Folk Tales and the Social Development of the Child

By

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Abstract
The folk tale which is an aspect of the folklore has been engrained into our culture from time immemorial. These tales are handed down from one generation to another and have ethically served as the “cement” of the society. They were crafted to bring stability into the society when there were no strong laws to govern people, and they have continued to be the moral code in many societies. Themes of folktales are closely related to the natural laws that hold the society together, where by good is rewarded and evil is punished, and good relationship among people is revered. This paper reveals that folk tales can foster the social development of the child in the areas of language acquisition, which enables a child to communicate with people in his environment; emotional attachment, which pertains to the child’s relationship with his family, community, friends and peer group; morality, which involves acquiring moral standards, honesty, integrity and hard work; and cognitive abilities, which helps a child to be imaginative, intelligent and understanding. Some folk tales that will aid a child to develop in these areas are also cited in this work. Mediums of transmitting folk tales to children which are through the community, family, school (teachers) and children’s libraries (in school and public library) are also discussed.

Introduction
Folk tales are part of the great stream of anonymous creation known as folklore. Folklore is regarded as the accumulated wisdom and art of simple everyday folk. In the broadest sense, folklore includes superstitions, medicinal practices, songs, festivals, old tales, fables, myths etc. Of all the varieties of folklore mentioned above, the folk tale is perhaps the most familiar and the most appealing, especially for children. Folklorists who have worked on the origin of folklores concluded that folk tales are the “cement” of the society, because they do not only express, but codify and reinforce the way people think, feel, believe and behave (Huck & Kuhn, 1986).
Folk tales teach the children and remind their elders of what is proper and moral. They put the stamp of approval upon certain values held by the group, and thus cement it together with a common code of behavior. They teach kindness, modesty, truthfulness, courage in diversity - and they make virtue seem worthwhile because it is invariably rewarded and evil is punished. This idea of the folktales as the carriers of moral code, help explain the ethical significance and the emotional satisfaction they still hold today (Arbuthnot, 1957).

Some explanations of the origins of folk tales are dubious and this notion is reinforced by the fact that most of these events took place “once upon a time”, “a long time ago”, “once in the land of…” Folklorists have come to agree that folktales are created by most people at an early level of civilization. Historically, they may contain elements from past religious, rituals, superstitions or past events. Psychologically, they serve to satisfy in symbolic form some of man’s basic emotional needs.

Folk tales employ a wide variety of themes that are relevant to the social development of the child. They portray universal emotions such as, love and hate, joy and sorrow, fear and courage etc. (Fayose, 1995). They provide for the child, moral, social and cultural education that will help him to thrive in his community and invariably become a member of the society. They warn the child against vices like arrogance and disobedience, which may result into severe punishment.

Types of Folk Tales

There are various types of folk tales. There are stories that talk about the ‘how’, ‘why’, ‘when’ or ‘where’ of things. Critics refer to them as “pourquoi” or explanatory tells. These stories are closely aligned with myths, because they often trace the origin of events or situations, which can only be supplied by the gods. Examples of these tales are “Why Dogs Chase Cats”, “Why the Sky is Far Away”, “How the Leopard Got its Claws”, “Who is the First Man that Lived on Earth” etc.

Some folk tales are based on accumulation and repetition of details, and they are called cumulative tales. Their charm lies in their minimum plot and maximum rhythm (Fayose, 1999). An example of this type of tale can be found in Tortoise King of the Animals by Nkiru Njirinzu. In this story, the hen thought that there was serious
commotion when she saw the cock croaking and flapping widely in the air. She raised an alarm and started running out of the village. The other animals joined in the race - the monkey, deer, pig, hare, antelope, lion and even the elephant. The significant feature of this story is that the author repeats the names of all the animals in the race as a new one joins in. A child tends to learn the names of these animals because they are repeated over a number of times. Other folk tales in this category are, “The Pancake”, “The Old Woman and her Pig”, “A Journey” etc.

