

Indigenous Children's Play-songs as Vital Tools for Ethnic Cohesion in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article argues that indigenous children's play songs are vital tools, which can be harnessed to foster ethnic cohesion in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious polity like Nigeria. It also shows how the wisdom in these songs is accessed. Examples of six (6) selected indigenous children's play songs were analysed using the functionalist theory of Oral literature. The study demonstrates the pedagogic roles of children's play songs, emphasizing the neglected children's songs mostly from the ethnic minority of Plateau State. The paper argues that the indigenous children's songs lead to and provide a rich environment for inculcating values that are absent in English nursery rhymes. The songs depict their thoughts and worldview on the relevance of peaceful coexistence. In this way, incorporating traditional childlore in teaching approaches not only enriches the Nigerian orature, but also facilitates harmonious social cohabitation where "all birds fly freely without colliding". The virtues and values learnt are practical and have a long lasting effect on the child.

Introduction

Nigeria is a very highly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious polity with over four hundred different languages and ethnic groups. Thus the management of such a diverse country has remained a major challenge. Rather than nurture and utilize the various potential of these complex heterogeneous societies (Nigeria), these diversities have continuously bred crises: The incessant cycles of violence have been traced to various causes ranging from politics, ethnicity, religion, quest for economic dominance, among others.

It must be stated that, due to urban migration, various cultures and languages have leapt speedily across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Rather than a harvest

of harmony and unity, the cards of ethnic rivalry and other divisive tendencies are still being flashed in our polity. This reality hangs like a time bomb waiting to explode and disintegrate the nation.

It is against this backdrop that this paper explores and recommends indigenous children's play songs as a vital tool in fostering ethnic cohesion.

1.2 Indigenous Children's Play Song

Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto writes that children's literature has always provided an opportunity for nurturing, response, appreciation and internalization of people's cultural heritage. Piaget as quoted by Read D. Tuddenham emphasizes that young children strive for understanding in a world that fascinates and sometimes confuses them. He regards the growth process, in particular, cognitive growth as a process of individual discovery propelled by personal experience. Quoting Saul McLeod writes that although Vygotsky's Social Development Theory differs from Piaget's, however, it agrees with him on the submission that children do not strive alone since their efforts are embedded in a social context where the things they notice make them become inquisitive. Vygotsky further argues that parents and elder children offer assistance, present challenges, provide instruction and encourage the child's interest and motivation.

The researcher observes that children's play songs provide an opportunity where the children learn by guided participation in social experiences, and explorations of their world as they play. Also, such indigenous play songs have been found to instill in the young self-confidence, social skills and social understanding (Eienberg and Fabes) This stance is justified by the position of scholars such as Sutton-Smith, Richard Priebe, Iwokitok, and others who view the concept of childlore as a well-defined and recognizable field of academic discourse.

Indigenous children's play songs provide children an opportunity to learn values such as sharing, respect, and friendship, among others. Most of these indigenous songs pose skills that teach the children about social interaction from childhood to adulthood. Sometimes, these songs are recited as rhymes, other times they are accompanied with drumming, or are a form of games laced with songs.

Kathleen Stassen Berger observes that, children's play songs are more than just games, as most researchers will have us believe. The songs are embellished with valuable skills that are capable of shaping the entire conduct of the child.

Sadly, some Nigerians seem to be running away from these indigenous children's songs and most nursery/primary schools will rather conform to such English rhymes as "Bah bahbah Black Sheep" which foster a culture of subordination in the sense that it encourages a master-slave relationship where the sheep's wool is for the master and his family and not the sheep itself. This according to Shumirai Nyota and Jacob Maparaputs in the learner's mind that he has to work for the master and not enjoy the fruits of his labour, a mentality indoctrinated into the Almajiris in northern Nigeria by their benefactors.

