

## Cultural Riddles and Performance in Modern African Societies

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### Abstract

Several forms of performance arts are underutilized in the past few decades and the Urhobo riddles are not left out. This research therefore examines various methods of preservation and transfer of riddles in traditional society. This study adopted the survey-descriptive approach as the data and information were collected from natural environment and analysed. It is underpinned by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory that focuses on the unconscious mind of people which can be activated and its latent materials brought to their conscious awareness. The data were collected with audio recordings which were later transcribed and translated from the Urhobo language into English. In-depth interviews were also conducted to obtain first-hand information from respondents. The respondents were purposively selected and interviewed. The data collected in the field were qualitatively analyzed using descriptive and analytical methods. Findings reveal that riddles perform utilitarian functions like entertainment, education, knowledge transfer, coping and distractive strategies and so on. Riddles as linguistic resources should be preserved and documented due to their cultural values. Though there are problems hindering the growth of riddle performances in contemporary societies, orators have devised the use of popular music as new way of preservation and transferring of oral traditions like the riddles to successive generations.

**Keywords:** folklore, traditional, riddles, psyche, verbal.

### Introduction

The human psyche is a reservoir of repressed experiences that can influence thoughts, emotions and behavioural patterns of people in society. Sigmund Freud structured the mind into three layers: conscious, preconscious and unconscious. The conscious level implies the aspect of the mind that enables us remember things immediately while the preconscious refers to the layer that would make us recollect things after much time of racking the brain for stored information. In affirming the foregoing, Al-Dmour (2019:48) acknowledged Bressler (1999) who states that the unconscious mind is the storehouse for hidden desires, emotions, ambitions, and fears." The third part of the human mind is the unconscious which contains repressed thoughts, emotions or experiences from early stage in life. Oral resources such as the folksongs, proverbs, riddles, myths, folktales, legendary stories, and other verbal arts are therefore stored in the unconscious minds of people from childhood to adulthood. These linguistic products are activated and brought to the conscious level of the human mind during performance. The mind thus helps significantly in the preservation and transmission of oral traditions to successive generations specifically in traditional societies.

Whenever verbal arts such as the riddles are recollected from the unconscious and brought to public domain, people with such knowledge have their mental consciousness activated while those without the foreknowledge are subjected to critical thinking to decode the meanings embedded in such oral products. Familiar oral materials doubtlessly perform various utilitarian functions in traditional societies where they are valued by the people. Besides other functions, they are employed by performers unconsciously in addressing psychological problems of listening audience in socio-cultural settings. This study therefore examines modern methods of preservation and transmission of African riddles in order to promote their cultural values in society. It will specifically focus on African riddles as verbal arts; factors responsible for extinction of the verbal art of riddles; the utilitarian functions of African riddles; and popular music as modern means of preservation of riddles in contemporary African societies.

### **Riddles and Verbal Arts**

Verbal arts are integral part of the oral traditions of people in traditional societies and their utilitarian functions cannot be overemphasized. According to Bula (2019:109), "verbal art is not the same as the normal or ordinary speech of human beings. Verbal art is deliberately and skillfully undertaken. The 'verbal art' of the verbal artist is always intentionally and artistically executed, not in the act of speaking per se but in that of oral performance." The predominant verbal arts that exist in every African community are folksongs, folktales, proverbs and riddles. The concept of riddle cuts across all cultures even though this verbal art has not recorded a huge harvest of research works from scholars. The attention of scholars over decades has been on folktales, proverbs, songs, and other artistic products that people perceive as more fascinating.

According to Okpewho (2004:239), Riddle could be defined as "a word game in which the elements of intellectual exercise and verbal skill are combined to varying degrees." The scholar further reveals that riddling performance always involves "two parties, with one party proposing and the other responding. (But) in the practice of song-riddles, the lead singer proposes and answers riddles largely made up by the singer." Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2001:7) on his part notes that riddles are a voyage into the unknown. They are an invitation to embark on an adventure that either brings delight, amusement and gratification at discovering the right answer, or humiliation and vexation at being led astray. Kaivola-Bregenhøj further reveals that riddling is a primordial verbal art that has been transferred to present generation across every ethnic group across the world. The scholar found that, "riddles are known to have existed since way back in time, for the first documents dated from thousands and hundreds of years ago and such countries are India, Palestine, Mesopotamia and ancient Greece. Most languages also have a word for riddles because as genre riddles belong to all cultures to the archaic stratum of folklore"(9). Gachanja and Kebaya (2013) acknowledged Okumba (2013:135) who sees the concept of riddles as word puzzles in which familiar objects or situations are referred to in figurative terms for us to

decipher what is actually meant. Riddles like other verbal arts are facing extinction in African societies, specifically in Urhobo nation. Though scholars have investigated artistic products in the past, there are no significant studies carried out previously in the area of African riddles and their preservation in modern societies.

