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The Role of Elders and Oral Traditions in Shaping Moral Values, Attitudes and Behavioural Patterns of Children

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of elders and oral traditions in shaping the moral values, attitudes and behavioural patterns of children in Oyo town, Nigeria. Three specific purpose and three research questions guided the study. The study was anchored on Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977). A qualitative research design was used for the study. semi-structured interview schedule and a focus group discussion were used to collect responses from the respondents. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected. The results of findings revealed that elders serve as the custodians of cultural values, mentors and disciplinarians, oral traditions instill moral values and good behaviour which include honesty, respect, obedience, kindness, generosity, and responsibility. It was recommended among others that elders should be actively engaged to instill moral education to children in school and teachers should integrate oral traditions into classroom activities to promote good morals, behaviour and right attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

In many traditional African societies and other indigenous cultures around the world, elders and oral traditions have historically played a pivotal role in the transmission of cultural heritage, social norms, and ethical standards. Elders, revered for their wisdom and life experiences, are considered the custodians of communal knowledge and are often seen as moral exemplars. Through storytelling, proverbs, folktales, songs, and rituals, they convey important life lessons, historical narratives, and culturally accepted codes of conduct to younger generations. These oral traditions are not merely forms of entertainment but serve as powerful tools for teaching values such as respect, honesty, diligence, compassion, and responsibility. In the absence of written texts, they provide a dynamic and engaging means of socialization, shaping children's worldviews, guiding their interpersonal relationships, and fostering a sense of identity and belonging. The participatory and repetitive nature of oral traditions ensures that moral lessons are internalized over time, forming a solid foundation for the development of moral values.

Azenabor (2022) posited that the term "moral" originates from the concepts of custom, habit, or a particular way of life. In contemporary usage, morality refers to the principles and beliefs that help individuals distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, and justice and injustice. According to Kehinde (2015), morality concerns how individuals relate with others and how their actions reflect what is considered right or wrong within a social context. Morals are deeply rooted in culture, and as such, culture plays a crucial role in shaping philosophical thought. The socio-cultural environment in which individuals, particularly philosophers, exist significantly

influences their worldview, leading to diverse cultural expressions and a variety of philosophical doctrines, perspectives, and methodologies. As Azenabor (2022) further explains, values are institutional ideals or standards held in high regard by individuals or communities, often serving as moral compasses in daily life. Seetha (2018) also emphasized that values are perceived as elements of great worth or importance, functioning as essential standards that guide human conduct. Moral values, therefore, represent the fundamental principles of good and evil that direct an individual's choices and behavior. These values may be shaped by societal norms, religious beliefs, governmental regulations, or personal convictions (Ijiwole & Adeyemi, 2020). In the same vein, Amy Rollo and Dragomir (2023) clarified that attitude is the internal expression of a person's feelings, whereas behavior is the outward expression of those feelings through actions. While the two are distinct, attitude often finds manifestation in behavior. Within this moral framework, the role of elders and oral traditions is pivotal, as they serve as vehicles for transmitting societal values, shaping children's attitudes, and reinforcing behavioral patterns through storytelling, proverbs, and communal teachings. The role of elders and oral traditions in shaping the moral values, attitudes, and behavioral patterns of children in Nigeria is both profound and multifaceted. Elders, often regarded as the custodians of indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage, play a central role in the moral upbringing of children by using oral traditions such as folktales, myths, legends, and proverbs as tools for value transmission. These traditional narratives serve not only as a source of entertainment but also as powerful instruments for imparting ethical principles, social norms, and communal values. Through these stories, children are

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introduced to the foundational virtues of honesty, respect, responsibility, empathy, and justice, while simultaneously learning about the consequences of negative behaviors such as dishonesty, greed, and disobedience.

According to Olugbemi-Gabriel and Ukpi (2022), storytelling remains a central feature of moral education in traditional Nigerian societies, where elders often organize communal gatherings to share stories that emphasize ethical conduct and responsible citizenship. These sessions not only engage children cognitively and emotionally but also create opportunities for reflection and dialogue about the moral implications of the actions of characters within the stories. This interactive method fosters the internalization of societal values in a way that formal education systems may not fully replicate.

As Obidi (1983) observed, the process of moral education extends beyond formal instruction. It includes direct teaching, role modeling, and the subtle, often unconscious absorption of values through everyday interactions with adults. Children learn by observing the behavior of respected elders and internalizing their responses to moral dilemmas. In this way, the lived experiences and character of elders serve as practical guides for young people navigating the complexities of right and wrong.

