
**EXAMINING ORATURE AS CULTURAL LITERACY DEVELOPMENT
TOOL: THE CASE OF CHILD BIRTH SONGS**

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Abstract

Scholars have continued to engage in advancing strategies for ensuring effective literacy development. However, while recognizing the need to come up with strategies that are universally responsive to literacy needs, it is also pertinent to consider the uniqueness of every society, in terms of culture, orientation and world view. Every society has its uniqueness, and this must be built into any development strategy that involves such society. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to examine the place of orature in literacy development of children among the Igbo, south east Nigeria. Literacy ought to be an all-encompassing phenomenon. The contention of the paper is that the seeming disappearance of folktale and folksong, for example, has contributed to the imbalance in the literacy development of the present-day children of Igbo, south east Nigeria. The paper relies on the theory of cultural literacy. The major argument of the paper is that a situation where every effort is put towards developing a child in modern-day science and technology with a near total neglect and discouragement to acquiring the wit, wisdom, and experience that would enable the child effectively fit into his or her native environment is detrimental to the total growth of the child. Thus the recommendation of the paper is the revival of the use of folk songs as effective means of integrating a child into the worldview of his or her environment.

Keywords: Orature, Literacy, Development Strategy, Birth Songs.

1. Introduction

One of the attributes that distinguishes a human being from other animals is the ability to use language to represent the varied social problems and situations. Language is used to express human thoughts and emotions, whether in sorrow or joy. It encapsulates and expresses everything felt and thought by man; an art that can be manipulated by man to satisfy his/her needs in the society.

Linguists have come up with various definitions of language, and one of the constant features used to characterize language in all the definitions is that language is vocal. According to Lyons (1981, p.11), "it is one of the cardinal principles of modern linguistics that spoken language is more basic than written language". McElroy cited in

Azikiwe (2007, p.11), also posits that “language is a composite of sounds, some intelligible and some not, that are universal in their origin and function”.

The vocal resources of man could be utilised for other activities outside language. For instance, man is endowed with the innate ability to stretch his/her vocal cords to produce lyrical and sonorous sounds. This is known as song. Song, just as conventional language, performs different functions, ranging from entertainment, education, communication of messages, and so on. Therefore, there is a close link between language and song. It is against the background of this connection that this paper seeks to examine song as a mode of communication, with particular focus on its potential as a tool for the literacy development of a child. The scope of the paper has also been delimited to birth song which is one of the types of folk song among the Igbo, south east Nigeria.

2. Review of Relevant Concepts

There are cardinal concepts that require brief discussions to help us situate the paper in the proper perspective. They include: literacy, orature, song, and birth song.

Literacy: Literacy is often viewed as the ability to read and write. However, in recent time, the notion of literacy has assumed a much broader sense. It has gone beyond reading and writing to incorporate issues such as cultural literacy, that is, the ability to understand the cultural values, norms and tradition that are essential to enable one fit into and participate in the affairs of one’s society. It is the form of literacy which helps a child develop the right sensibilities and skills for understanding the various undertones associated with his or her society. According to Emejulu (2004,p.214), literacy development of a child should include using “elements of a society’s culture in the mediation of the rest of the culture indicators to children. The mediation could be in formal settings such as schools, libraries, and festivals; or in informal settings such as homes, playgrounds and get-togethers...” This paper, therefore, treats the occasion of birth song, which is an aspect of orature, as one of the informal settings that could be used in the cultural mediation in a child.

Orature: Orature is a term coined to designate African oral literature as a distinct area of scholarly exploration different from the European literary forms. According to Anumihe (2007, p.11) , “the term was coined by PioZimiru and NgugiwaThiong’o to represent the study of African oral and literal (sic) art as distinct from the traditional European forms such as Prose, Drama and Petry” African oral literary forms include: folktales, ballads, myths and legends, songs, riddles, proverbs, chants, festival drama, ritual performances and others. Apart from the artistic functions of entertainment and recreation, oral African literary forms are also used to educate, satirise ills, eulogise

virtues, and preserve culture. The focus of this paper is on folk song (birth song in particular) and its relevance in literacy development.

