

Using Traditional Oral Forms to Combat Insecurity in the North Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

Security issues are a source of concern in the Northeast and indeed, the other parts of Nigeria as these have resulted in monumental loss of lives and property. Combating insecurity in the Northeast appeared to have defied kinetic solution therefore the need for traditional oral forms as a panacea. A survey that covered the six states of the Northeast geo-political zone was carried out. Seventeen (17) elders across the geo-political zone were randomly selected. Interview method was used for data collection. The seventeen (17) elders answered the interview questions. The result revealed that inculcating the lessons embedded in the values of the traditional oral forms in youths will make them better citizens. Imbibing the values of oral forms has the capacity to combat insecurity in the Northeast and indeed every part of the country. For desirable impact, African traditional oral forms should be introduced at all levels of educational institution.

Key words: *Traditional oral forms, proverbs, folktales, insecurity, Northeast*

Introduction

Insecurity in the North eastern Nigeria is of great concern to all and sundry. It has caused monumental loss to both public and private individuals. Properties worth billions of naira are destroyed. Many homes, farms, business establishments, schools and many public institutions have been burnt down and lives are lost. Many families have been rendered homeless and pushed into the internally displaced camps (IDPs). Life in the Northeast becomes a nightmare as a result of the activities of Boko Haram, ISWAP, bandits, and other insurgent groups.

Attempts have been made by the government at various levels, especially through the kinetic approach, to combat insecurity in the Northeast but all these are facing serious challenges. Budgets on security continue to increase on yearly basis yet the situation appears insurmountable. Security issue in the Northeast is contributing to food crisis in Nigeria, hence the need to mitigate it.

Foreign influence on our societies has made the traditional method of training the youth ineffective. The traditional values are no more imparted hence there are many youths nowadays that are beastly in behaviour. Imbibing the lessons of the traditional oral forms will change the perception of criminally minded youths to become good citizens.

The traditional African societies are folkloric. Activities in these communities are conducted through words of the mouth. Knowledge and precepts are handed down from one generation to the other through words of the mouth. Educational system is informal. Therefore, life in a traditional African society revolves around orality. This was how African societies were organised and

operating before the foreign influence on the continent. As an African society, the Northeast, and in fact, Nigeria is not different from the other parts of the continent.

Every society has its own codes of behaviour. In the Northeast like every other part of Nigeria or Africa, the codes of behaviour are systematised in oral forms and the oral forms become the instrument of training the children and youths to be responsible citizens. Observance of these codes of conduct is binding on every citizen, and in a community, it is a social contract for one to be the other's brother's keeper. This was how African societies existed and operated before their contact with alien civilisation whose negative influence has brought devastating effect, including insecurity to the land. The family and the entire society as two levels of social institutions have the responsibility of training the youths and the oral forms are the instrument to use in moulding the character.

The traditional oral forms used for the children's upbringing are proverbs, folktales, among others. Proverbs are used to warn, advise, scold, praise, etc. and folktales are didactic. These are some of the functions of proverbs as tailored for character moulding for a reliable work force to build a good society. It is believed that "without the command of proverbs, individuals in many African societies cannot effectively fulfil their roles as adults" (*International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, 498). When put in their right perspective, oral forms can combat insecurity in the Northeast.

No society can make progress with insecurity. Peace and harmony are a sine qua non for development therefore no price is too much to pay for them. Traditional oral forms which were the instrument of training youths in the past were very effective in raising well-behaved children and can play a similar role in our present society. When these forms are harnessed and imparted, they will create a positive impact. This is the goal of this research; to inculcate good behaviour in youths through traditional oral forms to make them good citizens and shun bad behaviour that is responsible for breach of security.

Statement of the Problem

Insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, etc. are at an alarming rate in the North Eastern Nigeria. These cases of insecurity in the region keep rising on daily basis and there seems to be no hope anywhere near the horizon anytime soon. Even though security in the country including that in the Northeast is given the desired attention by the government, and the military with other security agencies are twenty four hours up in arms, a lot is yet to be achieved. This is why it is now necessary to think of an alternative method. While the military approach is going on with the armed forces, the traditional method should also be deployed. Having spent a lot of the country's resources in an attempt to combat insecurity without an end in sight, traditional oral forms should be employed as well. This is what this research seeks to achieve.

It should be noted that the traditional oral forms mould character. Therefore, they are a method that is resilient and more reliable. They lay the foundation for a sustainable future and peaceful society. This is why these forms should be imbibed. It is why this research is advocating use of oral forms. They have both short term and long term achievements.

Objectives

The objective of this research is to project traditional oral forms and the lessons that can be imbibed to combat insecurity in the Northeast. The specific objectives include:

- (i) a focus on the proverbs that discourage killings of fellow human beings
- (ii) a focus on proverbs that condemn bad behaviour

- (iii) identifying proverbs that praise virtues
- (iv) identifying folktales that are didactic for character moulding.