Fasoro (2011) emphasized that folktales and proverbs are especially effective in conveying moral lessons, as they are often structured around moral dilemmas and resolutions that require children to think critically about the consequences of actions. These narratives frequently include questions or pauses for reflection, encouraging children to engage in moral reasoning and make judgments about appropriate behavior. This method not only cultivates ethical awareness but also enhances cognitive development and social-emotional learning.

Furthermore, grandparents in particular hold a significant position in the transmission of traditional values. As noted by Piekhachek-Oherman (2017), they provide emotional support while also reinforcing cultural continuity by sharing their wisdom and life experiences. The trust and affection children have for their grandparents make them especially influential in shaping character and guiding moral development. Despite the growing influence of modernity and globalization, many children still seek the counsel of their grandparents on ethical and moral issues, demonstrating the enduring authority of elders within family and community structures.

However, the traditional framework for moral education is increasingly challenged by the forces of Western education, urbanization, and global media influences. As Obidi (1983) highlighted, these modern dynamics often promote individualism and autonomy, which can lead children to develop moral frameworks that are detached from communal and cultural roots. This shift may result in the gradual erosion of traditional moral values, as children become more influenced by external cultural narratives than by the oral traditions of their elders. This indicates that influence of elders and oral traditions remains vital in shaping children's moral values, attitudes, and behavior,

there is a growing need to balance this traditional wisdom with contemporary realities. Recognizing and preserving the moral teachings embedded in oral traditions can serve as a powerful foundation for ethical development in a rapidly changing world.

The empirical studies collectively highlight the enduring importance of elders and oral traditions in moral and character development across diverse cultural settings. Onaolapo and Makhasane (2024) emphasize the influential role of elderly guidance in promoting discipline and ethical conduct within school environments, while Ben-Fred (2024) illustrates how oral literature—particularly folktales—serves as a powerful medium for transmitting communal values, norms, and traditions to the younger generation. Similarly, Zulfa *et al.* (2025) demonstrate that oral poetry like Mo'odulele plays a vital role in shaping character, instilling virtues such as honesty and respect, and maintaining cultural identity. These findings underscore that despite the pressures of modernization and formal education, elders and oral traditions remain pivotal in nurturing moral values and guiding behavioral patterns among children and youth.

To frame this study within a theoretical context, Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, introduced in 1977, is particularly relevant. Bandura posited that "learning is not only a product of direct experience but also occurs through observation of others." This statement emphasizes that individuals can learn behaviors, attitudes, and values by observing role models, such as parents and elders.

In the context of Oyo Town, this theory elucidates how children observe the behaviors of elders and the lessons embedded within oral traditions, shaping their moral compass and social behaviors. The interplay between elders and oral traditions thus creates a rich tapestry of moral education, ensuring that essential values are instilled in the community's future generations. Through their guidance and storytelling, elders play a crucial role in fostering moral and social development, ultimately contributing to the holistic upbringing of children in Oyo Town.

Statement of the Problem

In traditional African societies, particularly in Nigeria, elders and oral traditions have historically played a central role in the moral and social development of children. Elders are seen as custodians of cultural values and norms, who, through their experiences and wisdom, serve as moral guides and role models for younger generations. They utilize oral traditions such as storytelling, proverbs, and folktales to transmit moral lessons, reinforce societal expectations, and shape acceptable behaviour. These cultural tools are not only used for entertainment but also serve as informal educational mechanisms that promote virtues such as honesty, respect, self-control, and communal living.

While existing literature acknowledges the influence of cultural practices on children's upbringing and

the significance of elders and oral traditions in value transmission, many of these studies remain broad and general, lacking focus on specific communities. There is a noticeable research gap regarding how these cultural practices function within distinct local contexts like Oyo Town, especially in the face of increasing globalization, urbanization, and the growing influence of formal education and digital media. Furthermore, there has been limited empirical investigation into the specific roles elders play today, how oral traditions are actively employed, and which moral values and behavioral patterns are most emphasized through these traditions in contemporary settings.

