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CHILDREN LITERATURE: BEDROCK OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Education is the bedrock of any nation, and Nigeria is no exception. It is a critical pillar of sustainable human development without which we stagnate, flounder, and become inert. Education can also be referred to as the bedrock of social, economic and political development. It is important for creating enabling conditions for sustaining change. A well educated populace (which begins with a child) is necessary to bring about technological innovations and to adapt and modify it in the context of local conditions and realities. Only education can equip children with the confidence to make the most of their abilities. Quality education and basic literacy will open doors to information technology and the "new economy". According to Jegede (2006), effective national development depends on education whose bedrock is the acquisition of knowledge. A learning society is a knowledgeable and wise society. What a person imbibes from childhood forms the basis of his attitude in life hence in Yoruba culture, a child is taught the norms and values of the society right from childhood through diverse means, one of which is children poems. These poems are didactic and they cover a wide range of themes. The language is very simple and they are easy to remember. They mould children's attitude as they journey through life. This paper discussed educating children through poems. The poems of Olatubosun and Odunjo were used as case study.

Keywords: New economy, Yoruba culture, didactic, poems

INTRODUCTION

Scholars and practitioners concerned with young people and their literature are on the increase in recent times. This is simply because of the great understanding of the effects of children literature, part of which is children rhymes, can have in shaping the lives of young people over time. This brand of literature caters for the reading and listening pleasure of children with the aim of moulding their character in their preparation for adulthood.

There is debate as to what can be called children's literature. While scholars like Beers (1997:34), Gent (2002:22) and Eng-

land (2004:8) believe that they are books which are selected and read by children themselves, Mákindé (2006:45), Norman (2001:9) and Oḍénéyẹ (2003:21) say they are those vetted "as appropriate" for children by the relevant authorities e.g. teachers, parents, publishers, bookstores and scholars, while others like Akíndóyèní (1997:34) see it as the literature written specifically for children (Dasylya 2006:49). However, what matters most in children's literature is for the writer to know he is writing for a specified or particular level of audience and therefore, should learn to appreciate the characteris-

tics of that level.

Language is the blood and flesh of any culture and the prime medium of expression (Iṣṣalá 1996:121). It is very central to this specified genre. Bámbóṣé (1969:6), Awóbùlúyì (1973:15), Babalṣalá (1983:20), Ògúndèjì (1991:35), Akíntúndé (2008:67) among others are scholars who have worked on this important aspect of the society – Yorùbá children Literature (Dasylyva 2006).

In the Yorùbá society, children literature within the literary genre can be classified into three known forms: prose, drama and poetry, with various texts under each category. The aspect of children literature this paper will focus on is poems of a light-hearted kind with a pattern of similar sounds at the end of the lines. The works of Olátúbòsún Oládàpò and J.F. Odúnjò will be used as case study.

Educating Children through Poetry

Poetry, according to Frank (1997:12), is a form of imaginative literary expression that makes its effect by the sounds and imagery of its language. All children have a right to poetry because they would have rich experiences with nursery rhymes, interactive dialogue and other forms of language play. They also have the enjoyment and power of poetic language put across to them while growing up.

In Yorubaland, before the advent of the Europeans and subsequently, the western form of education, poetry was purely oral. According to Ogunsina (1992:7-8), Yoruba language was first put into writing in the 19th century by Bowdich in 1817 precisely through collection of some Yoruba words. The first concrete effort

towards producing literatures relevant to children was by Church Missionary Society (CMS) with the publishing of Yoruba readers series between 1817 and 1915. These include “Ìwé kíkà lédè Yorùbá” 1-5 (Yoruba Readers’ Book 1-5). In 1955, Egbé Ijìnlè Yoruba formed in the late 1940s, produced the first Yoruba children magazine called “Àwòrèrín” which floats varieties of education topics, riddles and jokes, historical and moralistic themes that enlightened, entertained and educated children. Odunjo’s “Àkójòpò Ewì Aládùn in 1961 could be regarded as the first attempt at children poetry even though it is the collection of his poems in “Aláwíyé” Series Books 1-6 for primary schools. In 1974 and 1975, Túbòsún Oládàpò’s Àròfò àwọn Omòdé” 1& 2 were published, followed by “Ewì Omòdé” by Ṣòsànyà in 1976 and Òpádòtun’s “Ewì fún àwọn Ògo Wèrè” in 2001.