1.3 The authenticity of indigenous Children's Play Songs in Fostering Ethnic Cohesion.

The literature on integration and national cohesion is replete with different definitions of the term. Maurice Duverger, as Emmanuel Ojo quotes, sees it as "the process of unifying a society which tends to make it harmonious city, based upon an order its members regard as equitably harmonious" (177). Ethnic cohesion as used in this segment implies the need for ethnic harmony in a more positive and constructive manner. Fernando opines that ethnic harmony entails two main components and these are low visibility of boundaries and a high level of positive interaction. It should be noted however, that cohesion does not mean an elimination of boundaries, like the great famous strong walls of Berlin; the goal is basically to reduce at least the rigidity created by boundaries. For instance, a monolingual community is a rigid boundary. However, when the opportunity is created to accept and learn another language and culture, the rigid boundary would be evidently reduced.

The play method has over the years served as the best method of learning through which children acquire several psychomotor skills. This is indeed a legendary method of teaching children indelible values of conduct. Ironically, this method is gradually giving way to the regimented, strict set-up of the constructed colonial classroom situation. This demoralizes the children and turns them into mechanised products, guided by a strict code of "thou shall and thou shall, not." F.B.O. Akporobaro writes that in many ways, indigenous literature shapes an individual's mental processes (35). Agreeing with Akporobaro's submission, Akinwumi Isola, quoting Geertz, states that culture perpetuates and develops men's attitudes and knowledge about life.

Since language is the abiding place of culture and literature provides its illumination, children's indigenous literature can be harnessed to cultivate in the child the right attitude of mutual respect for other cultures and a knowledge that only a complimentary co-existence with other cultures can foster harmony since no man is an island.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

Functionalism was first developed by William R. Bascom in 1965 when he identified the four functions of folklore: Folklore lets people escape from repressions imposed upon them by society; Folklore validates culture, justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them, Folklore is a pedagogic device which reinforces morals and values and builds wit, and Folklore is a means of applying social pressure and exercising social control. This paper finds the theoretical reasoning of functionalism to be the most compelling approach to interpreting folklore. There are several ways that folklorists interpret texts, and many deal with different theories and interpretations. However, Functionalism interprets folklore as an ongoing process of expressing information and beliefs within folk groups through communicative means (Sim/Stephens 174). The ideals of functionalism focus on the community, and the idea of a folk. Of the various proponents of the functionalists theorists, this study relies on the Functionalist theory of oral literature proposed by Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown.

This theory expounds the view that any cultural activity must have a utilitarian value for its people. For the purpose of this research, this theory was considered ideal since the researcher's interest lay in the utilitarian function of the oral narratives as reconstructions of a community's culture and history and as media through which the community's philosophy of life is expressed. Functionalists see society as a stable entity perpetuated by various cultural activities. Narratives are then seen as embodiments of the beliefs, customs, rituals and structures that need to be maintained. They are also charged with the role of censoring deviants (Okumba Miruka, 15).

The theory in effect proposes an absolutist way of looking at life as a construct maintained by selected immutable principles and perhaps processes that must be perpetuated. However, it is worth noting that societies change and accommodate contemporary thought. For the purpose of this research, the theory

investigates how children's play songs can be used as pedagogic tools to reconstruct the fragmented nature of the Nigerian polity as a consequent of the various ethno-religious conflicts the nation has and is still going through. In particular, the study opens up the people's worldview of unity as projected in the selected children's play songs and the functionality level of the songs at meaning and content.