Literature Review

This research is in the field of literature, especially the oral literature. Literature is about society and its concern is change for a better society. The African literature, like the traditional oral forms is didactic. It is not concerned with art for art's sake. This is why Achebe observed that

Christopher Okigbo believed, as I do that art and community in Africa are clearly linked. African art as we understand it has not been distilled or purified and refined to the point where it has lost all traces of real life, lost the vitality of the street, like art from some advanced societies and academic art tend to be (56).

Every form of art in Africa has a function to perform. Traditional oral forms have their own functions which, due to the influence of western education and civilisation have been submerged and relegated. Aspects of foreign influence that have negative impact on our people can be addressed through imbibing the lessons of traditional oral forms.

In line with the above, Obiechina observed that the traditional African narrative can be said to embody more than the art for art's sake (22). In the past, proverbs and some of the oral forms were developed for several purposes. They are society oriented meant to serve the society that uses them. Oral forms are introduced for the well-being of society. Therefore, they should be utilised for the stability of the North eastern Nigeria.

According to Ahuemokhan,

The Nigerian author saw literature as a type of carryover or continuation of the oral tradition. He wanted to use it to instruct, to educate, and to fulfil all the functions which oral literature had been performing in his community. He therefore used the novel as a weapon to examine, applaud or condemn what he saw (135).

The way that art, and in particular, literature works has been demonstrated here. Traditional oral forms have been part of the language used by the people and they are meant to chart a good direction to attain an orderly society. There are oral forms that are designed to be corrective measures. Some applaud while others condemn certain behaviour. They are veritable tools in combating insecurity in our society.

Yakubu noted that: "As an instrument to mould children's characters, folktales idealize heroes and heroines who uphold the values of society and treat with disdain villains that violate the tradition and norms of the community. Heroes and heroines are to be emulated" (18). The didactic function of folktales is realised from the above listed characteristics. As an oral form to mould the characters of youths, a careful selection of folktales when inculcated can solve security problem.

Literature in Africa, like every other serious art in the continent has transformative role. Cook observes that "the socially conscious writer does not set to work in a vacuum, but urges his society from what it is towards what it might be" (3). This view is echoed by Achebe in his submission that "the African writer who steps aside can only write footnotes or a glossary when the event is over. He or she will become like the contemporary intellectual of futility ..." (55). Literature, whether written or oral is a corpus of knowledge that is concerned with a better society. It is an agent of change. The oral forms that are evolved are to mould characters to make youths good citizens.

The spate of insecurity in Northern Nigeria is worrisome and it is an issue of daily anxiety. Therefore, an empirical consideration is important at this juncture of literature review given the critical role of security in every society.

Lawal, in an interview with Sheikh Gumi noted that

The rate at which bandits and terrorists kill and kidnap Nigerians is on the increase, particularly in the northern part of Nigeria. In an attempt to combat this, the Federal Government has spent billions of naira to ensure that Nigerians are safe, but this issue continues to ravage the northern region. (*PUNCH* Online).

This is to reiterate how bad the security situation is in Nigeria. It has gulped so much of our scarce resources: both monetary and human energy. What we need now are both kinetic and non-kinetic approaches. This explains the need for the present research on the use of traditional oral forms to combat insecurity in the Northeast.

In a related development, the senator representing Borno Southern Senatorial District, Senator Ali Ndume, raised an alarm that,

About 252 attacks carried out by Boko Haram terrorists between November, 2024 and April, 2025 in Borno State led to the death of 100 soldiers and 280 civilians, totalling 380 casualties The military needed MRAP (Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected) vehicles that would cost about \$1 billion each. (1).

Apart from lives that are lost due to the nefarious activities of insurgents, trillions of naira that should have been used for infrastructural and other developmental projects is being sunk into the fight against this insurgency. The present approach being proposed to combat insurgency does not require huge amount of money, moreover, its results last for life time because it moulds the character and reorients attitude.

Furthermore,

Residents of the nineteen northern states of the country are predominantly farmers who produce crops, such as yams, maize, millet, rice, potatoes, onions, pepper, and melon, among others, on a large scale.... But the sustenance of this is now endangered by high-level banditry, insurgency and herdsmen killings that currently face states in that part of the country where farming is the main occupation There had been a negative turn around in the past few years due to insurgency in some states of the Northeast, especially Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe. (*Vanguard* online).

This report underscores the importance of security for the welfare of the people and development of society. Since it launched its first attack on 26th August, 2011, Boko Haram has appeared invincible being confronted through military approach. That the insurgency has been insurmountable through kinetic method for 14 years requires an innovation of another method which is the position of this present study.

