

# **Inaugural Lecture**

## **The Role and Significance of Oral Literature in Social and Psychological Development of Children**

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This inaugural lecture is dedicated to my late husband Elijah Kiprotich Chesaina and to my children: Kimulwon, Kaptuiya, Chebet and Rottok. Your love has been the source of my inspiration throughout my academic career.

*May God bless you abundantly!*

## BIOGRAPHY

**C**iarunji Chesaina (née Ciarunji Geteria) was born in Embu, Eastern Kenya on 20th May 1947. She started her schooling at Kagaari Primary School in 1954 where she took her Common Entrance Examination (C.E.E) in 1957. She joined Kabare Girls Boarding School in 1958. It was common practice for girls to drop out of school to assist at home, particularly during crises. Hence when the crisis of the birth of her sister Lady Justice Murugi Mugo occurred, Ciarunji had to leave Kabare and return home early 1959. She spent the rest of that year at home looking after her new sister and other siblings. Fortunately, in January 1960 she was able to join Mbiruri Intermediate Day School where she sat for the Kenya African Primary Examination (KAPE) in 1961. She joined Alliance Girls High School in 1962 and sat for the Overseas Cambridge School Certificate in 1965 and the Cambridge Higher School Certificate in 1967.

After working as a research assistant for the Child Development Research Unit (CDRU) at University of Nairobi, she proceeded to Makerere University for a Bachelor of Arts degree course in English and French in 1968 and graduated in 1971. She worked for the Child Development Research Unit once again before leaving for Harvard School of Education in the USA, where she graduated with a Master of Education degree in 1972. At Harvard University, Professor Chesaina specialized in Child Psychology.

Upon her return to Kenya, she taught initially at Alliance Girls High School and thereafter joined Kenyatta University (the then K.U.C, constituent college of University of Nairobi) as a Tutorial Fellow in December 1972. In 1974, she was promoted to the position of Lecturer and became the first Department of Literature Chairperson. She joined Leeds University (UK) for M.A. degree in Literature in

1977, resuming her teaching at Kenyatta in 1978. In 1985 she was awarded a Commonwealth Academic Staff Fellowship and she proceeded to Leeds University once again for her doctoral studies. She obtained her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Literature in January 1988 and resumed her teaching once again at Kenyatta University. She joined the University of Nairobi as Associate Professor in 1991 and was promoted to Full Professor of Literature in 1998. While at the University of Nairobi she has served as Chairperson of the Department of Literature, Coordinator of Departmental Postgraduate Studies, Faculty of Arts Representative to Senate, Faculty of Arts Representative to Senate Disciplinary Committee, College of Humanities Representative to the Board of Postgraduate Studies, Acting Director of Board of Postgraduate Studies and Director of International Programmes of the University of Nairobi.

In the year 2000 Professor Chesaina was appointed High Commissioner to the Republic of South Africa and represented Kenya in Pretoria until end of her tour of duty in 2003, when she resumed teaching at the University of Nairobi.

Professor Chesaina has published widely in the fields of Literature and culture. She has published 8 books and the 9<sup>th</sup> is in press. She has also contributed over 30 articles in refereed journals and encyclopaediae as well as numerous chapters in books. Besides being a critic of children's literature, she has published several stories for children.

Professor Chesaina is a gifted actress on stage, screen and radio. She has for many years utilized her voice to contribute to Kenya Institute of Education's audio educational programme. In drama she has been an adjudicator at national level for more than three decades. She has been External Examiner at University of Dar es Salaam and, while at Kenyatta University, she served as External Examiner for Literature at University of Nairobi.

She has won many academic awards, including Carnegie Foundation Scholarship (1971), Association of African University Scholarship for Anglophone Lecturers (1977), Kenya Government Academic Scholarship (1977), Commonwealth Academic Staff Fellowship (1985) and American Cultural Exchange Fellowship (1988).

Professor Chesaina is an active member of various organizations and boards, including Kenya National Academy of Sciences, Kenya National Examinations Council, Global Civil Society and the Fraternity of Christian Lay Counsellors. She speaks several African languages and is fluent in oral and written French and German. Currently Professor Chesaina is making progress in learning Spanish and Japanese.

Professor Chesaina's motto is that humility and the love of God are the keys to knowledge and success.



## INTRODUCTION

*I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it. (Luke 18:17)*

*But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. (Matt. 18:6)*

In the last two decades or so, children's welfare and matters to do with children have generated a new interest. There has been a global outcry to revisit issues such as children's safety, children's rights, children's education and so on. It is unfortunate that this increased consciousness about the child has stemmed mainly from child abuse, child neglect and child exploitation that loom large all around us.

Children's place in society and their plight in various communities have always occupied a special place in our African cultures. Since literature is the reservoir in which our traditions and cultural values are enshrined, we do not have to look far to see how children were perceived, for instance in Kenya. Our oral literary sources abound in narratives, songs and proverbs which underpin the importance of children in society.

The sensitivity and empathy with which children were regarded are underlined metaphorically through evoking labour pains and the pangs of delivering a baby. The Gikuyu simply say: "A baby is painful!" The Embu and Mbeere put it thus: "Even if a woman delivers an animal, she pleads that it be killed gently, because she carried it for nine months." The Akamba put it graphically and dramatically: "*Ona wasyaa ngiti ni yaku no mbaka umwiongye; wisililye nondo syaku kati wa mbosela yayo umwiongye.*" (Even if you give birth to a dog, it

is your child. You must give it your breast. You must squeeze your breasts between its fangs and give it to suck!) These proverbs appeal for the tender care that a whole community is called upon to accord the young ones, regardless of the physical state or social stratum of the particular child.

Children comprise the future of any society. They are not only the future members and leaders but they also ensure the fecundity and continuity of every society. Children are the future custodians of a society's mores, values as well as the society's entire culture and heritage. As a discipline in the arts, humanities and social sciences, literature cannot be excused from the role of educating young ones to fit into the niche of such custodians.

