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STORY-TELLING TRENDS AMONG SOME GHANAIAN CHILDREN

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Introduction

This paper is the result of an on-going research which seeks to demonstrate how children in Ghana learn and practise story-telling. The choice of this area of study stems from the realization of the invaluable tradition of this verbal art form and the consequent concern that it should be strengthened and transmitted from one generation to another.

The aspect of the project reported in this paper is geared towards the discovery of the extent to which the tradition is currently utilized by adult members of Ghanaian societies to enhance the linguistic development of children. The first section of the paper therefore reports a survey of story-telling trends among two groups of children, highlighting the degree of adult involvement in the children's story time. It is the contention in this section that a high level of adult participation in the art will not only enable children to be acquainted with the techniques of performance, but will contribute significantly to the development of language skills. The second section provides insights into children's acquisiton and mastering of their native language and the role that story-telling can play in these directions. The final section looks at other values of story-telling and discusses how it can be promoted and strengthened in order that children may derive maximum benefit from it.

1. General Observations on Story-telling Among Children

Story-tellng is one of the most widespread traditions in Africa which are now rightly recognised by scholars as literary genres and in recent decades the volume of litera- ture on this genre has mounted significantly. Although a large portion of this literature deals with various aspects of adult story-telling techniques a small portion of it is devoted to children's story telling. Researchers like Arewa (1974) and Nabasuta (1983) have dealt with story-telling among Nigerian and Uganda children respectively. The two writers have concentrated on the narrative style as mani- fested in young people's stories. Nabasuta indicates that children's narratives reveal significant diferences in style from adult renderings. She adds that even the best of children's narratives lack embellishment and ornamentation of language, elevated style, subtlety of expression, mimetic devices and elaboration of episodes. On the other hand the stories are full of omissions, substitution of episodes and undeveloped characters.

Field-work carried out by the present writer has shown that narratives by Ghanaian primary school pupils exhibit similar characteristics as those of Ugandan children. Another observation is that children's narratives are generally imitations of adult versions; in other words children recast stories that they have heard from adults. Such imitations of adult stories may be indicative of the importance of adult models in the development of the skills and techniques of narrative performance. Such efforts enable children to gain confidence in themselves which in turn leads to resourcefulness and independence expressed in the way they create and recreate episodes and add embellishment to their stories.

The above point can be substantiated from observations made during the field-work. Among a group of young children was a seven year old boy who was adjudged the best story-teller in his class. He told two stories which he had heard from his grandmother. The approval of his audience encouraged him to tell an original story in which he introduced certain items of material culture resulting from contact with modern technology. The story was about an adventure of the narrator and his friend called Joe and of how they went to purchase motor bicycles from a shop. Out of poor judgement Joe selected an inferior brand and as a result failed to derive much pleasure from its use. In contrast, the narrator enjoyed using the superior brand. Although in terms of content and style this tory may not be called a good one by traditional standards, it can be seen as an attempt to create stories within his limited experience and interest. As he becomes more and more practised in his native language and as his experience and interest widen, this creative ability may be more fruitful.

One will agree with Nabasuta (1983:56) who says that "the story-telling skills that develop and grow with the child are directly influenced by the level of verbal sophistication" but the reverse of this statement is also true, that is, the level of verbal sophistication can be influenced by story telling skills. As children gain exposure to adult story telling culture, they gradually and consciously or unconsciously, assimilate verbal skills that enhance general linguistic growth. The following survey highlights the extent to which story-telling is being used to enhance verbal growth.

II. Survey of Story-telling Trends among children

Since adult guidance in story-telling is important to children in their own cultivation and performance of the tradition, the present writer investigated the extent of

adult participation in children's story time. It was assumed that with the development of literary culture, the advent of electric lighting and its accompanying gadgets such as radio, video and television which provide alternative pastime, story-telling might not attract many people. Also with the emergence of formal classroom education and its resultant separation of grand-children from grandparents, and the general desire among Africans to learn European rather than African languages, it is feared that all this might lead to children not getting the opportunity to learn the story-telling culture. One might also expect that modern job pressure that leads to parents being less involved in the activities of their children, might affect the frequency with which this activity is performed in many homes and the degree of adult participation in it. Many Ghanaian parents, especially those in the urban areas, are seen to provide videos for their children to watch rather than tell them stories, either because they regard story-telling as an 'old-fashioned' and irrelevant practice, or because they do not have the time for it.

