

(RE) STORING YORUBA TRADITIONAL IDEALS THROUGH FOLKTALE

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Abstract

Culture is an accumulated pattern of values, beliefs, and behaviours which is shared by an identifiable group of people with a common history and verbal system. Folktale is a culturally oriented people's story possessed by each culture. It serves as rules and regulations of societies learnt consciously or unconsciously by members of the community. This literary aspect of patterns of life is becoming neglected. This paper is an attempt to revisit these didactic acceptable manners of impacting lives. It views folktales as important traditional aspect in communities with special emphasis on the Yoruba community of Western part of Nigeria. The paper answers the question of identity of "Who am I?" To which culture do I belong, its significance, problems and prospect? What are the accepted norms of behavior for me? The present social values and its' lapses could be determined from tracing the past through folktale, what could be its benefit and problems in the current global village. The paper submits some plausible suggestions towards having a peaceful and cohesive Yoruba society with the service of fables.

Keywords: belief, culture, folktales, Yoruba, culture.

1. Introduction

The contemporary worrisome occurrence of immoralities in societies, like rape, corruption, selfishness, greed, and acts of all sorts, calls for the concern of literary writers, religionists, anthropologists, sociologists, moralists and psychologists. This accounts for concentrating and addressing contemporary issues towards having peaceful and egalitarian societies (Akpobaro, 2006; Mello, 2001). Folktale played and continues to play a major role in building a cultured society. As an outgrowth of the human experience with nature, folktale itself was thought to be a natural expression of man before city, commerce, civilization, technology, and culture contaminated the purity of his life. Folktale reflects the collective experience of society. It could also be regarded as the mirror which the community constantly faces. Stories characterize and define identity, for both individuals and groups, as expressed in the work of Jung (1969). Jung identifies a series of specific and formal elements within world mythologies that have become primary archetypes. Each archetype represents a core mental function common to all humans. Archetypes are found symbolically within folktales and are described in a variety of arrangements. The fact that many of these archetypes occur repetitively in myths from widely divergent geographical areas is the evidence, that a "collective unconscious" exists connecting peoples, cultures, and time within a "generative

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force", Mello (2001) opines. Several embedded cultural principles have been overlooked and have no more place in many societies all as a result of modernization. The culture of the developed nations is overpowering others, hegemony then sets in. Many embedded ways of life of one nation turn out to be negatively adopted and assimilated by others, partly as a result of the natural phenomenon or the level of their development. This over-all adoption of foreign cultures constitutes a menace in such a strange area/ nation.

2. Effects of cultural/scientific innovations

The advancement in science, various international religions, urbanization, literacy, technology; radio, television, mobile telephones, and the internet have been wrongly influencing the young ones across nations and in the Yoruba area in particular. This contributes greatly to excesses in many human endeavours as they bring about the desire for illegal means of livelihood and sustenance. The migration from rural to urban places is another vital issue that contributes to the dearth of local flavor and appreciation of one's traditional norms as it affects characters. The lack of necessary indigenous taste enhances unlawful behaviours in societies. The greed towards acquiring properties at the detriment of many other things, coupled with the traditional beliefs and power of the Yoruba leads to disruption of life and even total loss of life to others. Recently, killing for rituals becomes the other the day across ages. The younger ones, according to daily medias reports are not left out of the menace as they also kill themselves and others kill their parents for money rituals.

Before the advent of these technological inventions, the Africans in general and Yoruba in particular have means by which they promulgate morals and preserve their cultural etiquettes. The effect of foreign cultures in home-videos and accessibility of phonographic materials is also a problem to many societies. Many of these films are not censored, thereby resulting in many unintelligible and unethical films being made available to these teenagers at the detriment of the peace, moral uprightness and tranquility of their societies. The love for wealth at all cost, egocentrism and greed partly from what they see in films or hear on radio or any other avenue brought by globalization and technological inventions is affecting the reasoning faculties and behaviours of these youths to the detriment of their means of livelihood. The concern of many literary critics, folklorists, anthropologists is now being committed into how the past and the present could be interrelated in the present era of globalization, i.e., now that the whole world is turning into a global-village, how could each society benefit from the existing knowledge and experiences of the past generations. In spite of the combined rapid developmental efforts of science and technology with religion, we learn easily from our close personal associations. They serve as the basis for learning about life and transmitting important observations and expressions. It then becomes paramount for humanities to borrow from the experience of the past so as to better the present era. Evans (2009) agrees with Bausch, (1999, p. 26) that,

Every people, nation, and community has stories and myths that preserve and prolong the traditions that give them their identity," said William Bausch, author of *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*. "When a nation is in trouble, it often returns to its traditional stories to look for direction and healing, to regain a sense of what made it great in the past and what will nurture it into the future." He said that "individuals, families, and communities also have their identifying stories that link them to who they are, to their culture.