The purpose of this lecture is to examine the role and significance of oral literature in children's development. It should be noted right from the beginning that children are creative and a human being's creativity and eagerness to learn is most acute at this formative stage. By its very nature, oral literature simultaneously satisfies the child's creative and educational needs. As an art, oral literature appeals to the child's senses and hence providing pleasurable experiences. On the other hand, the social values and moral lessons contained in oral literature strike a chord in a child's curiosity to learn about the world around him/her.

Before we look at this crucial role of oral literature, we need to elucidate on who we really refer to as a child and what is expected during the phase of childhood. In other words, we need to focus on the social and psychological needs of children.

## **OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS**

Definitions of the term 'child' are as numerous as scholars, writers, thinkers and practitioners of children's welfare. However, diversity occurs only with regard to cultural expectations of what childhood entails. All scholars in child development disciplines are agreed that a child is a young human being or anyone who is not yet an adult. *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* defines a child as a person between either birth and puberty, infancy and maturity or infancy and puberty. Childhood is defined as the period between infancy and adolescence, (Reber & Reber, 1985; 2001). Whereas age and physical maturation may be used to measure who is a child and who is an adult, the question of development into a 'normal' adult is very important. Child development may be defined as, 'the scientific study of changes in the child's biological, social, cognitive and emotional behavior during the period of childhood,' (Hetherington & Parke, 1975; 1993 p. G-3)

There are two ways of measuring normality and abnormality. The first one entails the absence of mental and physical disorders. Over the years, the parameters based on the absence of physical disorders has been de-emphasized, due to the need to give physically impaired children a stigma-free life. This does not mean ignoring the physical disadvantages, but it entails offering physically-impaired children the leeway to develop without the demeaning attitudes that often have negative effects on their self-esteem. The second parameter of measuring normality and abnormality is related to a child's development of skills that enable her/him to operate in the culture within which she/he lives. Important among these are the skills to communicate. The skills for communication have a very close affinity with oral literature. Other development skills which are related to literature are the ability to act intelligibly and responsibly as well as the social skills that enable a child to have good rapport with other people in the social milieu.

Let us now take a glance at children's psychological needs. Right from birth, a baby needs communication with the adults around him/her. Since communication is a two-way process, involving a sender and a receiver of a message, our response to the baby's first cry is important. We may mention here the effectiveness of oral literature in giving the baby feedback as the receivers of his/her first-cry message. In our traditional setting, the mid-wife is accompanied by other women who sing messages of welcome to the newborn.

A baby's five senses are alive and continue to develop right from birth. The senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch help babies to learn about the world around them. As these senses develop, emotions also become acute so that a child can be easily aroused to joy or anger. If their needs are not met or if they feel they are not understood, young children easily become irritable, impatient and frustrated. Hence empathy is crucial in communicating with children. Adults need to anticipate what their behaviour might trigger in children and therefore forestall such frustrations.

Play is very important to children's development as it helps exercise, not only the body but the mind as well. Play is enjoyable, but it is also in the course of play that children learn about the world around them. While playing, children come across basic elements which form the world around them. They begin to learn the relationships between these elements while at the same time using their imagination to carve for themselves a place in the social and geographical environment. Hence, while children are trying to figure out and experiment about these relationships, they develop organizational skills, thought processes and their entire cognition.

The development of language gives the child the major tool of communication. As mentioned above, the sense of hearing develops, among other senses, right from birth. A normal baby will begin making

gurgling sounds at barely one month. Though no child develops *at the* same speed as another, it has been observed that by one year, a child will be able to say a significant number of words. By four, the child can form complete sentences, while by six all the basic elements of language have been learnt.

It is therefore important to begin speaking to babies straight after birth. Talking to them encourages babies to begin making associations between sounds and objects. It inspires them to strive to communicate verbally and to feel confident about their achievement, even though the words may often be unintelligible to adults. Besides talking, singing repetitive songs such as lullabies, contributes to the psychological development of children. The melody in songs is also enjoyable and will help children develop memory capability.

A key landmark in the cognitive and creative development of children is imagination. Imagination helps a child call to mind situations they have experienced as well as those they may not have actually experienced. A child is able to engage in make-believe and visualize being in a place which he/she has never visited, or even to see himself/herself as someone else. This is the world of fantasy which is very important in children's literature. Imitation is a key technique through which children learn their social roles. Owing to children's innocence and honesty, adults around young ones have to be wary of projecting double standards. Children are very sharp in detecting contradictions between what an adult says and the behaviour this adult projects.

For children to develop into fully-integrated individuals, they need to have positive role-models. In homes where aggression and hostility is the order of the day, for instance, children will assume that this is the norm and they will follow suit. On the other hand, where people communicate through dialogue as well as exhibiting kindness, patience and consideration, the child will no doubt develop these

peace-inspiring qualities. Hence as care-givers, teachers or general role models of children, we are called upon to be sensitive to the kind of response our behaviour might trigger in the child. We also need to be empathetic, that is; we need to put ourselves in the child's shoes.

As they grow older, children learn the moral codes of their societies. They learn how to distinguish right from wrong. They learn to differentiate the behaviour that the society condones from the behaviour that is considered misdemeanour. It is the responsibility of society to inculcate cultural values in children as they leave the various life stages and develop towards adulthood.

At adolescence, the child is at a very delicate stage. He/she is neither a child nor an adult. The physical and emotional changes taking place in the body render the adolescent prone to irritation, mood swings and obstinacy. The search for recognition and independence might lead to what adults often view as rebellion. Healthy dialogue and communication become crucial here, so as to bring the child on board without rupturing good relations with the family and other social groups. It is at this stage that adults need to understand that the deep-seated desires of the adolescent should not be met with rejection. Adults charged with the responsibility of bringing up adolescents: parents, teachers or other care-givers, need to handle these young adults with understanding rather than with an iron hand. What might otherwise be viewed as rebellion is not rebellion *per se*, but a development towards self-assertiveness, self-reliance and self-esteem, as the child gropes towards attaining identity in the world of adults.

We have given attention to children's psychological development and needs as a way of understanding our audience in oral literature. Good literary art is that which is sensitive to the needs of its target audience. A sensitive artist of children's literature is one who, not only understands the psychology of children, but also empathizes with these young ones.

