

CULTURE AND THE CHALLENGE OF LITERACY

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Abstract

Literacy which basically is seen as the ability to read, write, speak and enumerate at certain a level in the society, may also be explained in its extension to such other forms as culture. It is in this regard that culture, as a people's ways of life that have become generally acceptable within a given society, play certain roles in enhancing the literacy of the people. In this paper, with the Igbo culture as case study, an attempt is made to raise the inquisition on perspectives of literacy not only from its modern perception but the traditional. Here, it is not considered based on the ability to interact and communicate using different modern technologies, rather it is an invitation to pursue literacy within the recognition of the observable elements as they are prevalent among the people and their environment. Vygotsky's Cognitive Development Theory is adopted by the writers to look into the concept of literacy and its challenges. It is therefore intended here to examine how robustly the Igbo culture may be derived in promoting literacy. There is a pertinent tendency towards appreciating how Igbo folklore, proverbs, riddles and jokes, have become channels for the enhancement of literacy. It is to this extent that cultural literacy becomes imperative in all spheres of educational management, planning and implementation.

Keywords: Literacy, Culture, Orature, Folklore, Society

Introduction

The attainment of the gains of literacy has always been bedeviled with enormous challenges. The said challenges have more often been influenced by certain factors like environment, level of development, utilization of cultural elements, teaching personnel and other relevant factors. Effective learning tools are better programmed to target the full understanding of the unknown, beginning from the known. It is in this regard that the potentials of cultural elements are considered to be of great essence in pursuing and attaining the goals of literacy, especially in the learner's immediate environment. There is a pertinent submission here that Igbo cultural heritage is not only rich but also qualifies in promoting literacy.

Literacy of a particular culture arises with time through consistent involvement and participation in certain cultural activities. Most importantly, those key areas of culture that have to do with arts, history, religion, family, story, business etc. In essence, one can therefore acquire literacy through oral culture, without written language or technologically recorded media. (*en.m.wikipedia.org.retrieved 5/9/2019*). Literacy is basically seen as the ability to read, write, speak and enumerate at certain levels in the society. Ogbonna is among the scholars that believe that there are multidimensional paths to the enforcement of literacy: "Literacy does not easily land itself to simple definitions and conceptualizations" (2019:89).

In affirming that scholars look at literacy in different ways, Omoniyi states that: "What serves the literacy needs of one person might not serve those of the others in which case the literacy needs of individuals vary" (1999:5). Another perspective to the varied application of individual's literacy potentials is that people could be literate, for instance, in their mother tongue, but are illiterate in their official language. The instances of this measure of literacy are found with use and competencies in the English language in the Anglophone countries or French Language in the Francophone countries. On the other hand, depending on what

becomes one's first language, one may be literate in the official language, but illiterate in one's mother tongue.

The variance in the needs of particular people overtime, also affects literacy. This is so because those who were literate several years ago, may have to acquire another literacy skill in order to be relevant in the present age. A typical example of this is the case of a typist who acquires typing skills with a manual typewriter and the challenge of securing his job in this present dynamism of information and computer technology. It is for this reason that Gale identifies with literacy as:

...a process by which one expands one's knowledge of reading and writing in order to develop one's thinking and learning for the purpose of understanding oneself and the world. This process is fundamental to achieving competence in every educational subject, since literacy is a necessary foundation for educational achievement.

(2006:19)

It is not in contention therefore that 21st Century definition of literacy has to take cognizance of variety and forms of language available for the growing ones. In view of the above, Literacy is defined as "the set of skills which allows an individual to engage fully in society and learning, through the different forms of language, and the range of texts which are valuable and useful to the society".