This then could be likened to a Yoruba proverb that, *omo kò ní bá ipèlẹ̀ iyá a rẹ̀, kó re aso mú*. Meaning: a child that follows the footsteps of his mother will not go astray. The

Yoruba is of the view that history instills the experiences of the olden days in the new generations, thereby expect them to be wiser in their activities. Folktale includes some cultural proceedings and accomplishments. It then becomes a store house of knowledge where members consult for their daily activities.

Culture is dynamic and should be adaptable to the contemporary social conditions. The present social condition with the level of moral decadence calls for the exploration of the past to redefine the present. Folktale is one of the several other oral traditions which serve as instrument to maintain peace and inculcating morals in the younger ones. Akporobaro (2006, p. 101) opines on African oral folktales that, *'folktale becomes a moral force that aesthetically directs the consciousness of the community towards the lore and cultivation of what is good and desirable'*. We then ask, what is folktale? Finnegan, (1978, p. 317) perceives folktale as, *a term to describe the supposed customs, beliefs, and culture of both the "early" man and his presumed equivalents today: contemporary 'primitive' peoples and the modern peasant*. This definition goes further that folktale is the study of survivals, with the implication that its subject-matter (which included folktale) was basically crude, primitive, and in many cases, orally passes to the new generations by the previous generations. It is evident that, folktale is traditional cultural expressions through which a group of people maintains and passes on its sense of beauty, identity and value from one generation to another. The stories reflect the cultural identity of such group and preserve the cultural elements embedded. It could be shortened that; folklore reflects the collective experience of society and it is the mirror which the community constantly faces. Folktale affirms cultural advantage and distinctiveness. Often, the purpose of folk stories among others is to teach a lesson or to describe some characteristics of one's culture. It continues to be a factor that binds societies and its philosophies. It will not be an overstatement to attribute part of the peace and mutual intelligibility of the past to the effective use of this oral tradition. It then becomes an established fact that the principal function of any narration is with the functioning of the society.

Literature oral or written, celebrates human multiplicity and laments human isolation. It reveals the universality of human character and emotion through the use of animals. Chamberlin (2003, p. 1), when commenting on folktales, pronounces that, "Our land, our language, our stories, our history, our heritage, our identity – our very being of who we are – are all tied up together, are all integrated". They all represent our existence and creature as human beings, irrespective of our race or colour. This shows that all these elements are interlinked and any attempt to challenge one is resulting in challenging all. Folk stories ensure continuity of communities and identities. These stories live long in the mind of the narrator as well as the listeners.

These folk stories are common in every society and have popular animal in such milieu as the main character. Tortoise, a common animal in the Yoruba area serves as the principal character in their narrations. Tortoise is known to be covetous, very smart, clever, and foolish in stories. These negative attitudes of tortoise are likened to human characters and attributes. Consequence of these outlooks on the tortoise serve as warning and cautions for human being. Animals serve as characters in folktales, these sets of animals behave like human beings, they talk, and act like human beings. This gives the narrator ability to achieve his desired goals. In folktales the characters are not well developed nor the location clearly described. The listeners do not bother on the genuineness, the ownership or place of origin of such a story. They are always concerned with the leitmotif, plot, and the mode of presentation of the story. This then serves as an added advantage to the narrators, as a colorful narration can be given without any suspicion or unwarranted question by the listening audience. What is paramount is that the narrator should be eloquent in his use of language, which is usually the language of the

immediate community. The narrator carries his/her audience along in the narration of the story. Using animals as characters in folktales makes the narrator to be explicit among other reasons. The good example is the fables of Jean de la Fontaine in the 17th century of France. Jean de la Fontaine, the fabulist is able to satirize the political power of the then despotic ruler, Louis XIV. This authoritarian ruler could not do any undesirable thing to this fabulist, partly because of the system embedded in fables employed. Man is able to learn consciously or unconsciously from the behaviours of these animals and laugh at himself in some cases. In the Yoruba community, folktale plays a very significant role in the upbringing of their younger ones. Folktale narration is usually considered part and parcel of their cultural and daily activities. After the daily activities, before retiring to bed, the Yoruba narrates stories, partly for relaxation and amusement after the day's work but principally to instill discipline in a relaxed atmosphere).