1.5 Literature and the Childlore

Many African writers have continued to infuse the traditional oral forms as well as its antecedent worldview that include the Childlore and childhood experiences in their written expressions. Uwemedimo E. Iwoketok submits that such inclusion particularly as it relates to children, accentuates the functionality of folklore in general and the Childlore in particular. She reiterates that "... all the major issues of life; past present and future: life as it affects adults, life as it affects children within adult society, find expression in this lore" (1). Therefore evidently conspicuous, in the fabric of written literature are identifiable instances of the Childlore. The childhood troupe has become an important feature not exclusive to the oral tradition, but in the written tradition. Madeline Hron identifies the adoption of the "child focalize" (28) in literary narrative as a rich literary tradition. A few among the earlier generation of African writers include some established African literary texts that explore life from the child's point of view. Some canonical African literary texts that deploy the Childlore include; Camara Laye's *the African Child* (1955); Ferdinard Oyono's *Houseboy* (1966); Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1971) Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) Chukwuemeka Ike's *Potter's Wheel* (1973), *Bottle Leopard* (1985) Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala and Arrow of God* (1964), among others. Despite their thematic, stylistic and contextual differences these works, appear to be similar in their use of a child narrator as a voice and symbol of particular African issues. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe includes the detailed narration of the famous folktale "Why the Tortoise has a Broken Shell" (67-70) as well as "The Boy and His Flute" (235-9) in *Arrow of God*. These inclusions confirm the important role of Childlore in the African worldview. While canonical African fiction uses childhood in order to expose oppression and exploitation, it can be plausibly argued that folklore in traditional societies serve as pedagogic tools to enact in the child the human attitudinal

societal expectations and norms. Isidore Okpewho thinks that the constant presence of the oral tradition by implication Childlore, in modern African writing is to “demonstrate that Africa has had, since time immemorial, traditions that should be respected and a culture to be proud of” (qtd. in Olaniyan and Quayson 83).

Ekaterina P. Stavrou submits that, “Folk Literature is a prime scientific area through which a child develops his identity and physiognomy, as it points out the diverse nature of things during the pedagogical process”. (527). He advocates that educators should take this fact into account so that they can substantially and effectively guide children to find real truth and knowledge and, at the same time, realize their true essence through folk tradition. According to him, tradition, which involves the cultural heritage of centuries, has the power to consciously or unconsciously penetrate into the soul of a child, which shapes his identity at an immature stage of development. Our intervention in this paper focuses on folk songs.

1.5 Selected Indigenous Children's Play Songs' Translations and Meanings
Each ethnic group in Nigeria has a rich children's oral poetic heritage comprising dance, songs, musical instrument and chants. Interestingly, these various types of songs share similarities in wisdom, function, subject-matter, the values they emphasize, the vices they condemn, philosophy they propagate, among others. These similarities, when strongly emphasized, reveal a common origin of the various ethnic groups, and these can be used to inculcate values such as respect for other cultures and the need for harmonious living.

Six (9) indigenous children's play songs are purposefully randomly selected across the ethnic groups in Nigeria. An attempt is made to translate and analyse these songs.

Songs 1: Igbo Children Play Song Solo:

Kwenuudo

Chorus: Udo – o – o, udogo di,

Solo: Ebinwunye Udosiriofe Egusi

Chorus: Udo – o – o, udogo di,

Solo: Kwenuudo

Chorus: Udo – o – o, udogo di,

ebihunanya di, eba,,ahuk,,udoga di.

Solo: Umuokorobiakwnen,,u – udo
Chorus: Udo – o – o, udogo di
ebihunanya di, eba,,ahuk,,udoga di. Solo:
Umuagboghobiakwen,,u – udo Chorus:
Udo – o – o, udogo di ebihunanya di,
eba,,ahuk,,udoga di.
Translation:

Solo: Echo Peace,
Chorus: Peace-o-Peace-o-, there will be
peace
Solo: Udo's wife cooked Egusi soup
Chorus: Peace-o-Peace-o-, there will be
peace
Solo: Echo Peace,
Chorus: Peace-o-Peace-o-, there will be
peace
Where there is love, there, there
will be peace
Solo: Young boys, echo Peace,
Chorus: Peace-o-Peace-o-, there will be
peace
Where there is love, there, there
will be peace
Solo: Young girls, echo Peace,
Chorus: Peace-o-Peace-o-, there will be
peace
Where there is love, there, there
will be peace

This play song is performed by children between ages seven to twelve, during moon light nights. The keyword in the song is peace. The children perform it while dancing around sing in circular form.

