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## Folklore as a Cultural Strategy for Enhancing Abilities in Children among the Bafut of the North West Region of Cameroon

Mary Lum Che Feh, PhD

*Biaka University Institute of Buea*

[lum17d@gmail.com](mailto:lum17d@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This article highlights the richness and importance of African folklore and its contributions to the development of children's coping abilities. Currently literature on topics related to folklore across Cameroon pays no attention to parental use of folklore as a way of helping children acquire the abilities necessary for daily living, or to the tools parents use to assess the effectiveness of their efforts in this regard. In an attempt to fill this void, this author conducted a study in Bafut (the author's native land) of the North West Region of Cameroon on how folklore facilitates children's acquisition of abilities. A combination of qualitative (ethnographic design) and quantitative (survey design) paradigms was used to carry out the research. Findings acknowledged that folklore socialises children to acquire abilities for survival in daily life. The author is aware that some aspects of folklore are implemented in schools but argues that, with regard to folklore, the curriculum should be revised so as to assist the children's acquisition of knowledge, abilities, and practices applicable to (and necessary for) their maturation in Cameroonian society

*Keywords: folklore, cultural strategy, abilities*



## Introduction

Observers of socio-cultural trends in Cameroon have often expressed concerns about the breakdown in traditional child rearing practices in Sub-Saharan Africa in general (Omigbodun and Olatawura, 2008) and Bafut village of the North West Region of Cameroon in particular (Feh, 2016). Although many of these writers (Tchombe, 2016; Ashu, 2010; Ntumngia and Mfonyam, 2004; and Utley, 2016) have written extensively on folklore as sources of indigenous knowledge across Cameroon, only a few have focused on the relationship between the this breakdown and the parental use of folklore to assist and assess children's preparedness for growth and survival in Cameroon. There is therefore a compelling need for a study like this—one that focuses specifically on the cultural strategies that parents utilize to gauge the children's progress in acquiring the knowledge, abilities, and practices necessary for their daily living. These cultural strategies involve behaviours such as exposing, engaging, guiding and, demonstrating specific knowledge or practice associated with the folklore that Bafut parents employ (in conformity with Bafut culture) for the holistic development of Bafut children (Feh, 2016). It should be remembered, however, that Folklore is only one of the many indigenous sources used by Bafut people to advance childrens' abilities: those hardwired, innate capacities that facilitate acquisition of knowledge (Goldstein, 2012).

## Methodology

This study employed a combination of qualitative (ethnographic design) and quantitative (survey design) paradigms with multiple sources of data collection instruments: questionnaires, observations, interviews and discussion guides. A purposive-random-multi-stage sampling technique was adopted to select 270 children 6-12 years old, and 300 parents, making a total of 570 participants. For qualitative data, Narrative, Thematic & Content analyses were undertaken with the support of Atlas Ti 5.2 (Atlas Ti GMBH 2006). For quantitative data Thematic analyses were performed with regard to open-ended questions, and, with regard to close-ended questions, a

pre-designed EpiData Version 3.1 (EpiData Association, Odense Denmark, 2008) and SPSS version 21.0 (IBM Inc., 2012) was adopted.

According to findings, folklore lends itself well to cultural strategizing since its embedded riddles, proverbs, etc., promote and enrich children's socialization. In fact, parents revealed that they use folklore to communicate issues of everyday life to children, issues such as cultural norms, morals, survival techniques, and procedures for performing specific actions. Banda & Morgan (2013) recommend that the components of folklore should be analysed separately to identify their educational values. In compliance with this recommendation, folklore as a cultural strategy relates to parental use of the following folkloric forms: riddles, proverbs, folktales, and traditional songs.

### *Njâla'â: Folktale as Folklore Strategy*

Information divulged that parents use the contents of folktales to socialise children. It was observed that (240-80.0%) parents confirm that stories are used for instruction and child upbringing. It was also realised that (300-100.0%) parents and (243-90.0%) children view folk tales as a source from which children acquire abilities to cope with their environment. To gauge the worth of their contents (according to findings), folktales can be categorised thus:

- a) Stories that involve singing (Njâla'â nyæə mīkoo)
- b) Stories that do not involve singing (Njâla'â jii mə ka bi si mīkoo yə'ə').