Animal stories are the favourites of children. These stories may be the animal tale of the wise beast - foolish beast pattern. These stories always tell of how the tortoise outwits the other animals, and how Ananse the spider tricks the other animals or how ‘Ebule Ako’, the wise ram outsmarts the lion or how Zumo, the rabbit cleverly outwits the hyena, leopard and other friends (Harris, 2003). Sometimes, the animals talk with human beings as in the case of “The Girl and the Lizard” by Ihuaku Ucheoma.

Romance in folk tales is usually as remote and impersonal as the waves of the sea. Like them, romance is cause - things happen because of it, but the characters are stereotypes. Romantic love is sudden, glamorous and idealized with no indication of love making (Huck & Kuhn, 1986). Stories like “The Suitors” by Paul Eto, “The Girl from the Sea” by Uzo Ekwuru, “Cinderella”, “Sleeping Beauty”, “The Beauty and the Beast” etc depict this form of fairy tale.

Social Development

Social development refers to the process by which a child acquires behavior, beliefs, standards and motives valued by their families and their cultural groups. Socialization occurs when children learn the ways of their groups so that they function acceptably within them. In order to develop socially, children need to interact with their peers and adults in a socially acceptable way (Norton, 1999). Developing good social skills is necessary for them to be able to eventually form healthy relationships and fit into social scenarios comfortably. They must learn to exert control over aggressive and hostile behavior if they are to have acceptable relationship with family members, friends and the larger community.
For a person to be loved and respected in the society, he must show a level of intelligence and understanding. These attributes are very important to a child in relating with family and friends, because he will use them to avoid/solve some problems that may emanate from associating with others. Being able to effectively communicate, listen and empathize with others form the basis for healthy relationships and the ability to successfully fit into social situations both now and in the future. Social development requires developing language and thinking skills, and understanding the rules necessary for social interaction. Children become social by developing a sense of self, after feeling secure in relationships with adults and peers. Folk tales give children one vehicle to develop social skills.

The relationship children have with their peers and relatives is germane to their self-esteem and social development. Therefore it is imperative that relationships be examined with the view of providing problem-solving and coping skills, especially in adversarial situations. Folk tales can be used for this purpose because children love stories as they have a certain enchanting quality about them. Stories also contain humor, wisdom, lessons, magic and fantasy. When these stories are coupled with the sincere efforts to achieve social maturity, academic success and moral compliance, then learning and pleasure will merge, resulting into behavioral modification and ultimately healthy smooth development (McDaniels 2003).

Psychologists like Erikson (2013), McDaniels (1988) and Schkloven (2007) acknowledged in their different works that folk tales and fairy tales engender children’s social development in the areas of language acquisition, cognitive abilities, empathy, emotional and moral developments. Whitaker (2010) also recommended that fairy tales could be used to develop a child’s social domain in the aspects of integrity, honesty, self control and all other areas that can help a child to become a distinguished personality in his community. All the various topics that will be treated in this paper under folk tales and the social development of a child will be grouped into these four main headings: language development, emotional attachment, morality and cognitive abilities. All these areas are essential for a child’s social development and they can be achieved through folk tales. This diagram depicts areas of a child’s social development that can be influenced by folk tales.
Social development of the child, Akanwa, P. C. (2014)

Language Acquisition

This is the act of acquiring language or words, which makes it possible for people to communicate. This process starts from early childhood to adolescence (about 9 months to 14 years). This aspect of development is very important to the child, because the verbal relationship that he enjoys with people in his environment is the outcome of this process. This topic is treated in the paper under communication, because it is the end product of attaining language skills.

