



The Importance of Riddles in Society: The Tiv Experience

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ABSTRACT

Despite the massive cultural shift in Africa owing to the impact of colonialism and globalization, folklore has remained resilient and retained its place in most societies in Africa, and by extension, the Tiv society. Riddle as a genre of folklore has equally survived technological advancements and has continued to play great roles in shaping the life and actions of the Tiv people. Riddling is carried out by the Tiv people mostly at night after a day's work and play significant roles which are both latent and manifest. It is fallacious to believe that riddles are an exclusive preserve of children because it is performed by people of all ages, gender and social status; and plays educative, social, intellectual and cosmological roles. It is therefore not out of place to encourage its continuous practice even beyond the Tiv cosmology. This paper therefore takes a look at the importance of riddles in Tiv cosmology using the functionalist theory as its framework. Data for this study is collected orally from native speakers of Tiv language within the North East geo-political zone of Benue State. Findings from the analysis of the collected riddles show that riddles are functionally dynamic to the Tiv people and serve the purposes of entertainment, memory training and didacticism among others.

Keywords: *Riddle, Panacea, Language Cosmology and Preservation.*

Introduction

Riddles play both latent and manifest roles in the Tiv society but seem not to engage enough scholarly attention by Tiv folklorists. Linguistic attention has been beamed on other genres of folklore like proverbs and folktales and it seems there is a conspiracy against the Tiv riddle. This notwithstanding, riddles are valuable to the Tiv society in their own right. Awedoba (2000) opines that this neglect might be connected to the fallacious belief that riddles are primarily a preserve for children. This however does not take away the validity of the genre in almost all African societies.

The riddle as a genre of folklore has been bedeviled with several definitions since 400 A.C.E. when Cleodnius Pompeius Julianus attempted a definition (Scott 1965). To Scott, these definitions are little more than descriptions of some of the major characteristics of the genre, and tell us nothing about how the riddle is formally different from other folklorist genres within cultures. Dietrich (2018), agreeing with Scott says that "The world is full of riddles". According to him, riddling is as old and ubiquitous as language itself. When God invited Adam to name all the animals and beauties of creation, he showed that each naming was an answer to the universal riddle, "what am I called?" Much later, somewhere east of Eden, many of the prophets worked in riddles: Daniel in Babylon could read the writing on the wall, and Solomon knew of that which "scattered yet increaseth". Samson marked his wedding feast with a riddle for the philistines: "out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness". Among the Greek, Oedipus had to solve the riddle of the sphinx. The birds of Aristophanes regarded the lives of men as so many riddles. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, sums it up: "the very nature of indeed a riddle is this, to describe a fact in an impossible combination of words (which cannot be done with the real names of things, but can be with their metaphorical substitutes)". From the foregoing, it can be seen that the idea of riddling is as old as man himself. Riddling began right from creation and has evolved into what is obtainable today. Consequently, we can look at a riddle as a statement or question that offers a puzzle to be solved. It involves critical thinking on the part of the reader or listener in order to figure out the answer. Gunner (2000) sees a riddle as an enigma and enigmas, according to him, employ the use of allegorical or metaphorical devices and they require critical thinking on the part of the listener to derive an answer.

The general opinion of linguists is that linguistics is the scientific study of language. It seeks to describe succinctly the structural properties of language and to understand their interactions, how they change and how they serve the broader functions of language as a tool of communication embedded in human physiology, cognition, interaction, society and culture. Folklore on the other hand deals with the traditions, legends, myths, songs, dances, customs, beliefs, attitudes, lifestyles, riddles and other forms of cultural expressions of a society or community. The fact that folklore is expressed orally makes it linguistic in nature. These forms of cultural expressions are passed down from generation to generation through the instrumentality of language. Language is therefore the instrument through which folklores are expressed with each community having its own language or dialect. Folklore and linguistics can therefore be said to be inseparable phenomena since the former uses the later for its expression. Folklore can therefore play a significant role in language preservation generally. It is a powerful tool and holds an immense value for language preservation. It is worthy of note here that folklore is just a way of

language preservation among many. Folklore embeds linguistic features in all its forms of oral traditions, songs, poems, proverbs and riddles and these preserves vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation in their natural, spoken form. All these are expressed through language.

