal and human relations, shared responsibility for the common good of society, and acquisition of competencies necessary for self-reliance.

In modern-day Nigeria, where there are home videos, televisions, viewing centres where European league matches are shown, multimedia phones, radios, cinema houses, cyber-cafes which provide all-night browsing service, folklore in the evening appears to be outmoded, even in the rural areas. Where power supply is a problem, generators are used as an alternative source of power at these viewing centres. These centres are patronized mostly by young people in the evenings and at night.

As attractive as these developments in information and communication technology are, some social problems that were alien to traditional societies have emerged. Internet hackers called 'Yahoo boys' use all kinds of methods to rob people through the Internet. Children who should be at home can be found at night watching football league matches in public places. These children are exposed to dangers on the street and perform poorly in their academics due to inadequate rest. In addition, these activities have destroyed social ties in the community, resulting in poor social control and social capital in the Nigerian society. The practices that promoted societal values in the past should be promoted in order to save the Nigerian society from total collapse.

Conclusion

Songs, imagery, and stories from folklore can be used in modern communication media – radio, television and computer. Even where it is not practicable to gather

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children around an elder in the evenings, electronic media should be used to pass on the people's cultural values to the younger generations. Through these means, young people can learn about their culture and relate them to other cultures. This would restore the identity that is lacking in young Nigerians of today. In the non-formal settings of mass media like radio, television and cinema, folklore should be introduced to catch the attention of the younger generation. After considerable success in the non-formal setting, then it would be expected that classroom teachers introduce folklore to their classroom work.

Folklore should be a vital channel for resuscitating lost cultural values. After all, in the school system, the teacher is an elder who by virtue of training and experience in the community should be able to make the young people understand and uphold indigenous cultural value systems.

Nigeria's National Policy on Education states the need for "the full integration of the individual into the community". This is one of the bases of Nigeria's philosophy on education. It is also based on the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen and the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, both inside and outside the formal school system. These elements on which the philosophy of education is based have learning implications, since all citizens, regardless of age, sex, culture and religion, would be able to use the resources of education to achieve their goals in the society. In a society where there is a wide gap between the rich and the poor, full integration of the individual into the community is rather difficult. An individual in an oppressive society cannot develop into a sound and effective citizen since there is no provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country.

Although the purpose of learning in traditional African societies was the moral incentives the members were given to acquire knowledge, skills and dispositions that were of benefit to the community, this goal of education has not fully been achieved in the modern Nigerian society. This factor helped to forge relationships and gave people the opportunity to probe the depth of their being and the totality of cultural values.

Universal moral values are not to be discovered in education or training *per se*, whatever they are; its potentiality lies in the relationship that emerges between persons and teaching. Learning in both education and training makes this possible. Tapsoba (2002) and some African scholars have emphasized the values

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dimension of learning. According to him, learning needs to be integrated with societal values. There is the need to look at development within the available resources in the society. If people have to build their activities in ways that promote learning, they must have the capacity to access, on a continuous basis, information and knowledge, technologies and other innovations. Before the cultural renaissance in modern Africa, value dimension in learning dated back to the philosophers of the ancient era; it is therefore apt to revitalize the values of traditional society through folklore.

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