# **THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ORAL LITERATURE IN SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN**

Literature has always been an important art in moulding children to fit within their environment and social milieu. The dual function of literature has been most appropriate to children. The didactic role of this discipline has been applied the world over; that is, to inculcate moral values in children. On the other hand, the entertaining aspect has been utilized, not only to make learning interesting, but also to sharpen the creative genius of a child as he/she grows up and finds his/her niche within the various social boundaries.

This section looks at a panorama of oral art and illustrates its role and significance on the social and psychological growth of children. Although we do not intend to overlook idiosyncratic and cultural differences, we have adopted a holistic approach to illustrate the universal nature of the pivotal role played by oral literature for children's psychological development and incorporation into the social environment.

In Africa, oral literature has played and continues to play a very important role with regard to children. When a baby is born, that child's immediate response to the departure from the womb, is to search for comfort. The world outside the womb is no doubt extremely strange as compared to the cushioning haven that the womb has been. Medical practitioners have their own explanation of the baby's first cry. They say that with the first cry, the baby takes its first breath of air that will enable him/her to live. However, fellow social scientists will agree that, much as the baby needs that air he/she needs to feel welcome and at home in the social environment. Have you ever wondered what would happen if a baby came out of the womb and found nobody

waiting to welcome him/her? Our guess is that the unfortunate baby would look for a way to go back into the womb in search of refuge from a hostile world.

Through oral literature, babies are welcomed into the world and made to feel part and parcel of the social environment. As they congratulate a mother who has just given birth, Embu and Mbeere women welcome the baby with the following song:

Iyai we have been asking this  
Iyai we have been asking this  
Have you ever heard any news about this home?  
Has anybody heard  
Whether a baby has arrived?

The baby has arrived safely  
We have been eagerly waiting for him  
We are grateful to our ancestors  
Our God is good  
He brought our baby safely ...

(Chesaina, 1997, p.145)

Besides food, a baby's first need is love and acceptance. As the baby grows older, he/she needs to feel loved. Even when left under the care of an older sibling and the mother is otherwise occupied, the baby needs to know that he/she has not been rejected. M. Scott Peck, a renowned American psychiatrist, persuades us to understand that rejection can have very damaging and long-lasting psychiatric consequences for children. In fact, he argues that in children's eyes, rejection or abandonment equals death, (Peck, M.S, 1985, p.13). Hence the Maasai little girls sing the following lullaby to express their love for their baby siblings and to assure them that they have not been rejected, even if mother has gone away to handle various chores.



Our cattle have come with buffalo-shaped horns  
(Our sheep have come with the rams)  
I peep through the window but will not meet them  
Keep quiet my beloved little one  
Let me thrash the spoilt old man  
The one dressed in coils and beads  
Get up brother and let us call the alarm.  
Whom do we alert when my brother is missing?  
Parmuat of my mother's with the fair skin  
The one whom the Itatua shoot but leave standing  
The one fondled by the corners of the gown  
His gown as red as the beads.

(Kipury, 1983, p.200)

One might wonder how a mere baby is able to understand all that is alluded to in this lullaby. Yet we must be aware that communication with babies is not an academic exercise. Babies are very sensitive and the beauty of poetry from oral tradition is that it is never performed in a static position. A lot of body language goes into it and a good performer makes sure the audience is involved. Hence the child-minder here will make facial expressions and smile, much to the baby's delight. As Santrock observes:

The human face is perhaps the most important pattern for the newborn to perceive. The infant masters a sequence of steps in progressing towards full perceptual appreciation of the face. The older infant [spends] more time examining the internal detail of the face, while the younger infant [concentrates] on areas on the outer contour of the face. (Santrock, 1997, p.146)

Rhythm is another aspect of traditional songs that has great appeal to babies. As she performs the lullaby, the child-minder will no doubt swing the baby rhythmically and soothingly, while uttering endearing phrases such as, “my beloved little one,” “Parmuat of my mother’s” and “the one fondled by the corners of the gown”. Furthermore, the tone used by the child-minder is specially suited to the baby’s comfort, so that the baby can even fall asleep from the interaction between tone and rhythm.

It will be seen that the lullaby plays other functions as well. The child minder is a child herself and as such, one of her needs is to play. Rather than miss out on play, she is given an opportunity to play, dancing to the lullaby and teasing the baby as well as other people who are around. Notice the way she uses this teasing technique to remind the old people of their responsibility to provide security for the baby. She says:

Let me thrash the spoilt old man  
The one dressed in coils and beads  
Get up brother and let us call the alarm.  
Who do we alert when my brother is missing?

(Kipury p.200)

The multiple role of oral literature is not peculiar to African traditions. Genres of European oral literature, for instance, do serve more than one social function, just as in the African oral literature context. Among these is the song which entertains, socializes and teaches children some of the important cultural aspects. The song ‘Old Macdonald’ quoted below is a popular one, having even been exported to Africa during the colonial era. It goes like this:

Old Macdonald had a farm  
Eya! Heiya! Hoo!

And on that farm he had some cows  
 Eya! Heiya! Hoo!  
 With a moo moo here  
 And a moo moo there  
 Here moo, there moo  
 Everywhere moo moo  
 Old Macdonald had a farm  
 Eya! Heiya! Hoo!

The song is repeated over and over again, each time substituting the cows with other farm animals. Children use the song to add rhythm and enjoyment to their games while at the same time socializing with one another. The song also plays a didactic role; it is a most effective way of teaching children about farming; that is, animal husbandry as an economic activity. Such a song is particularly important for teaching children in the urban areas about a key means of livelihood in the rural areas.

Though, among other imported lyrics, the above-quoted song is performed very often in our nursery schools, there are children play songs from the African oral tradition which are more relevant to our rural settings. An example is the popular Kalenjini play song '*Sogome Kwany Kimyet*' (Sogome prepare ugali):

<i>Sogome kwany kimyet</i>	(Sogome prepare ugali)
<i>Sogome kwany kimyet</i>	(Sogome prepare ugali)
<i>Si ngeam ak cheko</i>	(So we eat with milk)
<i>Sogome eh!</i>	(Oh! Sogome!)
<i>Kwany kimyet</i>	(Prepare Ugali)
<i>Cheruto sut muge</i>	(Cheruto prepare the gourd)
<i>Cheruto sut muge</i>	(Cheruto prepare the gourd)
<i>Ngerongin cheko</i>	(So we put milk in it)
<i>Cheruto eh!</i>	(Oh! Cheruto!)

