

# Literature

## What Kind of Literature for Ethical Education in Africa?

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### Abstract

I attempt in this paper to answer the question “What kind of literature is needed for ethical education in Africa, especially in this era of globalization?” I proceed to examine three identifiable kinds of literature in Africa: Oral literature in local African and modern European languages, written literature in local African languages and written literature in European languages—to determine what role each is playing in our contemporary educational system. I then advance the view that, in spite of the progressive transition of Africa from the predominance of Oral literature in local languages to written literature in European languages, and in spite of the undue influence of European languages in the education of many Africans, Oral literature in African languages remains the most appropriate language of education for Africans. This is especially true at the lower primary level where the very foundation of ethics and all education is laid. Indeed, it is this aspect which calls for the efforts of each and every African country in the development of oral literature for these major reasons. In the first place, oral literature is an important component of African cultural heritage. Besides being the most vigorous and effective medium of reflecting contemporary ethical and cultural diffusion prevalent in Africa, oral literature provides a greater opportunity for the development of literary talent than does written literature in modern European Languages. I will use folktales and proverbs selected from different parts of Africa to underscore the role and function of oral literature as part of both national and global literature.

### Introduction

This new integrated culture of yours with the African stream diluted by [foreign] currents, call it whatever you please, but don't call it African. (Fonlon, 1968:8)

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate and contribute to action-oriented debate relating to the fundamental problem facing policy makers in most African countries which, put quite simply, has to do with the rapid and significant decline in ethological aspect of education offered in post colonial Africa. The resulting moral depravity became all the more pernicious because it has, in turn engendered such insidious evils as corruption, embezzlement, kleptomania and hedonism which have entrenched themselves firmly in our society.

This dehumanising and gangrenous phenomenon has raised compelling ideological and social issues with questions that require urgent answers. One of these issues is the relevance and inadequacy of the present educational system in most African countries:

What is the philosophy behind it? What are its premises and guidelines? What and whose social vision is it setting out to serve? On the basis of our answers above, what sort of literature should we be teaching in our schools? (Brumfit and carter, 1986:223)

We wish to posit in this paper that the moral decadence in body politic today is the result of European imperialist bourgeois philosophy behind the educational system bequeathed to us by our erstwhile colonial masters and the paucity of the ethical and moral nature of the literature that is being taught in our schools.

### **Definition of terms**

Before delving into the heart of the matter, however, we intend first to define our two terms, education and literature. Kneller in Ezewuu defines education as “the process by which society deliberately transmits its cultural heritage through schools, colleges, universities and other institutions” (Edward Ezewu, 1984:32). Kneller’s view of education is modern. That is, it excludes simple school-less societies. The fact remains that whether in its formal and/ or informal stance, education is used basically to transmit cultural heritage. Rev Father T.H. Mbuy opines that if education means anything at all, it must make the human being more human. According to him, the human being operates in four levels: physical, emotional, intellectual and religious. He posits that

On the physical level, he [the human being] is no better than a brute. As an emotional being he is a “bundle of passions”. His intelligence could transform him into a wise rogue while at the religious level, at the danger of falling into fanaticism looms very much in the background (1996:98).

Historically and at different times, various tendencies have tried to educate by emphasizing one of the aspects of the human being but in as much as each of these forms of education supplied a desired goal, none by itself can be considered education. Education must therefore aim at the entire person; the whole being. It must at the same time, train the body and make it physically healthy, enlighten and educate the senses to appreciate the beauty in the world; cultivate the intellect to judge correctly and apply reason in the moral sphere to get a well formed conscience. It should produce what Fonlon calls “the genuine intellectual” who is both a saint and scholar.

D.J. O’Connor as cited by Ezewu writes that the “educational system of any community is a more or less elaborate mechanism designed by a society to instil in individuals certain skills and attitudes that are judged to be useful and desirable in society” (Ezewu,32). According to O’Connor, the business of education is to develop the individual person and prepare him to function effectively in society.