To illustrate how the content of folktales enrich children's development of abilities, a 70 year-old man (during an interview in Njinteh) recounted that folktales in Bafut tell children about the past and give them an opportunity to compare the past with the present in order to predict the future. For example, telling children a story of how individuals in the past carried out their daily activities and about the methods they used to solve problems, allows children an opportunity to judge whether the procedures and problem solving methods used in the past can fit within the present dispensation. By assessing the past and the present, children perfect their abilities of carrying out actions and in the long run become experts of certain actions.

The reasons parents gave for telling children folktales denote that parents are aware of what is embedded in the stories. This awareness makes parents use certain expressions (when telling children folktales) that facilitate their enrichment of competencies. These expressions include echolalia (repetitions of words and phrases)-(262-87.3%), simple language (213-71.0%), soft voice tone (202-67.3%), singing (200-66.7%), expressions indicating mood and feeling (194-64.7%), facial expressions (191-63.7%), body movements (189-63.0%), acting (to make story more memorable and interesting (176-58.7%), humours (168-56.0%), slogans (160-53.3%), gestures (134-44.7%) and dancing (116-38.7%).

Parents end their story-telling activity not only by using signals and expressions also by ascertaining (1) whether children have retained the meaning of folktales and (2) whether the content of folktales has improved children's development of specific abilities for daily living. To do this, parents distinguished four approaches: i) when children carry out actions and attribute them to folktales (156-52.0%), ii) when children take actions and associate them with characters in specific folktales (181-60.3%), iii) when children repeat folktales and meaning in conversations with friends and other individuals (210-70.0%), and iv) when questioning children from time to time in an effort to draw their attention to the folktale(s) told (211-70.3%).

#### ***Mikòò: Traditional Songs as Folklore Strategy***

Findings reveal that traditional songs are used for communication, as a source of teaching and way of assisting children's acquisition of procedural, tenacious and proactive abilities for survival in society. Parents (299-99.7%) and children (232-85.9%) conceded that traditional songs provoke children to acquire these abilities. Children (265-98.2%) were of the opinion that the contents of traditional songs have changed their behaviours and triggered their acquisition of abilities (problem solving, perseverance, compliance), thereby helping them to solve daily problems. Parents notified that traditional songs reflect the minds and feelings of the people in Bafut because most of the traditional songs sung by individuals are composed as a result of events, situations and circumstances.

According to findings, traditional songs are used for several purposes in Bafut. Opinions of children and parents concerning the use of traditional songs are enumerated below:

- a. Entertain individuals;
- b. Hail individuals and clans who do well;
- c. Rebuke individuals who are wayward;
- d. Ridicule individuals who have done something inappropriate;
- e. Advise people on directions to take;
- f. Warn individuals about the path they are taking;
- g. Teach individuals proper morals and appropriate abilities for survival;
- h. Act as reference points for individuals as they check from time to time whether their current life styles are appropriate or whether some changes are imperative for their growth;
- i. Condole individuals in times of sorrow;
- j. Condemn inappropriate behaviours and indigenous practices;
- k. Connect the past to the present and link to the future and; and
- l. Direct individuals on how to go about their daily lives.

Accentuating the above points, a 116 year-old woman (interviewed in Niko) narrated that “in the old days” Bafut had people who were experts in composing traditional songs. If a child (son or daughter) did something wrong, the parents went to a song composer (without the knowledge of the child) and told him/her what the child had done. The composer would write a song in accordance with the complaint that the child’s parents gave. Some days later, the composer would visit the home of the parents who had complained and sing the song which had been composed. After singing the song, the composer would ask the child what (s)he had learned from the song. When the child gave his/her opinions regarding the song, the composer would explain to

the child the lessons from the song to ensure that the child learned from the content. This practice changed children's behaviour in many areas because the songs were tilted towards situations, events and actions that children carried out daily.

