



AFRICAN TRADITIONAL FOLKTALES AS AN INTEGRATED CLASSROOM

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Abstract

African people generally are story telling people. These stories mirror more or less accurately the ideas of the African people and their general outlook upon life, conduct and morals. This piece attempted to study the nature of traditional folktales, its types and educative value. In this process, the phenomenological and hermeneutic methods of inquiry were employed. This research discovered that apart from the African system of education which is tied to roles such as farming, hunting, firewood gathering etc., the African got much more instruction through tales. It further recommended the employment of African traditional tales for the educational institutions in Africa, more importantly, at the primary and secondary levels.

Keywords: *African, folktales, instrument, education, traditional, societies, educative, experience.*

Introduction

J. B. Conant, an American philosopher and educationist, after visiting a number of educational institutions in the English speaking world says: "I do not believe that educational practices are an exportable commodity". By this, he did not mean that we cannot learn from current educational practices in countries other than ours. He rather emphasizes that education is sensitive to time and place. While some permanent features or attributes are observable, it is constantly changing, adapting itself to new demands and circumstances. This is true of education in traditional African societies. Traditional African societies adopted methods that were conterminous with the time and circumstances. One of the basic instruments used at the time for teaching the young was folktales. Folktales conveyed meanings using concrete circumstances. Thus, Brosnan (1976) observes that the African form of education was never by definition or the use of abstract terminology.

Apart from the African system of education which is tied to roles such as farming, hunting, firewood gathering etc., the African got much more instruction through tales (Kanu 2015a&b). This was in the main moral instruction given at night after the evening meal, on the way to farms or the stream, in the village square or at moonlight nights. These traditional tales were preserved orally, and are characteristically anonymous, timeless and placeless. Those to be instructed sat on logs within the compound and instruction was given by an elder or the head of the household. If the head of the household is not well or is absent, it is normal for the next in seniority to take his place. There are times when the boys sat with their father differently and the daughters with their mother, while the father told stories about war, the mother told stories that would help the girls fulfill their roles as mothers and wives. Shorter (1973) further avers that these stories were also used by Elders when judging cases in village courts. They tell them in such a way that people are able to pick up their meanings without any explanation. Thus, Zani (1972) observes that Africans are parable and story telling people, and their stories according to Rattray (1930) "mirror more or less accurately the ideas of the people and their general outlook upon life, conduct and morals" (p. ix).

Theoretical Framework

The Indigenous Wholistic Theory developed by Absalom (2010), is employed to underpin this study. This theory is based on the idea that indigenous peoples have worldviews and means of relating to the world. This worldview is rooted within indigenous epistemologies, cultures and traditions with the understanding that we are all related- each aspect relates with the whole: the dynamics of reality are based on the relationships and experiences of interrelationships and interconnections. It is wholistic in the sense that it encompasses the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical elements of being. It forms a framework to indigenize our thoughts and actions into active healing processes that simultaneously decolonize and indigenize. As a theory, it is whole, ecological, cyclical and relational.

Folktales Telling as an Integrated Classroom

Nwachukwu (2009) defines folktales as stories that teach moral lessons, often, with animals as characters. These stories are used to illustrate real life events and day-to-day experiences within African communities. The character and behavior of animals in these stories help children to understand basic moral principles such as respect for elders, responsibility

for self and others, and other important relationships within the community. During storytelling process, the child is often encouraged to generate his/her own answers to various moral questions posed in the stories. The elders (grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, teachers, and older siblings) generally tell these folktales to children.