The engagement with cultural activities by the children in the course of their learning will not only mature their skills but also their knowledge in literacy and language. For children and young people to develop competence in communication either by good structured sentences or coordinated utterances, they need to be well nurtured and drilled in their cultural practices. (*blogs.glowscotland.org.uk*)

The term culture means different things to different people. Also it could be used in different ways with different meanings. Culture is generally acceptable way of life of a people. Taylor (1891), as cited in Abakere, defines culture as: "The complex

totality of man's acquisition of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, customs, technology, etc. which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation" (2009:3). More often than not, cultural practices become accepted as ways of life when certain enduring conventions provide measurable satisfaction to the given people or when they are seen to accomplish certain purposes. Again when the practitioners of such culture migrate, there comes the possibility for the exportation of such culture and perhaps variants of its practices. While this is often seen to be native to its exporters, such culture might become more globalized and to some extent lose their original identity.

Another pertinent perception of culture and one which is most relevant to this paper is that culture is the way of life – the commonly acquired attitude of a people, which include mode of thinking and actions, as members of the society. These involve norms and values, ideas, religion and philosophy, as well as literature of the people. Culture is therefore very vital to the literacy and intellectual emancipation of the people within the cultural group. Literacy in one's culture area enables one to know one's ancestors and their activities, up to their tenth generations and more. It becomes pertinent to ascertain how aspects of the people's culture could enhance their ability to deal with the challenges of literacy? For clarity and better understanding, the culture in reference in this paper is that of the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria.

This learning theory by Lev Vygotsky embraces the notion of socio-cultural activities in learning, which perceives process and makes sense of the knowledge. Proponents of this theory insist that learning takes place within a cultural setting and includes a complex of social interactions that require an understanding of the relationship between human mind and activity. Learning, from the socio-cultural perspective, is a process of meaning making within a specific socio-cultural context through the process of dialogue. (Vygotsky, 1978:67)

Vygotsky maintains that cognitive abilities are socially guided and constructed, in that way, culture acts as a go between for the formation and development of certain abilities, like learning, memory, attention and problem solving. He believes that parents, care givers, peers and the culture, at large, were responsible for developing higher-order functions. Vygotsky maintains that learning is based on interaction with people, after that, the information received is then integrated at the level of the individual. Socio-cultural theory focuses, not only on how adults and peers influence individual learning, but also on how cultural beliefs and attitudes affect the learning process.

The Igbo are mostly found in Igbo land of the South Eastern Nigeria. According to Igbokwe and Ahumaraeze, (2019:5)

“The Igbo are conglomeration of people who share the same reasoning, time and space. They share life and grow together as a people. They are resilient. A people with diverse culture, as well as adherent to their traditions. The Igbo are known for their spirit of oneness, tolerance and hospitality, and more importantly can adapt to any situation.”

Culture extends to the rules governing the people and their material object. All these make culture the entire social heritage, knowledge, beliefs, customs and skills acquired by a people as members of a society. (Abakere, 2009:5). In line with the topic of this paper, the acquisition of knowledge and skills in one’s culture makes one culturally literate.

Asumah cites Iris Marian Yong (1990) whose perception of culture is that it encapsulates:

...aspects of social life from the point of view of their linguistic, symbolic, affective and embodied norms and practices. Culture includes the background and

medium of action, the unconscious habits, desires, meaning, gestures, and so on that people grow into and bring to their interaction. (2010:7)

Fredland, maintains that culture is: “The cumulative practice and beliefs of a fairly homogeneous group. “Culture can be seen as both a process and an institution. It is structured into the economy and politics and its roots lies [sic] in families, learning institutions, music, art and sociopolitical institutions of the society (Asumah, 2010:7).

The Igbo usually hold onto their culture strongly and at high esteem wherever they find themselves. Traditionally, their development and civilization have been substantially linked with the methods that proceed from their cultural literacy.

Embedded Literacy Models in Igbo Oral Literature

Aspects of Igbo oral literature provided the means by which children particularly were involved in literacy as well as informal education. According to Okeke, oral literature comprises all aspects of creative art communicated orally. (2009: 173) Within this corpus, Okeke subsumes drama, stories (oral narratives), poem such as lyrics, satires, elegy, anecdotes, proverbs, riddles, etc. Oral literature serves as the foundation for African creative art in language form, and also maintains certain degrees of departure from the western taxonomy of models of literary expression.