Taking into consideration that the contents of traditional songs cut across all aspects of life, and that these songs nurture the abilities that children acquired, parents catalogued songs (mì`kòdò) via:

1. Folktale songs (mì`kòdò mì` njâla`à)
2. Twin songs (Akòdò mifa`à)
3. Ordinary born house songs ( mì`kòdò mì` ñdamù)
4. Lullabies – (ñtsmsə`)
5. Death songs (dirges) - mìkòdò mì`niwò
  - a) Mìkòdò mì`niwò mì ala`â - death songs for ordinary people
  - b) Mìkòdò mì`niwò mì` ñtə`ə` - death songs in the palace
6. Traditional dance songs - mìkòdò mì`la`â
7. Dance songs using drums for entertainment - mbagølem
8. Fon's annual dance songs for entertainment - lera
9. Church songs - mìkòdò mì` ñdanwi
10. Song for worship of traditional gods (for libation)- mìkòdò mì ma`a biñwi
11. Children's play songs - mìkòdò mə boñkghə`
  - a) Children play songs in the palace - mìkòdò minidorò mì bəə ni ñtə`ə`
  - b) Children play songs for ordinary children - mìkòdò minidorò mì boñkghə`

12. Secret societies' songs - mikòdò miṅdâ binaṅbanse`
13. War songs - mikòdò mi`ṅtsô
14. Songs for fons - mikòdò mi`mfô`
15. Marriage songs - mikòdò minì`yô`ô`
16. Traditional anointment songs of successors - mikòdò miyô`ô bi jùbiṅdâ
17. Entertainment songs - mândere`
18. Songs for princesses (and descendants of princesses) - mikòdò mi` bôô ṅtô`ô bi mbàṅghe` ni mi bô`ô` biàà
19. Songs for princes - mikòdò mi` bôô ṅtô`ô` bi mbaṅnə ni bôô bi` bôô biaa`

Findings reveal that when teaching children traditional songs parents use certain expressions that help children to acquire abilities to survive in daily life. These expressions range from humour (164-54.7%) to exclamations (138-46.0%), to gestures (185-61.7%), to the use of echolalia (repetitions of words and phrases) (274-91.3%), to different forms of intonation and rhythms (238-79.3%), to emotional expressions (174-58.0%), to body movements (193-4.3%), to facial expressions (165-55.0%), to traditional musical instruments (207-69.0%), to dancing (169-56.3%), to modifying lyrics from songs (205-68.3%), to acting to make songs memorable and interesting (149-49.7%), and to preserving adages (171-57.0%).

Findings reveal, furthermore, that, parents after teaching children traditional songs, indicate the song's effectiveness (in changing children's behaviours and attitudes for survival in society) by observing five categories: when children carry out actions and attribute them to traditional songs (204-68.0%), when questioning the children (212-70.7%), when the children interact with relatives, peers and other people in the society (219 -73.0%), when children explain the meaning of traditional songs in other contexts (94-31.3%) and when children take actions and associate them to persons, places and events in specific traditional songs (132 - 44.0%).

*Njâla'â tete: Riddles as Folklore Strategy*

According to Bafut community, riddles become a folkloric strategy when parents use the content of riddles to communicate with children in such a way that the children acquire abilities. A sample of opinions on the reasons parents tell riddles to children evidences that a total number of (227-75.70%) parents tell riddles for instructions and child upbringing; a sum of (298-99.30%) parents and (219-81.1%) children acknowledged that another reason parents tell children riddle is that riddles assist the children's development of abilities. Therefore, one could confirm that in Bafut village, riddles are used as a strategy to socialise children and promote their maturation.

Findings of this study also unveil that riddles, though sometimes disguised as games, enable people to learn important truths about life, to observe social values, to improve one's memory, and to equip people with lifelong abilities such as reasoning, inferential and verbal accuracy, problem solving, and decision making. Thus riddles function as a tool of self-cultivation.

Parents and children affirmed that riddles taught to children pertain to aspects of economic, social, geographical, and traditional values and norms. As for the type of riddles that parents tell children, it was noticed that parents placed equal importance on riddles that pertain to economic contexts 266 (88.7%), social contexts 294 (98.0%), geographical contexts 287 (95.7%), and traditional values and norms 300 (100.0%). These findings denote that among the Bafut people, riddles could be classified in four domains. Children also brought to limelight the fact that parents are aware of abilities that children acquire when engaging in riddles and that is why parents not only tell riddles to children but also spend time explaining to the children the meaning of the riddles.