On daily basis, there are reports of lives being wasted, “Governor Zulum in shock as bomb blast rocks Borno, kills eight, injures many Zulum expressed grief over the loss of life and extended condolences to the families of the deceased” (*Dialy Post* Online). This report is similar to the one which claimed that Governor Caleb Mutfwang of Plateau State admitted that the government has failed its citizens in the provision of security. In our present situation in the country and for the government to have done their best using the military approach but with challenges, considering use of oral forms to combat insecurity cannot be overemphasised.

Moreover, Raymond Chidama spoke of the incessant attacks on Hong L. G. A. that “the attacks on these communities have now become a daily affair, bringing fear and terror into the remnants of the people there” (*Daily Post* Online). Some of the perpetrators of this crime are from the local community. They are youths whose behaviour does not connect with the belief system and the

traditional values. Therefore lessons of the oral forms are required to reform the youths of the bad behaviour imbed.

Daily Trust also reported that “Boko Haram militants and its offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have mainly operated in the northeast of Nigeria attacking security forces and civilians, and killing and displacing tens of thousands of people” (Online). This is pathetic more so as it appears that security personnel and experts have exhausted the application of their best known methods without a lasting solution. Now, is the time for the application of traditional oral forms.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study is broken down under the following sub-headings:

(a) Study Samples:

A survey was conducted in the process of this study. Sampling technique was used to sample the population that would provide the needed data. The Northeast geo-political zone is made up of six states. All the six states were visited. The interview method was employed for data collection whereby seventeen (17) elders were randomly selected and interviewed. Few elders were selected to give room for meaningful interaction and conversation. The distribution of the interviewees on state basis is as follows: Yobe State: 3, Taraba State: 3, Gombe State: 3, Borno State: 3, Bauchi State: 4, Adamawa State: 1. We strongly believe that answers from these interviewees can be used for generalisation and the findings of the research.

(b) Research Instrument:

Five interview questions were set (see the appendix). Each question requires ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer but an interviewee has the liberty to give explanation. The ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer is to streamline the views on the use of traditional oral forms as a panacea to security problems in the Northeast. These questions are tailored to generate information on the capacity of oral forms to combat insecurity in the Northeast.

(c) Data Collection and Analysis

The required data for this research were collected through interview method from 17 respectable elders spread across the six states of the Northeast geo-political zone. There were five questions for an interviewee to answer. These questions with the answers given are analysed below:

Question 1. Do you think that inculcating the lessons of the values of proverbs, folktales, and wise sayings in children will make them better citizens? All the 17 interviewees representing 100% of the total number answered ‘yes’. This implied that in the olden days, the responsibility of the family and the immediate community or the larger society in the Northeast in particular, and Africa in general in deploying the oral forms to mould the character of the children and youths before the contact with alien civilisation was more effective than the present situation resulting from foreign influence.

Ahmed Isa Nguru reiterated that the present elders were better citizens as youths compared to the youths of nowadays because of the lessons embedded in the values of oral forms which they imbibed. They lived communal life and every elder participated in the training of every child in the community. Love was a bond they enjoyed which contributed to children’s upbringing.

2. Do you think that imbibing the values of oral forms (proverbs, folktales, etc.) can reduce or combat insecurity in the Northeast? The 17 elders in this interview answered ‘yes’ which is 100% of the total number of the population sampled.

In a highlight, Nguru pointed out that no traditional African society encouraged vices and deviant behaviour, and stealing was mocked. He pointed out that immorality was not welcome and the

approved codes of behaviour were conveyed in oral forms. Simon Sara Bello reiterated that as children's minds are tender and the memory, retentive, they should be made to imbibe the lessons of the traditional oral forms from the formative age as anything learnt at that period lives with them throughout their lifetime. Inculcation of these values, in his opinion, is a panacea to security problems in the Northeast. According to Ademule Saleh, imbibing the values of oral forms by youths, apart from reducing insecurity will reduce immorality in society. Ibraheem Alhassan is of the opinion that apart from the existing proverbs in the various ethnic groups, more that capture modern sentiments and sensibilities should be developed. This, according to him, will project the importance of proverbs which will encourage youths to learn them.

Phidelia Waziri-Ugwu who strongly believed that imbibing lessons embedded in the values of traditional oral forms can combat insecurity in the Northeast said that according to her grandfather, "traditional religion is better than Christianity". This implies that African traditional values are more beneficial to our society than foreign ones, therefore, the need to give them an attention. Melelem Abatcha who totally agreed with others is of the view that the NTA programme, 'Tales by Moonlight' should be reintroduced because of its didactic benefit in moulding the character of children.