This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the role of elders and oral traditions in shaping the moral values, attitudes, and behavioural patterns of children in Oyo Town, Nigeria. It focuses on three key questions: What roles do elders play in the moral and social development of children? How are oral traditions (such as storytelling, proverbs, and folktales) used to transmit values and shape behaviour? And what specific moral values and behavioural patterns are most commonly promoted through these oral traditions? The findings of this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how indigenous moral systems are preserved or transformed in a modern Nigerian context.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to examine the role of elders and oral traditions in shaping moral values, attitudes and behavioural patterns of children. Specifically, the study aims to:

examine the contributions of elders to the moral and social upbringing of children in Oyo Town.

explore the use of oral traditions—such as storytelling, proverbs, and folktales—as tools for transmitting cultural values and shaping behavioural norms among children.

identify the core moral values and behavioural patterns commonly reinforced through oral traditions in the local context of Oyo Town.

Research Questions

What roles do elders play in the moral and social development of children?

How are oral traditions (such as storytelling, proverbs, and folktales) used to transmit values and shape behaviour?

what specific moral values and behavioural patterns are most commonly promoted through these oral traditions?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the roles elders and oral traditions played in shaping children's moral values, attitudes, and behavioural patterns. This design was deemed appropriate for exploring cultural practices, lived experiences, and indigenous knowledge systems within their natural setting.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Oyo Town, located in Oyo State, Nigeria. Oyo Town is rich in Yoruba cultural heritage and known for its strong traditional institutions and community-based child socialization practices.

Population of the Study

The population comprised elders, parents, teachers, and children in selected communities within Oyo Town. These groups were considered key stakeholders in the transmission of moral values and oral traditions.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 20 participants, including:

8 respected community elders known for storytelling and cultural knowledge,

4 parents,

4 teachers, and

4 children (aged 10–14) who were familiar with or had experienced oral tradition sessions.

This technique ensured that participants possessed the cultural and experiential knowledge relevant to the study objectives.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses on the influence of elders and oral narratives on children's moral and social development.

Validity of the Instrument

To ensure content validity, the interview and FGD guides were reviewed by two experts in African oral traditions and educational psychology. Necessary adjustments were made to align the questions with the research objectives and cultural context.

Reliability of the Instrument

A pilot study was conducted in a neighboring community to assess the consistency and clarity of the research tools. Feedback from the pilot led to minor revisions, which improved the instruments' reliability.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through in-person interviews and group discussions, conducted in either English or Yoruba, depending on participants' preferences. Interviews were recorded (with consent), and field notes were taken to aid triangulation.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded manually to identify emerging themes related to elders' roles, oral tradition practices, and the transmission of moral values and behaviors. Patterns and

connections were drawn to interpret the findings in the cultural context of Oyo Town.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1

What roles did elders play in the moral and social development of children in Oyo Town?

Interviews revealed that elders acted as custodians of culture, moral instructors, and disciplinary agents. They played a pivotal role in resolving conflicts among children, mediating disputes, and setting examples through daily conduct. Participants noted that elders often gathered children for evening talks or informal counseling sessions, where virtues such as respect, honesty, hard work, and communal living were emphasized. These findings highlight the centrality of elders in moral education within Oyo Town. Their involvement was not only instructional but also experiential, as children learned by observing the elders' behaviors and social interactions. Elders helped reinforce social cohesion by modeling and transmitting collective values across generations.

Research Question 2

How were oral traditions (such as storytelling, proverbs, and folktales) used to transmit values and shape behaviour among children?

Participants reported that storytelling sessions, especially during moonlight or communal gatherings, were common avenues through which elders communicated moral lessons. Folktales often featured animals or legendary heroes and were followed by reflective discussions. Proverbs were used daily in speech to offer advice or caution children. Themes such as truthfulness, respect for elders, teamwork, and humility recurred frequently. These practices functioned as informal moral education. The use of relatable characters and cultural symbolism made abstract values tangible and memorable for children. Proverbs served as concise, context-specific tools for behavior regulation. Overall, oral traditions were effective in shaping children's worldview and fostering ethical behavior in culturally relevant ways.

Research Question 3

What specific moral values and behavioural patterns were most commonly promoted through these oral traditions? The most consistently promoted moral values included honesty, respect, obedience, kindness, generosity, and responsibility. Behavioral patterns emphasized included greeting elders properly, sharing with peers, admitting faults, and performing household duties diligently. Elders also discouraged traits like greed, laziness, disrespect, and disobedience through cautionary tales.

These values and behaviors align with communal expectations in Yoruba society, where individual actions are seen to reflect on the family and community. Oral traditions reinforced the cultural importance of good character (*iwà rere*) and served as a moral compass for children. This underscores the traditional view that moral

upbringing is not solely the responsibility of parents but a collective community duty, guided by elders and cultural practices.