What is Song: According to Jon Guerra, “song is a composition made of lyric and music for the purposes of producing a proportionate feeling or emotion in relation to a particular matter”(www.jonguerramusic.com). From this definition, song is made up of two components: lyric and music. Lyric makes reference to topics while music or melody makes reference to feeling or emotion. The creativity of a song, thus, comes from the synergy between lyric and melody.

It is also important to distinguish song from music. Song is music with words. Song goes with music but music can go without song. An instance of the latter is what is technically called instrumentals which produce only melody. Song combines melody with vocal expressions (rendition). Music could be produced with mechanical or non-human equipment but song is produced with human voice.

There are different types of song such as religious hymns, country songs, rock and pop songs, traditional African songs and so on. Throughout history the world over, many cultures have developed songs which are connected to their history, and which are often passed down from one generation to another. In Africa for instance, there are traditional folk songs which reflect the activities of common people. In communities where they are performed, everyone knows them even though they may not have existed in writing.

There are different purposes for which songs are performed: to tell stories, express emotion, convey beliefs, make difficult works to be lighter, and entertain. In Africa, the Igbo society as an instance, folksongs are not merely seen as rendition of melodious sounds. They contain very intrinsic feelings of the people’s mind. What is voiced is the consciousness, the hidden messages about the very essence of the socio-cultural existence of the people. On such occasion, song performs the functions of entertainment, information, education, social control and so on. For the purpose of this paper, song is viewed as a mode of linguistic communication that could be harnessed for the socio-cultural development of a child.

Communication in this paper is seen from the viewpoint of expression of ideas, feelings and thoughts. It relies on Crystal (1982, p72) who describes communication from the linguistic point of view as “the transmission and reception of information (a message) between source and receiver using a signaling system: in linguistic contexts, source and receiver are interpreted in human terms, the system involved is a language and the notion of response to (or acknowledgement of) the message becomes of crucial importance”. From this definition, there are variables that constitute a communication situation:

- There is information
- There is someone to send the information
- There is a signaling system
- There is someone to receive the information.

In the context of this paper, therefore, song becomes communication because these variables are present. The singer is the sender, the listener or audience becomes the receiver, the voicing of the song and the overall performance (including the paralinguistic cues) become the signaling system, and the social message embedded in the lyric becomes the message. However, it is the message component that is of interest to the paper. This is essentially because the paper believes that there is no communication without message. Thus, by extension, it believes that there is no song without message or purpose. It is the message component that gives social, moral, and political relevance to a song.

Song exists in words (language). Human language has the potential to communicate different messages, different moods, as well as different intentions. According to Anyanwu (1999, p.138), language is “a system composed of symbols, signs and vocal acts arbitrarily created and conventionally used in communication”. From the viewpoint of Anyanwu’s definition, song which exists in lyric (vocal signs and symbols) is communicative. It is in examining the messages embedded in the songs and their relevance to the context of situation that the linguistic essence of a song could be appreciated.

Birth song: Birth song is a functional song rendered by women to herald the birth and safe delivery of a new born baby. There are many sides to the significance of birth song. Tasha (2011, p.11) observes that “the birth of a child is always a time of great rejoicing. It means that a couple was blessed, and that the family unit and the community are being perpetuated and strengthened...”. The child is the core of lineage continuity, therefore, is valued above any other gifts of nature. It is a blessing which everybody prays that should not elude him or her in life. The occasion of birth song is, thus, an important one in traditional Igbo, and African cosmogony at large, and is always an occasion for merry-making.

Uweh (2011, p3) on his part affirms the above view when he states that “in Igbo culture east and west of the Niger, the arrival of a new baby is always greeted with happiness. There is always a joyous welcome song. As soon as the news of a safe delivery of a baby is broken, the women around would assemble and start singing songs of joy and happiness”. From Uweh’s assertion, the source of joy is not only from the promise of lineage perpetuity, but also from the fact that the woman has been delivered of the baby safely. This is where the gender dialectics and other social structure insinuations come into play. Sometimes, the songs are also laced with satirical connotations relating to the

assumed peripheral role of men in child bearing as well as general indictment of male folk in society.

