

# SYNECTICS PRINCIPLES IN THE RIDDLES OF THE LELNA OF NIGERIA AS A TOOL FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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## Abstract

Riddles are used all over the world for entertainment as well as education. Moreover, it is one of the common links between Jewish and African communication systems. What is more, its use of analogies shares common features with the synectics teaching and learning strategy. Riddles therefore provide a useful link between traditional and progressive education which can be used to make Christian education more effective in Africa. This paper explores the existence of synectics principles in the riddles of the Lelna of Nigeria, showing how riddles can be used to introduce students to the synectics procedure before using synectics to engage in Christian education.

## Introduction

Most of the approaches to Christian education extant in Africa today are based on Western philosophies of education (Ango, 2006, p.1). As a result, the approaches often fail to solve the many problems of Africa. The approaches that have dominated Christian education in Africa seem to follow the basic assumption of the missionaries who brought Christianity and Christian education to Africa, that there were no existing educational systems in Africa. But just as it has been established that contextualized theology seems to result in more effective evangelization in Africa, it is believed that applying the principles inherent in African traditional education to the task of Christian education might lead to better results (Ango, 2006, pp.4-7). One of such African traditional approaches to education is riddles. According to Webster (1979, p.1557), a riddle is “a problem or puzzle in a form of a question, statement, etc, so formulated that some ingenuity is required to solve or answer it.” Commenting on the neglect of riddles, Bade Ajayi (2002, pp. 7-9) declares that “Western education and religion have led us to forget our heritage.”

Riddles can be an effective approach to doing Christian education because it is no stranger to the Bible. Pointing out its use in the Bible, Thomas Nicol (1988, p.271) notes that “like the proverb or the parable or the allegory, the riddle served a more serious and didactic purpose than we usually associate with the word. The didactic usage is found throughout the whole of the OT.” In the Bible riddles are mentioned in Judges 14; I Kings 10:1; Proverbs 1:6; Ezekiel 17:2; Daniel 8:23; Habakkuk 2:6; and Matthew 13:34-35 (in reference to Psalm 78:2). Since riddles are shown in the Bible to be useful for teaching, it may be possible to apply African riddles effectively to Christian education.

In applying African approaches to the task of Christian education, the guiding philosophy is that neither traditional teaching alone, nor progressive education alone is sufficient for effective Christian education. The learner, the subject matter and the teacher must all be given prominent places, while making God central. The theoretical concern is to strike a balance between traditionalism and progressivism. The authority of God, seen in respect for the authority of the teacher should be upheld, while encouraging freedom of expression and creativity of the learner. This balance is especially useful if the learner is to be helped to develop a healthy concept of the Christian life, while maintaining the liberty to think creatively about Christian living.

Riddles, a traditional mode of expression, use analogy to describe things. They can therefore be a useful tool for understanding the synectics teaching-learning strategy, a modern mode of expression, which also uses analogy (Joyce and Weil, 1990). In striking a balance between traditionalism and progressivism in our approach to teaching, using riddles to prepare students to understand synectics, and then applying the synectics principles for Christian education will give room for sufficient interaction between learner, teacher and subject matter.

## The Synectics Principles

Synectics is a teaching-learning strategy from the affective school and personal family of models of teaching. It is derived from the Greek word *synecticos* “joining unrelated things,” and connotes analogy (Joyce and Weil 1990, p.162). Synectics means the use of analogies in order to develop creativity in learners. Participants freely describe objects, ideas, persons or situations, using different types of analogy, until they gain new insight into a familiar situation, or gain meaning out of unfamiliar things. Conceptual distance may be increased to allow free imagination to create something new, or connections may be made between ideas through analogy to explore the unfamiliar.

In synectics three types of analogy can be used, namely personal analogy, direct analogy and compressed conflict, described as follows:

**Personal Analogy:** A person may identify himself or empathize with an object or other person being described. The process involves empathic identification that describes facts and feelings in the first-person personal sense to try and arrive at new thoughts about the object being described. For example, a person may say, “I am a broom,” as a starting point for thinking about a broom. Some biblical examples are, “I am the light of the world,” “This bread is my body.”

**Direct Analogy:** In this type, direct observation of natural phenomena would lead to creative thinking. The observation of the action of an animal could lead to the invention of a mechanical device similar to the animal’s action. Some biblical examples are “My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me;” “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit;” “Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly father feeds them.”

