

*An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies  
(LALIGENS), Ethiopia*  
Vol. 4 (2), Serial No 10, May, 2015: 164-169  
ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v4i2.12>

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**Women, Children and the Environment: The Use of Folktales  
in Managing Climate Change**

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**Abstract**

Environmental issues are global problems that continue to get the attention of every well meaning person. Different world communities are experiencing their different 'shares' of environmental challenge. Various debates are held at conferences, in publications and interviews. The challenge necessitates an inter-disciplinary collaboration and everybody, including women and children, should be involved on how best we can manage our environment properly. Since children are used by their parents, especially mothers, in many communities as agents of environmental destruction through destruction of shrubs and trees in search of fire wood, and deposition of refuse into gutters, water sources and ways. Therefore, proper sensitization of children in home is important. Mothers can sensitize the children through folktale narration session which entails narration of relevant folktales at home during relaxation and children are shown the causes and effects of environmental degradation. The children can be used as agents of change in their various families and communities. Consequently, the world becomes a better place for human, animal and plant habitation.

**Introduction**

Climate Change is among the most topical issues in today's world. The state of the environment raises great fear about the future of the world and indeed, the human race. Therefore, meaningful efforts need to be made to sensitize people at

different levels on the need to save the environment so that the world and its 'contents' can be saved from environmental menace. Different parts of the world today experience the adverse effects of human reckless usage of the world's natural resources. The desert frontiers are fast expanding, engulfing even areas of hitherto savannah vegetation. A great percentage of this is due to the indiscriminate felling of trees within the savannah, (especially along the fringes of the desert areas) and the utter disregard in re-planting of trees. Consequently, the topsoil becomes unable to hold together through the existence of trees, therefore, the attempts by the desert to acquire further territories meets with no resistance.

Similarly, the wetlands are also seriously plagued by environmental degradation. Part of this is due to the unprecedented destroying of woodlands and forests through human activities of wood logging and bush burning. Thus, the great waters that fringe such areas find the deforested lands loose frontiers for successful raids. And before long, such locations are washed away by surging waters. Erosion, a serious menace, is aided ignorantly by the world's human inhabitants through the cultivation and excavation activities in erosion prone locations and thereby causing landslides and complete washing away of landed ecological locations and communities.

Consequently, the reality of the present situation is that unless something urgent is done to replenish the 'lost' in the ecosystem, the world would meet a disaster that is better imagined than experienced. In Nigeria, for example, the present level of reckless felling of trees spells a disastrous situation in the North. Similarly the cultivation of erosion prone sites like slopes of streams and ravines has also proved a continuous encouragement of erosion and landslides in communities in the South. Furthermore, the stubborn and unpatriotic disposal of refuse into drainages, especially in the urban centers have, lately, shown the people in such Nigerian states like Lagos, Bayelsa, Jigawa, Kano, Bauchi, Adamawa, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kebbi and Sokoto, to mention few, that rain water could devastate while searching for passages, especially where it has been deprived of its designated routes. The story of dried streams and disappearance of grazing areas in the rural areas is a popular one. The absence of grazing land causes constant and sometimes deadly clashes between cattle rearers and farmers in Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba states of Nigeria. The famous Lake Chad is constantly shrinking and the hitherto benefiting communities are today suffering economic downturn and unemployment which consequently causes insecurity and insurgency such as 'Boko Haram'. These are direct results of human activities through unfriendly environmental behaviour. Similarly, many rivers of note in the past, streams and water sources in various parts of Nigeria are drying up because of the amount of wastes deposited on their courses by their upstream communities.

This encapsulate the reckless expense at which today's man has utilized available natural resources, and the disastrous future that awaits a posterity whose forebears may consume all, without a corresponding attitude to planting for the future. The need to plan and reserve for the future forms the basis of the global concern for sustainable development. If we are to fashion out a promising future for the next generation, then enormous efforts are required to reverse the environmental degradation of the planet. Therefore, the problem of environmental challenge demands that the issue be tackled in an inter-disciplinary manner. The message of salvaging the environment should also be taken to persons of different classes and ages. The problem demands the urgent and proper sensitization of everyone. Everyone here means the inclusion of women and children.

### **Women, Children and the Environment**

Orientation of children on environmental issues is important. This is because children are mostly used by their mothers as agents of environmental degradation in many communities. In rural Nigeria, for example, mothers mostly send their children on errands that include destruction of shrubs and trees, deposition of refuse into gutters, water ways and sources. The children ignorantly engage in activities such as bush burning to trap animals and bring some meet for the mothers to cook. Although it could not be advocated that children should start refusing being used for such environmentally unfriendly errands, as this would be immoral in most Nigerian cultures, however, the children's high level of environmental consciousness could influence the thinking and actions of their parents and family members. Thus, these children could be used as agents of positive environmental advocacy in their families and communities.

More importantly, children are the adults and policy formulators of the future. This makes their environmental awareness an investment. Furthermore, child education exposes the child at a very tender age to issues affecting the child's existence that the child might learn to adapt and imbibe new systems of doing things as dictated by the environment within which the child finds him/herself. The children, therefore, might have no generation to lead if nothing is done fast and effectively about the preservation of the ecosystem that sustains them and every living generation. The dangerous slide in the world's environmental condition has to be laid bare at their feet. It is one of the duties the environmentally conscious adults of the moment owe to the children who are investors in the future dream of the world.