The study by Bula (2019:108) examines the African verbal art artist among the TIVs in Nigeria, particularly the artist's art of oral poetry. The scholar observes that "the sources where ideas are gotten to produce oral poetry are from personal and societal experiences; the amusement provided by the artist through art has a modicum of usefulness; and the utility of the art of the verbal artist also offers diversionary." Amali, Yusuf and Jekayinfa (2012:346) found that in Idoma society, riddles are meant for children of primary school age. Since the indigenous Idoma educators knew that "the child was a product of his total environment, a wide range of environmental data was presented to him as instrumental materials." The scholars argue further that:

the contents of Idoma descriptive riddles include every sphere of natural and human life of Idoma society. These include various phenomena such as the characteristics of persons, places, plants, animals and other naturalia. Specifically, it can cover areas like parts of the human body, agricultural crops or implements and implements of Idoma domestic life. It can also be drawn from the animals, vegetations and crop world. Further, it can cover natural phenomena like the moon, stars, rain, water, cloud, mountain, fire and stones, etc (347).

In the opinion of Amali (2012:346), riddles play immeasurable roles in every society especially in the lives of children. This correlates with the findings of Amali (1980) that, riddles are used to introduce the child to the material and non-material culture of the Idoma people. It is an education that is laid on the foundation of the child's cultural vivid visual impression, particularly those drawn from the natural world which often indicates close observations made on them by the indigenous Idoma educators. Also on the audience of riddle performances, Awedoba (2000:37) observes that, "until recently, it was the practice for children to entertain themselves in the evenings with riddles, folktales and children's games. There is however no session devoted exclusively to telling riddles or riddling, and at the same time sitting children engaged in riddling, telling folktales and playing other games."

Similarly, Gachanja and Kebaya (2013:293) acknowledged Dundes' (1964) view that "riddles have long been marginalized due to various misconceptions that they are childish in nature and when enacted, their primary role is to entertain. Further, this entertainment is understood to be that of eliciting laughter from the participants as well as the audience hence restricting them to the children province." Dundes' argument is that people generally have misconstrued the performance of riddles for children alone. He observes that, "children in many communities in Kenya and Africa as a whole are considered to be the primary recipients of riddles because riddles form part of the games that they play. The Abagusii community is no exception as many of its members view riddles as a source of

amusement for children." Noyes (1995) noted that, "by the time an individual has reached adulthood s/he would have encountered most of the interesting riddles in the area. The consequent lack of adult interest means that, unlike folktales, riddle diffusion from ethnic group to ethnic group has been until recently minimal.

The research carried out by Gachanja and Kebaya (2013:298) observe that "riddles are essentially crucial in sharpening the mind and the thought processes of the participants. It is evident that through riddles, people learn important truths about life though disguised as a game. Participating in the riddling process helps one to learn more about life and the social surrounding and in this way, one is able to develop a sense of intellectual satisfaction". The foregoing therefore affirms Gelfand's (1979:85) view that riddles help the young to learn about the existence of social values and equips him with yardsticks to measure them. On the aspect of sources of riddle in society, Awedoba (2000:42) found that: Riddles, it will be realised, are based on critical observation 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, etc. this kind of knowledge can be acquired from either the riddle precedent or the sequent.

The foregoing implies that every riddle must reflect the immediate environment of the performer, hence, riddles contain images found in African societies particularly the Urhobo land which is the area of this study. However, riddles can perform foreign verbal arts if they are imported from other societies and cultures.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study adopted the Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory that explores the underlying factors responsible for reactions, emotions and thoughts of individuals in society. According to the National Open University of Nigeria (2014:254) reveals that "psychoanalytic criticism believes that literature provides a fruitful and complex source for the analysis of the human mind. It helps to reveal to us things about the relation between the conscious and the unconscious mind, language and reality. A psychoanalytic interpretation of a work can help to solve the mysteries involved in complex and symbolic themes." It focuses on the view that the human mind contains (cultural) materials that were collected from childhood to present but pushed into the unconscious. This therefore indicates that psychoanalytic theory is rooted in psychoanalysis hence Al-Dmour (2019:48) notes that "literature builds on Freud theories of psychology, which helps readers simply interpret literary texts". In this study, the repressed contents are the folkloric resources that can be activated and brought to consciousness of people. Ritamani (2014:14) argues that: Psychoanalysis is a tool by which we can interpret the meaning of the different folklore items. Folklore- the knowledge and learning of people is incomplete without the aid of psychoanalysis. By analyzing the lore in the light of psychoanalysis, we may understand the