To illustrate, take the riddle "My uncle's suit is made of holes"—answer: "fishing net." Parents start by telling children what words represent in the puzzle. In the riddle, uncle's suit symbolises a fishing net and holes describe how fishing net looks. Parents move from explaining what words represent in the puzzle to the actual meaning of the riddle in general and then relate that meaning to real life situations. Parents explain to children that the riddle describes how a





fishing net looks and directly inform children that fishing nets have holes. This riddle teaches children that when repairing, they should be careful in identifying which net is torn and which is not (since original nets do have holes). In order to differentiate fishing nets, the child uses critical thinking to study fishing nets and identify what methods and materials to use when repairing so that the holes that existed from creation will not be further increased. From the parental comments on the meaning of the riddle, the child can describe and differentiate fishing nets and wisely choose methods and materials to use when repairing them. When parents go through the processes of differentiating and selecting, the children are inspired to become innovative when doing repairs. The child's innovative ways of carrying out repairs on the fishing net shows him\her to be practically intelligent.

To buttress the above point that riddles assist children to acquire abilities. (INTENTIONAL FRAGMENT.) A 67 year-old woman from Niko highlighted (in an interview) that the riddle, besides acting as a source of entertainment, is a vehicle to test children's cognitive abilities. She said riddles usually involve an individual presenting a puzzle (like "What goes up whenever rain is falling?") which another child is expected to solve (the answer: "An umbrella"). She said the questions or puzzles asked in a riddle extend children's abilities in various domains because riddles pertain to many subjects about Bafut tradition which and schools children on how to go about their daily chores and life. According to her, children who are involved in riddles keep their brains alert, improve their vocabulary, and are very fast in responding to questions and solving problems, thereby enabling children to develop sustainable abilities.

After teaching and explaining the meaning of riddles, parents enable children to communicate (with respect to the riddle taught) by using skills like explaining, repeated questioning, narrating, describing and engaging children in actions that generate new knowledge relevant to their daily duties. Parents do not only explain riddles and relate them to real life situations, but also use certain expressions (in the course of narrating riddles) that facilitate children's development of abilities. For example, in the course of recounting riddles to children, parents use gestures (such as pointing) 202 (67.3%), facial expressions (such as frown) 215

(71.7%), figurative expressions (for example “as slow as a snail-lazy”) 187 (62.3%), simple language 186 (62.0%), humour 184 (61.3%), idioms (for example, “take the bull by the horns,” which means “deal with a problem decisively,” or “to call the shots/tune,” which means “make the important decisions) 158 (52.7%). The parents also help children to interpret the meaning of the riddles by using suitable/appropriate comments such as calling children good names; cheering them on; and using appealing words according to circumstances 176 (58.7%); performing practical demonstrations and expressions such as “listen attentively,” “this would help you during your daily life”, “this implies ...”, “you should be hard working” 158 (52.7%); and speaking in a soft tone 109 (36.3%). In these ways parents pass on messages to children that aid in their development of competencies and their acquisition of new knowledge necessary for their survival.

To elaborate: Bafut parents consider riddles as a serious strategy for augmenting abilities, are concerned with the “how” of learning, and utilise certain mechanisms to find out (1) whether children have retained the meaning of riddles told and (2) whether the content of riddles has improved children’s development of abilities for daily living. Findings indicated four parental approaches for attaining their goals. These mechanisms range from asking children questions about riddles and having children responding correctly (209-69.7%), to allowing children to perform a task that was suggested in one of the riddles and having the children perform that task well (207-69.0%), to encouraging children to have daily interactions with people (190-63.3%), and to having children apply knowledge obtained from riddles to daily real-life situations (152-50.7%). Through these mechanisms, certain abilities are passed on to children, abilities that help them to survive in the environment. As an indication of this fact, (265-98.5%) children observed that the way behave and the way they look at life have changed because of the riddles that parents told them.

### ***Mighaa mi` ñnâ nàà: Proverbs as Folklore Strategy***

Findings confirm that a proverb is a strategy that Bafut parents adopt to communicate, educate, guide and interact with children in a manner that aids children in the acquisition of abilities. Unlike riddles, proverbs are used for instruction in child rearing and for the children’s acquisition of coping skills. Findings revealed that (254-84.7%) parents use proverbs for



instruction and child upbringing while (300-100%) parents were of the opinion that proverbs are used to help children acquire coping skills.

