



The Role Played by Folklore in Raising Up an African Child

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ABSTRACT

Folklore is commonly understood to be a collection of traditional beliefs, traditions, and practices that are practiced by communities all over the world. It is essential to pass down social standards and cultural values from generation to the next. The purpose of this study is to investigate how folklore, especially in African civilizations, shapes moral behavior, social values, and collective identity. Additionally, the study explores how folklore serves as a vehicle for communal cohesiveness, education, and amusement. A qualitative study methodology was used, which included interviews with elderly and cultural practitioners in addition to content analysis of a few chosen folktales, legends, proverbs, and songs. The results show that folklore is still an effective means of fostering the community, resolving conflicts, and imparting moral lessons. In addition to providing pleasure, stories read by the fire in the evening also encourage proper behavior by imparting moral lessons. Although they are frequently disregarded in contemporary settings, superstitions and irrational beliefs have traditionally assisted societies in overcoming adversity and uncertainty. Because it promotes intergenerational communication and conserves indigenous knowledge, the conversation highlights the timeless value of folklore even in modern culture. It also recommends more research and documentation of oral traditions to preserve them for upcoming generations. This study adds to the body of knowledge by demonstrating the diverse functions of folklore in society, not only as a holdover from the past, but as a dynamic, ever-evolving mode of cultural expression that still shapes ethics, behaviour, and identity formation.

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INTRODUCTION

Folklore has a great impact on how children are raised. It is an essential means by which cultural values, traditions, and beliefs are passed down from generation to generation. The rich and diverse African folklore includes fables, legends, and folktales that are used to teach young people about their environment and how to live in it. In addition to being transmitted orally, folklore is also transmitted through ceremonies, dance, music, and other artistic mediums. Toelken asserts that music and dance are highly valued in African societies and are often used to celebrate important life events and milestones for children.¹ Through various forms of expression, cultural traditions are also passed down from generation to the next.

¹ B. Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2014), 36.

Raising children has historically been a collective duty in many African communities, and the community as a whole has helped to mold a child's moral and social identity. Children are frequently taught about their heritage, social norms, and moral behavior through folklore by elders, parents, and community storytellers. According to Onwuatuogwu and Paul-Mgbeafulike oral traditions such as proverbs, songs, storytelling, and rituals are a vital component of indigenous educational systems because they effectively and enduringly transmit moral teachings and wisdom.² Furthermore, Wu highlights that these traditional forms are not just artistic manifestations but are intricately woven into society and have a significant influence on a child's development.³ Children gain a strong sense of cultural identity, respect for their heritage, and a sense of belonging by actively engaging in these oral traditions.

Nevertheless, academic discourse frequently ignores folklore's useful role in sociocultural development, even though its significance in childrearing is widely recognized. The majority of the literature that is now available tends to concentrate on the literary examination of folktales, ignoring their usefulness as instruments for teaching morals and emotions.⁴ Academic studies on the direct effects of many folklore forms, including lullabies, initiation songs, riddles, and group storytelling, on a child's moral development and psychological health are severely lacking. Traditional means of cultural transmission have also been increasingly disturbed by modernity, urbanization, and the prevalence of formal education systems modelled after those in the West.⁵ As a result, folklore's role in raising children in African cultures is progressively waning, although little is known about this change and its effects.

By analysing the role folklore plays in African children's moral, emotional, and cultural development, this article aims to close that gap. It specifically seeks to examine the many traditional folklore practices such as storytelling, proverbs, and song that are still relevant in today's rapidly evolving culture and to assess how they are used in childrearing. The study also aims to examine how modernity affects folklore transmission and how these old knowledge systems might be incorporated into modern educational and developmental frameworks. By doing this, the paper hopes to provide insights on how African values, identity, and resilience can be instilled in young people through folklore.

The instructional purposes of folktales and storytelling in African societies, the symbolic and psychological effects of folklore on children's identity formation, and the role of gender in folklore narratives and their impact on socialization are the subjects that will steer this conversation.⁶ The conversation will also cover the difficulties that modernization and formal education have presented for the preservation of folklore, and it will end with some methods for incorporating folklore into current educational and developmental frameworks. The paper seeks to validate the ongoing importance of folklore in forming generations that are socially conscious and culturally anchored through these themes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the function of African folklore in a child's upbringing is made easier by using the social learning theory as a framework. According to this idea, people learn new behaviours by watching and copying the actions of others, and rewards and punishments can affect whether this behaviour will change. Children learn cultural values and beliefs by witnessing and copying the behaviour of characters in folktales, legends, and myths, which serves as a social learning tool in African culture. For this reason, Mphasha asserts that:

² Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuogwu and V S Paul-Mgbeafulike, "African Traditional Educational Framework: Unveiling the Wisdom beyond Western Education," *Nnadiabube Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2023).