Folktale telling in traditional African societies, in the perspective of Samson-Akpan (1986) can be "likened to an integrated classroom. Children, teenagers, adults attend and participate in it" (p. 67). It was guided by the dialogical method that gives proportionate places to the teacher (the elder- father or mother etc) and the student (children, slaves, student etc). It sees the teacher and the student as a community of inquiry; a community in the search for knowledge. Education and the educator are understood as mid-wife who is humane, self-effacing, caring, non-authoritative, collaborative and academically unassuming. It recognizes the rights of the human person in their proper perspective. Taking from Anih (2004), it allows for the free interplay of the values of critical thinking, creative thinking, caring thinking, lateral thinking, higher order thinking, systemic thinking and synergic thinking in the entire process of learning. Thus, the teacher becomes the *educatore* (facilitator-learner), and the student *educandi* (student-learner). In this dialogical process, both parties are learners, however, with a facilitator of the process. Dialogue is, here, an educational existential necessity. *Igwebuike* can be described as an interactive approach to learning, based on the interactive nature of the African universe. As Freire (1972) avers, without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education. Kanu (2015c) avers that this provides the basic atmosphere for free high extension capacity thinking. The teacher is not placed at an intimidating ivory tower; he is part of this community of inquiry, and they work together for the overall good of the whole through a critical and creative thinking that eliminates biased, distorted, provocative and prejudiced reasoning. As Conner (2004) observes, people learn best when they have control over their learning.

Types of African Folktales

1. **Cosmogonic Folktales:** they are myths of origin that explain the remotest origin of people, as well as the origin of their social, economic and political institutions. The Supreme Being is the principal actor in these myths. This is born out of the fact that most peoples in the world (Greeks and Africans) see the world as the effect of a creating power.

a. The Nri Tale

The Nri hegemony and its influence on Igbo history cannot be over emphasized. It is in this regard that Madubuko (1994) observes that the story of the Igbo people, no matter how briefly considered, would be incomplete if one omits the Eri-Nri contribution. Afigbo (1981) shows Eri clan as originating from the regions of Anambra River, at Aguleri; from there they fanned eastward and established various communities. According to Uzukwu (1988), Eri is the father of all Nri; and tradition says that he came from *Chukwu*. It is reported that the earth was not firm when he came to the world. To solve the problem of flood, he employed blacksmiths from Awka to use their bellows to dry the flooded land. There was no food as well for the people. To provide food, he prayed to God and God demanded that he should sacrifice his first son and daughter to him. After the sacrifice and burial of his son and daughter, yam and palm tree began to grow out of the place where he buried his first son while vegetables and cocoyam grew out of the place where he buried his daughter. Since yam germinated from where Eri's first son was buried, it is interpreted that yam is the resurrected son of Eri, and since it was given to man to sustain life, it is regarded as life itself.

Madu (2004) observes a cosmological drama in the Nri myth. It reveals the dynamics of the cosmic drama between god, man, land and crops. Eri, the civilization hero enjoys a special relationship with *Chukwu*, and through Eri's sacrifice, humanity now enjoys a special relationship with the land which offers food for its sustenance. The ritual act performed by Eri established a covenant between Eri, his descendants and *Chukwu*. From the sacrifice of Eri, we come to discover why yam is very prominent in Igbo sacrifice and life, a situation which warrants its

annual elaborate festival throughout Igbo land. The growing of yam from the spot where Eri's first son was buried accounts for the respect given to *okpara* (first son) in Igbo life, he is in fact considered to be closer to the ancestors.

2. **Etiological Folktales:** moving away from natural phenomenon, they seek to explain the sacred rites and customary practices of a people. Such as the taboos of a clan etc.

a. **Kiigbo Kiigba and the helpful spirits**

There was a man named Kiigbo Kiigba who lived a very long time ago in a little Yoruba village. Like many of the villagers, he was a very hardworking farmer, but he had one major flaw he was very stubborn. In fact, his name in Yoruba means one who does not hear nor accept?, since he neither listens to anybody nor consider anybody's suggestions.

Like many villages in the ancient Yoruba world, the village was inhabited by both people and spirits, but to avoid disputes amongst these two groups a law was passed to enable spirits to roam the land on certain days when all people would stay home.

As you might have guessed, Kiigbo Kiigba would not obey this law and would insist on going about his normal business on days elected for spirits. On the first day that people were asked to stay in their homes while spirits were out, Kiigbo Kiigba picked his hoe and cutlass and headed to his farm. Once there he began to till the land in preparation for planting his yams. He had been working for a while when he heard ethereal voices booming out from around him saying; who are you and what are you doing? He answered? I am Kiigbo Kiigba and I am tilling my land; Alright, we will help you; the voices boomed back and suddenly, hundreds of hoes appeared and started to tills the land. In a little jiffy, the entire farm was tilled and Kiigbo went back home.