The Nature of Tiv Riddle

The Tiv riddle, called *kikyaa* is a short expression or utterance which may be in plain language or language that is poetic. The riddle sometimes comes in form of questions and calls for a response or utterance like the riddle itself. The riddler usually begins by posing the utterance “*kikyaa*” and the audience must respond “*kyelee*” before he poses his riddle. The conversation goes like this:

1) Riddler : *kikyaa*. 2) Riddler : *Kikyaa*
 Audience : *kyilee*. Audience: *Kyilee*
 Riddler: *kpuun me hide we*. Riddler : *Wantor tem ceer kpenan akera nenge aa pusu ga*
 Audience : *ka mtuen*. Audience: *Ka asan*

The audience is thus expected to provide the solution to the riddle if they know the answer but if they do not know, they concede defeat and allow the riddler to tell the answer. The interlocutor concedes defeat by saying “*mfa ga*” (I don’t know) or “*se fa ga*” (we don’t know) as the case may be. The response may be a single word, longer phrase or a sentence that accords with the syntactic pattern of the riddle. The expected response is meant to be discovered taking into account the clues that have been provided but more often the interlocutor is expected to remember the customarily approved answer or else concede ignorance and wait to be told the answer. Some riddles may have more than one answer such as the riddle “*nyian baan*” (pure red). The audience is expected to think of things that are pure red and name them. There are many things that are pure red in the Tiv cosmology. The answer can be “*kpagh*” (camwood), “*awambe*” (blood) and so on.

Apart from certain riddles having more than one answer, some riddles have more than one statement or precedent and therefore more than one answer or sequent. For example the riddle: “*Anngôivo wam za shin kungur a wan mom kpa gema hide a mbayev kpishi*”. (My she goat went to the backyard with one kid but came back with many kids). In another way round, the she-goat can be substituted with any other animal like “*ngô kyegh*” (hen). The answer to this riddle is generally accepted to be “*Abum*” (groundnut), meaning only one seed is planted but many seeds are harvested from the one seed. However, “*Alegh*” (beans) too can go for an answer in this case. There is a close affinity between the riddle and sequent in Tiv and this facilitates recall. The relationship, according to Georges and Dundes (1963) is derived from metaphor and metonymy as various scholars since Aristotle remarked. Harries (1971), quoted by Awedoba (2000) comments that “... riddle is an exercise in the association of ideas based on close observation of natural life”. Awedoba continues that “that association confines to nature but applies also to ideas about the supernatural and about what could not possibly be visible”. For the Tiv riddles, there is semantic fit between the riddle precedent and the sequent. Some of the figurative elements involved are straight forward for all to see. For example in the riddle “*wan tor tem icheer tugh kper pepe or kera nenge a apusu ga*” (the prince breaks melon in the night but no one sees the peelings the next morning). The statement put differently is asking what appears in the night in numbers but disappears in the morning. The answer, within Tiv cosmology, is the stars.

Tsenongo (2000) pens the time of Tiv riddling to “...a prelude to telling of stories, typically by children in the evening before the rather serious narrations commence”. There are instances where riddles are performed between stories as interludes and partly to allow professional narrators some respite in their lengthy narrations. All these are mostly done in the night when families retire from the hard days’ work.

Theoretical Framework

This work adopts the functionalist’s theory credited to Malinowski. This is a theory that insists on the function of an oral rendition in the society. The theory proposes that any performance that does not function to the benefit of the society that produces it is useless. Proposed by Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, they emphasize on the function of any art form in the society. Considering the fact that this work explores the functions that riddles play in Tiv cosmology, this theory becomes apt for the study.

For instance: The riddle ‘*dum dum weke*’ has ‘*ka mngerem ma ken ishegh*’ as its answer.

‘*dum dum*’ is the sound made when water comes out in gulps from the container and “*weke*” is the sound of the last gulp.

A keen look at this riddle reveals that; like many others in Tiv society, the riddle can play three functions : . To entertain, educate, therapy.

Importance of Tiv Riddles

The *kikyaa* or *ukikyaa* (plural) play important roles to the Tiv people irrespective of the gender, age and social standing. Some of roles riddle play in the Tiv society is discussed below.

Entertainment

To the Tiv people, the primary function of riddle is entertainment. It affords the people leisure time to laugh off some stress and amuse themselves. According to Finnegan (1970), the primary purpose of riddles to the Tiv people is amusement. Families usually gather in different households at night, prior to bedtime, to amuse themselves with riddles. This avails them the opportunity to relax, laugh and make merriment after a day's hustling and bustling. Riddles are sometimes organized as competitions between households or groups and folks come to be entertained by the riddlers. However it is organized, be it competitive or not, the entertainment value of this genre of folklore among the Tiv people cannot be underestimated.

Memory Training

Riddles help in memory training especially to the children. Most Tiv riddles have answers that are universal and are not expected to be changed. These answers are expected to be memorized and given to the appropriate riddles anytime the need arises. Consequently, children are encouraged to always remember the correct answers to these riddles. This trains their memories to be able to recall events even beyond riddling. This is in contrast to Harries' (1971) assertion that the motive for riddling is not in any way didactic. The Tiv riddle, just like riddling anywhere, emphasizes on recall of associations. This sometimes leads to multiplicity of responses in certain riddle. Example can be seen in the riddle below: *Dum dum weke*. The riddle has multiplicity of answers. The riddle is onomatopoeic signifying the sound of a liquid being poured from a jerry can. Thus, when the riddle is posed, any liquid can go for an answer. The answer can therefore be "water in a jerry can" or "oil in a jerry can". Whatever the answer, children are expected to memorize all the associative answers and give them appropriately.