<i>Si ngelu cheko</i>	(So we drink milk)
<i>Cheruto eh!</i>	(Oh Cheruto!)
<i>Sut muge</i>	(Prepare the gourd)
<i>Kipruto rib tuga</i>	(Kipruto look after the cattle)
<i>Kipruto rib tuga</i>	(Kipruto look after the cattle)
<i>Si ngelu cheko</i>	(So we drink milk)
<i>Si ngeam bendo</i>	(So we eat meat)
<i>Kipruto eh!</i>	(Oh! Kipruto)
<i>Rib tuga</i>	(Look after the cattle)

Variations of this Kalenjin play song are found among other Kenyan communities, depending on the people's economic activities. Such songs socialize children about their socio-economic roles right from a tender age. Children are taught that hard work is a virtue and they are not too young to start cultivating such virtues. They are taught gender roles that make work easier and help uphold order within a traditional cultural setting.

Children feel even more confident and more at home with regard to the shorter forms of oral literature; that is, the riddle and the tongue twister. This is because children regard these texts as their own art. Here we note the issue of ownership that facilitates the didactic role of children's oral literature. It is interesting to observe that though these genres are normally regarded as mere child's play, they have significant social and developmental roles to play in the lives of children. The riddle is performed by children on their own without the supervision of adults, although it may also be posed during story-telling sessions. The tongue twister is predominantly a genre for children and adults appear awkward attempting to play along during children's tongue-twister game sessions.

Since the riddle requires at least two people for its performance, it acts as a tool to cement relations among children. Children socialize with

one another as they enjoy challenging each other with riddles. They learn to compete, but more importantly, they learn that life is “give and take”. This they learn, for instance from the requirement that, in order for the challenger to provide the answer to a difficult riddle, the respondents must part with a handsome payment (albeit imaginary) to the challenger.

Riddles are culture specific. This means that, although some riddles may appear cross-culturally, the elements from which they are formed must be part and parcel of their specific cultures. In other words, the materials referred to must be found within the cultural and geographical boundaries, otherwise the search for answers to the challenges posed would end up as futile exercises. Consider the Gikuyu riddle, “The pigeon peas on Mount Kenya have just blossomed”, whose answer is “the blossom of a fig tree”. To make connections between the challenge and the answer, the respondents must be familiar with both Mount Kenya and fig trees. The fig tree (*mukuyu*) is sacred in Gikuyu culture. It is at the fig tree that sacrifices are performed. Hence from an early age, oral literature is used to signal to the children the central place occupied by the *mukuyu* within a traditional Gikuyu culture.

Riddles and riddling exercises are enjoyable ways of teaching children about the environment around them. Furthermore, as they search for answers to riddles, children learn to be observant about the environment in which they live. This is important because, being observant with regard to and understanding the environment helps children control as well as relate to this environment.

Like any other genre of traditional literature, the riddle helps children develop imagination. As they grope for answers to riddles or think about which riddle to pose, children have to do a great deal of thinking which exercises their imagination and helps develop their creative faculties.

Whereas the riddle exercises the minds of children, the tongue twister exercises their tongues and lips. The tongue twister's major function is to assist children develop language pronunciation and articulation. It is created through combining and repeating phonemes or sounds which are difficult to pronounce. The alliteration then helps children "loosen their tongues", as it were.

The tongue twister is perhaps the most universal of children's oral tradition genres. Luo children exercise their tongues with tongue twisters such as, "*Rawo luor liel, liel luor rawo,*" (hippo go round the anthill, anthill go round the hippo). Gikuyu children can be heard trying out, "*Kaana ka Nikora kona kaana koora koora koora, nako kaana koora koona kaana ka Nikora koora koora,* (Nikora's child saw a baby frog run away and ran away, and when the baby frog saw Nikora's child run away it also ran away). The Abagusii have a very interesting and popular tongue twister. This is created from just one long word: "*takonakonyemurunganeriangeria*" (Don't be complaining to me all the time). It is interesting that here children become teachers to one another. The importance of ownership intimated above cannot be overlooked. The warning here is given to children by their fellow-children. It is they and not adults, who own the advice inherent in the tongue-twister. Subsequently, the children being warned against a complaining attitude will take care to avoid behaviour that could lead to their being ostracized by their peers.

In the European zone, oral traditions have utilized the tongue twister for centuries, just like in the African context. The following English tongue twisters are very familiar: "She sells sea shells by the sea shore", and "Peter bought a packet of bitter butter. It would have been better if Peter bought a packet of better butter to make the bitter butter better." The Russian have interesting tongue twisters, some of which use names of people, like in the latter example from the English tradition. Two illustrations will suffice. "Shla Sasha pa shasse ee sasala sushku"

(Sasha was walking along the highway sucking a pretzel) and “Karl u Klary ukral koralli” (Karl stole Klara’s corals). In the first tongue twister, the child has to pronounce all the “s” sounds, taking care of the variations in these sounds; while in the second, one has to pronounce all the “r” sounds.

The French use the tongue twisters, not only for children but also for people learning French as they are very particular that their language be spoken correctly. These are tongue twisters such as: “*Je suis ce que je suis, parce que je ne suis pas ce que je ne suis pas*” (I am what I am, because I am not what I am not) and “*Celine cire les chaussures de sa soeur, mais Celine ne cire pas les chaussures de Charles*” (Celine brushes the shoes of her sister but Celine does not brush Charles’s shoes).