folk- the people. It is necessary to understand the folk- their hopes, desires, needs and conflicts which is possible through psychoanalytic study and other methods.

Since oral traditions are produced by rural people (the folk), there is therefore the need to investigate how they reflect the cultural life of both the performers and the listening audience in traditional settings. In order to achieve this, Ritamani (2014:13) asserts that the application of the psychoanalytic "theory is useful because it helps us to understand the nature of human mind. Again, it helps us to interpret the symbolic meanings found in different folklore items." The functions of verbal arts particularly the African riddles and how they shape the lifestyle of individuals and the general wellbeing of society will form our major discourse.

### Methodology

The study adopted the survey-descriptive approach since the data and information were collected from natural environment and analysed. The data were mainly collected from audio recordings which were later transcribed and translated by the researchers. In-depth interviews were also conducted to obtain first-hand information from respondents. The respondents were purposively selected and interviewed at informal settings and public functions. They were adult men and women who have profound knowledge of riddles and their utilitarian functions in socio-cultural settings. A total of fifty (50) Urhobo riddles were collected based on their thematic relevance from various sources and qualitatively analyzed by the researchers using descriptive and analytical methods.

### Utilitarian Functions of Urhobo Cultural Riddles

The Urhobo society is characterized with various forms of folklores or oral traditions such as proverbs, folktales, myths, legends, folksongs, riddles, tongue twisting, oral poetry and non-verbal dramatic performances like sacred rituals, masquerade dances, and traditional festivals, among others. In his research, our focus shall be on some of the utilitarian functions of the cultural riddles.

**I. Critical thinking:** The performance of riddles among children and adults subjects them to high level of imagination and critical thinking as they make frantic effort to proffer solutions to the problems contained in the oral performance. This view is affirmed by Marni, *et al.* (2020:660) who also acknowledged the findings of Ennis (1985). According to Ennis, "critical thinking is a reflection of thought." He explains also that when one knows his thinking ability, it will involve a strong analysis and a sharp note of what is in front of them and their minds." Riddles are intellectual task that require cognitive ability to unravel the meanings embedded in them. They also activate the consciousness of audience about the mysterious phenomena in societies.

### Examples:

(1) Ido: *Die je awo evwo, oje abo evwo; ye ove ame phiye oche ro ye?*

Riddle: What has no legs and hands but it fetches water and fills its own pot?

Answer: *Ukokodia* (coconut)

(2) Ido: *Mi mue uwewwi me vwo yan; Die ye me phan?*

Riddle: I walk around with my house; what am I?

Answer: *Usekpe* (a snail)

(3) Ido: *Die oye Oghene mare ye avwo teye ubi-in?*

Riddle: What did God create that we cannot use it to break kernel?

Answer: *Ukoho* (an egg)

(4) Ido: *Die ye vre anurhoro we omi ju we yere?*

Riddle: What passes at your door post without greetings?

Answer: *Osio* (rain)

(5) Ido: *Die yi vwe awo ye osa ya-an?*

Riddle: What has legs but does not walk?

Answer: *Imeje* (a table)

(6) Ido: *Die yi vwe ako buebu ye osa dovwe ohwo-o?*

Riddle: What has many teeth but cannot bite?

Answer: *Ofeto* (a comb)

(7) Ido: *Eravwe vo oye nya ve awo ene urhioke, awo ive ogheruvo gbe awo erha ovwovwo?*

Riddle: Which animal walks on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three in the evening?

Answer: Oshare; (A man, since he crawls as a child, then walks and uses a cane when he gets older).

(8) Ido: *Phughu phughu si potor.*

Answer: *Odja rue ihori-in*; (Soap does not get produce worm).

(9) Ido: *Teye agogo, kpere alleluyah;*

Riddle: Hit the gong, shout alleluyah.