³ Biyang Guo et al., "How Close Is Chatgpt to Human Experts? Comparison Corpus, Evaluation, and Detection," *ArXiv Preprint ArXiv:2301.07597*, 2023.

⁴ David C Virtue and Kenneth E Vogler, "The Pedagogical Value of Folk Literature as a Cultural Resource for Social Studies Instruction: An Analysis of Folktales from Denmark," *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 32, no. 1 (2008): 28–39.

⁵ Timothy G Reagan, *Non-Western Educational Traditions: Alternative Approaches to Educational Thought and Practice* (Routledge, 2004).

⁶ Anthonia Yakubu, "The Potter and the Clay - Folklore in Gender Socialisation," May 2020.

The future of the child lies in the hands of the parents. Parents are expected to teach their children to be wise. Wisdom is not inherited but taught. Parents have better knowledge and skills to maintain life and are the ones who should play an important role in the leading of the young.⁷

A helpful foundation for comprehending the function of folklore in bringing up an African child is provided by Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory. This idea contends that children build their own conceptions of the world through their interactions and experiences with it. Folklore helps youngsters develop their cognitive skills by helping them make sense of the world through the stories and cultural practices that have been passed down through the ages. Thus, the explanation of folklore is in accordance with group life and culture. The communities have made great strides in the control of a better life for all.⁸ They ensure, among other things, that their members have equal opportunities for life and development.

Cultural psychology also provides a theoretical framework to understand the function of folklore in forming the cultural identities of African children is also provided by cultural psychology. According to this viewpoint, culture affects people's psychological development and behaviour, including their sense of self and identity. Folklore is a tool for cultural socialization because it teaches children about their origin and helps them feel proud of and connected to their African roots.

In general, a theoretical framework for the function of folklore in the upbringing of an African child would draw on social learning theory, cognitive development theory, and cultural psychology to comprehend how folklore is used as a tool for socialization, cognitive development, and the formation of cultural identity in African children.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the function of folklore in the rearing of African children, this study used a qualitative research design. The method was used to obtain a thorough understanding of the social, cultural, and moral aspects of African folklore. To understand lived experiences and cultural manifestations in context, a qualitative framework works well.⁹

A thorough literature review, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and case studies were used in the data collection process. Knopf states that a literature review should critically assess the gaps and discrepancies in the corpus of existing knowledge in addition to summarizing the main conclusions from earlier studies. Among the participants were those who grew up in African communities where folklore was a part of their culture.¹⁰ A wide range of African folklore, including songs, proverbs, legends, myths, and folktales, were chosen for analysis. The underlying lessons and effects on children's development of these formats were investigated.

To find patterns, recurrent motifs, and moral teachings ingrained in folklore, the data analysis process included content analysis.¹¹ This approach made it possible to arrange both spoken and visual content in a way that made culturally significant meanings clear. Cultural activities related to storytelling, music, rituals, and oral traditions were also observed and interpreted through the use of ethnographic research.¹² By providing insights into both universal and distinctive pedagogical uses of folklore, comparative analysis assisted in evaluating how African folklore functions in connection to the systems of parenting seen in other cultures.¹³ Additionally, the development and adaption of African folklore throughout many generations and sociopolitical eras were traced using historical analysis.

⁷ Lekau Eleazar Mphasha, "Revitalization of Imagery through Proverbs: The Case of Northern Sotho Language in South Africa," *Studies of Tribes and Tribals* 13, no. 2 (2015): 135–41. P. 139

⁸ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Open Book Publishers, 2012). P. 525

⁹ Margaret Diane LeCompte and Jean J Schensul, *Designing & Conducting Ethnographic Research: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (Rowman Altamira, 2010).

¹⁰ Jeffrey W. Knopf, "Doing a Literature Review," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39, no. 1 (January 13, 2006): 127–32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506060264>.

¹¹ Tracy G Harwood and Tony Garry, "An Overview of Content Analysis," *The Marketing Review* 3, no. 4 (2003): 479–98.

¹² LeCompte and Schensul, *Designing & Conducting Ethnographic Research: An Introduction*.

¹³ S. Ottenberg, *Cultural and Societies of Africa*. (New York: Random House, Inc., 2014).