Before the coming of the Europeans to Africa on their colonial exploration, and even the missionary activities and literacy campaigns, traditional literary performances had already been in existence, especially in oral forms. That form of literature, which was basically oral, are made up of contents transmitted by tradition, by word of mouth or by custom and practice. A close study of each genre of Igbo oral literature reveals the patterns of their transmission, especially from one generation to another. According to Emenyonu, given that they are prominently instructive on the society’s considerations of what is right and what is wrong, they

are mostly channeled to the young and to those who were in the position of influencing opinions and characters. (1978:1).

In spite of serving as leisure and entertainment activities among the Igbo, the culture of telling folktales provided for an effective pattern of literacy and informal education for children particularly. While the master/mistress storytellers are those that have matured with age and experience, they derive some pleasure in passing on the culture to their younger folks for whom it is majorly a form of education. Despite having non-humans – animals and ghosts as the chief characters, folktales mostly derive their themes for humans. Therefore, even while the setting might have locales in the ghost or animal kingdoms, much of the events involve human social/political endeavors. These characters are given attributes and traits of humans. The characters could be; *Nza* - weaver bird, *Mbe* - tortoise, *Udegudegu* - spider, *Ngwere* - lizard, *Oke* - rat etc. These characters are assigned with roles which easily express their endowment with the instinct of survival. It is within the proviso of their elevated mental reasoning and cleverness, that they are seen to be equipped in escaping certain precarious situations notwithstanding their physical inadequacies.

In Igbo folktale, honesty always triumphs over dishonesty, truth over falsehood, and good over evil. Linking the essence of Igbo folktale to literacy, Emenyonu, (1978:1) says,

Children grow up under the tutelage of their mothers and through these kinds of tales, especially the animal stories, they learn about good and evil in their society. In all this, the real significance of the folktale is that it demonstrates the logic of behavior and its vital implications and consequences for life in general.

The Igbo story teller plays the role of an entertainer, educator, philosopher and counselor. While entertaining, he instructs and ensures that the values portrayed in

the stories are made manifest. Directly or otherwise, the audience is made to learn about the distinctiveness among the animal characters. For instance, it is only through cultural literacy in the Igbo situation that one learns that Leopard is the more common specie in the cat family than the lion. In this regard, one would sound illiterate to tell a story of Tortoise and Lion instead of Tortoise and Leopard. However, the traditional Igbo tellers of folktales were not considered to be literate. While they did not receive their learning from books, all the same, their imaginations were developed through the participation in several sessions of the performance of those stories.

Part of the process of imbibing the logic of weaving the narratives comes with the probabilities in providing the link between the fable, with mostly animal characters and the human reality in the actions being re-presented. In sum, the thematic preoccupations of the folktale relate values and precepts within the communities where those tales are told. Through folktales philosophies and ideologies are entrenched. Not only are proverbs embedded in folktales, the proverbs sometimes become the abridgement of certain commonly told folktales. Oral literary forms excite and incite the imagination of the listeners, particularly because the elements that are made to form the figures are symbolic within the society where it is performed. Not only does the derivation of such elements make sense, the logical patterns in the narrative plot provide the measure of justification as sound reasoning. It is in such circumstances that the learners are initiated into the rhetorical conventions in their nativity, language embellishments with imagery, idioms, and varied figurations. With these performances, the young in particular learn the basic ideas that shape the philosophies of life, the values and norms of their people and sometimes the myths that have been accepted to substantiate them.

An experienced storyteller uses varied narrative styles – song accompaniments, foreshadowing, flashback, dialogues, in not just drawing the audience’s attention but also in bringing them to participate in the narrating process. These styles usually

appear in form of proverbs and sayings, summarizing the important points in the story. The presence of proverbs, symbols and imagery in folktales, make the story more tasking to understand and activates the thinking and reasoning faculties of the listener. Okonkwo describes Igbo folktales as being “Used to teach morals, create amusement and laughter, expose the follies of people, and extol the praiseworthy actions of others”. (1976:110).