Subjects

In order to find out the extent of adult involvement in this aspect of culture a survey was done among some school children in Akropong Akwapim and Anyinasin, both in the Eastern Region of Ghana. In all, four hundred and fifty nine children, between six and thirteen years old were involved in the study.

Method

The researcher visited the schools, told stories and recorded stories told by the pupils. In each class, the interviewer tried to create a relaxed atmosphere in which the pupils could interact freely with her. This she achieved by recording their stories and playing them back. After this initial acquaintance, questions were asked which sought to elicit, among other things, the following information from them:

their native languages; other languages they spoke; with whom they lived; numbers in their families; how they spent their leisure; who participated in story-telling at home with great-grandparents, grand-parents, granduncles/aunts, parents, uncles, aunts, older siblings and peers; how often they engaged in this activity or why they did not engage in it.

In order to ensure that correct responses were given, the interviewer explained the purpose of the study and why it was necessary to answer correctly. In a few cases pupils' responses were verified by checking with older siblings in the school or other pupils who lived close by the interviewees.

Results

The details of the results of the study are provided in Tables 1 and 2 below. As the tables show, about 52 per cent of the children in each school do not participate in story-telling performance at home. In schools A and B, 28.5 per cent and 35.3 per cent respectively take part in story-telling sessions within the peer group only. The percentages that have adult involvement in their story-time are rather small. In school A, 15.2 per cent have story-telling sessions with their great and/or grandparents/uncles/aunts etc. and only 4.2 per cent engage in story-telling with their parents/uncles/aunts etc. In school B, 3.3 per cent of the children hear stories from their great and/or grandparents/uncles/aunts etc. and 8.7 per cent get the opportunity to listen to their parents/uncles/aunts etc. telling stories.

Table 1: School A (Akropong)

Story-telling Patterns Among Some School Children

Class	1	2	3	4	5	6	Totals
No. of pupils	63	54	61	46	36	49	309 (100)
No. that have great or grandparents'/uncles'/ aunts' etc. participation	10	18	8	2	4	5	47 (15.2)
No. that have parents'/ uncles'/aunts' etc. participation	1	3	3	2	0	4	13 (4.2)
No. that have peers'/ siblings' participation only	18	14	5	33	2	16	88 (28.5)
No. that do not participate in story-telling	34	19	45	9	30	24	161 (52.1)

Discussion

The survey leads to some interesting insights which deserve elaboration. The results indicate that modern alternative pastimes do not seem to be relevant since the percentages of children who do not engage in this activity are identical in both towns despite the fact that Akropong has electric lighting and Anyinasin lacks this facility. The survey also shows that

Table 2: School B (Anyinasin)

Class	1	2	3	4	5	6	Totals
No. of pupils	33	25	24	30	21	17	150 (100)
No. that have great or grandparents'/uncles'/ aunts' etc. participation	0	0	1	2	1	1	5 (2.3)
No. that have parents'/ uncles'/aunts' etc. participation	1	3	3	2	1	3	13 (2.3)
No. that have peers'/ siblings' participation only	13	13	3	5	14	5	53 (35.3)
No. that do not participate in story-telling	19	9	17	21	5	8	79 (52.7)

the children do not have any negative attitudes towards the tradition of story-telling. This statement is supported by the observation that even without adult supervision and guidance, about a third of the subjects tell stories within their peer group. Furthermore, most of the children who gave negative responses as to whether they engaged in story-telling at home revealed that the art was not practised in their neighbourhood and that they would be involved in it if they got the opportunity. Others indicated that they were often engaged in school assignments and a few said they performed household chores and ran errands which made it difficult for them to participate in story-telling.

The above revelations are confirmed by the degree of the children's involvement in story-telling at school. Most of the teachers interviewed attested to the excitement and enthusiasm with which the children welcomed the story time. They observed that the children showed enormous interest in it both as audience and narrators; and often wanted to exceed the duration stipulated for the activity on the time table. The present researcher also observed that the children were eager to perform. On most occasions more than two children would indicate their willingness to tell stories; while the one selected showed satisfaction, the others would not rest until they had had their turn. In most classrooms the children listened attentively and

reacted to jokes, exaggerations, funny comments and songs from the audience.