The major thematic thrust of the song is peace which is not a supernatural phenomenon but that which is propelled by man's action. The song is preaching peace so as to make for progress, development, and prosperity in the society. These song texts do not only have themes but also stylistic ways or devices applied in the composition. These include repetition, and rhyme scheme. Repetitive device is used in the above song so as to have an extended

performance. An item is repeated several times before it is changed to another one "Peace-o-Peace-o-, there will be peace/Where there is love, there, there will be peace". Again the performers may want to emphasize some points. Repetitions as seen in the song are effected through textual phrasings and chorus. The diction is simple, denoting the simplicity in which children interact among theirs peers.

In the song also food is juxtapose with peace. Here, the wife of Udo cooks the children's favourite soup. Eating food is profoundly a social urge. Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is also an occasion for sharing, for distributing and giving, for the expression of altruism, whether from parents to children, children to peers, or anyone to visitors and strangers. Food is the most important thing a mother gives a child. Thus food becomes not just a symbol of, but the reality of love and security as evident in the song. This is a symbolic way of appeasing the children, thus this action has brought peace. Although the original audience is the Igbo community, the song can be sung either as a nursery rhyme or used during Physical and Health Education periods when the children engage in different activities.

Songs 2: Yoruba Children Play Song

L'abeigiorombo
N'ibel'agbenserewa
Inuwa dun, arawaya
L'abeigiorombo Orombo,
orombo Orombo,
orombo.

Translation

Under the orange tree
Where we play our games
We are happy, we are excited
Under the orange tree...
Orange, orange Orange,
orange.

This is a children's play song from the Yoruba extraction of Nigeria. Children from the Yoruba speaking part of the country sing this song while playing together

outdoors. They sing it, during play sometimes holding hands or sitting down under the shade of a tree in the hot sun. The aphorism of the above children play song conveys the philosophical truth of unity of purpose. The conscious use of the pronouns “we” and “our” denotes that a child alone cannot enjoy play. The setting of the song which is “Under the orange tree”, shows that natural resources are to enjoyed by all. The song, therefore stand, as a major means of preaching and instilling, the act of communality amidst the Yoruba society. The contextual content of the togetherness in the song, further recounts and reminds children generally of the irrevocable unity and selflessness. Hence, their enjoying the shade the tree provides as well as the nourishment from the orange juice. This kind of song further complement and emphasis the place and the need of unity as a virtue in the life of every child in the Yoruba society. The Yoruba society believes that good character stands as the foundation of any child that wants to succeed in life. This is been supported and been said of any child with a character through the popular proverbial phrase among the Yoruba that „Iwarereniesoeniyan“ (Good character is the treasure of life).

Songs 3: Hausa Children's Play Song

Solo: Ina wanimaidubanbaya

Chorus: Ba wanimaidubanbaya

Solo: Akwaiwanimaidubanbaya

Chorus: Ba wanimaidubanbaya

Solo: Is anyone looking back wards

Chorus: No one is looking backwards

Solo: Who is looking back wards

Chorus: No one is looking backwards

The above song is sung during children's games. It is a call and response song it is observed that both the cantor and the response/chorus are constant. The repetitive device in the song is done so as to have an extended performance. The cantor and response are repeated several times while the lead performer runs around the other children as they clap to the rhythm of the song before the baton is changed to another one. Again the performers may want to emphasize some points. Here, the rule is for the other children to remain focus and not to look back. However they are also expected to be conscious of the action of the led performer. The lead performer drops the stick behind any of the children and if he/she comes

back to see that the child is not conscious of what has happened, such child is pursed and punished. This children's game can be used effectively to inculcate the need for children to be conscious to the events in their environment while remaining focused in their task, so as not be overtaken by danger unguided. Also, in a multi-ethnic school setting the game can be used to foster harmony amidst the children, the selection of who becomes the led performer is often done unconsciously. This way tolerance and friendship are established.