Yoruba poetry is based on various themes which teach children various lessons of life. Some of them will be discussed using the works of J.F. Odúnjò and Olátúbòsún Oládàpò.

Cultural Values

One of the ways by which most children learn about the culture and the cultural values of their people is through their contact with and understanding of literature (poetry), written purposely for them. In “Iyi Iyawo-Ona”, children are taught about Yoruba culture on marriage. Virginity is very important on the wedding night in Yoruba marriage. A bride that is deflowered before the wedding night is always disgraced if not divorced. So this poem is advising youngsters to guard against pre-marital sex.

A ní ìyàwó ó jàdò, kò jẹ́ é
 Ohun a fẹ́ jẹ́ pẹ́,
 □ó wá yẹ́ ká jí i jẹ́?
 A kǐ jàdó ní kòrò
 Lọjọ́ ẹyẹ́ ìyàwó fíí ládùn.

The bride is told to eat honey-
 comb, she refused
 What one will eat forever
 Is it good to be stealthful about it
 Honeycomb is not eaten in secret
 That is what makes the wedding
 night delightful.

Also, children are taught to be proud of
 their black cultural heritage in “Dudu ni
 mi”.

Dúdú ni mí,
 Mo dúpẹ́ Orí
 Tóo dá mi ní dúdú
 Dúdú ni mí
 Mo gba fawo mi.
 Mo dúpẹ́ tí mo dúdú lára
 ...dúdú wù mí: ó gbayì ní tẹ̀mi
 Èdùmàrè má pa mí lówò ẹwà dà.

(Oladapo 1979:13)

I am black
 I thank God
 That created me so
 I am black
 I like my complexion
 I am thankful because I am black
 I like being black: blackness is
 dignifying to me
 God, don't change my beautiful
 complexion

Moral Values

Yoruba people attach great importance to
 moral values. A child that is morally up-

right called Ọmọ́lúàbí is loved, respected
 and praised in the society while a morally
 decadent one is abhorred and treated with
 disdain. So, children are given moral in-
 structions through literature specially de-
 signed for them. In “Ìwà rere lẹ́□ó ènìyàn”
 for example, the poet tells the children that
 no matter the position one attains in life, if
 he or she lacks good behavior, everything
 he/she has amounts to nothing.

Tẹ́tí kí o gbọ́ mi, ọ̀rẹ́ mi
 Ìwà rere lẹ́□ó ènìyàn
 Bí a bí ọ́ nílẹ́ ọ́lá
 Bí o sì fa wàrà ọ́lá mu dàgbà
 Bí o kọ́ ẹ̀kọ́ àkọ̀dọ́rí
 Bí o rẹ̀ni bá ọ́ wá i□é rere
 A gbọ́ pé o pé ná, iwà yíí n kó?
 ... iwà ló n mú ni wu ẹ̀dá láyẹ́
 Ìwà lẹ̀wà ọ̀mọ́ ènìyàn...

(Ọdúnjọ 1979:1)

Listen to me my friend
 The beauty of a person lies in his
 good behaviour
 If you are wealthy,
 If you were born with silver spoon
 in your mouth
 If you are a successful academic
 If you are able to secure a good job
 You are perfect all round we know,
 but what about this your undesir-
 able behaviour?
 Your behaviour can endear you to
 people
 Good behaviour is the beauty of
 human being.

Also, “Tọ́jú iwà rẹ́” is another poem that
 talks about the importance of good behav-
 iour not only in the society here on earth,
 but also when we die.

Tójú iwà rẹ ọrẹ mi
Ọlá a máa ńí lọ nílé ẹni
Ẹwà a sì máa ńí lára ènìyàn
Olówó òní le tò ńí bó dọla...
Gbogbo wọn ló ń ńí lọ nílé ẹni
Ọ̀ùgbọ̀n iwà ló ń bá ni dé sààrè
Owó kò jẹ nńkan fun ni
Ìwà lẹwà ọmọ ènìyàn...

(Odunjo 1979:2)

Guard your character, my friend-
Wealth can fly away from your
house
And beauty can fade away
A rich man today can become a
pauper tomorrow
All may disappear from your
house
But, only character will accom-
pany you to the grave
Money does not mean anything-
Good character is the beauty of
mortals.

Poems teaching morals are likely to be more effective than giving children orders.