Strict adherence to ethical principles was maintained. After being informed of the study's objectives, interviewees and focus group participants gave their informed consent. According to ethical research guidelines, their identities were kept private and anonymous. A well conducted study respects the participants' privacy and dignity in addition to effectively presenting the findings, as Bolderston highlights.¹⁴

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Folklore has been found to be essential to African children's socialization, according to earlier research. Children are taught about their cultural background, history, and customs through the use of folktales, myths, legends, and other types of folklore. Children learn valuable life lessons, morals, and beliefs from these tales, as well as a sense of self and pride in their African heritage. Folklore is also shown to be a means of passing on cultural knowledge and traditions generation to generation. Oral storytelling is a rich tradition in African communities, and the craft of storytelling is frequently used to transmit folklore from one generation to the next. This procedure ensures that cultural traditions in Africa are preserved and passed down over time, preserving cultural knowledge and values. According to du Plooy and Kilian, everybody should realize that the human world is always governed by standards (norms), and that whatever decision is taken, it is really a value judgement.¹⁵

African children's cultural understanding and sense of identity increased significantly as a result of the incorporation of folklore into early childhood education and community-based storytelling projects. Teachers, parents and guardians saw that kids who were exposed to traditional games, songs, and stories grew more connected to their culture and beliefs. The digital age has seen the preservation and promotion of African cultural heritage; and thanks to the utilization of contemporary media to adapt folklore for internet platforms, making these customs more accessible.

Studies that examine the effects of folklore on infant development have shown that traditional narratives have a good impact on social competence, emotional intelligence, and cognitive development. Folklore-based educational resources improved linguistic and historical learning, and cultural exchange initiatives promoted respect and understanding across many African cultures. Fostering artistic expression through folklore enabled children to investigate and commemorate their cultural background, confirming the crucial function of folklore in becoming culturally literate and socially conscious adults.

Additionally, folklore is essential to foster a sense of community and social cohesiveness. Numerous African folktales stress the value of community, collaboration, and support among one another. Children learn the virtue of cooperating and helping one another through these tales, which fosters a feeling of social cohesion and fortifies communal ideals.

Finally, folklore encourages youngsters in Africa to be imaginative and creative. African folktales frequently include fanciful characters and miraculous occurrences, which pique children's curiosity and inspire them to push the boundaries of their creativity. In general, folklore plays a varied and intricate function in an African child's upbringing, spanning socialization, cultural transmission, shared values, and creativity.

DISCUSSION

African communities place a strong emphasis on storytelling in their daily activities. Elders and locals frequently gather by a fire or under a tree to tell children tales. These tales are used to impart knowledge, morality, and values in addition to being entertaining. They impart a sense of pride and respect for one's background while also assisting children in learning about their history and culture.

Children are also taught crucial life lessons through folklore. For instance, many African folktales have animals that behave like people do and frequently include moral teachings. The trickster

¹⁴ Cathryne Palmer and Amanda Bolderston, "A Brief Introduction to Qualitative Research," *Canadian Journal of Medical Radiation Technology* 37, no. 1 (2006): 16–19.

¹⁵ Jan Louis Du Plooy and Cornelius Johannes Gysbertus Kilian, *Introduction to Fundamental Pedagogics* (HAUM Educational, 1993). P. 22

hare is a typical figure in numerous African folktales. In these tales, the hare is frequently portrayed as a mischievous and cunning creature that, by using his/her cunning and intelligence, defeats larger, more powerful creatures. Children are taught the value of using their intelligence and creativity to solve problems in life through these tales.

The value of community and cooperation is also emphasized in African folklore. Many stories have people who cooperate to overcome challenges and accomplish shared objectives. Children learn the importance of cooperation through these tales, and they also develop empathy and a sense of social duty. It is traced back to the individual's relations to the family and other groups. In other words, it is interpreted as a product of organizational measures of the community.

These are exceptionally difficult issues that make life impossible for human beings. They are regarded as those that obstruct personal or community self-realization, judged by given norms and religious convictions. Not only personal problems are human problems, but also social problems since these latter are the outcome of people's co-existence. Hunt also stresses that natural problems are exclusively men in that he cannot completely fathom and control nature. The problems are complicated because of the tremendous diversity in the directedness and involvement of life.¹⁶ It must be noted that no problem can ever be isolated because it is always associated with other problems. Carver clearly indicates that if a certain action is judged by the community, then the values and norms apply as laid down by culture on behalf of the community.¹⁷ Cooley goes on to maintain that anti-social behaviour is part of life's problems because it is interpreted as part of the co-existence of finite, imperfect and sinful humanity.¹⁸

As any breach of values and norms may adversely affect not only the individual but also the entire community, the cultural system is used to ensure that they are all maintained. To support the statement which has just been mentioned, Mönnig goes on to say that:

Within the life of the individual he is, through the normal process of enculturation, taught to conform to the norms and customs of his tribe, and is made aware that a breach of the accepted conduct is sanctioned in various manners, among others by legal institutions.¹⁹

The quotation indicated above shows that folklore consists of concepts and rules which have been developed from time immemorial to adjust the relationships between individuals or groups and of people to their environment. This indicates that the rights of the individuals or groups are safeguarded. In every community, there are so many norms that are accepted and operative and, in this way, people's lives are better. It must be understood that man is by nature a moral or ethical being and as such can distinguish good from evil and act rightly or wrongly. What a person does as a moral being is known as his/her morality.