Furthermore, in Igbo land particularly, children are the cherished bond of love for their parents, family, clan and community. This is why their welfare is not usually left for their nuclear parents. They are highly valued, fed, taught and trained by all concerned in the community. A hungry child is not left to roam the village. People often volunteer to take the responsibility from the clan or community. Also, a disobedient child is not left for the nuclear parents, he or she can be cautioned or flogged by anybody from the clan or community. Children are seen as the responsibility of all. Therefore, any discrimination against them is regarded as an act of wickedness.

Granvist and Inyama (1992, P.43) write that “an Igbo proper name says that there is nothing as valuable as a child (Ifeyinwa), an expression which most of the birth songs repeat, echo or imply, and any anger or gesture of disapproval would be construed by the community as ingratitude and wickedness”. This pattern of naming and other features which are inherent in birth songs are sociolinguistic manifestations of the place of the child in the Igbo society. In birth songs, meaning is of great essence as it is to other songs. It informs, teaches and corrects defaulting individuals in society towards amending their ways, hence ideal as a literacy tool.

3. Socio-linguistics of Song

Socio-linguistics according to Wardhaugh (2006, p.13) investigates “the relationship between language and society with the goal being a better understanding of the structure of languages and how languages function in communication”. Ndimele (1999, p.1) simplifies the definition as “the study of the interaction of language and society and the many factors that arise with the use of language in a society”. The presupposition of these definitions is that language enjoys intricate relationship with society. It is often said that language does not exist in a vacuum. In being used to express ideas, it bears the culture, identity, as well as the thought patterns of the people.

Against this background, song which we have established as being close to language, cannot be entirely divorced from its socio-linguistic setting. The relevance of its message can be fully appreciated when contextualized within the sociology (the pattern of social existence, the culture and thought pattern) of the society where it is used. It is in this manner that the function of entertainment, satire, eulogy; the iconic representations as well as the metaphors in a song can be appreciated.

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this discussion is culture literacy theory. Culture literacy theory stretches the application and knowledge of literacy beyond the traditional reading and writing skills to the broader skills in the culture, norms and tradition of one's society and how they can be positively applied to ensure active participation in the affairs of the society. Studies, especially in sociolinguistics, have shown a close connection between language and culture, as well as the fact that both are communally owned and shared. One can only claim to be a full member of any society when one is able to share in its language and culture. Meanings in language are sometimes embedded in such a manner that they are culturally assigned; such meanings contain knowledge concerning attitudes towards life. Knowledge of a language should therefore stretch to the cultural embodiments that assign meanings to the symbols. The focus of this paper is on orature, with particular reference to the use of folk song in the literacy development of the child hence the relevance of this theoretical framework.

5. Methodology

The data used in this study were collected through direct observation and participation. The method of data analysis adopted is qualitative. The researcher analysed two birth songs among the popular birth songs used by the Owerri people, south east Nigeria, identifying the features that contain significant sources of culture literacy in them. The method of selecting the birth songs analysed is through simple random technique.

5.1 Data Presentation

The data used in this paper are two birth songs entitled Onye Nuru Olu Nwa and Ihe Eje Ebu Uzo Aju Bu Nwa which are popular among the people of Owerri, south east Nigeria. For clarity, the songs have been presented in both Igbo and the English translation.

Song A:

Onye Nuru Olu Nwa

Igbo Version

Onye nuru olu nwa eee

Ah eee

Onyenuru olu nwa mee ngwa-ngwa

Obughi out onye new nwa

English Translation of Song A

He who hears the voice of a baby eee
Ah eee
He who hears the voice of a baby should hasten up
A child does not belong to only an individual.

(Note that the idiophonic components of the song have been retained in both the original and the translated versions.)