Answer: *Orieda ka re ishoshi-in*; (A witch must never cease to be in the church).

From the above verbal arts, the answers provided for the riddles such as the 'ukokodia' (1), 'usekpe' (2), 'ukoho' (3), 'osio' (4), 'imeje' (5), and 'ofeto' (6) must be convincing to the audience after careful reflection on the expressions with the images they convey. For instance, it is mysterious for coconut tree to bear fruits with water in each nut; the shell of

a snail is likened to a house that it carries about; and, eggs are round but not as solid as rocks or stones that can be used to crack palm kernels.

**II. Educative:** From time immemorial, riddles have been regarded as informal means of educating children and adult listeners in traditional settings. They are tools for moral instructions, social construct, social cohesion and validation of cultural beliefs and practices. According to Anene and Njoku (2018:72), "As the oldest industry, it is the main instrument used by society to preserve, maintain and upgrade its social equilibrium. A society's future depends largely on the quality of its citizen's education. In all human societies, education is meant to pass on to the new generations the existing knowledge of their physical environment, to introduce individuals to the organization of society." In corroborating the forgoing, Eguavoen (2016:91) states that "the riddle serves to educate both the young and old about the ideals and values of the people and to maintain the status quo." The view of this scholar is affirmed by Anene and Njoku (2018:72) who acknowledged Esuand Junaid (2014) that "education is a process by which the society assists the younger generation to understand the heritage of their past, participate productively in the society of the present as well as contribute to the future." Some illuminating examples of riddles that are educative are provided in this work.

(10) Ido: *Me vwe urhe, kemu kemu mi vwori evwo rue emu; Die ye me phan?*

Riddle: I am a tree; every part of me is useful. What am I?

Answer: *Orie* (a palm tree)

(11) Ido: *Die oyi se yere enu ye ovwe abo-or?*

Riddle: Tell me what climbs up without hands

Answer: *Orodeko* (a snake) or *Usekpe* (a snail)

(12) Ido: *Die oye muegbe ke ophovwi ye okpe ophovwi-in?*

Riddle: What prepares for war but does not go for it?

Answer: *Ovwen* (palm fronds)

(13) Ido: *Vue vwe ihwo ive re anye da nyan vwe osio, ame te ovo yen ote ovo-on.*

Riddle: Tell me two people that when walking under the rain, water beats one and does not beat

the other.

Answer: *Aye ve evu* (a pregnant woman)

(14) Ido: *Die ye sa che akpo ve erhuvwu omi bi rhe rhioma ve umiovwo?*

Riddle: Tell me who comes to the world beautiful and goes back ugly.

Answer: *Owhorapkor* (a human being)

(15) Ido: *Die oye eravwe re orehe evu re unu ye a rio-or?*

Riddle: What is the meat in the mouth but is not eaten?

Answer: *Erevwe* (the tongue)

(16) Ido: *Vue vwe omo re obaphiyor kpe aghwa, ode rhivwi rhe ve iwu.*

Riddle: Tell me the child that went to the farm naked and came back with clothes.

Answer: *Oka* (a maize)

(17) Ido: *Vue vwe orinvwin re onyovo she omaroye.*

Riddle: Tell me the corpse that buried itself.

Answer: *Oworhe* (cough)

The above riddles can educate audience in socio-cultural settings where the listeners understand the messages being conveyed through them. For instance, the *orie* (palm tree) or *irie* (plural form) are used in various ways in traditional communities where they are usually planted. Some of the uses include soap making, local food, foot match, thatch roof, brooms, palmwine, kernel oil, nuts, antidote, and so on. The answer of snakes above is also educative as audience will become aware of the fact that snakes climb trees especially palm or raffia palm trees and dwell at the uppermost part. Palmwine tappers or palm fruits harvesters could attest to this because some of them recount their personal experiences with snakes especially the black spitting cobra. For the riddle of palm fronds, audience will realize that warriors in traditional communities use the fresh, tender yellowish palm fronds as costumes and in some cases, diviners employ them to ward off evil spirits and for cleansing of people. Riddle 13 reveals the fact that a pregnant woman only gets drenched while walking in the rain but not the fetus in her womb.

Also, the riddle (17) above implies that individuals can suffer from *Oworhe* (cough) suddenly as sickness and also, they become healed as if the ailment were buried in the human body. Abari, Ayodeji and Okunuga (2013:9) thus observed that riddles as verbal arts are vital aspects of language that facilitate learning, through interaction with adults and collaboration with mates; children learn things they could not accomplish on their own, especially in a language.

