

Tortoise, Sage of Sages and the Rest of Us: A Didactic Exploration of Folkloric Materials

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The towering resourcefulness of literature lies in its capacity to transpose real and imagined materials (stories) into value system by impacting on all aspects of life. Folktales fall into the category of the unconfirmed or anonymous stories handed down through generations and it provide archetypes or parallels to reality. This paper focuses on the contents of two selected folktales with a view to transposing their anecdotes. The finding of the paper is that such folktales are adaptable for communal orientation, education, and values. It is therefore recommended that critics should continually harness the inherent values of folktales as useful illumination on human behaviours and interpersonal relationship.

Keywords: folktales, value, archetypes, anecdotes, stories

Introduction

Oral traditions and ethnic history often serve as sources from which creative artists draw materials for imaginative reinvention. Thus from natural events to scientific breakthrough which Obafemi (2001, p. 2) referred to as “signs of time”, the literary artist “immerses himself in sciences and civilization in order to fashion out an artistic product as his contribution towards the growing appraisal of humanity”. Obafemi (2001, p. 7) argued further that

for literature to play this combative role, it must have an authentic and genuine sense of history—history of society and cultures and history of the totality of human and natural contribution, and from there it can assert and etch a pathway to the future. Hence literature must cross borders into other disciplines in order to meaningfully apprehend the totality of human culture.

Cunningham and Reich (1982, p. 1) are of the opinion that cultural values are not only invention but products of nature’s symmetric manipulation by man. Abubakar (2005, p. 1) expanded this notion by arguing that it is the human intellectual efforts that are translated into value system. Culture connotes value system and existential beliefs which encompass the physical, intellectual, and emotional components.

Furthermore, culture is a conscious and collective resolution of a group, race, or people functioning on the pedestal of aesthetic, beauty, and systematic ordering of the society. Thompson (1991, p. 21) supported the above opinion that culture is the creation of people which is as well transmitted by people and in the end shapes every person’s way as may belong to that culture. The ultimate aim of cultural invention is to achieve socio-political and material evolution of mankind. Using Thompson’s words, culture has its own assumption about things, such

as purpose of human existence, relationship with God, labour, rights, and family ties. Abubakar concludes that the systematic manipulation and the resultant equilibrium and values are manifest in pre-literate Africa. This view is supported by Achebe (1964, p. 58) that Africa sometime had a philosophy of great depth, value, and beauty.

Basically, this cultural milieu was embedded in the oral artistic traditions of the African people. Oral medium has its pre-eminence in Africa before the introduction of the written medium by her colonizers. This is supported by Achebe that African societies had a philosophy of great depth value and beauty which in turn served as oral sources. These oral sources abound in what Kunene (1976, p. 107) called allegory, parables, etc. They are genres which

... can be seen as a continuation of the tradition of oral narrative, particularly of the use of the fable as a commentary on human affairs. Allegory owes its effectiveness perhaps largely to the fact that commonly accepted experiences of life with their related consequences or associations, are used as a surface argument for closely parallel situation which would seem to be incontrovertible once the surface or illustrating argument is accepted.

The adoption of oral art forms is not unconnected with the fact that these creative works by Africans are by-products of cultural matrix which gave birth to and nourished the maturation of these artists. It shapes and sharpens their creative imagination. This development in the words of Ohaeto (1998, p. 11)

is not strange because when a society comes out of an oral tradition into a written form, continuity is not lost and the changes are often gradual. Thus there is a manifestation of coexistence and mingling of both the oral and written phenomena in Nigerian poetry.

Commenting further on the fusion or adoption of oral tradition into the written medium, Bodunde (2001, p. 36) says it is a relevant artistic development:

Needless to say, oral forms have their own existence and functions within the culture. They are often used in written literature to perform similar functions. The act of correlating the artistic and social functions of existing oral genres with creative possibilities in written[works] for instance, makes sense because these forms have succeeded through ages in conditioning certain valuable means of cognizing and humanizing the society.

Lindfors (1973, p. 4) strengthened this position further that African writing when done in foreign language and Western literacy still bear indelible cultural orientation and style that is African.