Song 4: Pidgin Children's Play Song

If I call your name,
 You come and dance!
 If I call your name
 Will you come and dance?
 (Name) come and dance,
 Dance your mama dance, Dance
 your papa dance.
 Pee peepee you too sabi dance!

Translation

If I call your name,
 You come and dance!
 If I call your name
 Will you come and dance?
 (Ebere, Amina, Gbenga) come and dance,
 Dance your mama dance, Dance your
 papa dance.
 Pee peepee you can dance well!

The above song is similar to the Hausa Children's play song. The children make a circle and hold hands. Each child takes turns going into the centre of the circle while the others sing. The one in the centre of the circle sings and dances to impress. There is such fun and joy in this play song and circle dance. The naming of the next child to dance is done spontaneously. This is done until every child takes turn to dance. At the end of each performance, the children themselves give verdict on the ability of the performer. The last 2 lines of that song is sang in the Pidgin version of the English language and it says 'pee pee pee you too sabi dance.' 'To sabi' means that you can dance well, that is if you can dance well. But

if you are not a good dancer, then the line will go, 'pee pee pee, you no sabi dance, you no sabi dance' - 'no' meaning "you cannot dance". This when consciously controlled by the children educators will inculcate the virtues of fairness and equity as the judgment given by these children is not based on ethnicity and nepotism, but on how they see the child perform.

Song 5. Ngas Children's Play Song

Mujikhi mu kanke
Mujikhi mu kanke
Mujikhi mu kanke
Ngasmwa mu tong gak
Ngasmwa mu tong gak
Ngasmwa mu tong gak
Ngasmwamujiooo
Mukankekhimutonggak
Wunijigwal da ritka
Muni jigwal d ant ka
Ngasmwamujiooo
Mukankekhimutonggak

Translation

Come let us have unity
Come let us have unity
Come let us have unity
Ngas people come let us live as one
Ngas people come let us live as one
Ngas people come let us live as one
Ngas people come ooo.
Let us unite and live as one
You see this evil they are doing is not good.
Ngas people come ooo.
Let us unite and live as one.

The timing for the performance of the song is not restricted to any particular time of the day. The thematic thrust of the song is unity. There is the effusive use of repetition as a stylistic device to accentuate the theme imbedded in the song. Also the rhyme scheme adds to the rhythmic note of the song and this appeals to the

sense of the children. Thus, in a school environment, the song as Ishola puts it, can be used to replace such songs as „Bah bah Black sheep“, a colonial bequeath to a “country where the sheep hardly produces any wool”.

The thematic thrust of song 2 also stresses the need for peace and unity. This kind of song, when taught and learnt across cultural frontiers, certainly will promote peace and cohesion.

Song 6. Mwaghavul Children's Play Song

Balka, Balka

Balka, mpeba'arnshak

Translation:

Unity, Unity

Unity, for helping each other

The above short song is performed during play, usually after a hectic time at the farm. The Mwaghavul community is still known for its communal labour practices. Thus such songs are taught to children to prepare them for a positive interaction during adulthood. Unity strikingly is also stressed alongside the need for communal existence, a feature which is gradually becoming alien to our present society. Such songs can be used to re-enact the very values that mark the African identity. Although the song comprises of two lines, it is prolonged through a repetitive performance.

Song 7. Mupun Children's Play Song Amewimokhideekoorsii eh?

Oh a muno

Wuwaniwunkhikambilka eh

Mu wwakum o ...

Wuukatshurepmorhitokkumme?

O ... haiyoo .. '.

Da Jesukhijilernun a shak o ... Bhiwuuji o ...

Translation

Who are those over there?

Yes, we are!

Where are you coming from with baskets on your head?

Do women participate in paganism?
Absolutely no!
Jesus has come to unite us together
Therefore everybody should come.