Song B:

Onye Muru Nwa Abalaa Eze

Igbo Version

Gini ka ebu uzo aju eee
Ihe eje bu uzo aju wu nwa
Gini ka ebu uzo aju eee
Ihe eje bu uzo aju wu nwa
Ihe eje ebu uzo aju wu nwa
Maka na onye muru nwa abaalaa eze
Ya mere anyi ji na agu si onye muru nwa abaala eze
Onye muru nwa na elu uwa eee
Onye muru nwa abaalaa eze
Ineee aaa onye muru nwa na elu uwa eee
Onye muru nwa abaalaa eze.

English Translation of Song B

What is the first thing to ask after eee
The first thing to ask after is child
What is the first thing to ask after eee
The first thing to ask after is child
The first thing to ask after is child
Because if a person bears child, the person has become a king
That is why we sing that if a person bears child, the person has become a king
If a person bears child in this world eee
The person who bears child has become a king
Ineeee If a person bears child in this world eee
The person who bears child has become a king

6. Analysis and Discussion

There are several socio-linguistic imperatives within the Igbo society, which are present in these songs. Let us first examine Song A.

This song celebrates the spirit of communality that is part of the socio-culture of the Igbo society. It is obvious that such song may not create as much impact within the western society where individualism thrives above communalism. Let us consider some of the implicit messages in the song.

The song has the implicit advice that communal existence is better than individualism. Secondly, it emphasizes the importance of child protection and care which is core to the psychic existence of the Igbo. This might also not make as much impact within a society (say the Northern Nigeria) where a child is often left to his/her own fate and destiny. Thus, the song not only entertains, but also educates and cautions, and this can best be appreciated within the social consciousness and viewpoints of the Igbo that own the song. Such knowledge is required for the proper integration of the Igbo child within his/her society.

Song B celebrates the primacy of the child in the existence of every family. It says in categorical terms that a person that bears child has become a king. King in the context of the song transcends a person occupying an administrative position. It is viewed from the view point of metonymy, where it incorporates certain attributes such as a favoured person, a blessed person, a respectable person. In this regard, the song sums the benefits that come with a child in a family in the image of a king.

Again, to underscore the feeling attached to child bearing in the Igbo society, the song states that the first thing that any concerned person asks after is child. This presupposes that and wealth and other social paraphernalia are inconsequential vis-à-vis having a child.

Based on these identified features, the songs do not only entertain. They serve as a window into understanding the socio-culture of a people, encapsulating their perceptive modes, value system, expressing their likes and dislikes. Such folk songs, therefore, are therefore veritable tool that could be used to understand the culture and mode of existence of the people.

A culturally literate child would ask questions such as: what role does the song play within the social context of its performance? What prompted the choice of the song at that moment? Are there messages or lessons that could be derived from the song? Answers to these questions would help the child grow in the understanding of some of the socio-cultural nuances in his/her society.

Assessing the relevance of the song to its context of performance is as important. For instance, the song is a birth song, and would be absurd if performed by the male unless as caricature. Similarly, the song would amount to absurdity if performed at a burial ceremony. The message will remain the same but the contextual expectations would be violated. The messages or lessons inherent in the songs have been identified. Therefore, these songs when performed are not exclusively for entertainment, but are also intended to educate the listeners or audience. Through such, someone who listens to the songs is expected to extract some basic knowledge about the world view and thought pattern of the society; which would help him/her actively participate in the affairs of the society.

7. Conclusion

The paper has examined the role of orature, particularly folk song, in the cultural literacy development of a child. It has examined song from the perspectives of expression of ideas and communication of the cultural nuances of a society. It has also observed that song is not limited to a mere rendition of melodious sounds. Song involves the voicing of the intrinsic feelings, perception and worldview of the people. Language is a major medium through which literacy development is carried out. Thus, the linguistic properties of a folk song, as well as the embedded messages assigned to it, can serve as veritable tools that can be harnessed for the literacy development of a child.

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