3. Utilities of Folktale

Folktale is a highly verbal and auditory art form. It serves different purposes across societies. It associates story images with familiar events and places in such a particular human culture. The folktales experience is both educative and powerful because it allows listeners the opportunity of controlling their understanding through a comparison, or negotiation, of real and fantasy worlds. The subsequent meanings gathered from the roles, motifs, and archetypes of stories have more impact when told orally (as opposed to reading them from a book). The most powerful part of the folktale, to the listeners is the way it is narrated and the relationship that develops between the teller and listeners. Listening audience also use the folktale event as an opportunity to connect and explore relationships. This act of narrating, combined with the content of the stories themselves, becomes a link that connects the learner with both interpersonal and intrapersonal realms. Folktale causes listeners to think more deeply about their cultural diversity and their own relationship to the social construction of identity. It enriches the listeners' ability to think critically and deeply about social issues and their social world. Summarily, it also boosts the listeners' ability to clarify and examine their value systems. As folk stories entertain, they also teach morals and norms of the society. Role of legends and stereotypes in social construction of communities; uses of folktale in contemporary everyday culture; social functionality of oral narration and many functions of these folkloristic have been neglected. This could be reasons for the amoral acts in societies. Folktale has played an important role in shaping tradition memory and public knowledge about tradition in Yoruba. This role remains uncaptured by any other modern discoveries. Those stories of tortoise in the primary schools of up to the late 70s remain assets for that generations. Folktale has many themes, what is more important to the story is that there is usually conflict between good and evil with good usually being rewarded and evil being punished. Usually, the end of the story represents a selfless act for the benefit of the common good. Selflessness is only one of the characteristics that can describe someone who gives of his or her time, talent and resources. Such a person who voluntarily gives for the improvement of the common good is a philanthropist. All these attributes continue to be treasured in folktale. The stingy ones also receive adequate compensation. Folktale teaches how to be good and to be a philanthropist. In all, good virtues are encouraged while the vices are discouraged. This constitutes some of the ways the societal norms are implanted in the younger ones in Yoruba community.

Folktale serves several purposes in the Yoruba circle. There is a particular Yoruba tale about etiquettes of marriage in Yoruba society, this tales involves a snake and a lady, Ajihun, the only child of her parents. This lady refused to listen to her parents' instruction as regarding whom to marry. This is like rejecting the culture that holds the society together. The Yoruba appreciates marrying their daughter to a person from well-known family. They frown on the

girl marrying a stranger. They do not attach any meaning to wealth when it concerns marriage, good name is cherished than affluence. They also do not appreciate or do not allow any of their children to choose (husband or wife) for herself or himself. This particular folktale expresses the communal aesthetic and ethical standards as regards marriage.

3.1. The story; Snake and Ajihun

Once upon a time, there lived a farmer with his wife, Olorisade.. They lived in a village. They planted yam, maize and plantain. This man was also a hunter, just for him and the wife. He did not sell any animals killed. He gave to neighbours. This makes the community to respect him for this generosity. They gave him a pseudonym, 'Sooresa', meaning giver at all period. This man has only a daughter, Ajihun, with his wife. They visited many herbal houses, both far and near. All resulted the same. The efforts of this couple to have another child proved abortive. They adored the only child considerably. They pampered her and did not allow anything to affect this lady. As years passed, this lady became matured and time for her to get married. These parents awaited their daughter to come with her suitor as all those proposed to her was rejected. She gave one reason or the other as excuses for not loving and not ready to marry any of those presented to her as husband. Many reasonable and well-meaning people in the town proposed to marry this lady, but to no avail. Ajihun continues to see one negative thing or the other in almost all. She aimed and promised to marry the wealthiest person. Her parents frowned at this greed nature of their daughter and they used to tell her the implications of such a notion.

The lesson derivable from the story is morally suitable for many ladies of nowadays. Many of them are after the prosperous ones. Some adore beauty and sugar-coated mouth. They marry affluence at the expense of their good livelihood. Many ladies do not allow their parents to have any saying in their marital matters.