The French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, sees education as “the influence exercised by the

adult members of a given society over the young ones” (32). Durkheim views education from the sociological point of view of socialization. For Bernard Nsokika Fonlon, education is the “physical, the aesthetic, the intellectual and the moral upbringing of man” (Fonlon, 1965:16). We gather from the above definitions that the primary aim of education is to prepare the right type of academic and interactive environment for the individual to allow him to grow physically, mentally and spiritually. Seen in this light, we can conclude that education prepares or nurtures individuals to live in society and to perform specific functions for society. But education cannot function without a system and, as we learn:

The nature of this system of education will depend, in the main on what sort of individual that particular society wants to produce, or on what is their idea of the perfect man. And their idea of the perfect perfect man will depend, to a large extent, on the problems that beset that society; for their ideal man will be the man best equipped, best able to meet these problems (Fonlon, 1965:15)

Traditional life in pre-colonial Africa subsisted on the ideological matrix of collective solidarity. As a result, the concept of the ideal man is that of the “virile man [who] also had to be a virtuous man, a man engaged in war against all that his society believed to be wrong” (18). That explains why the “aim of the African system for the upbringing of children was the production of a man, the individual endowed with manliness, with virility” (16). Such emphasis on manly courage and moral rectitude of necessity implies the existence of an educational system in which “intensive intellectual training is counter-balanced by a moral training equally intensive” (28). Here, in a nutshell is the ethical and moral philosophy behind traditional education in Africa. We find that the value which sustains the society is collective responsibility, the responsibility of the group for the wellbeing of the members. But, the group and its interest always take precedence over the individual and his self-interest. That was what prevailed in traditional Africa until the colonial powers came and superimposed their baneful and amoral systems on us. This system emphasised the assertion of the autonomy and integrity of the individual experience as opposed to collective solidarity. As Emmanuel Obiechina points out:

The individual, outside the immediate pressures operating within the traditional social structure, is more likely to see his own individual experience as his arbiter of reality, but since he has little or no guidance from a collectively conceived moral or socio-cultural universe, he becomes a victim of the social, economic and political forces which operate in a rapidly changing society (Obiechina, 1975:8)

Bernard Fonlon lamented the debilitating impact of the individual experience which is the product of the devious and invidious colonial educational systems on Africans in the following words:

Under colonial government the new education is reserved for the few; and to the few it is not manly courage and valour that are held up as ideals worthy of their pursuit. No, rather it is pleasure; it is the hoarding of wealth, of money, as the surest way to pleasure. And colonial conquerors have always known that there is hardly a means that is more insidious, more infallible of emptying a people of manliness and making them willing slaves than to excite, especially in their elite leadership, on insatiable thirst for pleasure (1968:19)

Individualism, then, is the product of the sinister and maleficent educational systems which our colonial masters bequeathed to us at independence and which has given birth to a flagrant disregard to the necessary moralities of human intercourse, to political chicanery and to the protocol of thieving which has virtually ruined the very vitals of our society. Thus, not only do we need a radical reversal, we also need a new educational system.

There are many definitions of literature depending on the theoretical position or school of thought referred to at a particular instance. My position is that literature like education is not an individual matter but a subject that involves and affects the entire society. Therefore, I shall take those definitions which portray literature as something that should be valued for its own worth, that helps individuals to develop socially accepted forms of behaviour, promoting the artistic, creative and imaginative growth and development of individuals and society.

Literature, as described by Raymond Crowell in *The Critical Enterprise*, is an “exploration of the relationship between the ‘word’ (spoken or written) and the ‘world’”. It relates ‘language style’ to ‘life style’; therefore it is a record of language in use, seen from the personal and social points of view. (1975:19) Richard Olaniyan in *African History and Culture* appears to have a more comprehensive view of literature especially when he posits that

Literature is a work of art expressed in words to mirror life and to be perceived intellectually to uplift the mind and soul. As a work of art, it has aesthetic values for man, exuding beauty and thereby giving him satisfaction and pleasure. As a mirror to life, it instructs man in the ways of the world, making life more intelligible to him. As an intellectual exercise, it uplifts the mind and the soul of man, showing him how to live better, die better and leave the world a better place. Finally, being all three things (a work of art, a mirror to life, and an intellectual exercise) rolled into an indivisible whole expressed in words; literature plays a humanizing, unifying, consolidating and even revolutionary effect on man and society (1982:175).

Literature like education serves man and society in several ways. But, Cicero the Roman forensic philosopher has in his characteristically pithy manner reduced these functions to three-*docere, placere, movere* to teach, to please and to move. In this paper, we are

interested in the first function which is to teach. However, a question immediately comes to mind which is, to teach what? Fonlon boldly attempts an answer, “to make man on earth a better man, to make the world a better world” (ABBIA, 1982:208). Thus literature may be used to teach moral and spiritual values. But not all kinds of literature are suitable for the teaching of these values.

### **Kinds of literature in Africa**

The situation in most African countries in respect of their literature may appear on the surface to be simple but, in reality it is complex and at times confused. In pre-colonial Africa, there was only one kind of literature which was oral, which was carried by the different local indigenous languages and which consisted of traditional materials. It was a vital component of the people’s heritage and an integral part of their moral education.