It is interesting to note that the semantic significance does not matter when it comes to tongue twisters. Sometimes, a tongue twister may suggest the absurd or the impossible. For instance, it would be absurd to see a whole massive hippo going round a small anthill, just as it is impossible for the anthill to go round the hippo. What matters here is the exercise to articulate combinations of “r’s” and “l’s” which is challenging, particularly for children. Sometimes, a lengthy tongue-twister might appear really petty, not only semantically but also with regard to the depth of the implications. A good illustration is the Japanese, “*Kaeru pyoko pyoko mipyokopyoko. Awasete pyokopyoko mupyokopyoko,*” (three frogs bobbing, when they come together six bobs). This tongue-twister may not be saying much semantically, but besides offering children a chance to pronounce the “p’s” and “k’s”, it provides drama. As in the case of the Luo tongue twister, the Japanese example gives children an opportunity to exercise their imagination even as they exercise pronunciation. Humour is utilized extensively. It is fun to imagine three frogs bobbing, just like it is funny to imagine the hippo going round the anthill, and even the anthill going round the hippo.

In a discussion, on the importance of oral literature in children's development, it would be a glaring omission not to discuss the oral narrative. Unlike the riddle and the tongue twister, many of which may have been created by child artists, the oral narrative has predominantly depended upon adult creativity. This does not mean that children have been passive audiences or dormant artists with regard to the narrative genre.

Children have contributed to nuances, stylistic devices and other elements in narratives during their participation in story-telling sessions. These variations eventually lead to variations in and versions of certain traditional tales. For instance, there is a popular trickster tale among children in the City of Nairobi which can only have been the result children's efforts in recreating traditional tales. As would be expected, the traditional chief trickster, Hare, is the key player. But unlike in the original traditional tales where the action would be taking place in the bush, at the *shamba* or at a homestead, the setting here is a construction site and Hare hides behind bags of cement. The strangest thing is that he is also wearing shoes which would shock his counterparts in traditional trickster tales, who were always barefooted.

The oral narrative represents mainly the adult point of view and has social and psychological functions to fulfill. Traditionally, the oral narrative was told by adults particularly grandmothers, for specific social-psychological goals. There was also a tradition of passing narratives from one generation to the next, hence ensuring that the values were kept alive in the society. An illustration of this context among Native Canadians (Indians) is retold by Armstrong in *Neekna and Chemai*, (Armstrong, 1984; 1991). Tupa, great-grandmother, narrates a story to Neekna and Chemai emphasizing, "You must carry these things I tell you to your great-grandchildren", (p. 9).



In this story the narrator uses two narrative techniques that enhance the didactic nature of the story: personification and the use of a child protagonist. A child forgets to wear his leg-warmers and snow-shoes and goes into the open, looking for squirrel tracks. The personified North Wind hurls some icy snow at the boy, stinging his hands and face. But the narrator explains:

North Wind didn't want to hurt the little boy, but he wanted him to learn to dress respectfully when he went out where the North Wind was. If he didn't learn, next time he would be punished worse, maybe North would bite his fingers and toes. (p. 11).

On the surface, this is just a simple story, but on a deeper level, it is an important narrative that teaches Native Canadian children about survival in the face of hostile climatic conditions. The personification of North Wind creates interest by appealing to children's imagination. On the other hand, the use of a child protagonist captures involvement from young audience and makes them identify with the boy.

The oral narrative is a powerful genre for teaching children moral values. In any society, there are no two ways about right and wrong; children have to learn what is acceptable and what is morally wrong and therefore unacceptable. It is interesting that in the story of *Neekna and Chemai* above, the narrator's message about survival touches on both the natural and the social environment. North Wind repeats several times that the boy's failure to wear the proper clothing for the weather is a sign of disrespect, (pp. 10-11). Respect for those in authority is a very important value. The oral narrative genre emphasizes it as one of the foundations of a healthy society.

The trickster tale is a subgenre of narratives that particularly appeals to children. Children enjoy the adventures of the trickster, while at the same time they are warned not to engage in trickery or fall prey to tricksters. The Kalenjin story 'The Foolish Friend' illustrates this

point, (Chesaina 1991; 1994, pp.63-65). In this narrative, a man tricks his friend and agemate to beat his wife. Arap Rero conceives the trick and deceives Arap Suge that he too will thrash his wife on the appointed night. However, while Arap Rero beats a cowhide and tells his wife to wail as if she is undergoing a terrible beating, Arap Suge takes his friend's wrong advice on face value and actually whacks his wife almost to death.

The motif of this trickster tale is common among Kenyan communities. In some stories, a trickster animal tricks another into beating his wife or his mother to death or almost to death, just like in the Kalenjin story. For instance, in the Mbeere story, 'The Enmity between Hyena and Hare', (Chesaina 1997, pp. 99-100), Hare tricks Hyena into killing his mother. Hyena, being a foolish friend just like Arap Suge, falls prey and kills his mother.

These stories are most appropriate for teaching particularly adolescents. Adolescence is a stage of development whereby a child finds himself or herself under tremendous peer pressure. Adolescents deliberately avoid the company of adults because the latter remind them that they are still children. Subsequently, as they steer away from adults in search of identity and independence, they find themselves under great peer pressure to act or to be like their agemates. Mwamwenda, one of our own African educational psychologists who have done extensive research in the adolescence phase, explains this tendency lucidly when he says:

The adolescent's assertion of his independence may cause conflict between himself and his parents, who wish to control him as they (have always done). At this stage, the adolescent is inclined to establish stronger friendship links with his peers, who exercise substantial influence over him. To gain approval and acceptance, he complies with their expectations.

(Mwamwenda 1995; 1996, p. 72)

It should be noted that in no way do trickster tales discourage children from having friends or socializing with their peers. Such an interpretation would be in contradiction to values which emphasize communal life. The emphasis is on the need for children to exercise wisdom and good sense when dealing with other people. The stories teach children that the social environment is full of all types, positive and negative alike; therefore they need to be cautious.

Intelligence, wisdom and good sense are highlighted in trickster tales where a big animal is duped by a small animal. African oral literature abounds in such tales. A popular story is the one in which Hare tricks Elephant and Hippopotamus to engage in a tug or war. For a whole night the two animals pulled and tugged, each one assuming that Hare was tugging and pulling at the other end. Though trickery is not necessarily condoned, through the foolishness of Elephant and Hippopotamus, children are taught that their size does not preclude intelligence. Their youth does not mean that they cannot perform great feats as long as they use their brains.