3. Will you advocate the teaching of these oral forms along with other subjects in schools and Islamiyya/other faith based schools? All the elders answered 'yes'. Furthermore, Ibraheem Alhassan and Jerome Mishon Gumpy suggested that the teaching should be introduced at all levels of education. Gumpy is of the view that GST syllable in the university should be expanded to include lessons on proverbs and folktales.

According to Ahmed Isah Nguru, the elders of GRA, Sabon Garri, Gashua, came together and organised something like what is being asked by this question. Going by a time table, they gather children in the area together and speak to them on various topics on morality and good behaviour in order to reduce criminality.

4. Are the children of nowadays acquainted with the knowledge of these oral forms? 14 elders, representing 82% of the interviewees answered 'no' while 3, representing 18% of the elders answered 'yes'. Those who answered 'yes' are of the opinion that a certain percentage of youths in the rural areas has the knowledge of oral forms. Even with this number as they have observed, there is no impact because of lack of attention and recognition to these oral forms.

5. Will you advise parents to teach their children the traditional oral forms? All the interviewees answered 'yes'. Babakura A. Kudomi observed that teaching children their traditional oral forms is a way of teaching them their culture, therefore, it is advisable. However, there are some elders who observed that some parents do not know any proverbs and folktales in their native languages, for such parents, teaching their children will be difficult.

According to Abdulhamid Dauda, 'Tales by Moonlight' that used to be aired by NTA should be reintroduced with programmes on other areas of traditional oral forms. This will help a great deal, in the education of those who have no knowledge of traditional oral forms.

The answers to the five questions given by the interviewees have stressed the role of traditional oral forms in the peace, security and stability of any African society. They are a proof of the sayings that: "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm" (Achebe, 47) and "when an adult is in the house the-she goat is not left to suffer the pain of parturition on its tether" (Achebe, 18). Now is the time for cultural renaissance. The culture of the people is their identity without which they are lost, forming a rudderless society. The predicament of African societies is caused by the relegation of their culture to the background. This is why there

are security issues that have appeared to be invincible and insurmountable. Lack of traditional values has produced mindless beasts in human skin.

Findings/Recommendations

The findings of this research given below are based on the analysis of the data collected from the interviewees. These findings are:

1. Proverbs, folktales, and wise sayings are effective tools in moulding the characters of children and youths; inculcating the lessons embedded in these oral forms in young adults will make them better citizens.
2. When there are no moral precepts to teach children and youths the right and wrong forms of behaviour, they are unaware of the consequences of their action therefore imbibing the lessons of oral forms which constitute codes of behaviour can combat insecurity in the Northeast.
3. Proverbs and folktales on the consequences of bad behaviour; reward for good behaviour; and the functions of these traditional oral forms should be developed into fully fledged curriculum to be studied in schools.
4. Tales by moonlight should be reintroduced on the NTA network programme. Talk show on security and morality, and programmes showcasing the values of traditional oral forms existing in the Northeast should be aired on television and the radio.
5. The synergy among the government, traditional rulers, community leaders, and parents is required in the deployment of oral forms to mould the character of youths.
6. Traditional oral forms are a sine qua non for peace and stability of any African society and therefore should be given an attention in the Northeast.

Conclusion

The breach of security being experienced in the Northeast is applicable to other parts of the country. There is banditry in the Northwest, armed herders' attack and Mahmud (Mallam Group) in the North central and Southwest, IPOB and ESN in the Southeast with kidnapping in every part of the country. Ritual killing, armed robbery, etc. are rife. The loss of our cultural identity and the values they teach are mostly responsible for all the security problems in Nigeria. The lessons of the traditional oral forms if successfully imparted can dissuade every evil intention. If these values are inculcated at the inchoate stage of the lives of the children, there will be positive impact on their character as they grow into adulthood to become responsible men and women. This is what we need at our present state, not only in the Northeast but also in the whole of the country.

Having identified the roles of traditional oral forms in combating insecurity in the Northeast, achieving the objectives lies with every citizen but majorly with the government that should make funds available to experts to develop African proverbs and design the curriculum for effective teaching and learning in schools. Traditional rulers, community leaders, and parents should ensure that use of proverbs and other traditional oral forms is practised as part of the quotidian life of their various communities.

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Appendix

TRADITIONAL ORAL FORMS

Name of Interviewee:

Local Government Area:

State:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that inculcating the lessons of the values of proverbs, folktales, and wise sayings in children will make them better citizens?
2. Do you think that imbibing the lessons embedded in the values of oral forms (proverbs, folktales, etc.) can reduce or combat insecurity in the Northeast?
3. Will you advocate the teaching of these oral forms along with other subjects in schools and Islamiyya/faith based schools?
4. Are the children/youths of nowadays acquainted with the knowledge of these oral forms?
5. Will you advise parents to teach their children the traditional oral forms?