As a consequence of the colonial experience, Africa developed two basic lifestyles- the autochthonous and the alien. These lifestyles in turn helped to fragment the oral literature from a single phenomenon to a triadic phenomenon. That is oral literature in local African languages; written literature in local African languages and written literature in modern European languages. These three kinds of literature constitute what is generally known as African Literature.

These three kinds of literature are not, however, mutually exclusive. Rather, they co-exist side by side and are being used at the different levels of the educational system for ethical and cultural diffusion with varying degrees of success. Nevertheless, since English, French, Portuguese and Spanish are respective official languages of education in different African countries, it follows logically that African literature in these languages has, with time, taken precedence over the others.

Having defined our terms and after making our introductory comments on education and literature and their general significance to Africans, focus will now be on proposing possible ways of stemming the down-hill trend mentioned in the opening paragraph of this paper, of pulling Africa out of the miasma of corruption and moral imbroglio into which it has been plunged and giving a sense of direction to a hitherto directionless society. Bernard Fonlon in *The Genuine Intellectual* had reflected on these issues and arrived at the implacable conclusion that: “nothing short of a complete mental and moral revolution will do” (1983:27).

Fonlon may be right that nothing short of a shock therapy will suffice. But, we do not think that an ethical revolution is imperative. On the contrary, we believe that we need an ethical renaissance because our ethics has always been an integral part of our culture long before it was rudely and unceremoniously sidelined by the colonialists.

Therefore, what we need is a new and genuine educational system based on the fundamental principle which is the wellspring of the traditional system of education. That is why we wholeheartedly endorse the view advanced by Olowo Ojoade as quoted by Ongoum Louis Marie in *Oral literature in Africa Today: Theoretical and Practical Approaches* that “the quality of instruction at all levels has to be oriented towards inculcating the following values: moral and spiritual values in inter-personal and human relations”. And that this instruction must be geared towards “self realisation, better human relationship, the right type of values and attitudes for survival of the individual and society (Ongoum and Tcheho, 1989:101).

Of the three kinds of literature extant in Africa, we are convinced that Oral literature is the most appropriate for reviving or promoting our cultural or ethical heritage. This is because, Oral literature in Africa as elsewhere serves as an instrument for the examination of individual experience in relation to the normative order of society. Thus Oral literature was used and is still being used in several parts of Africa to comment on how the individual adheres to or deviates from the community's norms of behaviour.

### **The ethical and moral content of African oral literature**

In order to survive and to progress under the harsh conditions of the time in which the bulk of the Oral literature in Africa is set, that is, in the proximate or remote past, it was imperative for the individual to respect the social institutions which predetermined his individuality. The institution encouraged in the individual the positive values of industry, courage, integrity and filial piety. While making some allowances for social deviance, the institutions deplored such negative traits as cowardice, greed and gasping individualism.

In traditional African societies then, environment was character. That is, the individual was what society had made him. But the society itself was basically competitive and acquisitive. Therefore it had to rely very much on its systems of social controls to ensure internal order. One of the instruments of social control was and continues to be, oral literature.

We will use one oral tale and a few proverbs chosen at random to illustrate our point. Storytelling in Africa has been a way of transmitting the traditions, beliefs, and codes of behaviour of a particular society from one generation to the next.

Animals play a prominent role in oral tales due to the fact that Africans live in close proximity to the animals that share their land. In many of these tales, Africans attribute human feelings and desires to particular animals; and even derive ethical ideals from their behaviour. A good example is the trickster tale.

The characters in these tales differ according to the different geographical areas of the continent. In the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, for example, the animal trickster is the spider while in the forest region of the Bakossi of Cameroon, it is the tortoise. No matter what names they assume, these wily smallish trickster figures have several things in common. They are usually small and weak, but they are also shrewd cunning, greedy, exhibitionistic and unpredictable. Consequently, they are the best instruments for commenting on the opposition between wit and force. Their main preoccupation seems to be to make up for their physical disability with a very high degree of intelligence which they invariably misuse in cunning. As a result, they are always engaged in trying to weave their way through a treacherous world of powerful, but less intelligent animals out to devour them. The fact that they almost always emerge victorious in a competition does not mean that the people approve of their activities. Rather, the people see in the trickster figures a reflection of the vices they condemn, the follies they ridicule and the evils with which they must contend. The tale of the tortoise's excessive greed centres on tortoise's scheme to benefit from a party for the birds in the sky.