Another insight provided by the survey is that currently, the level of adult participation in story-telling in these two towns is low. However, in Akropong the percentage of children who have great/grandparents' involvement in their story time is quite high (15.2%), as compared with children at Anyinasin (3.3%). This situation is the result of many children in Akropong having to live with their grandparents while their own parents engage in economic ventures in the capital and elsewhere. On the other hand more parents at Anyinasin (8.7%) tell stories to their children than parents at Akropong (4.2%). When the percentages of the two groups of adults are added for each town, Akropong has a higher percentage (19.4%) than Anyinasin (12%) although the difference is not significant (7%).

The general low level of adult participation in children's story sessions may be due, partly, to job pressures as indicated above, and partly, to lack of interest. A few adults interviewed in the two towns were of the opinion that it might be a fruitless venture to engage contemporary children in story-telling because the children would not be interested in it. When they were asked whether they had ever made the attempt, they answered in the negative.

The above discussion leads one to conclude that the children have a natural inclination towards story-telling and that lack of exposure to the adult model, coupled with lack of motivation and encouragement from adults, prevent the children from enhancing and developing this interest. One can also argue that most adults remain indifferent to the tradition because they regard it mainly as a pastime and are not aware of the invaluable contribution it can make to the general acculturation of their children and in linguistic development in particular. The latter function of story-telling is discussed below.

III. The Role of Story-telling in Linguistic Development

1). Acquiring the L1

Language acquisition researchers are generally agreed that by five or six years of age, a normal child has completed the acquisition of his first language (L1), e.g. Chomsky (1965), Lenneberg (1967), Brown (1980). The L1 is sometimes called the mother-tongue or the native language but sometimes the L1 of the child may neither be the language spoken by his mother nor the language of his place of origin. For example, Ghanaian parents who bring up their children in Britain may have these children using English as L1, but English cannot be said to be their mother-tongue or their native language. The term L1 is therefore often used to refer to the language which a child hears around

him as he grows up and in which he learns to conceptualize and to socialize. The idea that a six-year-old child is a user of his L1 means that from the simple cry at birth which he uses to indicate all kinds of emotions and all his needs, at six he is able to use compound and complex sentences to communicate these needs in more precise terms. From the initial monosyllabic utterances he makes, he is now able to use a vast number of bi- and polysyllabic vocabulary items. At six the child is also able to select from his repertoire words and expressions that are appropriate to the context with regards to the norms of his society. In short a child of six has a mastery of the sound, the grammatical and the semantic systems of his L1.

Although all that has been said above is true, it needs some modification. A child of six cannot normally equal an adult speaker in his language use although it is true that at this age he knows his language well. Readers may be familiar with instances where young speakers hesitate in their speech, where they use inappropriate words or expressions, or where they ask adults for clarifications on the use or meaning of certain vocabulary items. In fact, what should be said of the achievement of a six year old child in his L1 is that he has a grasp of the basic patterns of the language. This basic knowledge of the L1 can be likened to the foundation of a building. Like a building, a child also needs to build upon his basic grasp of the L1 and to develop it to perfection.

I want to call the foundation laid in the L1 by age six as consisting of primary-level skills and what needs to be acquired or developed after that age as comprising secondary-level skills. What I call secondary-level skills include the following: spontaneity in speech, extensive vocabulary, accuracy in vocabulary selection, knowledge and appropriate use of idiomatic expressions, similes, euphemism, metaphors etc. and the ability to understand and use proverbs. It is true to say that these skills are rarely completely mastered by any individual in his or her life time; people only achieve varying degrees of competence in them.

The terms 'beginners', 'intermediates' and 'advanced' learners are often employed to describe certain levels of achievement of second language (L2) learners in a target language. These terms are not usually used to refer to L1 Learners. However, they are equally applicable to them although in a slightly different sense. A child of school-going age may be called a beginner, despite the fact that he or she can speak the L1 quite well. The adolescent or an adult with automatic control of the primary-level skills and a moderate grasp of the secondary-level skills may be called an intermediate speaker, and the advanced speaker may be the one who achieves high degrees of competence in the secondary-level skills.

