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Children's Literature in Africa: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

Children's literature is one of the fastest growing areas of study. It has brought to light, in contemporary scholarship in the domain of humanities, many issues concerning the child. One of the issues is the issue of literary socialization, a vital process, which prepares the child to face the challenges of the present and the future realities of life. Since the ancient Greek period, writers in every part of the world have contributed to the education and entertainment of the child, by publishing books suitable for promoting enjoyment and value education. In Africa in general and West Africa in particular, a group of highly talented writers has been publishing books for children since the colonial times. Before independence, in most of the African countries, children were reading books which were designed and written by European writers for European children. Towards the dawn of independence, African writers realized the importance of writing and publishing in Africa for the African child. They made use of the traditional African folklore, legends, and ancient myths. This paper is an appraisal of the evolution of children's literature in Africa, since the colonial period to modern times. It highlights the fact that today books are being written by African writers in Africa, for the African child and many eminent writers are contributing to this marginalized genre of literature.

Keywords: Inferior, Colonial, Stereotype, Indigenous, Cultural heritage, Folklore, Staple food, Educational policy, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa.

Introduction

Mabel D. Segun (1992), a critic and writer of children's literature narrates:

> About twenty years ago the television producer of a Children's programme "Children's Playtime" on the then Nigerian Television Service had to fight hard

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> to get the authorities to give her credit on air. A highly talented person, she was household name in the country yet for a long time the authorities saw no reason why her name should appear on television among the credits. "After all" they said "it's only a children's programme"; meaning it was inferior to adult programmes and deserved no credit." (Segun 24)

The same applies to children's literature. Many people look down on children's because they think it is lower than adult literature. It is not even realized that in many countries most children's writers first pass through tutelage of writing for adults. This study is a critical re-appraisal of the history of children's literature in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. It is because Nigeria is one of the leading contributors to this genre. From this perspective, it would be relevant to evaluate its origin and development in the colonial as well as the post-colonial eras.

The Colonial Period

In late nineteenth century, the colonial authority introduced English medium in Nigeria. The Nigerian children began reading books written, edited, and published in Europe. The authors were those whose cultures differed significantly from the African. Stereotyping and sensationalism were the order of the day, for first and foremost, the books were meant for audience in their home countries. European readers used to enjoy the thrill of reading about primitive, half-naked Black people and the terrible things that went on in the Dark Continent. For instance,practices such as cannibalism and ritual human sacrifices were highlighted to suit the taste of the European readers.

As L. J. Lewis highlighted in his report on the production and distribution of literature in British West Africa in 1949, Hugh John Lofting's Doctor Dolittle series published from 1920 upwards had become the most popular tool of Western education in Ghana, Sierra-Leone and some regions of Nigeria. As reported by Lewis and his group of researchers, African folktales had become mere summaries and their presentation lacked the vibrancy of the rich of traditional presentation. These books lacked authentic indigenous life-experiences, because European authors could not employ the indigenous proverbs, refrains and orderly repetition, as found in the life of the African peoples.

By the end of the first two decades of the twentieth century, a few books began to be written by West African authors in English and in West African languages. These books were published mostly by various literature bureaus and governments of Nigeria and Ghana. In Nigeria, the most notable was *Azundu* (1927) by William Balfour Baikie. It became a major reader for most Igbo children, who attended between 1930s and the 1950s, *Omenuko* by Peter Nwana (1950), *Ruwan Bagaja* (1934) and *Karamin Sani Kukumi* (1944) by the Nigerian National Merit award winner Abubakar Imam, and *Jiki Magayi* (1934) authored by Mallam J. Tanfida Zaria and Rupert East. In 1947, Cyprian Ekwensi broke new grounds by adapting the African folktales for educating and entertaining the Nigerian children, who were reading European textbooks and supplementary readers as a part of their school curriculum. Before the adaptation of folktales by Ekwensi in the English language, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa

children had access to folklore through books written in Nigerian languages by some well-known Nigerian writers. However, in 1950, at the approach of independence, there was some kind of re-thinking by the colonial administration to give a re-orientation to the reading materials for the Nigerian child. The content and aims of education in Africa had a major shift in the early 1950s and school syllabuses began to be oriented towards local needs. Local examining syndicates substituted foreign examining bodies in West Africa. The new syllabuses demanded new reading materials. Universal Free Primary Education was introduced in some regions of Nigeria in 1955-56. An effect of this policy was thephenomenal 78% and 34% increase in the Western and Eastern primary schools enrolment respectively.