**Compressed conflict:** This involves two-word descriptions of objects or ideas using opposite or contradicting terms such as “slow speed;” “weak strength.” or “backward progress” to allow mental flexibility. Some biblical examples are the parables of the “rich fool” or “the good Samaritan,” and “the prodigal son.”

Synectics aims to either make it possible to see old problems, ideas or products in a new, more creative light or to make unfamiliar ideas more meaningful. To achieve the first aim, there are six phases in the procedure:

**Phase one** involves description of an existing condition. The students are asked to describe the situation as they see it (e.g. the room for a meeting is disorganized).

**Phase two** is the phase of direct analogy. Students make several

direct analogies, select one and develop it (e.g. the room is a wilderness).

Phase three is the phase of personal analogy. In this phase students describe themselves in place of the analogy selected in phase two (e.g. I am a wilderness).

Phase four is the phase of compressed conflict. Students use their earlier descriptions as bases for suggesting several compressed conflicts, out of which they select one (e.g. the wilderness is an organized confusion).

Phase five involves making another direct analogy based on the compressed conflict (e.g. the room is a habitable wilderness).

Phase six happens when the original task is re-examined. Using the synectics experience the problem is tackled (e.g. the classroom that used to be arranged in neat columns and rows for meeting can now be rearranged in an informal, semi-circular or other less orderly form to make the meeting more relaxed).

To achieve the second aim, seven phases are involved:

Phase one is that of substantive input. The teacher provides information about a new topic (e.g. in the law of gravity, larger bodies exert a magnetic pull on smaller bodies).

Phase two is when a direct analogy is made. The teacher suggests a direct analogy and asks the students to describe the analogy (e.g. the law of gravity is a mother and child).

Phase three is when personally analogy is made. Students are asked to “become” the direct analogy (e.g. I am gravity; I pull all smaller things towards the big things near them” or “I am the earth; I pull all smaller objects towards myself”).

Phase four is for comparison of analogies. Students identify and explain the points of similarity between a new material and the direct analogy (e.g. just as a mother is attracted to her child and the child to its mother, smaller objects within the earth’s orbit are attracted to the earth by the force of gravity).

Phase five is where differences are explained. Students explain where the analogy does not fit (e.g. gravity is not a living being; the earth and smaller objects in it do not speak to one another).

Phase six is the phase of exploration. Students re-explore the original topic on its own terms (e.g. what is the scope of the force of gravity? What happens to the smaller object when it is outside the sphere of the pull of gravity?).

Phase seven is for generating analogy. Students provide their own direct analogy and explore the similarities and differences (e.g. the teacher asks the students to think of and express other analogies in their experiences to the force of gravity, stating the similarities and differences).

Whereas in achieving the first aim conceptual distance is increased to allow free imagination and create something new (out of the old), in achieving the second aim connections are made between ideas through analogy to explore the unfamiliar. The teacher initiates the sequence and guides the use of the operational mechanism. Students have freedom to explore ideas. The teacher makes efforts to encourage the students to break out of familiar thinking patterns. Teachers must be ready to accept any kind of imaginative thought without criticism. A creative environment needs to be provided, with objects made available for inventive experiments.

In an experimental research in Ilorin, Nigeria Ango (2004) found that a group of junior secondary school students performed better in a test when they were taught the parable of the sower and the soils using the synectics approach than another group taught the same parable using the lecture method and given the same test. In Thailand Prakarnkao (1999) found that the creative thinking ability of some students was enhanced using the synectics teaching-learning

strategy. Kaunfer (1990) also found that synectics was effective in the teaching of Midrash (Jewish scriptures).

Of relevance for the arguments of this paper is the disclosure of Torrance and Meyers (1970, pp. 171-206) about the connection between creative teaching and learning (the essence of which is synectics), and riddles. They categorize riddles as a form of questioning for thinking under the sub-heading “The Redefining Question.” They explain: “Among the most challenging questions a teacher can ask are those that require the pupil to redefine an object, animal, person, or event. The redefinition question calls for the pupils to see something in a new light, to perceive functions and characteristics that are not obvious or usual” (p.183-4). They propose a possible approach to the redefining question as “riddling”: “After they have solved a few riddles, the children can be encouraged to devise their own. Frequently they can invent very clever riddles, but the main advantage in their making up their own riddles is that they will then be searching for relationships, thus increasing their understanding of the topic” (p.184). This means that using riddles as a part of the Christian education process will obviously make methods such as synectics easier to use, and improve knowledge and relationships. This paper proposes that, in view of the effectiveness of using synectics in teaching that involves analogy, Africans will understand the synectics approach better if African riddles are used to prepare the students.