On the second day that people were asked to stay home while the spirits were out, Kiigbo Kiigba chose to go to his farm to begin planting his yams. He had barely started when the voices boomed out saying; who are you and what are you doing? He answered, I am Kiigbo Kiigba

and I am planting my yams. Alright, we will help you, the answer came and in a jiffy, all the yam seedlings had been planted in neat heaps. Kiigbo went back home.

The third time when people were asked to stay home, Kiigbo Kiigba headed to his farm to harvest his yams. As he started to dig up the first yam, the now familiar voices boomed out saying; who are you and what are you doing? He answered, I am Kiigbo Kiigba and I am harvesting my yams. Alright, we will help you, the voices said and in a jiffy, all the yams in the farm had been dug up and placed in a big heap.

Kiigbo who just now had the opportunity to look at the one yam he had dug up realized that it was not yet ripe for harvest, and in fact, all the yams that had been dug up were not yet ready for harvest. As a good farmer, Kiigbo Kiigba would have examined a few yams and decided whether to give the yams more time to mature or continue with the harvest. But now, it was too late and his entire crop of yams had been ruined by these helpful spirits.

Kiigbo Kiigba cried, Woe is me? As he hit his head with both hands in sorrow. The spirits asked? Who are you and what are you doing? He cried? I am Kiigbo Kiigba and I am hitting my head in sorrow? Alright, we will help you; the spirits answered and immediately, a hundred hands appeared and started to beat Kiigbo Kiigba on his head.

3. **Moral Folktales:** These are tales told to instill moral behaviour. Amali (2014) avers that "Moral tales point to attitudes and effects of behaviour. They demonstrate that good behaviour is positively rewarded and bad behaviour is punished" (p. 92). Paul (1992) adding to the perspective of Amali, argues that "they teach on why it is not good to be disobedient, greedy, lazy, etc." (p. 13). Achufusi (1986) and Adeyemi (1997) opine that they are usually presented with a theme, always centred on the moral lesson to be taught.

- a. **The three brothers and the pot of porridge**

Three brothers were traveling through the dense rain forest jungle. They had been traveling on foot for almost a full day and night was falling. They needed a suitable place to rest for the night, a place where they would be safe from prowling animals of the night. They were in

luck because before darkness fell, they spotted a little isolated hut in the distance. When they arrived at the hut, they met a kindly old woman who invited them in and offered them a place to spend the night.

The old woman offered them some porridge which she was cooking in an iron pot over some firewood. The brothers declined for they were very exhausted and also did not want to impose on this old woman who living alone, had cooked enough porridge only for one person. The old woman gave them some mats and showed them into a room where they could lay down and have a good night rest. Soon, the entire hut was dark and everyone in it was asleep.

Sometime in the night, the youngest of the three brothers woke up and he was very hungry. His older brothers had declined the offer of some supper and he had just gone along, but he was really hungry. So he went out into the kitchen to see if any of the porridge remained and indeed, there was enough porridge in there for one person. It appeared that the old woman had not eaten any of it, she must have been keeping it for the next day. It wouldn't harm anybody if he ate just a little bit of it, and it would certainly do him a lot of good. So he ate a little bit. Then a little bit more, and even more until it was all gone. Realizing his folly, he decided to cover it up and went out to pick some stones to put in the pot. He hoped the old woman would not notice. The three brothers were up early the next morning to continue on their journey. They bade farewell to the old woman and thanked her for her kindness.

The old woman discovered the stones in her pot soon after the brothers left and immediately set out after them. Even though she was very old, she could move as fast, or as maybe even faster than any young man since she was able to catch up with the three young men. She accused them of stealing her porridge and filling her pot with stones, at which the eldest brother who spoke for them sincerely denied. The old woman though was certain that one of them performed the deed, so she challenged them to take a test. They went to a nearby river which had a log laying across it. Each one of them would walk across the river

on the log while singing a song which the woman taught to them. They would each sing this song in Yoruba:

Ti m ba je koko arugbo: If I ate the the old woman's cocoyam

Ki okun gbe mi, ki okun la mi: Let the sea take me

Ki okun gbe mi si erigidi ofun: Let the sea take me to

The first two brothers walked confidently across the river singing the song. But the youngest brother so scared as he walked and sang. His step faltered several times and he eventually fell into the river.