Discussion of Findings

The Role of Elders in the Moral and Social Development of Children

The findings of this study revealed that elders in Oyo Town play a significant role in the moral and social development of children. They serve as custodians of cultural values and are respected figures who provide guidance, correction, and mentorship. Through their lived experiences, elders directly and indirectly influence children's understanding of acceptable behaviors within the community. This finding aligns with Olugbemi-Gabriel and Ukpi (2022), who assert that elders utilize communal gatherings to instill ethical behavior through moral storytelling and guidance. Similarly, Obidi (1984) noted that elders' influence is transmitted through direct instruction and modeling, with children unconsciously absorbing moral values from adult role models. The authority of elders, particularly grandparents, continues to hold significance despite the impact of modernization, as supported by Piekhachek-Oherman (2017). Thus, the study confirms that elders not only maintain cultural continuity but also play a central role in shaping the behavior and character of younger generations in indigenous Nigerian communities.

Use of Oral Traditions in Transmitting Values and Shaping Behaviour

Oral traditions such as storytelling, proverbs, and folktales were found to be powerful tools in moral education. These traditions were employed by elders in Oyo Town to convey societal expectations and ethical standards in ways that were engaging and memorable. Evening storytelling sessions, the strategic use of proverbs in conversations, and moral-themed folktales all served as means of behavioral regulation and value inculcation. This resonates with Fasoro (2011), who emphasized the effectiveness of folktales and proverbs in teaching virtues and discouraging vices. These oral forms often include reflective questions and are designed to develop critical thinking among children. The cultural performance aspect of these traditions, as observed by Ben-Fred (2024) in the Ogba folktales, also underscores their societal relevance in transmitting customs and traditions while educating the youth. Furthermore, the significance of oral poetry in character formation, as seen in Zulfa *et al.* (2025), highlights the didactic role of oral tradition across various Nigerian cultures. Therefore, oral traditions serve not only as entertainment but as structured educational frameworks deeply embedded in community life.

Specific Moral Values and Behavioural Patterns Promoted Through Oral Traditions

The moral values most commonly promoted through oral traditions in Oyo Town include respect for elders,

honesty, humility, generosity, obedience, and communal responsibility. Behavioral patterns such as greeting elders respectfully, sharing with others, fulfilling household duties, and avoiding dishonest practices were repeatedly emphasized in the stories and proverbs shared with children. This corroborates Fasoro (2011), who noted that oral narratives teach clear distinctions between right and wrong through symbolic representations and consequences. Ben-Fred (2024) also affirmed that oral literature in Ogba society played a pivotal role in familiarizing children with the values, customs, and rituals essential for social cohesion. Similarly, Zulfa *et al.* (2025) demonstrated that oral traditions like Mo'odulele poetry transmitted virtues such as respect and honor, reinforcing desirable conduct and strengthening community ties.

Summary of Findings

This study explored the contributions of elders and the use of oral traditions—such as storytelling, proverbs, and folktales—in the moral and social upbringing of children in Oyo Town. The following key findings emerged:

Elders play a vital role in shaping the moral and social development of children by serving as cultural custodians, disciplinarians, mentors, and role models.

Oral traditions—including communal storytelling sessions, proverbs, and folktales—are effectively used by elders to transmit values, regulate behavior, and promote ethical decision-making among children.

The moral values and behaviors most commonly transmitted include respect for elders, honesty, humility, generosity, obedience, responsibility, and communal living.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the enduring cultural importance of elders and oral traditions in shaping children's character and social behavior in Oyo Town. Despite the influence of modernization and Western education, elders continue to hold moral authority and utilize oral traditions as practical tools for value transmission. These traditional practices foster not only moral reasoning but also social cohesion, identity, and emotional bonding between generations.

Therefore, preserving and revitalizing these indigenous practices is essential to ensuring the continuity of cultural values and the holistic development of children in the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

Elders should be actively engaged in school and community programs aimed at moral education to reinforce traditional values alongside formal instruction.

Teachers and curriculum developers should integrate oral traditions such as storytelling and proverbs into classroom activities to promote ethical thinking and cultural awareness.

Parents and guardians should encourage intergenerational

interactions, allowing children to regularly learn from elders within family and community settings.

Community leaders should organize cultural events that feature storytelling, folktale performances, and discussions around traditional proverbs to sustain interest in oral traditions.

Policy-makers and educators should document and preserve oral traditions, especially indigenous folktales and proverbs, for inclusion in educational resources and youth development programs.

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