It may be observed here that the use of animal characters greatly enhances both appeal and appreciation of narratives for children. The technique enables the narratives, for instance to expose absurdities without offending the listeners. Dramatization is also enhanced, thus adding to the humour which captures children's attention and maintains their interest. The art used in the narratives enables children to identify with the admirable, morally upright and benevolent animals.

Over the years and generations, oral art, particularly in the narrative, has developed a way of symbolizing values through animals. Owing to the vivid portrayal of animal characters in narratives, children are able to detect, for instance, that Hyena and Ogre symbolize evil, greed and foolishness, Hare symbolizes trickery, Crocodile symbolizes slyness and meanness while birds symbolize benevolence and hope.

Such symbols teach children about the personality types found in the social environment; warning them to be wary of negative individuals, on the one hand, and to appreciate the positive, on the other. Human characters in narratives are, however, found to be useful for discouraging children against assuming attitudes such as arrogance and looking down on those who may be underprivileged or handicapped. In such stories the arrogant are punished and have disastrous ends, while the humble and handicapped are rewarded.

The Luhya story of Simbi and Nashikufu the hunchback illustrates this point. (Adagala and Kabira, 1985, pp. 1-7). Simbi is beautiful but arrogant, selfish, mean and lacks common sense. On the other hand, her handicapped sister Nashikufu is intelligent, sensible and altruistic. She is also gifted in singing and being acutely observant. Unlike her sister who only thinks about herself, Nashikufu uses her natural endowments to help other people. It is as a result of her good heart and good sense that her people, including Simbi, are saved from the ogres. The story has a very happy ending for Nashikufu, but not so happy an ending for Simbi. Nashikufu's fortunes change from a despised person at the bottom of the community ladder into a very rich and most admired wife of the chief's son. In effect the despised Nashikufu ends up as the future Queen of the community. Here children are taught that their natural and God-given endowments can have a meaning only if utilized for the common good. Furthermore, children are taught to emulate characters who meet this ideal.

Scholars of oral literature cannot over-emphasize the importance of character portrayal in the area of role-modelling for children. A role model has been defined as "A person whose behaviour, especially that which is exhibited in a particular capacity, serves as a model or standard for another person to follow," (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1985; 1993, p 1806). Role-modelling is one of the oldest child-rearing techniques

used for generations all over the world. Psychologists have noted the effectiveness of teaching children through models, as illustrated by Simons *et al*:

Observational learning, *also called modeling, is a learning that occurs when a person observes and then repeats someone else's behavior.* The capacity to learn behavior patterns by observation eliminates tedious trial-and-error learning. Indeed, many of our successful adjustments involve our exposure to competent models who display appropriate behavior in solving problems and coping with the world.

(Simmons et al. p. 44, italics in the original)

The issue of mentorship is crucial to child development, and oral literature has given themes of mentorship tremendous emphasis. Children have dreams of greatness in the future. Their aspirations for the future are very much influenced by the people they admire. They fantasize about great things and live in the hope that one day they will attain their dreams. They therefore need encouragement that what they aspire for is not beyond their reach. This is the context of role-modelling in children's oral literature. Children's oral literature inspires them through portrayal of characters bearing qualities that they can identify with. Evil characters are punished in order to teach children the importance of morally acceptable behaviour.

In oral narratives, legendary figures are "competent models who display appropriate behavior in solving problems and coping with the world," (Simmons *et al*, p. 44). These are heroes such as Shaka in Zulu oral tradition, Sundiata in Mali oral tradition, Wamugumo in Gikuyu oral tradition, and Lwanda Magere in Luo oral tradition. Where these male legendary figures act as role models for the boys, female characters inspire the girls. These are legendary heroines such as Kobilu Kwondab Kimosop in the Kalenjin oral tradition, Wangu wa Makeri in Gikuyu oral tradition, Mekatili in the Miji Kenda oral

tradition, Mang'ana Ogonje nyar Ugu in the Luo oral tradition, Cierume in Embu/Mbeere oral tradition, Moraa Moka Ngiti in the Gusii oral tradition and Ciokalaine o M'Barungu in the Meru oral tradition.

The beauty of oral literature is that while using artistic devices to emphasize the powers of legendary figures, it does not overlook their weaknesses. In the portrayal of these characters the narratives also emphasize the weaknesses that contributed to a particular legendary figure's downfall. Thus children are given the opportunity to utilize their imagination and common sense to emulate models, only in so far as their strength of character goes; they are taught to avoid the mistakes or negative qualities that are said to have brought a given legendary figure to a tragic end.

An important area that cannot be overlooked with regard to oral literature for older children is that of politics. It was observed above that adolescents are at a phase of life whereby they gravitate towards their peers and are constantly in search of independence. While not denying young adults their independence and while at the same time recognizing that children are the future leaders, oral artists are at pains to teach the youth about the importance of responsibility in leadership.

The Kalenjin story entitled, 'Kill the Aged,' teaches about responsible leadership, (Chesaina 1991 pp.32-44). The protagonists of this oral narrative are young animals who are tired of living under the leadership of the older generation of animals. So they call a meeting of all the youth to decide on the best course of action. Their deliberations on the issue lead to the decision that they stage a *coup d'etat* in which each young animal kills his parents. Subsequently, all the adult animals are killed, except for Old Hare who eventually saves the desperate situation that arises.

The death of the old folk in the narrative enables the youth to lead a life of laxity and debauchery that is free from any sanctions. Naturally, disorder sets in. The youth cohabit with whoever they choose and roam wherever they wish. The herbivorous animals now even cohabit with their carnivorous counterparts. It is the height of chaos and disorder unequalled by any in the history of the animal kingdom. The narrative is allegorical of human communities. Hence, for didactic purposes, this should be seen by the audience as the state of anarchy that would set in within a social environment under similar circumstances.