Communication: According to Williams (1980), “words are the chief tools of communication between people. The more words a child gets to know, the easier it becomes for him to understand what others tell him and to express himself both in speech and writing” p.132. As a child grows and matures, his language skills improve, and he becomes more involved with other children and adults around him, making social interactions with peers an important part of his life. Folk tales help children to acquire communication skills, because many folk tales have some parts that are chanted. For example, if you are telling the story of the tortoise and his escapades, there is a part with a short song: “Nnabe ejemekwe”, then the audience will chant
“mbeleke”, “jeme jeme”, “mbeleke”, and small children of 9-15 months can join in this exercise. Also in some places, there are phrases that are used to introduce folk tales which require a reply from the audience. In Igbo land before a story is told, it is preceded with statements like, “lfo hi-ha”, “Oruru otu mgbe - otu mgbe eruo”, “Tun, tun gem gem - oso mgbada n’ugwu”. All these literature experiences help the child to acquire words, which will aid him in communication.

Accumulative tales can also aid a child in language acquisition and invariably in communication. These are tales that are based on accumulation and repetition of details. “The pancake” is an example of such tales, where the pancake has to repeat the names of the people he escaped from before meeting the next person. These tales help the child to acquire words because they are repetitive in nature, and therefore as a child repeats the words, they create a permanent impression in his mind.

**Emotional Attachment**

A child’s ability to recognize and express feelings and to understand and respond to emotions of others provides him with important emotional skills. Emotional attachment occurs when an individual becomes involved in a relationship with another individual. Development of emotional skills such as, self control, empathy, love, appreciation, etc precedes the development of relationships with family, peers and groups. Relationship topics like family life, friendship, communal life and control over aggression are placed in this area.

Family Life (The Family System): Children’s first relationships usually occur within the immediate family, then extends to friends in the neighborhood, to the school and finally to the broader world. Folk tales and other literature related activities can aid in the development of these relationships by encouraging children to be sensitive to the feelings of others. The family is an important organ in a child’s social development, because it is in the family unit that a child is nurtured. Piaget (1965) believes that at birth, a child’s mind is tabula rasa that is, nothing is printed on it. It is therefore in the family that the first impression or mark is engrafted in a child’s mind. So whatever the family inculcates in a child at this level of development may determine what the child shall be in the future.
Knowledge of what is expected from a child in his family circle and community is imparted in the child in his home and the school primarily. But folk tales can be used at all levels of a child’s development, to inculcate in him attitudes that will help him throughout life. Many folk tales depict family life and children are usually the focus of these stories. Well behaved children are saved from evil witches, ogres and wicked stepmothers. These children are universally good and this quality attracts favour to them. “Ola and Odusorola” is such a story. Ola is a very good girl in her family and everybody loves her. When out of jealousy her sister Odusorola pushes her into the river to die, the mammy water saves her, and she was returned to earth with many gifts. When her sister saw all the ‘goodies’ that she came back with, she became jealous and fell into the river, so that she can get her own gifts. But unfortunately for her, she was murdered by the mammy water, because her purpose was not genuine and her character on earth was bad. Any child who listens to this story will learn his lesson. Other folk tales with the same theme are Adibe the Great Wrestle and Akunna the Beloved, by Ihuaku Ndukaku. Children in all these stories fared well because they are good children, with the blessings of their families.

The child is not only expected to be of good character in his family, but also in the community where he comes from. Children are expected to respect their elders, talk properly to them and help them with family chores. Children who do these in folk tales are usually rewarded. “A bag of gold and other stories”, by Precious Aka is the story of Akuma who was given a bag of gold by the woman he helped to carry her heavy load. After reading this book or listening to the story, children will start helping elders so that they can attract such rewards.

Friendship: Friendship is the pleasant and rewarding result of human interaction. Friends are people who know and like each other, and all human beings need to share the common bond of friendship with others (Yu Yeong, Ostrosky, & Fowler, 2011). Traditionally, making friends is viewed as a natural and simple ongoing process. It is envisaged that through the use of folktales children can learn valuable skills that will enable them make and maintain friends.

Many folk tales for children deal with various emotions related to friendship. Best friends may have strong attachment with each other, as shown in Miriam Cohen’s Best
Friends and Russel Hoban’s Best Friends for Francis. True friendship is always revered as in the case of two friends, Okon and Ottong by Mirriam Edet. Okon goes into the forest in search of a magic bird and was lost. He friend Ottong follows him into the forest, and uses the experience he gathered from his father, who is a hunter to rescue his friend. Both of them returned to the village amidst celebrations and rejoicing. But there are stories of false friendship as in Kemi Morgan’s The Crowning of the Elephant and Joseph Sidahome’s “Agebeye” (Norton, 1999).