**III. Entertainment:** Riddle performances are primarily meant for pleasure among children especially after the day's work. In traditional societies, riddles are performed during relaxation while the moon shines or a native lamp is positioned at the centre of the arena. The forms of riddles that are structured into questions and answers, are performed by individuals, in pairs or groups depending on the pattern of riddling with a view to diverting attention of audience to pleasant moments. Again, the riddle (13) of pregnant woman requires critical reasoning for meaning to be unfolded. Actually, the foetus inside a woman's womb is another human being that is not physically seen by people. The riddle implies that



the foetus never get drenched by rainfall or water. Also, the birth of a baby is usually mood enhancer but its death activates sadness, worrisome and depressive moods. Food is among the basic necessities needed by man in every society. However, poverty and famine should not make one eats his own tongue. This riddle (15) correlates with the Urhobo proverb that, "Owevwe hwe ohwo ade rie erevwere-en"; (Hunger does not make one eats his own tongue).

(18) Ido: Die oye kporho siere odeya?

Riddle: What gets wetter as it dries?

Answer: *Omokpa* (towel)

(19) Ido: die oyi vwe inu buebu ye onyore ame?

Riddle: What is full of holes but still holds water?

Answer: *Ahwerhe* (a sponge)

(20) Ido: Me se ko yen mi vwe iwu-un. Die onyen mephan?

Riddle: I am always spinning but I don't have any clothes. Who am I?

Answer: (a spider).

(21) Ido: Die onyi se she ye ovwirhe-en; ose vvirhe ye ose she-en?

Riddle: What falls but does not break; and what breaks but does not fall?

Answer: Night falls and day breaks.

(22) Ido: me sa die asa re urhukpe ephan, ye mi ghwe urhukpe de lo muvwe. Die ye me phan?

Riddle: I can only live where there is light, but I die if the light shines on me. What am I?

Answer: *Uphophoro* (shadow).

**IV. Distractive Strategies:** Riddles serve as means of diverting the attention of listening audience from their unpleasant memories, feelings and dysfunctional thoughts to something interesting and humorous. Some riddles invoke laughter when heard and so listeners are bound to be distracted from their emotionally disturbed condition to ideas and thoughts that will stimulate their happy mood. Riddles usually contain images and themes that can stimulate happy and sad mood of people during and after performances; hence, they can function as co-activators. The sound produced during the performance of certain riddles are usually humorous and exciting to hear and this can alleviate pent-up emotions of unhappy people in a socio-cultural setting. Some of these riddles are also presented in this study.

**Examples:**

(23) Statement: *Ekaka kokoro;*

Meaning: *Erawevwi ve ughweri-in* (Rats do not crack potassium chloride).

(24) Statement: *Rigida vo;*

Meaning: *Eravwe ve idjo rue unu-un* (An animal with horns does not enter a hole).

(25) Statement: *Kaka mi djo ko;*

Meaning: *Oho vwe uvuowo-or* (A fowl does not have a calf).

(26) Statement: *Phu phu ko-in;*

Meaning: *A phra dan vwe uyovwi dje urhe-e* (A bird does not fly and bash its head against a tree).

(27) Statement: *Tughor, tughor;*

Meaning: *Emue ubi kpahen ole teya-an* (One cannot place a palm nut on a tuber of yam to crack).

(28) Statement: *Phia cho ne;*

Meaning: *Egbede she vvirhe-en* (A needle does not fall and break).

(29) Statement: *Sukurubi;*

Meaning: *Eherobo dje eto-on* (Human palm does not grow hair).

Apart from the distractions which riddling bring about, some riddles provide effective strategies to cope with difficult conditions of life if their central themes and the images they conveyed are critically examined and reflected on. They reveal how to manage certain health and psychological problems in social cultural settings. Some of such riddles are worthy of note.

(30) Ido: *Vue vwe ohwo re akpor neje dje oshoroye, te oniomo, oseomo, odafe, ogbere, ovie, ovien; osa rho vwe ohwo siere ovwerhe de vwerhe ohwo.*

Riddle: Tell me who the whole world fears; who can't tell mother from father; who can't tell rich from poor who can't tell servant from king; who wakes you up when your sleep is sweetest.