This story is best suited to adolescents who are often in a hurry to attain independence from their parents. The technique of using animal characters must be appreciated. The story would be emotionally upsetting for children (even adolescents) to witness the slaughter of human beings *en masse* and in cold blood. In addition, the use of animal characters dramatizes the chaos vividly and sharpens the satire. The style of satire has always been very effective in children's didactic literature. This is the device through which folly and evil are ridiculed with a view to discouraging children from such weaknesses. Though 'Kill the Aged' does not condone a situation where the older generation deliberately refuses to relinquish power to the younger generation, it nonetheless teaches the youth to approach independence and leadership with a sense of responsibility, altruism and forward-looking strategies.

Lastly, it is worth noting the aspect of interaction of oral literature genres. The oral narrative provides an avenue for more than one genre to be performed in the course of narration. There is room for songs, proverbs and even riddles during a story-telling session. The song in particular, conveys emotions and facilitates the bridging of the gap between the narrator and the audience, as illustrated by the Kamba story of 'The Girl and the Ogre'.

In this story, a girl meets an ogre on her way from fetching water from a river. As usual with ogres, this particular ogre has disguised himself as a handsome gentleman in order to trap the girl. So he asks the girl to give him some water to drink. Assuming that this is a normal human being, the girl puts some water in a calabash for the ogre. As she holds out water for him to drink, she pleads with him not to keep her long as she has to travel home; far away through the forest and the clouds already portend rain. She pleads through song:

<i>Nduke kiwuu</i>	(Oh! Take the water)
<i>Nduke kiwuu</i>	(Oh! Take the water)
<i>Nduke kiwuu mwanakwa</i>	(Oh! Take the water, my brother)
<i>Ningwinuka kwitu</i>	(Oh! I need to hurry home)
<i>Mutitu tuu</i>	(Through the forest)
<i>Na katu ka mbula tuu</i>	(You can see rain clouds)
<i>Tumbililii tu!</i>	( <i>Tumbililii tu</i> )

Fortunately for the girl, ogres are foolish and therefore this one reveals his hidden agenda. He does not actually want water, but is just using it as a bait to kidnap the girl. So he also responds through song:

<i>Ngenuka kwitu na kamwiitu</i>	(I'll take a girl home with me)
<i>Nzungi syakua</i>	(Even if all dancers die)
<i>Na kamwiitu</i>	(Oh! I'll take a girl home)
<i>Na kamwiitu</i>	(Oh! I'll take a girl home)
<i>Tumbililii tu</i>	( <i>Tumbililii tu!</i> )

On hearing that, the girl sings while she is retreating and eventually manages to escape. The song enables the children listening to the narrative to sing along with the girl. This way, not only are they relieved from the monotony of listening to narration for long periods, but they are also enabled to get involved and empathize with the girl. Hence the song adds the most needed emotional touch while at the



same time inviting the children to identify with the protagonist. The message therefore hits home in a most vivid manner, and the children remember the danger of the evil lurking in the environment through the ogre's song.

Each genre of oral literature plays an important role within the oral narrative. The riddle captures the attention of children and sharpens their wit. The song facilitates children's involvement. Although the proverb is not ordinarily a genre for young children, an appropriate proverb may be used to summarize the moral of a story. The importance of this is to emphasize the moral while ensuring that the children internalize it and remember it long after the narration. In the final analysis, oral literature genres come together to enhance the didactic function of the art in an appealing and effective manner.

## **THE CONTEMPORARY KENYAN CONTEXT**

It would be myopic to paint such a positive picture of the role of oral literature in the social and psychological development of children, without giving attention to the realistic situation in Kenya. Are Kenyan parents, child care-givers and teachers taking advantage of oral literature's vibrancy in their role vis a vis child nurture? What about the school syllabi? Is oral literature given enough time and space in the Kenyan primary and secondary school syllabi? In other words, what is the Kenyan contemporary context?

In a bid to commit this question to situational analysis, the researcher carried out field-work in the City of Nairobi, and for control, she also focused on two rural zones: Embu/Mbeere and Baringo. In Nairobi she taught in a primary and secondary school for observation and participatory research with children. In addition, again in the City of Nairobi, she visited a sample of homes selected through a cross-section of social and economic strata. In Embu/Mbeere and Baringo, it was not

possible to actually teach in schools. But data was collected through observations and interviews. In both the city and the countryside, interviews were carried out with a sample consisting predominantly of mothers and female teachers.

There was a gender limitation in the population sampling. Except for two cases of single fathers in Nairobi, the rest of the parents and adult house-helpers were female. Fathers who lived with their wives were reluctant to be interviewed, contending that they could not add value to what the mothers would say. With regard to the teachers, the limitation arose mainly from the disproportionate ratio between male teachers and female teachers. Female teachers by far outnumber the male, particularly in the primary and lower secondary school levels.

A second limitation experienced in the field research was the discordance between the picture painted in the interviews about the place of oral literature and the actual reality emerging from observations. In most cases, the teachers and parents interviewed gave responses which seemed obvious that they wanted to satisfy the researcher through giving her what they assumed she wanted to hear. Hence, from the interviews, oral literature was painted as if it was still a significant force in child-rearing and child-teaching practices, while from observation this was far from the true picture.

Neither in the communities nor in the schools is oral literature receiving enough usage. In Nairobi there is too much emphasis on western-oriented values. At home children are under the care of paid house-helpers from a very early age while the mothers are engaged in money-generating activities. It was observed that under the care of house-helpers, the children seemed to follow a regimented existence of eat, sleep and play within a carefully-delineated radius. Asked why this seemingly mechanical existence was in place, the house-

helpers said that there was too much insecurity to take chances. It was interesting that households of western-educated parents in Embu/Mbeere and Baringo were run in a similar manner with regard to child-rearing. In fact, where a house-helper in the city might use a bit of Kiswahili for the children under her care, the house-helper in a western-oriented home in the countryside struggled to use English. The implication here is that the more alienated the children were from mother-tongues (including Kiswahili) the more alienated they were from oral literature.