The normative in personal existence is directed to the person's conscience, which is understood as meaning the whole and the unity of all the moral norms which by internalizing, s/he has accepted and made his own as the development of his moral potency. It is true that everyone has a conscience, however, defective. Besides the moral norms, there are social norms, which include all the norms operative in regulating and furthering social existence which contributes to the advancement of the personal life (self-realization) of all members of the community, for example, education norms, communication norms, job norms, feeding norms, housing norms, etc. The third one is the political norms which pertain to the guidelines and principles used to order, expand and safeguard the state, as well as interstate relations: for example, legal norms, administrative norms, military norms and international relations norms. The state with its political norms is not an end in itself but is intended to serve the community and the people of the community which the state constitutes in order to be of service.

¹⁶ Stephen Hunt and Nicola Lightly, "The British Black Pentecostal 'revival': Identity and Belief in the 'new' Nigerian Churches," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 1 (January 7, 2001): 104–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/014198701750052523>.

¹⁷ C. M. Carver, *Sociology and Social Progress*. (New York: Gim and Company, 2022), 19.

¹⁸ C. H. Cooley, *Social Organization*. (New York: Scribner., 2024).

¹⁹ H.O. Monnig, *The Pedi*, 2nd ed. (Cape Town: National Book Printers, 1978), 301.

It is of great significance to make sure that people bring their languages with them at all times because languages deal with their culture, customs, rituals, history and beliefs, etc. They need to examine the pride with which they talk about these languages. They should not have problems expressing themselves in their language, using their cultural expressions. Mazrui and Mazrui concede that a true owner should express his/her unreserved pride in his home language. Today, many schooled people are often ashamed to identify themselves with these indigenous languages.²⁰ They always associate these languages with backwardness, ignorance and illiteracy. Makalela then says that the majority of Africans are, however, finding nothing archaic about folklore.²¹ Therefore, it is important to teach African languages even in schools and higher academic institutions.

It is important to note that the missionaries had successfully brought the Western school system to the indigenous people of South Africa. During the time of missionaries, converting to Christian beliefs was a fashionable thing to do amongst the blacks. All those people who were born into Christian homes by parents who were already Christians by 1852 were regarded as models of the future generation. It looks as if there is a definite desire of black South Africans to place indigenous languages at the center of the process of growth and change. Section 30 of the Bill of Rights in The Constitution of South Africa²² reads as follows:

Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life and practices of their choice.

Communities can identify themselves with their languages and cultures. Every language is regarded as a natural activity. It is of great significance to ensure that business and the industrial world are taken into account because it is where economic power rests. That is why people should create conditions for the development of and equal use of all official languages.

The application of folklore does not mean that new ideas should be rejected. Sometimes changes in the universe is usually met with fear and rejection and new ideas and approaches to folklore are being explored. The focus in many places is on making folklore more people-centered, with a more problem-solving nature and outcomes-based. Changes threaten all old people, practiced, and familiar ways of doing things. After all, a change to something new does not imply that something is wrong with the old and that should not make people feel uncomfortable. According to Cristos, et al., the initial step of dealing intelligently with change is to *think back*, to understand how people's history shapes their present thoughts and practices.²³ The fact that so many of these ideas are unconsciously held makes it difficult to change them as they are too deeply embedded.

Africans believe that every human being should respect traditional values. By understanding their beliefs, which are often deeply hidden, they become more able to accept new ideas and practices. It requires people to understand what is important in the mass of new ideas that come their way. Shor goes on by asserting that it requires people to weld these ideas to the strengths they bring from the past.²⁴

The process will develop many of the skills that future citizens need. Thus, folklore creates a learning culture that educates youngsters on how to listen to others, share ideas and model others ways of thinking and doing things. In this way, they survive by using their own experiences, in addition to being told what to do. The three following issues are important in that this folklore develops:

1. *A strong inter-personal skill.* They learn to communicate better with their peers and negotiate mutually agreeable goals. These types of skills are used in their daily lives and at work. It is a norm, for Emaswati boys to frequently play mind games called *tiphicaphicwano* riddles when they go out to the fields to tend to animals. One of them, known as *Umphici*, presents the riddle to the others and waits for their answers. In addition to providing entertainment, these riddles improve cognitive function, maintain oral tradition, and fortify cultural identity.