### **Folktale and the Environment**

Folktale is a veritable tool that can be utilized as part of the efforts required in reversing the environmental degradation of most African communities. Folktale is a communal activity that intensifies the experience of the participants (narrator and

audience) and is capable of advancing the knowledge of the person beyond the familiar scope and immediate surroundings in addition to its being an important form of entertainment. Folktale takes its materials from life experiences and it is an intensive informant, vibrant entertainer and profound method of education. As a communal activity, folktale is a highly participatory activity. The use of folktale in the campaign to save the environment is therefore a promotion of group consciousness. And environmental friendliness is essentially a communal demanding activity. The urge for sustainable development is important for the replacement of selfish individualistic instincts in the usage of natural resources, with a patriotic societal habit of ensuring the continuous availability of these resources for succeeding generations. Folktale is a creative activity through which impressions that seemed vague are understood, where fragmentary knowledge had existed, the gap becomes filled and issues that were considered dreadful are overcome. The narrator and audience are allowed the freedom to create and express their ideas and situations. And the creation of environmental awareness is highly participatory affair. It demands the contribution of ideas to the process of stemming the tide of environmental degradation. Folktale can best be used in environmental issues when relevant tales are narrated at home by mothers during relaxation.

#### **The Folktale Narration Session**

It is no doubt that writing is the most convenient means of processing information and a powerful impulse to the scientific and technological development. Literacy is a necessary condition for any conception of modern life. Books comprise a comprehensive medium of human dialogue across time and space. However, this view can only be sustained by neglecting the fact that, whatever its capacity for humanistic liberalism, writing remains a secondary form, a 'representation', at a remove from the vital immediacy of spoken language. Therefore, despite the impact of literacy, orality is still the dominant mode of communication in Africa. Oral literature is still the most widespread and with which the vast majority of Africans are in constant touch with, thus Irele asserts that oral literature "represents that form of expression to which African sensibilities are most readily attuned" (79). Africa is a site of enormous, long, and ongoing creativity in relation to orality as a vector for the production of social life, religious beliefs, and the constant constituting and reconstituting of society, ideology, and aesthetics. According to Gunner "Orality in the African context (is) a means by which societies of varying complexity regulated themselves, organized their present and their pasts, made formal spaces for philosophical reflections" (67 emphasis mine). Therefore despite the influence of globalization, orality has not disappeared but has often adapted itself in its many different forms, such as folktale, to become a vehicle for the expression of the fears and hopes of new generations of Africans. Dinslage notes that oral tradition helps the

children to unconsciously find and identify their future roles in a society (52). Therefore, folktale narration can be used as a vehicle of imparting knowledge to our children on the environment to let them know the current problems and challenges that are facing our communities. Folktale is a traditional story which is told primarily for entertainment. Akporoboro sees folktale as one of the most commonest and popular form of oral literary expression in many African societies (96). Unlike many forms of oral literary compositions that are strictly associated with specific occasions, folktale is not bound up with particular occasion: it is told any time provided people are gathered together, and want to tell stories. Folktale can be narrated either by men, women or children.

The use of folktale narration at home would entail story telling when the children and their parents are relaxing either in the evening or during the day when there is less work to do. Using this approach, a story on tree planting with the message 'FOR EACH FELLED, PLANT THREE', could be narrated after opening formula to stimulate the interest of the audience thus: three different men go to the bush at different times and come back with wood. The first person sells the wood as timber, the second uses it as firewood and the third uses it to construct a house. A Carpenter in the community later needs wood for his chores but can hardly find any because all the big trees are gone due to the activities of the earlier three people. The Carpenter then goes to the city to buy wood exorbitantly, and hikes the prices of his products; house doors, windows, lockers, chairs, tables, etc. Erosion also sets into the previous site of the village woodlot and threatens farms and the entire community. The village starts experiencing a high intensity of heat. The entire village becomes agitated. One of their sons returns from the University and is alarmed at the unsafe situation in the village. He enlightens them on the need for a concerted effort at replacing felled trees with newly planted ones. The entire village agrees that from then on, every indigene should plant at least three trees for one felled. This type of story could also be replicated to represent a village which meets near disastrous situation as a result of intensive and indiscriminate cultivation around erosion prone areas like the slopes of the village stream, and defecation into communal water sources.

The narrative has to depict real situations and the characters can be given names of human beings. This makes it possible for the children to have a real 'feel' of the environmental situation depicted and be a part of the process of resolving the environmental challenge that arises from the spate of individual and communal degradation. The participation and quasi-independence of the children (audience) is of utmost importance in the circumstance, the woman narrator should restrain herself to the role of a narrator only, directing the children audience into channels where they

need to make worthwhile decisions and discoveries. Through this, the children would accept the issues and problems of their world and re-appraise their views.

### Conclusion

The process of attitudinal change, especially for persons who have already been 'focused' in a particular way of living is not an easy one. But for children who are still trying to form values about life, the early inculcation of correct environmental information is capable of creating a more environmentally-friendly persons. Since these young people cannot energize themselves in this regard, the responsibility of putting them through becomes that of today's adults. Women are directly involved in the shaping of children could become agents of environmental advocacy. Women, especially mothers, and the young minds they groom owe the environment a responsibility, a great part of which is the sanity and safety of the world, and the continuity of the human race. They have tools – potent tools in folktale. They should proceed to employ them in the social responsibility of shaping the humanity, children who would not only grow up into environmentally-responsible citizens, but also agents of change from a degraded to a sustainable world environment.

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