### **African Riddles as an Educational Approach**

African and Jewish traditions have many similar features, and this makes the use of African traditional approaches to education even more suitable for understanding biblical teachings than Western culture does. For example, just as Nicol (1988, p.271) points out that “with riddles the Jews have been wont from an early period in their history to display their intellectual ingenuity, or test the wisdom of the learned, or entertain festive occasions or hours of leisure,” Olatunji (1984, p.182) says of Yoruba riddles that they serve to keep people mentally awake before folktales; they entertain; exercise the intellect and wit; they instruct when they reflect material and social culture; and provide escape from taboos by allowing expressions that may otherwise be forbidden.” Olatunji describes features of Yoruba riddles as containing question-and-answer pattern; difficult metaphors; incongruity between statements describing problems; sequential and nominal concordial sentences; and sparing use of connectives. All these serve to make the riddles more enigmatic and thus more capable of stretching the imagination (p.182). In a similar description, Ajayi (2002, pp.7-9) says riddles form “one of the important ways Yorubas teach their children to think quickly,” adding that it provides competition, and keeps the youths from roaming about. It is an avenue to discuss parts of the body that would normally not be discussed. Synectics uses analogy to discuss ideas in much the same way that African riddles are done as described above. Familiarity with riddles will help Africans to understand the synectics teaching and learning strategy and make learning more enjoyable.

Riddles have actually been suggested as a method in modern education. Thompson (2000, p.131), for instance, suggests riddles as a teaching method for youths and adults which focuses on the sense of hearing. He proposes that the teacher should, “Challenge students to collect riddles for a month. Build a contest around this idea. At the meeting read the riddles and see who can solve them” (pp.12-13). Thompson believes this will have a positive impact on the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of learning. Since riddles are a form of aesthetic education, using them would accord with Onwuka (1996, p.351)’s contention that “aesthetic enjoyment gives way to, or is accompanied by, the critical detached intellectual way of knowing.”

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He suggests that training in aesthetic appreciation should involve preparation of pupils, presentation of the material, guidance by the teacher, and practice by the pupils (p.362). The procedure outlined by Onwuka is remarkably like the synectics procedure, and provides a possible way of using riddles to prepare the students for synectics. A look at the riddles of the Lelna of Nigeria may give further insight into how riddles may be profitably used to familiarize students with the synectics approach for the purpose of Christian education.

### Riddles of the Lelna

The Lelna live mainly in Kebbi State of Nigeria. A good number also live in Niger State, while a few may be found scattered all over Nigeria. Like other African groups, the Lelna make use of riddles for entertainment and education. Bulus Doro, a member of the Lelna ethnic group, gives the following as the purposes of riddles among the Lelna in a 2006 interview:

It develops the thinking capacity of participants.

It enhances knowledge through providing information.

It develops the ability to make sensible decisions.

It gives insight into human behaviour.

Lelna riddles, known as “Kurkurya,” attract participants of all ages. Usually done at night after supper, the riddles are learnt by constant practice. The questions or statements may be posed by anybody, and answered freely by any participant. There has not been much development of riddling among Lelna due to modern influences which attract the young away from traditional educational practices. It is much like what Ajayi (2002 earlier cited) has noted about Yoruba riddles that Western education and religion have led the Yoruba to forget their heritage.

Following are a few samples of Lelna riddles:

The dead weep; the living do not weep. The answer is: Fruit stones used for games. The meaning is derived from considering the fruit stones won by a player in a game known as “Zonga” as dead stones, which may still be put into play, hence their “weeping,” while the stones still in play are “alive” but do not “weep” as they quietly wait to be played. The riddle uses what synectics refers to as “direct analogy.”

I go in a hurry; I return majestically. The answer is: Going to the toilet. The meaning is derived from the fact that a person pressed to ease him- or herself is usually in an undignified hurry to get to the toilet, while the person who is relieved returns walking with dignified control. The riddle uses what synectics refers to as personal analogy.