In some folktales which are accompanied by songs, those songs not only entertain the people, they also compel the people’s participation in the performance in such a manner that, the people assume the status of characters in the tale. In such status, it becomes easy for the people to be participant performers in certain myths and beliefs system of the Igbo. Myths express how and why some phenomena come to be. They offer answers to the questions on certain mysterious occurrences, and sometimes their ritual significance. At other times they give explanation to such matters as why death exists, why women don’t grow beards, why tortoise has broken shell, etc.

Moreover, with the characterization in each folktale, in spite of the prevalence of animal or even ghost characters, the hero and the villain are often pitted against each other in a manner that reveals how they recollect human foibles. Usually the hero stands as a representation of the acceptable standards of morality. And in being placed against the wickedness of the villain, is made to attract the sympathy and emotions of the audience. Logically, poetic justice is built into the plot of the folktales. As the good is rewarded and evil punished, this structuring of the plot not only attempts to reform and instruct the society, the storyline provides sufficient justification in each circumstance for the appreciation of reality.

Igbo Proverbs and Literacy:

The importance of proverb to the Igbo cannot be over stressed. To make an impressive and powerful speech, proverbs are needed, hence a mature speaker is identified with the use of proverbs. In Igbo parlance, the ability to understand

proverbs makes one wise and intelligent, while the inability to understand proverbs makes one foolish and inexperienced. Little wonder, Okonkwo, (1976:99) describes proverbs as:

The experience and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression. While some nations quote the Bible, or the works and maxims of acknowledged authorities or wise men; or from a carefully worked out code of law, the Igbo quote proverbs (the time-honoured wisdom of their folk) to support and give authority and authenticity to an idea or a disputed fact.

The knowledge of Igbo proverbs helps in learning phrases of the grammar. This can be found in proverbs and its characteristics of segmentation. Proverbs like:

1a. *Egbe bere, Ugo bere. Nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwaa ya.* Let the kite perch, and the eagle also

Perch. The one that prevents the other from perching, may the wings break off.

b *Ukwa ruo oge ya, o daa.* When it is the breadfruit's time, it falls

c) *Ukwu jie agu, Mgbada abiara ya ugwo.* When the Leopard's leg is broken, the antelope comes to demand its debt.

d) *ka e letachaa, ka mgbo jiri tu enwe n 'isi'.* Let's watch closely to see how the bullet hit the monkey's head

e) *Eze anoghi, e kelee obi ya.* Even if the king is not there, we salute his palace

From the above proverbs, it is noticeable that there are phrases and clauses that make up the proverbs therefore, a good command of Igbo proverbs will go a long way in aiding a learner in understanding the rudiments of grammar.

Igbo Riddles and Literacy

Igbo riddles have great didactic values. They widen the imagination and help one to develop deep sense of concentration and observation. The fact that one has to look

beyond the questions on Igbo riddles before an answer, makes it thought provoking and brain teasing.

Agwugwa or gwam gwam gwam is children's choice play. It's didactic essence lies on the fact that it affords the mind to be exercised the employment of intuition. It also encourages the deep meditation on the deeper meanings in human linguistic performance. (www.teachyourselfigbo.com retrieved 9/9/19)

There are two popular types of Igbo riddle. In the first type, one is required to think beyond the question for an answer, but the second, which is referred to as "tone riddle" derives its answer from a phrase which follows the tonal pattern of the question.

Some riddles originated from signs and codes used by the secret societies, age grades and other groups. There are riddles used by masquerades, which can only be understood by their followers.

Ngozi Okezie sees a riddle as "a statement which alludes to an object, a person, or any natural phenomenon. The respondent is expected to use his wit to identify the object by recognizing the analogy of meaning"(46). Further on, Okezie observes that the "Uses of riddles include the fact that they are educative - they develop the memory, imagination, thought process and judgement by associating sign with ideas"(47). The Igbo riddle usually begins with "Gwam, gwam, gwam" Tell me, tell me, tell me. This is the call which the initiator makes on the other participants in the riddling game. It comes to the respondents in the interrogative form.