The technological invention, the social medias, Facebook, WhatsApp, twitter and several others, constitute avenue where many youths of nowadays lay foundation of their matrimonial homes without any acquaintance of the spouse. This is one of the major problems in the present age. They consider their parents as being old and could not determine their suitors/ husbands. This folktale also shows the Yoruba perception on marriage, they cherish to marry within their culture. This allows them to have an in-depth history of the supposed husband of their daughter and the family they will build. It also allows them to control and retain their norms and values. The cultural perception on this could be clearly seen and the consequences attached to the culprits is faced by this lady. A known worthy family is cherished while any family with bad image is not to be one's relation. When a marriage is successful, it bears positive effects and when unsuccessful, it contributes negatively to the society. It then becomes imperative to control societal standards through marriage.

Another important message that is passed across by folktale is contentment, the Yoruba cherish this and preach such to their younger ones, to live without being in haste. They hold the belief that man is not destined to die prematurely, it is avariciousness that leads to premature demise. The story of housefly, the wife of antelope narrated below justifies this. The present rate of divorce in societies could be connected to the ways in which the couples meet, many on social media, WhatsApp, Facebook, 2go, and the like, some others come across themselves in social gatherings, all these avenues do not allow much historical scrutiny or any of such at all. The traditional ways of choosing marriage partners could be a factor that assisted to maintain an ideal family life structure and pave way for their mutual co-existence.

3.1. The story; *Housefly and Antelope*

In the olden days, the Housefly was to marry the Antelope. According to the tradition, the oracle was consulted before their marriage by the parents of the Housefly. Housefly was warned to be careful of uncleanness. She should not be covetous, to live long. This warning was given and that if properly followed, she would live long and reap the fruits of her labour. She married to antelope and they lived happily in the same house.

As the years passed, Housefly would eat all the food that her husband, Antelope provided for her without leaving any for the husband. This continued increasing and she even did the same for her husband's friends. She consumed all food she sighted. This became a serious issue for antelope. He made several attempts to resolve this issue but to no avail.

It was during this period that the king of the town, Ajalaye invited the hunters for a hunting expedition to celebrate the Ogun festival, all hunters assembled to perform the assignment of the king. Housefly came and started jumping on them one after the other biting them. She bit harder and they all noticed. They then ready for her with their staff. They hit her with staff and she fell on the ground.

This becomes a warning for male and female not to live a hurried life. People are warned to wait for their appointed time. Many individuals of the present generation hurry to have assets at all cost in a hurriedly manner, and it leads to their untimely death. The story teaches the audience to take life easy. It shows the spiritual belief of the tribe in question, Yoruba. Before the advent of the western cultures and adoption of these foreign civilizations, the Yoruba believe in consulting oracle before taking any vital step that could affect their future. The saying of such an oracle or a divine fortune-teller is also respected. The Housefly refused to yield to warning, the repercussion came and claimed its life. The younger ones will also learn their lessons from such a greed manner and what can be the result.

4. Suggestions

The roles played by folktale in societies before the advent of the foreign contact cannot be overlooked in this present era. Folktales serve as the means of propagating morals and preserving cultures across societies. The low patronage, if at all, of this self-sacrificing cultural aspect, results in all sorts of vices in our societies. We need to reintroduce and (re)imbibe the act of narrating fables in the curriculum in our schools. Doing such will assist in inculcating morals in the younger generations, and the cultural aspects of societies will also be properly channeled. If the act of narrating fables could be reintroduced, in the educational arena, the performing-art of storytelling will continue to compete with media and computers as a system of instruction. This will go a long way in reshaping the society.

The internet and the unethical films should also be controlled. By so doing these children will be interested in their cultural etiquettes. The government at all levels should mediate in the Nollywood industries to include folktales in their films either to complement a particular theme or to be acted solely. The radio and television houses should also have dedicated folktale-hours to make their audience feel the aroma of their culture. Not only will it be avenue to preach morals it will also serve as entertainment for humanity. The ministries of Youth and Information, or ministries of Sports and Culture, at the States and Federal levels, should also place emphasis on the annual presentation of folktales by the society, this could be done on phases, according to age or any other criteria. The best narrator should be made to enjoy a fantastic prize and meaningful consolation prizes to other participants. Parents should be educated the more on the need to train their wards to appreciate their own culture.

5. Conclusion

The paper highlights the importance of folktales with some examples in the Yoruba community. The tradition and philosophy of this tribe is shown in the folktales cited. Folktales serve as preventive measures against vices in the society. The effect of western civilization on the present generation coupled with the quest for wealth at all cost reveals the attendant effects in the society. Lack of adequate moral and cultural instructions constitute part of the insecurity and menace in the present-day activities. The paper concludes by making some suggestions on how to better the living conditions by (re) inculcating the moral values in the younger generations.

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