Didacticism

Children, and even adults, learn through the process of riddling. Awedoba is of the opinion that riddles are based on the critical observations of the environment in which the society finds itself. This includes the physical environment, human society, its organization and how that society operates, how animals and other living organisms behave, the relationship of divinity to man and the physical environment. This kind of knowledge can be acquired through riddling. Take the riddle below: *M ngu a ikondo ken you I doo kpishi kpa ka kwagh u me hua ga.* (I have a beautiful cloth in my house but I cannot adorn myself with it). The answer to this riddle is *ingyôr* (sister). The interpretation of the riddle to the Tiv is that no matter how beautiful your sister is, you cannot marry her. If the riddler is a woman, then the answer will be "*tien*" (brother). This is a lesson on how people must conform to the cultural or social norms of the Tiv people and human laws such as incest and the prohibition of sexual intercourse with members of the opposite sex who are related by blood.

Children are introduced to a variety of vocabulary items through riddles in the Tiv setting. The act of riddling introduces children to names of animals, trees and artifacts including the numerous onomatopoeic words that abound in African culture with their meanings and uses. These words are very important in Tiv language because they provide the means for expression of shades of meanings that conventional words like the regular nouns, adjectives, adverbs alone are inadequate to convey. This can be seen in our earlier explained riddle, *dum dum weke*.

The knowledge of human anatomy can be gained through riddling. Members of the human body feature prominently in Tiv riddles and are exposed to the children. Cooperation of members of the human body can be seen in the following riddle; *Iorov uhar nenge a tyamev ki kon, iorov kyundu zor, iorov kyundu-gber kar uhar ya* (two people see a fruit on a tree, twenty people plucked it, thirty-two people ate it). The answer is *ashe, ave, angahar man anyi*. (Eyes, fingers, feet and teeth). By way of explanation, two eyes see the fruit, ten fingers and ten feet, making twenty people, combine to pluck the fruit and it is eaten by thirty-two teeth. Similarly, in the riddle, *er i haa kwagh shin gbande wam cii kpa ivin ga* (Nomatter how much you put in my plate, it will never be full). The answer is *ato* (ear). The ear is never full no matter how much it hears. These types of riddles teach the people, especially the children, parts of the human body and their functions.

Furthermore, just as Miller (2020) says, riddles can support children's problem solving, logic and critical thinking skills. If riddles are wrestled with for a period of time, they can help in concentration, focus and brain dexterity. They improve children's comprehension and creativity while also bonding people together as a result of working together to achieve desired results.

It will therefore not be out of place to call riddles the diamond within the Tiv setting.

Conclusion

Riddle as a genre of folklore is a statement or question that offers a puzzle to be solved. It is called *kikyaa* by the Tiv people and is mostly carried out in the night after retirement from the day's work. During these times, families gather in compounds to perform the act either as competition among members of a household or between one household and another. There is a belief in many quarters that riddling is meant for children but studies have shown that not only children engage in the act in Tiv, although majority of the participants are children. Riddles are carried out as prelude to storytelling and sometimes as form of interlude after a long time of storytelling. Some riddles are found to have more than one answer and the audience is expected to be armed with the universally accepted answer whenever a riddle is posed.

Among many roles, riddles are highly entertaining in nature. They afford the people the opportunity to relax, laugh and amuse themselves. Children's memories are also trained at retention of concepts and ideas. Almost all Tiv riddles have socially approved answers and it is expected of the children to

memorize these answers and offer them appropriately. Furthermore, riddles help the people especially the young have a grasp of new concepts such as body parts and their uses as they work in harmony to achieve results. New words are also learnt through riddling especially onomatopoeic words which do not have their equivalence in normal speech. Children are exposed to quick thinking ability and this transcends to their ability to think quickly and solve worldly problems when the need arises.

Recommendation

In order for Tiv riddle to maintain its value and place in Tiv cosmology even in the face of globalisation, the following recommendations may help:

- i. Screen plays and cartoons be made out of Tiv riddles to catch the fancy of Tiv children who are addicted to TV programmes.
- ii. Parents and guardians be sensitised on the need to revive the culture of riddling at home with their wards as another art of intertainment. This will help the kids develop more of their indogenous vocabulary .
- iii. Competitions be organised by government and other organisations of interest between, individuals, clans ,local governments etc and prizes given to the winners.
- iv. Tiv scholars must rekindle the interest of the younger ones in traditional Tiv performances generally and folktales especially by making them part of the curriculum of primary and post primary education so that all Tiv children understand and actively participate in tale telling. Folktales should be translated and transcribed into English. In this way, the children will learn the tales via the native language and English as a second language.

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