Societal Issues

Children poetry is geared towards educating them about societal issues. For instance,

I ńí ẹni oògùn i ńí ẹ
Múra sí i ńí ẹ rẹ ọrẹ mi
I ńí ẹni a fi ń deni gíga
Bí a kò bá rẹni fẹhin tí
Bí ọlẹ làá rí
Bí a kò bá rẹni gbẹkẹ lé
A tẹra mọ ńí ẹni

(Odunjo 1979:3)

Hard work is the antidote to poverty
Be hard working my friend
Hard work promotes one to lofty
position
If there is no support anywhere
One appears like a lazy person
If there is nobody to depend on
One should work hard.

This poem reveals the high respect the Yoruba people attach to hard work. Children are encouraged to work hard and depend solely on their ability to sustain themselves in future. Also in “Ranti Ola”, laziness is condemned. A lazy man always has himself to blame in future.

...onílẹ ń mọlé, Alágbàlá ń fàgbàlá
Ìwọ sùn lọ, o gbàgbé ọrìn rìn
Onílá ń selá, Elélùbọ ń sèlùbọ
Ìwọ sùn lọ, o gbàgbé àtíjẹ
Abíọdún ń ńí ọdún, Ajítóní ń
ńí ẹyàwó
Tégbè ń jẹka, nígbà tí ò roko.

(Oladapo 1979:40-41)

Someone is building his house
while someone is mending his
fence
You are busy sleeping, you have
forgotten cold
One is cooking her okro while one
is making her yam flour
You are busy sleeping, you have
forgotten hunger
Abiodun is throwing a party, Aji-
toni is getting married
Tegbe is regretting, when he did not
farm.

The end result of slothfulness is regret, shame and inability to do what one's peers

are doing in the society. So children are enjoined never to engage in slothfulness.

Social vices are frowned at and children are taught never to go anywhere near them so as not to soil good name. Examples of this abound in Yoruba poetry. In “Kí ni ñ folè ƣe”, the poet teaches that stealing is bad that it is better for one to become a slave or even die than steal because if a thief is caught, he will be arrested, handcuffed, prosecuted and jailed. Also, if a thief dies, he will go straight to hell even if he is rich here on earth.

Bribery is a social vice. This is also condemned in “Rìbá: Owó Èhin” (Oládàpò:1979:23). Covetousness is also one of the vices children are warned against. Oládàpò says this in “Temi to mi” (I am contented with mine) while Odunjo teaches it in “Òkánjúwà kò dára” (covetousness is bad) and Bí orí Ìjàpá ƣe pá (How Tortoise head became bald).

Furthermore, these poems are used to inform children of some basic health practices which help to mould their lives. Examples of these in Oladapo (1975) are “Ìmótótó” (Cleanliness), “Kòkòrò tá ò rí” (The invisible insect), “Òrẹ àti Òtá kòkòrò” (Friendly and Harmful insects). The predominant occupation of the Yoruba people before colonialism is farming. Children are encouraged not to leave agriculture completely in spite of the white collar jobs that is prevailing in the contemporary Yoruba society. In

Ìƣé àgbè ni ƣé ilè wa
Èni kò ƣi ƣé, a máa jalè
Ìwé kíkọ láì sí ọkọ àti àdà

Kò ì pé o, kò ì pé o.

Farming is the occupation of our fathers

He who does not work will steal
Education without hoe and cutlass
Is not complete, it is not complete.

The poet shows the extent to which farming is important to the Yoruba people in spite of formal education (Adeyinka 2008). This does not mean that the children are discouraged from paying attention to their studies in school. In “Ìƣé ni oògùn ìƣé”, the poet enjoins them to be very studious and not to joke with their studies as this secures a good future.

Èkọ sì tún ñ ƣoni dọgá
Múra kí o kọ ọ dárádára
Bí o sì rí ọpọ èniyàn
Tí wọn ñ fí èkọ ƣérin rín
ƣóra kí o má fara wé wọn...

(Odunjo 1961:5)

...Education also makes one great
Be serious about it
If you see people making jest of education
Beware! Do not join them...

CONCLUSION

Most of these poems are noted for their moral qualities based on Yoruba value system and child education. They are designed, according to Isola (1996:23) to help children understand the way the society is organized and to make them behave in a way that is acceptable in Yoruba culture. Children’s poems are easy to memorize and because of the simplicity of the language, they are easy to remember.

These poems cater for the reading and listening pleasure of children and they help in moulding their character in preparation for adulthood.

If children are properly trained, if they are well educated and good virtues are inculcated in them, they will grow up to become good leaders who will contribute meaningfully to the development and sustenance of the society.

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