The above song has some religious undertone. It juxtaposes both paganism and Christianity. The thematic thrust stresses both unity and liberation, particularly for the women. The traditional religious practices of Mupun (an ethnic group in Pankshin Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria) restrict women from certain roles in their indigenous religious practices. However, the intervention of Christianity with its liberational praxis has dealt a devastating blow to this relegation. Thus the people are urged to come together as one. Through the use of rhetorical questions the song draws attention of the audience as well as the performers to the thematic thrust of unity on one hand as well as comparison between the mode of worship of Christianity and paganism. The unity emphasized here, is gender based. Through the umbrella of Christianity, men, women and children have freedom of worship and equal access to God.

Song 8. Berom Children's Play Song

Simi Simi
Simi à sélor et
SimiSimi
Simi à dàldyam
Simi à sélor et
Simi à séloret.....
Simi à sépomoret?
Simi à séyéi mo?
Simi à dàlmwal.....

Translation

Love Love

Love in our homes
Love Love
Love is stronger than money
When there is Love in our homes
Love in our homes

Will there be peace in the society?
 Is love stronger than all?
 Love is stronger than money and the maker of peace

The above Berom song stresses the importance of love. The subject matter contains moral lessons and values in addition to the entertainment it provides. The moralistic undertone of this song can be used to check vices such as greed, selfishness, materialism, among others. At the same time, the song can be used to teach values such as love and peace, components that are virtually absent in our polity as captured in an Igbo proverb „onyeobulaza aha nnaya“ (let everyone answer his father's name). This song may be the exclusive preserve of the Berom community, a tribe in Plateau State, but certainly, it contains values capable of promoting national unity.

Song 9: Fier Children's Play Songs
 Call: Wel lo ... Welosinbetin ...
 Response: Wel a kankakhat hoi ya ...
 Call: Wellowelosinbetin ...
 Response: Khatihoiyatibalafudes
 I ... madotta to yaltikan ...
 Kakhat hoi yanattekankangop.

Translation

Call: Come come my brothers
 Response: Come let us unite
 Call: Unity is very good for us
 Call: Our god is calling us to unite
 Response: If we don't come together and unite
 We will finish.

“Wel lo” is a play song common among Fiery people, an ethnic group in Pankshin Local Government Area of Plateau State. The participants are young boys and girls between ages seven and thirteen. The group forms a circle, one participant sings while the others respond. Another participant is selected to stand alone outside the circle, and a masquerade takes him away. The rest will together resist any further attempt to take any person within the circle, and will prevail. The

Igbos have a similar song called “Agu o rinwaturu” (Lion water of a sheep).

The above play song strengthens the value of unity and discourages individuality. The song when taught across cultural frontiers can be used to stress the need for communal effort in combating any evil and action capable of disintegrating the nation.

Finally, all the selected children's play songs across the six (6) cultural and language frontiers share similar wisdom. This goes to reveal the inter-relatedness of the diverse languages and cultures. Thus there is the need for us, particularly those in the field of the nation's educational system, to pause and rethink “where the rain started to beat us,” as a popular Igbo proverb puts it.

1.6 Conclusion

This paper concludes that children's indigenous play songs, are an untapped treasury with undeniable social and literary relevance. The songs analysed here are prototypes meant not only for child's entertainment but to accentuate Bascom's argument on the four cardinal roles of folklore among which are validating culture, its pedagogic nature through inculcated morals and values, a means of applying social pressure and exercising social control. As humans occupying their unique space, children employ play songs to address issues that concern them. The style and language of these songs are similar to the children's everyday conversation. Hence, they employ indirect speech to state their demands. This study demonstrates the pedagogic roles of children's play songs, bringing to bear the neglected children's songs mostly from the ethnic minority of Plateau State. The songs depict their thoughts and world view on the relevance of peaceful coexistence. In this way incorporating traditional childlore in teaching approaches not only enriches the Nigerian oral literature, but it also facilitates the building of harmonious society where as a Yoruba proverb puts it, “all birds fly freely without colliding”.

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