Answer: *Ughwu* (death)

(31) Statement: *Phughu phughu sipotor;*

Meaning: *Onieda kare ishoshi-in* (A witch/wizard cannot cease to be in the church).

(32) Statement: *Zigbo zighigbo;*

Meaning: *Uvo mue osho te aso-on* (Day does not appear so frightening as night).

(33) Statement: *Karoha gbonuze;*

Meaning: *Esie ora re epharo ne-en* (No one can hide facial wound).

This utilitarian function is closely related to the distractive strategies discussed above. By implication, there are some riddles that enhance the mood of people whenever they are performed while there are also a couple of them that trigger psychic and emotional pains when their central themes are heard.

**VI. Knowledge Transfer:** Folkloric forms contain the indigenous knowledge of the people where they are produced and such knowledge must be transferred from one generation to another. For instance, some riddles convey cultural beliefs, sacred rituals, philosophies, folk medicine, human foibles, and so on, which must be transmitted to audience in traditional settings. In affirming the foregoing, World Affairs Council of Houston (2019:1) stated that “oral traditions make it possible for a society to pass knowledge across generations without writing. They help people make sense of the world and are used to teach children and adults about important aspects of their culture.” In contemporary society, verbal folklores are not only transmitted orally, they are transferred to audience through the new technologies and digital devices. The Urhobo riddles are also part of the oral traditions that are transmitted to successive generations through the dual modes explained above. Most of the riddles convey themes and images that will be memorable in the minds of audience.

(34) Statement: *Kodo ni kere.*

Meaning: *Udo re aware* (an ancient mortar).

(35) Statement: *Ocha, kpror; ora, kpror.*

Meaning: *Oche* (earthen pot for holding water)

(36) Ido: *Edo vo oyen ese ru vwe orore, emi bi nyo vwe orere ofa?*

Riddle: What is the sound you make in a town and it is heard in the neighbouring community?

Answer: *Owurhu* (canon)

(37) Ido: *Mi nene owe oke neje, mi rue obo wo rue ye wo se dje obo te vwe-e, wo se muvwe-e; die ye me phan?*

Riddle: I follow you all the time and copy every move you make but you cannot touch nor catch me. What am I?

Answer: *Uphophoro* (shadow)

The research carried out by World Affairs Council of Houston (2019:1) revealed that “although written history existed for centuries in West Africa, most writing was in Arabic, and the majority of people did not read or write in Arabic. So the transmission of

knowledge, history and experience in West Africa was mainly through the oral tradition and performance rather than on written texts." Several words and expressions help to broaden the knowledge and communication skills of audience in socio-cultural settings. During verbal art performance, for instance, children pay keen interest to the words of the speaker and narrator, reflect on them and provide the meanings embedded in such expressions. In the course of riddling, new words are used and their meanings are disclosed to listeners thereby increasing their vocabulary for public communication. Examples of riddles of such nature are gathered in the field and also analysed.

(38) Ido: *Orhe we yen ihwo efa vwo rue emu vre we. Onye idie?*

Riddle: It belongs to you, but other people use it more than you do. What is it?

Answer: *Ode* (your name)

(39) Ido: *Wo rue uvu re ugbula, urhukpe re uke, icandoro kugbe enyerhare ephan. Die onye wo ke vwo rhu taye?*

Riddle: You walk into a room that contains a match, a kerosene lamp, a candle and a fireplace. What would you light first?

Answer: *Ugbula* (the matches)

(40) Ido: *Die oyen osa te ota-an ye osa kpahen ko we sie re wo de te ota vwo ke?*

Riddle: What cannot talk but will always reply you when spoken to?

Answer: *Egho* (echo)

(41) Ido: *Die onyi vwe ubiero ovo nye more ore-en?*

Riddle: What has one eye but cannot see?

Answer: *Egbede* (needle)

(42) Ido: *Die onyi vwe orhen re obrabra siere odedie akpor, nye ogbon vwevwerhe siere ode ghwu?*

Riddle: What smells bad when it is alive but smells good when it is dead?

Answer: *Esi* (bacon)

(43) Ido: *Ghere ovwe ke me die akpor, nye ke vwe ame ke mi ghwu? Die onye me phan?*

Riddle: Feed me and I will live, but give me a drink and I will die. What am I?

Answer: *Erhare* (fire)

(44) Ido: *Oro vwe ikpe buebue re nye ovre emeravwe ovo-on.*

Riddle: It has been in existence for years but it is never more than a month old. What am I?