In many Ghanaian societies advanced speakers of the L1 are much admired. For example, among the Akans of the southern and central parts of Ghana, competence in the secondary-level verbal skills is often considered a mark of distinction and certain positions in the community require such people. The 'mpanyinfo' or elders who help the chief in the court must not only be knowledgeable in the customs and traditions of the society, but also in the language. A member of the royal family who may become a chief or a queenmother may be trained in the use of the language. A leader of a group such as 'asafohene'[1] or 'mmrantehene'[2] who falters in his speech may bring irreparable disgrace upon himself and this may be a cause for destoolment. On the other hand an 'ọkyeame'[3] who uses the language with all flexibility is applauded. Terms such as the following may be used to commend such an eloquent speaker of the language:

'N'ano ate sẹ akoo'. (He is as eloquent as a parrot).
'N'ano awo'. (His lips are dry)
'Ne kasa mu pi'. (His speech has depth).
'Ọka Twi frenkyeem'. (He uses pure Twi).

Expressions such as 'maataa maataa nipa' (a person who falters in speech), or 'onipa a ne tẹkyerẹma abutuw' (one whose tongue is twisted), are reserved for a person who is not adept in the use of his own language.

2) **Mastering the L1**

If a six-year old child is to consolidate his grasp of the L1, then he should strive to acquire the secondary-level skills. There are several ways in which these skills can be acquired. It can be said that as nature equips the child with the basic knowledge of the L1 or what has been called the primary-level skills, nature should be allowed to teach the rest. This implies that the child should be left on his own to acquire the skills by listening and watching others use the language in various natural situations and by participating in various social interactions. Although many Ghanaians acquire what they know of the L1s this way, this cannot be the safest strategy that may be adopted. A method that speeds up and enhances this natural development is preferred. Another way of training children in the secondary-level skills, is to teach them to read and then encourage them to read extensively in order to build up a vast stock of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. This is certainly a good approach and must be encouraged. However, one can immediately see a loophole in it, for a good reader is not necessarily a good speaker. There are many people who may read and write well but who may not adequately express themselves verbally. Moreover the 'reading method' is appropriate in highly literate societies where there is emphasis on written communication. However, in societies such as are found in Ghana and in

many parts of Africa, a high premium must necessarily be put on the development of high degrees of the secondary-level verbal skills. With increase in the numbers of people with mastery of the secondary-level verbal skills, advanced-speakers of the languages may be trained who will in turn become the future custodians of the history and oral traditions - folktale narrators, dirge composers and performers, oral poets, proverb custodians, praise singers and song composers of various traditions. There is also the need for effective speakers to communicate in the local languages with non-literate members on modern issues. For example, illiterate farmers and fishermen may need the assistance of agricultural extension officers in explaining to them new and improved methods of farming and fishing. Also the wide communication gaps that exist between African governments and the majority of their populations who cannot speak, read or write the official European languages may be narrowed, if literate people competent in the local languages can explain government policies and the expected roles of illiterate people.

In traditional African societies one of the major ways in which many children are trained in secondary-level verbal skills is through story-telling. The old generation often talk about their childhood days when parents and grandparents told them stories as they accompanied them to the farms, as they helped to watch the flock in the fields and as they performed the household chores. Some readers might have also heard about or even seen some of the groups that congregated around evening fires after supper to take part in the story-telling performance.

The story-telling tradition serves several purposes. Firstly, it is a way of passing on and preserving the history, the fundamental beliefs, customs and moral values of the society. Secondly, it is a means of explaining certain practices and natural phenomena to the younger generations. Thirdly, it helps in personality development and in character training. Fourthly, it affords the young people the opportunity to acquire the secondary-level verbal skills in the L1. It is this last function that interests us here.

The stories that are performed at story-time in many African societies cover all types of subjects. They are woven around things and activities in the lands of human beings, animals and plants; of the living and the dead; of fairies, elves and gnomes; of giants and dwarfs etc. These stories give the young ones the opportunity to know about things and events which do not surface in their normal daily intercourse. At the story-telling sessions the young children therefore acquire new words, new imagery, new concepts, new idiomatic expressions and learn the use of proverbs. They learn good listening habits, the

appropriate norms governing turn-taking, the effective use of gestures, body movements, eye direction, facial expressions, changes in the tone of voice and other discourse strategies all of which contribute to efficient verbal delivery. They also experience and take part in the aesthetic aspects of the narrative performance. In short, at story-time, children have the opportunity to improve their acquaintance with the L1 and learn literary appreciation.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