1a) *Gwam, gwam, gwam; akwa Chineke sara, o dighi ako ako.*

Tell me, tell me, tell me; the cloth which God the creator spread out that never dries.

b) *Gwam, gwam, gwam; Ihe gba aka baa ohia Lotawa chiri umu.*

Tell me, tell me, tell me; what went empty-handed into the bush and came back with children.

c) *Gwam, gwam, gwam; Ihe mere eze o jiri raa ntu.*

Tell me, tell me, tell me; what made the king to lick ashes

d) *Gwam, gwam, gwam; Umu ejima abuo na-adighi ahu onwe ha anya.*

Tell me, tell me, tell me; the twins that never see each other

e) *Gwam, gwam, gwam; Osisi oma m huru n'uzo, o dighi mma m ji egbu ya.*

Tell me, tell me, tell me; the lovely tree that I saw on the way but had no machete to cut it.

Each riddle is not only a test of intelligence, it also has the advantage of making the child see the realities of life through the problems that they pose in man's daily existence.

Tongue Twisters:

Tongue twisters, which are called okwuntabiire, okwuntuhi, okwumgbawaonu or ojuonu in Igbo language, are words that have similar forms and sounds, which are brought together in a sentence in such a way that the pronunciation is difficult.

Pronouncing tongue twisters does not accept time wasting; rather it is expected to be pronounced faster and repeatedly to prove that the speaker knows it. (Nwadike, 2002:135).

Children enjoy tongue twisters a lot, and they challenge their friends to say it fast and severally at a go. To gain tongue twisters correctly, one takes it slowly, once and twice or thrice, and continues from there upwards.

Tongue twisters help children in fluency. With it, children learn how to read freely and correctly too. Ability to speak and read fluently is a right step in achieving literacy.

Igbo Games (Okwe) and Literacy

Okwe or nchoko, an Igbo cultural game, helps both the young and the old in developing the skill of calculation and strategic planning. In the game, one learns how to be rich or poor at the same time. For instance, at the beginning of the game, each player has the complete number of seeds, but as the game progresses, the chances of retaining those seeds and or getting more seeds from the opponent

depends on how much each of the players have tasked the brain and applied common sense.

A better planner and one who calculates well always stands the chance of winning in the game.

Children's Drama (Ejije Umuaka):

Children's drama is another form of oral literature that promotes literacy among the children. In this form of drama, children assume the roles and characters as in the real family situation. The elder boy takes the role of a father, the elder girl takes the role of a mother and the others share amongst themselves the roles of sons and daughters, depending on their numbers.

In this type of play, the children recreate the activities of their parents at home. For instance, the child playing the role of a father gets into the construction of a hut/house, cutting off firewood, handing over money to the wife, instructing her to go to the market and make food available for the children.

On the other hand, the one playing the role of a mother, dresses up, carries her bag and prepares to go to the market. She also gives orders and instructions to the children on house chores they should take care of before she returns. At times, she carries a doll baby on her back to depict the role of a nursing mother. When she comes back, she makes an improvised fire and starts cooking with tins and cans, once in a while, she mimes tasting what she is cooking, and when the food is ready, she serves the food for all to assemble and eat, while she feeds the doll baby herself.

The above activities have cultural background and go a longer way in developing the reasoning faculty of the children. It also develops in them, the sense of responsibility and role playing, especially as it affects family life, built on combined efforts and obedience to the parents and elders.

Socialization and play, as posited by Vygotsky, in Cherry and Morin, (2019:3), reiterated the essence of play in learning process. Teachers and parents can leverage on this idea by exposing their children to much opportunities for play experiences.

They contend that through playing and imagining, children were able to further extend their conceptual abilities and knowledge of the world.

The types of play that are capable of promoting learning include those with imagery, games and those that recreate and reenact the true life stories and events.

The growth of the abstract thinking is enhanced by such activities.

Igbo Kolanut Hospitality

The Igbo kolanut hospitality is another aspect of Igbo culture that promotes literacy.

The Igbo kolanut has many social relevance; it features in all the crucial moments of social interactions-for ritual, marriage alliance, settlement of disputes, political gathering, reception of visitors.