Morality
This involves learning to know the difference between right and wrong, which is necessary to make appropriate decisions in life. The development of morality is based on a child’s experience and environment. A child’s experience from birth helps mold the morals he eventually develops. The use of folk tales at all the stages of a child’s development is seen as a good influence in shaping the child’s moral life. Topics like, acquiring moral standards (values and norms), honesty/integrity and hard work are subsumed under this topic.

Acquiring Moral Standards: This is an important part of every child’s social development. Moral development is a process through which a child develops proper attitudes or behaviours towards other people in the society, based on various environmental factors such as, social and cultural norms, laws and rules. According to Kohlberg (2001), childhood moral development is not genetic, but develops in stages, and occurs throughout a life span. Developmental psychologists maintain that folk tales provide children with a medium to help them begin exploring moral issues and everyday dilemma. They warn them against vices like arrogance and disobedience which may result into severe punishment. Cyprian Ekwensi’s The Boa Suitor and Anthonia Ekpa’s Abo and the Crocodile are folk stories that can help in a child’s moral upbringing. In these stories, the main characters feel that they can act on their own against the set norms of the society.

Abo goes to the river to play against her parents’ wishes. She was attacked by a crocodile and nearly lost her life, but for the intervention of the villagers. She paid dearly for her disobedience. The beautiful proud girl in the Boa Suitor refuses to
marry the men in her community, and only wanted to marry the most handsome man on earth. She ended up marrying a Boa, who disguised himself as a handsome man. The experience humbled her. Folk tales make it clear that the child who spurns parental advice will go wrong, and man’s attempt to change his fate, without regard for communal wishes will lead to failure.

Honesty and Integrity: These two words are closely related. If honesty means to be truthful and morally upright, then integrity means to be consistently or steadily so, without wavering. Honesty is an aspect of moral development in children, and every society reveres it. Children need to inculcate this virtue from early childhood, and reading and listening to folk tales can help a child to achieve this. Many folk tales are riddled with the theme of reward for honesty and punishment for dishonesty. The story of “Ugali and Uloko” is a typical example of this type of story. In this story, these two men were sent to the ‘land of light’ to acquire wealth. Uloko took a short cut, and did not go through all the processes specified by the society, while Ugali went through all of them. When he (Uloko) got there and collected what was due to him, there was no short cut again and he returned through the correct route. He was delayed because the people he met on his way back did not recognize him, and he was even imprisoned at a point in time. But for Ugali, it was home coming. He got home with all his consignment, while Uloko lost all his treasures on his way home. Ugali was finally rewarded, while Uloko was spurned by his people. This type of folk tale will always keep children on track, so that they do things the right way without cutting corners.

Control over Aggressive Behaviour: A child must learn to exert control over aggressive and hostile behavior if he is to establish cordial relationships with family members, friends and the larger community. He should not be filled with bitterness and vengeance. Folk tales like An African Night’s Entertainment by Cyprian Ekwensi can act as a deterrent to any child that wants to grow up in this way. In this story, Abu was mistreated by Mallam Shehu, by taking away his betrothed from him. Instead of leaving vengeance to Allah, he spent many years planning to revenge. Though he achieved this purpose, but he ended up tragically. In contrast, Nneka the Golden Child by Ihuaku Ndukaku, tells the story of a girl who is loved by everybody in her community because she is a good girl. Even though her stepmother treats her harshly,
she still loves her. When her step mother plans to kill her, their dog helps her to escape death, by exchanging her step mother’s food with her own. In folk tales, if somebody is good, everything works together to help him in times of need, be it an animal, as in the case of Nneka, or the earth in the case of Ajule in ‘The magic land of shadows or the fairy godmother in the case of “Cinderella”.