One cannot say with any certainty that the level of adult participation in children's story-telling as indicated by this survey, is better or worse than in the past. Perhaps there have always been families in the Akan speaking societies who have neglected the tradition and therefore have not passed it on to their children. It cannot be assumed that every Akan practises all aspects of that culture to the same extent. However, it is justifiable to say that the current levels of participation among both children and adults need to be raised. This seems to be necessary because of other roles story-telling can play, apart from enhancing linguistic skills of children. Firstly, by equipping people with the secondary-level verbal skills of the L1, story-telling prepares them for all the other oral traditions because without a high degree of verbal competence in a language no one can become a competent oral poet, a praise singer or a dirge composer. Secondly, the story-time gives the youth enormous exposure to other oral art forms. During the narrative performance there is often music, drama, drumming, dancing and poetry in which everyone may participate. Thirdly, many Ghanaian traditional and popular songs are woven into and around stories and proverbs that are heard during the story-time. For example, there are composers such as Agya Koo Nimo and Nana Ampadu whose songs are made up of strings of proverbs expertly put together. These two composers and many others such as Kakaiku and Bob Cole have put many of the traditional stories into song. For such composers and singers one can say that story-telling supplies the material for their songs. It is apparent that their participation in the narrative performance at some points in their lives has contributed significantly to the success that they now enjoy as composers and singers.

In an attempt to strengthen and promote story-telling in Ghana, there must be deliberate efforts by institutions such as the Centres for National Cultures and the National Commission on Children to promote it in the communities. In this direction one possible mode of action is for these institutions to emulate the initiative of Mrs. Efua T. Sutherland which has resulted in the establishment of 'Kodzidan' or a story-house at Atwia in the Central Region of Ghana. The 'Kodzidan' is a building especially

designed for story-telling and a place where the people of the town congregate on various occasions. At Atwia the narrative performance involves people of all ages. An interesting development from this 'kodzidan' is that the youth of the town who reside in Accra have formed a story-telling club in the city, thus giving the people in the urban community the opportunity to participate in this excellent tradition. Although it may not be possible to have a special building in every town for story-telling, the community centres found in many towns in Ghana can serve the purpose. In towns and villages where there are no such centres, any suitable house can be used as a story-house.

Another institution that can be involved in the promotion and preservation of the story-telling tradition is the mass media. Since these facilities have come to stay, it is not profitable decrying the way they have undermined traditional life styles. One must rather think of how to make effective use of them to promote, develop and preserve the traditions. In this connection the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation has a useful role to play. Instead of the regular telecasting of western movies thus promoting western values, story-telling sessions in the communities could be video-taped and telecast. Apart from the fact that this will provide entertainment for many Ghanaians, it may also assist in the promotion and development of Ghanaian languages, and in the documentation of the traditional stories for posterity.

The school as an institution can also help in this endeavour. Now that it has taken over the most part of the training and education of the child, it must seriously think of how the story-telling tradition can be incorporated in its curriculum. Well planned story-periods in the classroom will not only help to preserve this art, but also help in achieving many of the aims that are often stated for primary education with regard to intellectual, emotional and social development. Bugunywa (1970) has identified the following as some of the basic aims of primary education:

> development of initiative, confidence, resourcefulness, independence and a spirit of co-operation; orientations; concept formation; skills; literacy; and factual knowledge (p. 23).

What is currently done in many schools in Ghana in the form of story-telling leaves much to be desired. As a former primary school teacher, and on the basis of the field work, this writer knows that many teachers ask children to tell stories when they (the teachers) are occupied. Teachers can give encouragement to their pupils in the cultivation of this multi-purpose oral tradition. They can perform as narrators or invite expert narrators in the community to perform in the school. By

listening to good demonstrations of this art, children may also have the opportunity to retell the stories to their friends. As Bugunywa (ibid.) has recommended, teachers can also deliberately involve parents and grandparents in children's story-telling homework. If, for instance teachers reward children who tell new or good stories, or those who narrate the highest number of stories in a week or a term, such incentives may motivate children to ask adults to tell them stories. It is also necessary that the end of term evaluation in the L1 be based on both oral and written work; there is no reason why such assessment should involve only the latter. In reality, what most Ghanaian children need in the L1 is oral ability since most of them read and write very little in their own languages. In this connection, one can also suggest similar methods for assessing students at the secondary and tertiary levels who study the indigenous languages.

Notes

1. 'asafohene' refers to the leader of the warriors.
2. 'mmrantehene' refers to the leader of the youth group.
3. 'Okyeame' is the chief's spokesman in the Akan royal court.

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