It was encouraging to find that oral literature was very much alive among children of homes which were not so westernized, both in the city as well as in the countryside. Younger children (up to 7 years) performed songs, riddles as well as tongue-twisters. They utilized songs mainly to provide rhythm for various games. Older children utilized mainly the song genre, especially when they were performing various chores. It may be observed here that in all cases, at school and within the communities, in the city as well as the countryside, there was gender disparity in the performance of the song genre. Girls utilized the song much more than the boys. The boys tended to engage themselves in games or tasks which did not require the rhythm provided by the song genre.

Though the mothers interviewed seemed to appreciate the value of oral literature in the inculcation of moral values, there was little effort made to utilize the art. These mothers had neither enough time nor energy to spare for oral literature-laced interaction with their children. The only saving grace was in situations where children played with each other. This was the case in community-based playgroups as well as during break-time at school.

The responses of the two single fathers interviewed were very interesting and did not appear to be tailored towards pleasing the

researcher. Though interviewed separately, both fathers argued that oral literature had important lessons to teach young ones and bring them up into responsible Kenyan citizens. Asked why they did not seem to use the art as much as they promoted it in theory, each argued that even in the traditional setting the responsibility of moulding children's character fell on women's shoulders. This was the reason each gave for either sending the children to their grandmothers, or inviting these grandmothers to assist in nurturing the children during the school holidays.

Oral literature has been in the Kenyan school curriculum for over three decades. It would therefore be expected that the educational system makes up for the limited access to the art in the home environment. Secondly, given that the heavy school curriculum detracts from the leisure time that could be utilized for some consumption of oral art (even at play as seen above), one would expect that oral literature would be accorded significant time and space in these heavy school programmes. The situation, however, remains paradoxical.

Oral Literature was a beneficiary of the Literature syllabus introduced in Kenyan secondary schools in the early 1970s (see Gachukia and Akivaga, 1978). In the early stages of the syllabus, it was possible to give students grounding, for instance in the area of oral literature genres. As part of A-Level examinations, each student was required to do a project and the actual written examination tested oral literature comprehensively. As years have gone by, the significance of oral literature in Kenyan secondary schools has faded, leaving only a token mention of the art in the English Syllabus. The birth of the 8-4-4 system of primary and secondary school education faced out A-Levels, and subsequently the oral literature component was pronounced as having died of natural causes. The situation is worse now with the introduction of the so-called "Integrated English Syllabus." Oral literature does not stand on its own as a discipline. It is on the syllabus only as a means of

play, was observed to have far-reaching effects on the development of children. While contributing to moulding children into social beings, the riddle was seen to teach children about their environment as well as contributing to the development of their imaginative faculties. The role and significance of the tongue twister, as a short artistic form for children, was underlined. It was found that the tongue twister contributed significantly to children's pronunciation, and ultimately to their being articulate in their language of communication.

The oral narrative's role of inculcating moral and cultural values in children was highlighted. It was found that the oral narrative genre portrays characters in such a way as to provide role models for children to emulate and negative characters to warn them against misdemeanour. Interaction of genres within the oral narrative was given some attention. This characteristic was viewed as an important technique, considering that it could tap the educational value of the proverb which is not, strictly speaking, a genre for young children.

Field research revealed that the performance of oral literature for and by children was greatly hampered by the changing lifestyles in contemporary Kenya. A few factors were identified as possible causes of impediment to the significance of oral literature to children in Kenya. It was argued that ways of bringing up children had changed. The contemporary situation is as though we are guided by the erroneous notion that nurturing young ones entails only provision of physical basic necessities. Mothers spend less and less time with their children. Furthermore, the time mothers spend with their children is not conducive to utilization of oral art for child rearing. The heavy school curriculum takes a toll, not only on children's time but also on their energy. It is ironical that, though the school takes so much of the children's time, it does not accord time and space for oral literature; not even in the English and literature syllabus where it used to appear in times gone by.

It would be a gross omission for this lecture not to address the question of the way forward. Meaningful research is not only that which unravels where the problems lie, but that which also attempts to point to the direction from which solutions can be found. Our proposals on way forward lie on two broad areas. One of these is, harmonization between university programmes with early childhood, primary and secondary educational curricula. The other proposal is the need for greater harmonization of university programmes with educational, cultural and other relevant national policies.

The university level is where children from early childhood institutions and those in primary and secondary schools eventually come to specialize and shape their ideas about their future careers. We who teach at university level need to show greater interest in what goes on at these lower levels. It was intimated above that a child's creativity is most acute during his or her formative years. In the area of oral literature therefore, we need to find out whether the foundation the children are getting at the lower levels prepares them for the aims and objectives of oral literature at university level.

It was argued above that oral literature is a sub-discipline of literature in which moral and cultural values are enshrined. Bearing in mind that ethical issues are part and parcel of our diverse disciplines, including the sciences, the author recommends that further research be carried out to seek ways and means of incorporating oral literature as a tool for exposing our children to issues of moral and ethical nature. This includes fields outside the humanities and social sciences.

The area of policy is very important. We need to look critically at our programmes, particularly in the humanities and social sciences to see if they are aligned with our national policies. Some of the professors at this university have actually contributed in the formulation or revision of pertinent national policies. Unfortunately many of these policies remain at theory and archival levels. It is a high time that we got

more interested in the implementation processes. What better way to implement than to harmonize relevant policies with our oral literature programmes? For instance, the creative genius in oral literature could be harmonized with the policy of education for all regardless of age, creed, physical or mental capabilities. To this end, oral literature genres could be utilized to harness creative means of educating learners with special needs.

With regard to culture, oral literature could be tapped for the regeneration of our contemporary culture and for the cure of our moral decadence. Oral literature could be utilized to conduct research, on how our traditional societies benefited from taboos in curbing immorality. For instance, we need to find out how we have ended up as a nation of child molesters, and perpetrators of various forms of violence. Indeed, for a long time, we have been glossing over the bitter reality that immorality has polluted the very core of our socio-cultural fabric. It is my strong belief that oral literature can only find meaning and significance if it could be modernized and re-engineered to address contemporary social problems. This way the art could go a long way in assisting our children to hold their heads high as integrated and confident citizens of Kenya who are proud of their cultural and national heritage.

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