Changing Trends

The modification of educational policies and changes in examination patterns created a situation which rendered inadequate the use of British School texts or their adaptations and called for a distinct publishing strategy. British publishing houses began to open offices in Nigeria and commission Nigerian authors to write books, which were published locally. These publishing companies concentrated on textbook for primary and secondary schools with the exception of Pilgrim Books Ltd and Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. Pilgrim Books Ltd, publishing under the print "African Universities Press" launched two very successful Children's Series: the *African Readers Library* and the *African Junior Readers Library* which were used as supplementary readers in the lower classes of secondary schools. Among those authors published in the series are Cyprian Ekwensi (*Juju Rock*: 1966) Nkem Nwakwo (*Tales Out School*: 1963); Anezi Okoro (*One Week, One Trouble*: 1972); Teresa Meniru (*I be the Canon Boy*: 1987); Mabel Segun (*My Mother's Daughter*: 1965), and Peggy Appiah (*The Children of Ananse*: 1968).

The Post-Colonial Period

Writing in 1987, about the changes which had occurred in African children's literature between Ghana's independence in 1957 and 1987, Nancy Schmidt says:

> In 1987, the typical children's book is markedly different from the typical children's book of 1957. It is written by an African author, illustrated by African artists, edited and published by Africans in Africa. The context is almost always African usually specific to the African country or geographical region in which it is published. Folklore includes stylistic features of oral literature to the extent that this is possible in print. Illustrations depict African people in African setting and are more often in colour than they were in 1957. They are not single-mindedly didactic to the point of excluding creativity and stimulating reading for pleasure. Although some Europeans still write, illustrate, edit and publish books for African children, most of them live or have lived in Africa and are familiar with contemporary African life. (304-306)

Most of the books published in Africa come from four countries: Nigeria, with one hundred publishers, followed by Kenya, then Ghana and Cameroon used to be second in publishing output but economic recession as greatly tested their publishing industries very badly. In spite of the recession, Ghana fishing corporation, a State-

owned agency, keeps soldering on. Some fishing is done in Francophone African countries such as Ivory, coast and gal (through Nouvelles Edition Africans) and in Southern African Francophone countries such as Zimbabwe, where the young Zimbabwe Publishing (ZPH) has been quite active since it was founded. The Lusophone countries Angola and Mozambique have two publishing houses, which have brought out bright picture books. Very little publishing is done in the Gambia, Sierra Leone and other small African countries, whose small populations and poor economic base cannot sustain viable publishing for longer duration.

It is significant that the first publishing house in Nigeria showing a distinct bias children's books was not a multinational one but an indigenous one - Pilgrim Books Limited, an amalgam of Andre Deutsch and the Daily Times Publishing such was later sold to a private entrepreneur. Pilgrim Books Limited's laudable sample was followed in the 1970s by new indigenous publishing houses such as Onibonoje Books Industries which in 1973 launched the Onibonoje Book Club - in Black Africa, which by 1983 was said to enjoy a membership of several thousand members. Onibonoje also launched the Junior African Literature Series Readers. Other publishers, who specialized in publishing for young people, West African Book Publishers Limited in Lagos, an affiliate of Academy Press, has published a highly illustrated series of children's books in English and Yoruba (the Atoka Series). There is also Fourth Dimension Publishers in Enugu which publishes beautifully illustrated children's books by well-known authors, such as Chinua Achebe (*The Drum* and *The Flute*: 1977) and Mamman J. Vatsa's (*Children's Rhymes*: 1978). Also based in Enugu is Tara Press owned by Flora Nwapa. Two other well-known children's publishers are Obobo Press, Lagos and National Press in Ijebu Ode. Some indigenous multinational houses started publishing for children, although publishing in Nigeria largely 'textbook oriented.' Some of the well-known series are Series by Longman Nigeria Limited and the Winners Series Nigeria Limited. It is a sad commentary to make that although Nigeria boasts of 100 publishing houses, hardly 50 children's books are published every year, while in Britain over 2000 titles are published every year for children.