Hard Work: Hard work is the basis for everything worthwhile a person achieves in life. In every culture, hard work is extolled. It is generally believed that people who work hard enjoy themselves, while the lazy ones in most cases die in abject poverty. Many folk tales portray this theme. The Reward of Labour by Mba Azuonye is the story of the lazy grasshopper and the busy ant. The ant gathered in food during the dry season, while the grasshopper played around. When the rains came, the ant went into its ‘house’ and started eating what it gathered. But for the grasshopper, there was no food. When it tried to venture out to get some food, the rain beat it and it became sick and died. Children should be told this type of stories and their implications so as to discourage them from being lazy.

Cognitive Ability

They are abilities that influence the acquisition of intelligence and increasingly advanced thought and problem solving initiatives from infancy to adolescence. Cognitive abilities enable a child to think of future occurrences than just the immediate realities. In order words, it helps a child to think properly, and also spy into the future. In this work, imagination, intelligence and understanding and diversity are discussed under this topic.

Imagination: Imagination is a healthy attribute in a child and if a child is not imaginative, he may not function properly in his adult life. Psychologists like Faw and Belkin (2000) are of the view that imagination helps a child to understand not only the actual realities with which he or she comes into contact, but also the potential realities (future realities/possibilities) that may or may not physically exist at this time. Inventions like cars, houses, computers, air craft’s etc, were the figment of man’s imagination before they were brought into reality by his ingenuity. According to Pullman (2013) folk tales help children to inculcate imagination, because they “loosen
the chains of imagination, and give the child images to think with and the sense that all kinds of things are possible”. When animals talk, twins are saved by the chimpanzee, the wind helps Mmiri Mma to escape from the hands of evil spirits, and when they hear the stories of other lands children’s imagination is stretched.

Even when the episodes are homely and the situations familiar as in the ‘Girl and the lizard’ and the ‘little red hen’ the act of seeing them as distinct images and of following them with interest feeds the imagination. By entering into the lives of characters and identifying himself with them, a child develops a large sympathy and a sense of power; he gains insight into life, and a care for the interests of the world. This imagination grows “in flexibility, scope and in sympathy, till the life which the individual lives is informed with the life of nature and society.”

Intelligence and Understanding (Wisdom): Children should be encouraged to understand from early childhood that wisdom is a very important attribute that every individual in the society should possess. An individual is supposed to make useful contributions to his group and also help in the general well-being of his community. He can only achieve this if he has the seed of intelligence and understanding in him. It has been confirmed by writers like Kim (2010) that exposure to folk tales can help a child to follow the path of wisdom from early childhood. Also Albert Einstein once remarked, “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales, if you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales (Pullman, 2009). In folk tales, wisdom is often celebrated over foolishness. Even in cases where the wise ones are weak, small, poor or even disabled, they still outsmart their boisterous counterparts. For example, “The Tortoise and the Hare” is a story where the tortoise beats the hare in a running competition, even though the tortoise is a very slow animal, it used wisdom to win the race. In “A story, A story”, the spider outwits a series of animals and wins his wager with the being that controls stories. In contrast, in a folk tale “The Fisherman and His Wife”, the couple looses their possession and return to their humble position because of foolish choices and greed. Also in the story “The blind Woman and the Stranger”, the woman lost her sight ‘again’ because of foolishness and ingratitude. She preferred to collect alms by the road side to working
and earning money with her sight. The stranger returned her to her former state of blindness.

Diversity: Social education entails that people should not only know about their environment- culture, traditions, education systems, religion etc, but should also be exposed to other cultures, which will arm them with the means to compare their systems with that of others. There are many means that can be used to do this, but the folk tale offers itself as one of the most viable means to achieve this. Folk tales embody the popular attitudes, beliefs, customs, traditions and values of the society where the stories originated, thus as enriching children’s consciousness and appreciation of the cultures of other people. Folk tales offer a way for children of all ages to learn about cultural diversity. Reading or listening to folk tales about the child’s own culture helps develop self-confidence, while reading about other cultures shows children how the world lives, and encourages an appreciation of the differences. Folk tales like, *Our Father’s Land*, *Ugali and Uloko*, *Nneka the Golden Child*, *The King of the Forest* etc shall help a child to know more about his culture, while children can explore diversity by reading the following stories, *Goldilock and the Three Beers* by Lorinda Bryan Cauley, “Rumpelstiltskin”, *The Glass Slippers* by Charles Perraults etc.