### **The feast in the sky**

Once upon a time there was famine on earth because of lack of rain. As a result, there was nothing for Tortoise to eat and he was dying of hunger. One day, he overheard the birds

conversing about a feast in the sky. He approached them and begged to accompany them to the feast. The birds very reluctantly agreed because they knew Tortoise well. But he convinced them that he meant no harm. So, they lent him feathers, to enable him to fly with them to the party in the sky.

On their way to the party, he persuaded his companions that they should each take a name. He went on to tell them that his own name is "All of you" The birds accepted and continued their journey to the sky. At the party, they were received by the organizers. Tortoise was very impressed by the sumptuous meals that he immediately thought of a way to outwit the birds. He asked the birds if they remembered the name he took on the way. They all shouted "All of you". He went further to ask what the host said when they served the food. The birds chirped in unison that the food was for all of you.

Tortoise reminded them that since that was the name he had adopted; it meant that the food was for him alone. So he sat down and ate all the food while the birds watched in anger. The hungry and angry birds decided there and then to make Tortoise pay for his mischief. They took back their feathers and flew back to earth leaving him stranded in the sky. Perplexed, Tortoise begged the last bird that when he reached earth, he should tell his wife to bring out all the mattresses and pillows and lay them in such a way that he could land on them when on them when he fell from the sky. The bird agreed. But since all the birds had unanimously decided to make Tortoise pay dearly for his gluttony, the birds told Tortoise's wife to spread out all the hardwares in the house.

Meanwhile Tortoise was watching from the sky. When he saw that his wife had spread out what he thought were mattresses and pillows, he fell from the sky and landed on the hardwares thereby cracking his shell- an event which explains the tortoise's appearance today.

In the above tale, we realise that the ideological matrix holding the animal society together is collective responsibility. That explains why the birds decide to help Tortoise. Of course, the birds know Tortoise well. But since their traditional philosophy makes some allowances for the social misfit who does not seriously threaten the stability of the established order, they try to accommodate him.

Tortoise, on his part, is an extremely individualistic and ethically non-conforming character. That explains why he appears as a single and often isolated character. And since he has carved a niche for himself in which there is no unified cultural and moral ethos, he is free to indulge his instincts, drives and appetites. However, since Tortoise's code of behaviour which is based on unmitigated egotism poses a serious threat to the very survival and general health of the animal kingdom, the birds decide to make Tortoise pay dearly for his greed.

### **Proverbs**

Another genre of Oral literature which is one of the most valuable media of moral instruction in Africa is the proverb. According to Emmanuel Tala Kashim in *Orature in Africa*:

Proverbs are popular sayings in relatively fixed forms which are in oral circulation and which are marked by their brevity. They are fundamental ingredients in the intellectual traditions of Africa. They stem from everyday activities and embrace the philosophical and socio-cultural value systems of the people (1999:138)

Proverbs then express moral and value judgements. They indicate what is right or wrong; they are used to reprove an errant member of society and to praise the social conformist. Finally, they are used to teach acceptable moral behaviour. Here are some proverbs that are used as guides to good conduct and aids to moral lessons:

1. A fly without an adviser follows the corpse into the grave
2. A river that travels alone often meanders
3. The dog that will get lost would not listen to the whistle of the hunter
4. We do not by-pass a man and enter his compound
5. A man who carries a deity is not a chief.
6. Only a foolish man can go after a tiger with his bare hands
7. When you dig a hole of wickedness, make it shallow for you may be the one to fall into it.
8. He who despises another despises himself.
9. If you look in one direction your neck will become stiff.
10. The inquisitive eye will only blind its own sight.
11. One who talks too much has very little time to do other things.
12. Lying will marry you a wife but not keep her.

The first four proverbs are warnings to social deviants. They call attention to the consequences awaiting those who are foolish enough to separate themselves from the social group. The next set of four proverbs are reminders that a man is responsible for his actions and must therefore be prepared to bear their consequences. The last set of four proverbs enunciates a major theme: in order to act appropriately, a man must recognise his own limitations.

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing are but a few examples of the ethical and moral contents of Oral literature. That they point to the right direction is too obvious to deserve further comment. What we need to remind ourselves is that oral literature is not static but remains ever changing. Its thematic content is perpetually being broadened in order to reflect the important issues of the day. Thus, it not only permeates our daily lives, it also provides a rich commentary on what is taking place in our society. That is why we are proud of our Oral literature. That is why we insist that it should become an all- important subject in all our educational systems at all levels. Indeed, it is because of these major reasons that we are calling for the concentration of the efforts of each African country in the development of Oral literature.



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