Answer: *Emeravwe* (the moon)

(45) Ido: *Die ye dje gharie uwewwi ye ovwe awo ro vwo ya-an?*

Riddle: What runs all around the backyard, yet has no legs to move?

Answer: *Ogba* (a fence)

(46) Ido: *Die ye sa whra ye wo de hw eke, ome je hwe ko we?*

Riddle: If you drop me, I will crack; smile to me and I will smile back. What am I?

Answer: *Ughegbe* (a mirror).

(47) Ido: *Ose re Omotekoro vwe emete ri yoyovwi ene: Erhuvvuna, Omotikoko and Ometejohwo. Ono ye omote re ene?*

Riddle: Omotekoro's father has four beautiful daughters: Erhuvvuna, Omotikoko and Ometejohwo. What is the name of the fourth daughter?

Answer: Omotekoro

(48) Ido: *Vue vwe obo re onya ra ome ke uko, onya cha ome ke uko;*

Riddle: Tell me what stays back when coming and stays back when going.

Answer: *Ikawo* (The heels)

(49) Ido: *Die oye wo hwe wo ki vwo rue emu?*

Riddle: What has to be broken before you can use it?

Answer: *Ukoho/Ukokodia* (An egg or a coconut)

(50) Ido: *Die oye wo se vvirhi siere wo be toro-or eyen, wo dje obo te-en?*

Riddle: What can you break, even if you never pick it up or touch it?

Answer: *Ive* (A promise)

The indigenous knowledge contained in the above riddles can only be transferred to audience who understand the language especially those that can communicate both in written and spoken forms. Language is an integral part of oral traditions and it is the vehicle for communicating ideas, beliefs, feelings and norms. This view is affirmed by Abari, Oyetola and Okunuga (2013:9) who state that language remains the only means by which education is actualized and customs and tradition transmitted from one generation to another. Based on this, audience will not only acquire information that would enhance their cognitive and communicative skills but also obtain profound knowledge of their cultural heritage for transmission to successive generations.

### **African Riddles in Contemporary Societies**

Riddles in contemporary African societies are facing the problem of extinction like other verbal arts such as folktales, myths and legends, and the reasons for this are not farfetched.

**Religious Factor:** The focus of most children in modern times have been captured by religious programmes and activities at their various homes and worship centres. For instance, they engage in quizzes, Bible or Koranic studies, picnics, camps, prayer meetings and so on. While the faith of children is being built by religious groups, the oral traditions are neglected. Some religious leaders even discourage their members from participating in cultural practices and events, regarding them as fetish, barbaric and unholy. Sometimes, sanctions are placed on religious faithful who disobeyed their clergymen. However, this depends on the magnitude of the offence committed by the members. All these have far-reaching implications on the survival of verbal arts particularly the riddles.

**Education Curriculum:** In the past, children were given opportunities to develop their skills of listening and speaking through storytelling but today, our school system has changed. There are no more provisions for singing, cultural dances and storytelling in our education curriculum. There is no doubt that children in most cities and towns have no indigenous knowledge of folklores and even those that do, are not given the opportunity to display their narrative skills before their classmates or peers. The human mind usually contains repressed materials that are collected and stored from childhood to adulthood. So, oral traditions that are transmitted to children both at informal and formal settings have a long way to shaping the lifestyle of seven individuals in society.

**Insecurity:** The issue of insecurity is another problem that hinders the transmission of riddles and other linguistic products in most societies today. In the past, parents and children used to gather at moonlight to share stories learnt. The narrators were usually elders who have narrative skills and experience about life which they intended to transfer to younger generations. Insecurity then was at its barest minimal as everyone knew the members of every family in the community. Nowadays, parents do not allow their children or wards to keep late night because of fear of the unknown. There are increasing rates of kidnapping, robbery, rape, jealousy and so on, which prevent children from staying outdoors let alone telling stories in the neighbourhood.

**Violence:** Our field research has revealed that at traditional events such as festivals, song performances, dances, ritual of circumcisions and marriage ceremonies, the verbal arts of proverbs, riddles, storytelling, and so on, are predominantly deployed by elders and the performances were done in peaceful manner. These folkloric forms are usually performed in the evenings after major events have been completed by celebrants and well-wishers. Today, cultural events are characterized with violence perpetuated by secret cult groups, robbers and ritualists, to mention a few. Sometimes, people see such moments as the time for revenge, leading to loss of lives and valuable property.