Ekwensi (1972) stated that Nigerian children's books are governed by educational trends, to the extent that they are more or less 'geared to school curriculum'. However, he remarked that there are a few children's books which would fall in to the category of the 'books for pleasure.' The pre-school buying season concentrates on providing the children with the prescribed [text]books. Nigerian literary figures involved in the production of children's books includes, such well-established authors, such as Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, and Nkem Nwankwo. It indicates that senior authors are accepting the responsibility to educate the young in the cultural heritage of Nigeria. This trend is now providing the Nigerian children's literature the respectability that it deserves. This augurs well for the future. Beside participation of well-established Nigerian authors in the creation, production and distribution of children's literature, anumber of literary associations are also promoting the creation of children's books, such as Children's Literature Association of Nigeria (CLAN), Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN), Nigerian National Section of the International Board of Books for Young people (IBBY). The Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) is now

working hard to develop and promote children's literature. Children's Literature Documentation Research Center (CLIDORC) in Ibadan with Mabel Segun, as its founder and Director, is doing a commendable work in promoting the interest of writers, teachers, critics, researcher and parents in the Nigerian children's literature.

Segun also initiated a multicultural project in the University of Ibadan's Institute of African Studies in 1985 - the International Youth Year. The project involved collecting, recording and making an album of children's songs from ethnic group in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the recording was not done professionally and had to be discarded. In anarticle published on February 6, 2000 Mabel Segun pleaded for the resuscitation of the project of multiculturalism, as it would go a long way in uniting the different tribes of Nigeria. (Segun 1992: 24-42) A book edited by Mabel Segun entitled *Living Together in Harmony* (1998), sponsored and published by Amnesty International, Nigeria, decries the evils of discrimination against individuals and groups and advocates the give and take for full co-existence. It is an anthology of stories, poems and plays for the Nigerian children.

N. Roscoe (1971) identified the constructive approach adopted by Nigerian men and women writers of children's literature when he remarked: "Nigerian writers, it seems know the truth behind the dictum 'bend the twig when it is young".(74)

It is a sad commentary to make that between 1971 and 1999, the government and governmental agencies did not pay enough attention to the printing, and distribution of children's books in Nigeria. Very few attempts were made to encourage translations from one Nigerian language into another. In this way, the rich literatures of the various ethnic groups would be fully shared by tribal groups, thus contributing to the promotion of understanding and peace in the country.

Atwen R. Atwen, a Nigerian Journalist wrote after witnessing the bloodshed between the Chambas and the Kutebs during 1997 to 1999:

> We should not lose sight of the fact that all societiesand communities exist today through the process of integration and intercourse. For effective peaceful co-existence, rights such as culture, traditional institutionsof various groups should not be tampered with in spite of the different growth rate in population, education and status. (5)

Children's literature, which promotes multiculturalism, multilingualism and intercourse, will promote greater tolerance and unity in diversity. In an interview with *Sunday Punch* (July 9, 2000) Cyprian Ekwensi pleaded for total reconciliation and promotion of peaceful coexistence among ethnic communities that make Nigeria a nation, after the bitter experience of the Biafran War in which he had served as the head of the Broadcasting Corporation of Biafra. When asked by Sanmi Ashaolu, the interviewer, "Why he had not joined the pro-democracy political crusade as Wole Soyinka did", Ekwensi answered: "Well, we all have different ways of doing things. I found myself more of a technocrat than an activist."

Conclusion

In fact, Ekwensi meant that writers as artists and not as political propagandists or activists can motivate and influence the young minds through the literature of entertainment. Most of the African writers of children's literature are following the lead given by Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi. They are making use of the resources of cultural heritage and producing children's literature for the entertainment of the African child. They are also borrowing ideas from the works of writers around the world to encourage multiculturalism and harmony. A new breed of young writers is emerging and accepting the responsibility of educating the African child through the stories of adventure and fantasy. They are enhancing the quality of the contemporary African children's literature.

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