Onwu, (2002:20), describes kolanut thus:

Oji (kolanut) is life because he who brings it brings life in the dual sense: (1) that signifies welcome and friendship and (2) that the prayer for good and long life, which precedes its breaking and eating, would be accepted by the ancestors. From the biological point of view, the kolanut is also life affirming.

Everything about kolanut makes a lot of meanings, ranging from the presentation, blessing of kolanut, breaking of kolanut and the sharing. The structure of the kolanut itself has much to teach about the Igbo. Team spirit and brotherliness (onye aghala nwanne ya) for which the Igbo are known is represented in the structure of the kolanut. Each lobe of kolanut appears whole and complete, but it is not separate. Therefore, it must join with the other lobes to make a nut. This nature portrays the life of the Igbo, as they need liberty, and Independence, yet they believe that “no man is an island”.

Kolanut signifies peaceful co-existence, warm reception, prayerfulness, love and anything one can call good. Therefore, knowledge of the symbolic representations of kolanut in Igbo cultural practice, is literacy on its own.

Igbo Language and Literacy

Igbo language, which is part of Igbo culture, goes a long way in promoting literacy. The Igbo cultural community use Igbo language in their communication. As at the level of traditional education, Igbo language has been the medium of communication and instruction. There is no gain saying the fact that a good knowledge of Igbo language aids in learning English language.

Igbo language experts would easily function well in politics as campaign managers, interpreters and translators. Also in administration and security, the Igbo language experts can serve as Local Intelligent Corps.

In the media, translation of news bulletin from Igbo language to English language or from English language to Igbo language involves a mental exercise that promotes literacy.

On the part of enlightenment and campaigns, Dike, (2008:93) states;

“When any community is directly involved in the execution of development programme, there should be a group of local languages resource persons and experts who will utilize their communicative magic and get the people interested in that programme and make them participate actively in it”.

Addressing the rural dwellers in a foreign language will yield no good result, but the reverse is always the case with using the indigenous language in communicating with the rural dwellers.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the Igbo culture and its significance in literacy development. While literacy has been described as the ability to read, write, speak and enumerate at certain levels in the society, certain implications of culture as the general accepted way of people’s behavior, have also been seen to be crucial in literacy development. The culture of the Igbo literary tradition, of the south eastern

people of Nigeria, plays veritable roles in the promotion of literacy. This is made manifest in the areas of Igbo orature-folktales, riddles, tongue twisters, proverbs, Igbo kolanut hospitality and the use of Igbo language. Through these media, the Igbo culture impacts knowledge on the people.

Folklore as an aspect of Igbo culture is fast going into extinction because of the fast growth and awareness in modern inventions like books, radio, television, musical instruments and the more digitalized influence with recent innovations in information technology, . Also, rural-urban migration is on the increase, denying children such opportunities of the past when gathering during moonlight games or beside the fireplace to enjoy folktales, riddles and tongue twisters with kits and kin was a prevalent practice.

However, the impact of this aspect of Igbo culture cannot be completely wiped out as those who are privileged to have access to them still benefit from the instructions and lessons they have to teach. Therefore, Igbo culture contributes in no small measure in tackling the challenges of literacy, because one learns from one's environment, all one needs to survive in that environment.

Recommendations

In recognition of the importance of Igbo culture in the promotion of literacy, this paper recommends as follows:

- Teachers and education policy makers would need to contribute in the development and reinforcement of young people's literary skills by involving them in cultural activities that will enhance their proficiency.
- Society for Oral Literary Tradition should be formed in schools where they would embrace and re-enact the old communal ways of life which offer opportunities for gathering together as an avenue for oral performances.
- The Igbo language has to be given a prominent pride of place, sometimes with teachers of the language and those of the foreign languages engaging

students in sessions of translation, from the native language to the foreign and vice versa.

- Parents are encouraged to learn the figurative usages of the Igbo language and endeavor to communicate same to/with their children.
- Parents should also make out time to tell their children folktales.
- Churches should adopt Igbo oral forms as a tool for teaching and counseling.

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