**Death of Custodians:** This is another factor that has contributed to the gradual eroding of oral traditions particularly the riddles in our modern societies. The death of custodians of folklores (verbal and non-verbal) marks the end of oral traditions in some communities especially where such people were the only ones committed to transmitting oral works to the successive generation. For instance, the death of Chief Akpomedaye Ofua who was skillful in the performance of verbal arts like proverbs, tongue twisting and riddles is a threat to the survival of oral traditions in Urhobo society.

**Complimentary Verbal Art:** Riddles often serve as adjunct verbal art in traditional societies because they cannot be performed all day. For instance, children can begin moonlight plays with songs, dances, clapping, and oscillatory running within the arena before settling down to listen to myths, folktales and legendary stories. According to Awedoba (2000:37), "they may begin with riddles, then move over to sedentary games and perhaps end with storytelling. The time devoted to riddles is often short by comparison with the telling of folktales, folktales are usually regarded as more interesting and exciting." Riddles may be introduced into the entertainment session after the interests of the audience have been stimulated and sustained for the performance of the day.

**New Media:** The advent of the new media/technologies have promoted the collection and documentation of oral traditions in recent times. They have bridged the gap between the distant cities and the rural areas where oral traditions take place. People now prefer watching or listening to verbal and non-verbal folklores on television and radio instead of appearing physically at the scenes of such performances. Besides, the availability of social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Internet, and so on, has shifted the attention of audience away from experiencing oral traditions in socio-cultural settings. On the contrary, the new technologies like digital video disk (DVD), MP3, Ipod, Compact Disc (CD), E-mail, and so on, have helped in the documentation and transfer of oral resources to people across the world. Even researchers can now share ideas, download oral materials and seek information through digital devices.

#### **Popular Music and Documentation of Riddles**

Cultural values and indigenous knowledge of a group of people could be documented in several ways and these include cloth design, folksongs, riddles, proverbs, dances, dramatic performances, folktales, oratory, sacred rituals, ceremonies, prayers and herbal practices, to mention a few. Apart from the documentation of riddles through the common technology of print-writing, investigation has shown that such verbal art can also be preserved through folkmusic performed by traditional musicians in contemporary societies. Among the Urhobo of Nigeria, for instance, riddles are performed not only for documentation but for entertainment and education of listening audience in traditional societies.

Findings therefore show that since oral traditions are facing extinction in African societies particularly Urhobo land, song performers and orators are now documenting these artistic resources on their own volition. Often times, they weave some myths, folktales, proverbs and riddles into their song renditions for entertainment, education and documentation as well. The likes of Akpomedaye Ofua, Raphael Okejepha (Achonacho) and other orators have documented several oral works through song performance in audio recordings and these have been made available for people who have passion for Urhobo oral literature. The emergence of the new technologies of print-writing, audio and audio-visual media, the internet, and recently the social media platforms should not be considered as hindrance to oral performances but as new development that would strengthen oral literature in general and riddle performance in particular. It is against this background that this study examined the utilitarian values of traditional riddles among the Urhobo of Nigeria with a view to promoting psychological wellbeing of individuals for the growth and development of society.

### Conclusion

Riddles have no authorship in traditional societies as they are property of the communities where they are produced except those collected and documented or published by individuals. They are cultural materials that are shared or transmitted orally and stored in the memories for future utilization. Though the technology of print has helped in preservation and documentation of verbal arts especially the riddles, they appear to be fast eroding away from most communities owing to factors such as religion, education, insecurity, violence, new media, death of custodians, and so on. Orators have therefore deployed modern means of preservation and documentation of riddles through popular music or song performances in Urhobo society as could be experienced elsewhere.

### Recommendations

This study has shown the need for the preservation and onward transmission of oral products particularly the cultural riddles in modern societies. Though these performative arts are being threatened by modernization, there is the need to promote them because of their utilitarian values. Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations have been made.

- Oral performative arts such as the riddles should be infused into song renditions by oral artists for preservation and transmission to successive generations.
- Religious leaders and scholars should not denigrate oral performances such as the riddles because of their utilitarian functions in socio-cultural settings.
- The new technologies including the social media should be continuously and effectively deployed in the preservation and promotion of verbal arts particularly the cultural riddles.
- Literary writers should also incorporate cultural riddles into their artistic productions in order to preserve them.



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