4. **Historical Folktales:** they speak of heroes and heroines, who are presented as having gotten their power or wisdom from the Supreme Being.

5. **Explanatory Folktales:** Questions arise from time to time as people continue to encounter reality. Explanatory tales are employed to help people to understand why reality is the way it is.

a. Why mosquitoes buzz in people's ears

If you live in the rain forest climates of West Africa, you will be very familiar with the buzz of the mosquito in your ears on hot humid evenings. Even if there's only one mosquito and only one person in an area as large as a football field, the mosquito always seems to find that person's ear and buzz in it. If you've slapped yourself in the face because of a mosquito, you know what I'm talking about. Here's the story that explains the mosquito's attraction to the ear.

A very long time ago when Ear was a beautiful woman and ready for marriage, there were several suitors wooing her. There were big creatures, there were small creatures. There were fast and sleek creatures and there were slow ones. But they all professed their love for Ear and demonstrated their skills and there was such an impressive array of skills that Ear had a difficult time making a decision. Then along came mosquito. I would like you to be my wife, proposed Mosquito.

Ear was so offended by this affront. Look around you! she cried. Of all the people and creatures in the whole world, what makes you think I can entertain such a thought?? Ear was distressed. Marry you? she

continued. You will be dead before the week is over. You're not strong, you're weak and I will never marry you!?

Ear was exhausted from this tirade and she fell into her seat, fanning herself vigorously like she was trying to get any image of Mosquito out of her head. Meanwhile, Mosquito was really hurt by all that ear said. It was very embarrassing to be talked to like that in front of all the other creatures who were whispering to each other and giggling. Apparently, they all agreed with Ear. Dead before the week is over, thought Mosquito as he slunk away. We ll see about that.

And from that day forward, whenever Mosquito sees Ear, he flies up to her and says? *Emi re, mi o ti ku?*, which in English means ?Here I am, I am not dead.

The Educative Value of African Folktales

The educative value of African folktales is wholistic, multilateral and integrative. Stories are capable of engaging us on so many levels, and because of its logical flow, we easily retain it in memory for use as needed. It has all the stuff we care about; people, problems, solutions. A story is really just a bunch of information organized in the form of problems we want to know the answers to, and resolutions that give us hope. Odetola and Ademola (1987) aver that stories are very effective in imparting knowledge because they engage our imaginations, our hearts and minds at the same time.

Thus, Fafunwa (1974) avers that "the aim of traditional African education is multilateral and the end objective is to produce an individual who is honest, respectful, skilled, co-operative and conforms to the social order of the day" (p. 13). African folktales contain within them educational orientations that directs the mind of the listener towards the good and away from the evil. The significance of folktales in educating the child is centered on the fact that each time it is told, it arouses the child mentally- they could forget any other thing, but hardly do they forget stories told to them. The importance of these stories is that each time they remember them, they also remember the lesson or instruction that goes with the story. Thus, Ezeude (2009) observes that when students are told a story rather than read it, they retain more information from the story and are better able to retell it to someone else.

Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the fundamental place of Africa traditional folktales in the communication of knowledge in traditional African societies. It describes the setting for folktales telling in traditional African societies as an integrated class room or a community of inquiry, that which reflects the modern system of education often referred to as the anagogical method of education. The idea of an integrated classroom provides the conducive atmosphere necessary for learning. This piece further studied the different dimensions or types of African traditional folktales and their educative value. While revealing the educative content value of these tales, this piece recommends that it should be employed in our educational systems in Africa to enhance a better communication between the teacher and his pupils. Even though it might be difficult to have our education system return back to the pre-colonial era, there are still ways that the primary elements of traditional educational pedagogy can be reintroduced to fit into contemporary culture. For instance, policies could be made for media houses to introduce folklore programmes like Tales by Moonlight of NTA, Broadcasting Corporation of Abia State's Story Land and *Nti Nara Rie*. These are programmes that children do not like to miss. Such programmes could be a vital means of educating the young. Even in schools, traditional stories that would help in the transmission of the African cultural heritage should be taught or told the students in class.

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