**Media of Transmission of Folk Tales**

Children are provided folk tales in four major environments - the community, the home, the school and the library. 

The Community: Folk tales are supposed to be told to a large group of people. People gather (together) at the communal centre or any other place appointed by the story teller to listen to folk stories. The time for story telling is usually at night and this has influenced the titles of many folk literatures for example, *Moonlight Stories*, *African Night’s Entertainment*, *Arabic Nights*, *Nights of a Thousand Tales* (Akanwa, 2002) etc. They are usually told in moonlit nights or near an African fire place. This is one of the few activities that children and adults enjoy together, thus promoting social interaction, which is an aspect of social development. During these nights, children are intimated with stories that portray their traditions, values, and norms and the
rewards of those who adhere by them, and the punishment for those who go against
them. This method of transmitting folk tales is phasing out because people are no
longer interested in communal living and many of the rural dwellers have drifted to
urban areas.
The family or the home: is another important medium for the transmission of folk
tales. Since the communal story time is no longer effective, the family has the
responsibility of telling their children folk tales. In this case, the mother, father or an
extended relative may relay the story to them. Nowadays they are referred to as
bedtime stories which mean that they are usually told in the children’s bedroom or
sitting room before they go to bed. If well planned and told, they still have the same
effect as when they were told communally.
The school (classroom): The school presents another avenue through which stories can
be told to children. The classroom teacher dedicates a particular time for telling
children folk tales. This should be a special time, and the teacher should make sure
that children enjoy the story. She can either tell the story orally or read it from a book.
It has been observed by Akanwa (2002) that children enjoy folk literature when they
are read or told by adults.
The library: Children are mainly served by two types of libraries, the children’s library
in the public library and the school library. The children’s library is a section of the
public library, where children are served with books, extension activities, audiovisual
materials and ICT resources. The children’s librarian can schedule story hour during
weekend programmes, and tell the children beautiful stories that will help to entice
them to the library (and make them permanent users).

The school library caters for the informational needs of children in elementary and
secondary schools and teachers training colleges. The school library can also be used
to introduce folk tales to children. The school librarian invites the children to the
library for this function. He should first of all choose a story, decide on how to tell the
story and identify the lessons he will like the children to learn from the story. Apart
from telling the story orally, he can read from a book, or use resources like the
Instructional Television (ITV), slides, television, and radio etc. to add variations. For
cultural diversity, the librarian can tell the children the stories that emanate from other lands and cultures to help them understand how other people live.

Conclusion

Folk tales are seen in this paper as age long tales that have instilled discipline, taught moral lessons and helped man to live harmoniously with people in his environment. Folktales that can help a child to acquire language skills like repetitive tales, accumulative tales and sequence stories should be introduced to him. Also, stories that will enable a child to forge emotional attachments like family stories, friendship tales and relationship stories should be communicated to the child in his community, home, school and library.

Morality is an important aspect of a child’s development and must be fostered. Many folktales have this theme and they can be used to inculcate this virtue in the child. Stories in which good is rewarded and evil is punished best suit this purpose. Cognitive abilities on the other hand entail the acquisition of intelligence and increasingly advanced thought and problem solving initiatives. Folktales that will aid a child to think, like suspense stories, animal stories and fantasy should be told or read to them.

It could be derived from the paper that folktales can actually influence the social development of a child by helping him to be integrated into his environment. The paper concludes that if adults who are responsible for telling children folk stories choose adequate ones and tell them in a manner that will interest them, folktales will definitely influence a child’s social development.
References