A javelin by the river. The answer is: The oil palm tree. The meaning is derived from the height and shape of the palm tree, and the fact that it usually lines river banks. This riddle uses what synectics refers to as direct analogy.

The cattle egret says suffering is a wind that passes. The answer is: A recruit into *golmo* (a hard training for farming). The meaning is derived from the comparison between the migratory habits of the cattle egret and the hopeful thinking of a new entrant into a very difficult farming cult (known as *golmo*) through which young boys learn the discipline of farming and pays their bride price through working for their in-laws. The hope of the new entrant is that, like the migratory habits of the cattle egret, the hard farm labour and training ordeals constitute a passing phase of life. The riddle uses direct analogy.

I am a pregnancy on a hill. The answer is: An anthill. This is a simple comparison between the shape of a pregnant woman's distended stomach and an anthill. The riddle uses a personal analogy.

A tree in the house, its shade outside. The answer is: The birth of a female child. Because a female child is expected to ultimately leave her parents' home to belong to another family when she marries, she is a flitting joy, whose arrival is like a tree that has the potential to

provide a shade, except that this shade would be enjoyed by another family “outside” her home of birth. This riddle uses what synectics calls a compressed conflict.

I am a drum on a hill. The answer is: Pregnancy. Like example 5, this is a simple analogy between the shape of a woman's pregnancy and an imaginary drum on a hill. The analogy is more about the shape than the size. The riddle uses personal analogy.

Horses have ploughed the sand. The answer is: Sowing seed. A ground for horse racing always looks like a ploughed ground. It resembles a piece of land that has been tilled and sown with seed, hence the analogy. The riddle uses direct analogy.

I am an egg in the middle of the homestead. The answer is: The moon. This is a simple analogy between the shape of the moon and that of an egg; and the space of a family compound and the sky in which the moon is located. The little space an egg would occupy in a compound is also comparable to the little space the moon occupies in the sky. The riddle uses personal analogy.

The king has set a pot on fire on the road; whoever passes stokes the fire. The answer is: A stumbling stone. The analogy between the king and whoever or whatever placed the stumbling stone on the road is not clear; nor is the analogy between the stumbling stone and a pot on fire. Perhaps it is the pain that a stumbling stone causes to each person who stubs his or her toe that is compared to fire, the stubbing of toes is compared to stoking the fire, and the king might well be providence. The riddle uses a combination of direct and personal analogies.

The riddles essentially use metaphorical comparisons to describe various objects and situations. In synectics, participants are allowed to freely use various kinds of analogy to describe the object or idea being studied. Those who are well practiced in the formulation and use of riddles will find it easy to understand and participate in synectics. And because synectics is effective in teaching, Christian education can be done by a three-stage process of first preparing the students using riddles, introducing synectics as a development of riddles, and then teaching the word of God using synectics. A procedure for introducing students to synectics using riddles could take the following steps:

1. The teacher introduces the topic for the day's lesson.
2. The teacher introduces the use of riddles by citing biblical examples, e.g. “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge” (Ez.18:2).
3. The teacher asks the students to solve the biblical riddles.
4. The teacher presents some African riddles to the students and challenges them to solve them.
5. The teacher asks students to formulate riddles of their own.
6. The teacher introduces the idea of synectics and draws attention to its similarities with riddles.
7. The students are then asked to make direct and personal analogies, or compressed conflicts based on the topic for the day.
8. The topic is re-examined based on the analogies made.
9. The students are asked to formulate new riddles based on the lesson topic.
10. The students are given a test to assess their understanding of the topic.

### Conclusion

Christ was a very creative teacher. He deliberately used figurative expression to teach in a creative way. Horne (1991, p.51) observes in this light that Christ's “aim as the Great Teacher of men, was and ever is, not to relieve the reason and conscience of mankind, not to lighten the burden of thought and study, but rather to increase that burden, to make men more conscientious, more eager, more active in

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mind and moral sense.” This calls for imaginative creativity on the part of Christian teachers. As Ilori (2005, p.48) puts it, “Based on biblical facts, imagination brings interest and life to the biblical lesson.” In the words of LeBar (1989, p.221), “Christian creativity is God still at work today by His Spirit through His people.” Africa has many creative ways of teaching that have largely been neglected by African educationists. But, in view of the many similarities between African and biblical culture, it is imperative that we begin to explore African traditional approaches to education, such as riddles, in an effort to make Christian education more effective.

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