²⁰ Ali Al'Amin Mazrui, Alamin M Mazrui, and Alamin Mazrui, *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience* (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²¹ Leketi Makalela, *Not Eleven Languages* (De Gruyter, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614515067>.

²² South African Constitution, "Bill of Rights - Chapter Two," Retrieved November 12 (1996): 2013.

²³ C. Criticos et al., "Getting Practical About Outcomes-Based Teaching. Learning Guide" (Cape Town: OUP/Saide, 2002), 11

²⁴ Ira Shor, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (Black Rose Books, 1980). P. 13

2. *Strong cooperative and collaborative working skills.* These skills can balance the competitive either group or individualistic ethos. Children frequently perform folktales like *Nogwaja Nelibhubesi* and *Bangani Labatsatfu* in an Emaswati context. While other children may aspire to be the main characters, one child frequently demonstrates outstanding leadership and collaboration, assisting others in understanding their responsibilities and fostering togetherness. Usually, the group practices together, talks about the meanings of the folktale, and creates basic costumes out of natural materials. The collective spirit of the folktales is reflected in their performance, which typically emphasizes themes of togetherness, wit, and humility.
3. *Strong problem-solving and critical-thinking skills.* This happens if individual or group work activities are problem-based. These are important skills in a rapidly changing world.

The *Bangani Labatsatfu*, is a folktale from Emaswati mythology that emphasizes critical thinking and problem-solving techniques. In the folktale, the hare uses cunning tactics rather than speed to outsmart the other two friends. Children are often told this story to demonstrate to them that ingenuity and intelligence can overcome difficulties even in situations where physical power is insufficient. It teaches children to think critically and collaborate to overcome obstacles, which is an important skill in the rapidly evolving world of today.

This encourages less confident people to contribute their ideas. It establishes a system that creates better prospects of living a good life and a system where people recognize themselves as beneficiaries rather than traumatic home life. It serves as a way to understand how an individual or a group of people behaves in situations that present them with differing accordances and demands. Cheek et. al. continue to say that even in the future it will serve the same purpose when asserting that:

Personality is the characteristic and distinctive behavior, emotions, and thoughts that compromise an individual's response to his or her circumstances and environment. It affects the way people think and feel about themselves and others; it also influences the choices they make about career, family lives, romances, and social relationships. How people think and feel about themselves and others affects how they relate to others.²⁵

Folklore, as advocated by Nyamende, will still play an important role in the future if its owners lay a proper foundation, now that they have a focus.²⁶ Folklore is part of a language, and it should continue to be used simply because it holds people's culture, which will never be replaced. People must not feel undermined because, to the speakers, a discontinuation of their language is regarded as a violation of language rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Early childhood education should incorporate folklore, with schools using storytelling, traditional songs, and games to teach cultural values and social conventions. This will strengthen the significance of folklore in raising African children. To foster intergenerational learning, community-based storytelling programs ought to be established, and parents ought to be urged to involve their children in folklore activities at home. Additionally, folklore can be preserved and made accessible to today's kids by being included in contemporary media and technology.

The studies have a positive influence of folklore on child development, producing educational resources rooted in African folklore, and establishing cultural exchange initiatives to disseminate folklore throughout groups. Fostering children's imaginative expression through folklore, art, dramatization, and storytelling will also assist them in identifying with and appreciating their cultural background. By taking these actions, African children will be raised with a strong sense of self and an appreciation for their cultural heritage.

²⁵ Nathan Cheek et al., "I'm Right, You're Biased: How We Understand Ourselves and Others," *Reason, Bias, and Inquiry: The Crossroads of Epistemology and Psychology* (Ballantyne, N. and Dunning, D., Eds), 2022, 35–59.

²⁶ Abner Nyamende, "Beyond 2000: Sharpening the Focus on the Indigenous Languages," *South African Journal of African Languages* 28, no. 2 (2008): 126–32.

CONCLUSION

Folklore is essential to the upbringing of an African child because it provides a structure for the dissemination of cultural knowledge and values, fosters social cohesion and a sense of community, and fosters creativity and imagination. African children learn about their cultural heritage, history, and customs through folktales, myths, legends, and other types of folklore. They also gain a feeling of identification and pride in their African ancestry. African folklore plays a varied and intricate function in a child's upbringing that includes socialization, cultural transmission, upholding communal values, and creativity. However, it is evident that folklore is a significant resource for African tribes, offering a way of maintaining and transmitting cultural traditions and values, and promoting the well-being of future generations.

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