Interestingly, the study reveals that parents not only tell children proverbs but also explain to them how the proverbs relate to real life situations. Take for example the proverb “whether someone gave grass to the goat to eat or the goat ate it alone, the most important thing is that the goat ate the grass”. Parents begin by explaining words in the proverbs; for example, goat symbolises an individual. Therefore, someone gave grass to the goat or the goat ate it alone symbolises different ways / methods / techniques of doing things; the goat ate the grass implies that the individual performed the action rightly. At this point, parents expatiate on the meaning of the proverb and relate it to daily situations. For example, they explain that when children are carrying out any action—be it cooking, hunting, repairs, weaving or assembling furniture—they should always try other methods of doing the same actions. By performing actions in different ways, children in the long run perfect their abilities such as reasoning, acting proactively, and understanding procedural processes. It is this expertise which children use to perform actions that display practical intelligence. As proof that proverbs actually enhance children’s development of abilities, a total of (267-98.9%) children accepted that proverbs have changed their behaviour(s) and way(s) of handling situations in life.

Findings document that the contents of proverbs in Bafut contain aspects pertaining to character development (mighaa mi` ḡnâ nàà mi kweti` ni` bɔ`ɔ` mə` bi kwê ni` ḡḡsə), cultural norms (mighaa mi` ḡnâ nàà nlon ḡḡsə` àla`à), social activities (mighaa mi` ḡnâ nàà nlon mifa`â mi la`â) and to certain age groups (mighaa mi` ḡnâ nàà nlon iloò bə`)). In the same vein, (300-100.0%) parents emphasised the importance of proverbs pertaining to character upbringing, (300-100.0%) to cultural norms, (264-88.0%) to social activities, and (205-68.3%) to age groups. These findings therefore suggest that among the Bafut people, proverbs could be classified in the four domains explained above and propounded via the parents’ projections.

Findings substantiate that when teaching children proverbs, parents use certain expressions to aid children’s acquisition of competencies that help them to adapt to their environment.



Examples of such expressions include: biblical expressions (192-64.0%), facial expressions (187-62.3%), gestures (184-61.3%), simple language (175-58.3%), figurative expressions (173-57.7%), humour (142-47.3%), examples (148-49.3%), adages (48-16.0%) and soft tone (224-74.7%).

Authenticating the point that the content of proverbs stimulate children's development of competencies and practical intelligence, responses from parents and children indicated that the content of proverbs are pregnant with the wisdom and philosophy of the people. Thus proverbs act as an instrument of child upbringing, instruction, discipline, guidance and caution and, and for the acquisition of techniques for undertaking tasks in the Bafut community.

To display how knowledgeable Bafut parents are about the content of proverbs, parents use certain approaches to find out if proverbs have actually transformed children (both in their behaviours and in making practical decisions). Parents know children have retained the meaning of proverbs and have learned from what is embedded in proverbs through the following means: questioning (190-63.8%), observing when the child applies knowledge from proverbs to his/her daily life and practical chores (202-67.8%), and noting when the child uses proverbs and explains the meaning when he/she is with friends and other individuals (198-66.4%).

## Conclusion

In the process of socialising children through the use of folklore, Bafut parents manifest certain behaviours that aid children to acquire abilities that enhance children's holistic development. Findings indicated that folklore strategy in Bafut enhances children's development of abilities, knowledge and behaviours that assist children in adapting to their environment. The researcher is aware of the fact that some aspects of folklore are implemented in schools but argues that the content of folklore should be redressed and adjusted in a manner that suits the knowledge, abilities, and actions which teachers want to pass on to children. Furthermore, the meaning of folklore has different interpretations in different cultures. Teachers should be careful in extracting the meaning in folklore that fits with the purpose of the lessons. This intentional move might help



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children to acquire appropriate coping abilities for their survival in their immediate environments and in society as a whole.

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**Biography: Dr. Che Mary Lum Che Feh**

Dr. Che Mary Lum Che Feh is the Registrar and Lecturer in Psychology at Biaka University Institute of Buea. Dr. Feh has a Masters degree (2011) and a Ph.D degree (2017) in Psychology of Education, with a focus on Cognitive and Developmental Psychology. She acknowledges an Afrocentric orientation and expresses great interest in indigenous practices and mechanisms necessary for students to acquire knowledge, actions and abilities necessary for negotiating the contemporary world. She holds a Post Graduate Diploma in Educational Foundation and Administration (2005) and a Bachelor's degree in Curriculum Studies and Teaching (2003).