Art consists in what people have as their cultural heritage and orientation. It reflects people's peculiar way of doing things, especially in the area of value and ethic. This is usually so because art in the words of Ibitoye (1994, p. 76) "has tended to follow a generally identifiable pattern of responding appropriately to socio-political milieu in which it has existed". Chants, riddles, jokes, narratives, celebration, songs, music, and dance are put together by every society for entertainment, education, and reflection. These cultural activities are practised to make comments on their existence and survival as a people. In orature and written literature, it is the techniques that are different. Put in a broader sense, the basic distinguishing feature of a work of art or a literary piece is the aesthetics. That is the ornamental or embellishing artistic techniques built into or embedded in a work of art. It is the aesthetics that differentiates artistic creations from other forms. Aesthetics is the sum total of values, characters, themes, or meanings in a literary piece. This is what C. S. Pepper (1970) referred to as "a science, a department of the science of value". Aesthetic appreciation of a work of art must take into account as suggested by Horace (1965) both the edification and delight function.

Orature is a complex field requiring the ingenuity of the oral artist. The oral artist makes use of various verbal techniques which are in turn put down in writing by the literary artist. For instance, oral art forms, such as noted in verbal rendering can only be represented in written poetry using rhyme. Oral performance is reduced to writing; a line may not be important on its own. Apt translation and copious instances of borrowing and transposition must be employed. Eldred Jones (1992, pp. 1-7) maintained that writers of African background who adapt oral art forms do not only succeed but that it helps them project their ideas, themes, and visions, which are global and wider in application and concerns. He says African writers do not only draw inspiration from oral resources but

the ethnic background offers them the metaphor for their vision. What the writers see around them as they survey “their political and social mismanagement, corruption, violent upheavals and general misery. It is interesting that in looking to the future, some of the most hard-headed (writers) take backward glance at the cohesion which characterized small ethnic societies. This is not in the best of them mere stagnant nostalgia but a search for an ethic nurtured within a small idealist community and spread by means of a moral revolution throughout the nation and even more widely.

Basically, African societies are historically oral whose socio-cultural activities thrived on oral performance before they encountered colonialism. Oral aesthetics are those traditions which are essentially performative in nature as underlining the socio-political and cultural life of a people. Lindfors (1973, p. 3) modified this definition of oral aesthetics to mean “folklore in broadest sense to include popular beliefs, stereotypes and verbal performance styles as well as folktales, proverbs and forms of patterned oral art”.

From the above, oral aesthetics can be viewed from various aspects especially from the point of view of content and form. These are what can be called oral formulae as coined by the duo of Milman Parry (1930, pp. 73-147) and Albert Lord (1960). These oral formulae Na’Allah says are “simply the pattern in which the composed songs are put. The formulae extend to the theory of simultaneous improvisation”.

The duo of Parry and Lord conceive of oral literature as prominent in every culture of the world. Making reference to the artistic pattern and ingenuity of the oral performer, they conclude that every oral singer inherits the rendition pattern of his oral genre and that his job is only to formulate songs that fit into those patterns. It is this generic oral pattern that makes the job of the oral singer or poet easier and faster. It makes him able to simultaneously compose and deliver (as cited in Na’ Allah, 1994, p. 101).

In adapting oral aesthetics what the literary artist does is to employ principles of traditional aesthetics and rhetorical devices of the oral mode in written poetry. Or as Lindfors puts it “... the employment of the idiosyncrasies of local cultivation without losing sight of the vast common-ground from which all living art draws its primary strength” (1973, p. 3). Extending this justification further, Eucher (1966, p. 143) gave some conditions which the literary artist must fulfill to include four possible areas of influence as technique, delivery, subject matter, and the resources of language.

The meeting point between people’s life, their social well-being and their art production was the fictional world as extracted or reflected of the real world. Even with the coming of the alternative means of communication, the art either in the written or oral means thrives together without prejudice. This opinion is corroborated by Sekoni (1988, p. 47) in his observation that it is an incontrovertible point that man’s analysis and discussion of himself and his habitation, the community is usually through creation of the fictive world, an extraction from the reality. And that this is a universal trait. He goes further to strengthen this position:

It has been demonstrated that man creates fiction when there is no writing through oral story—telling, chanting, and performance, that he writes plays, poems and novels when his civilization includes writing and further creates similar forms for radio and television as soon as these gadgets become available.

This is brought about as noted above through the created world in stories, novels, and plays in print or electronic. The ultimate aim of these creations is to inform, reflect, expose, educate, satirize, condemn, or commend, persuade as embedded in daily interaction of man with his fellows or his environment. These functions are summarised by Sekoni as reinforcement of existing values; rationalisation for the change and transformation of existing values. These functions are universal and akin to cultural groups ever to be in existence not only in Africa but all over the world.

Supporting this claim as well, the duo of Bukenya and Nandawa (1992, as cited in Ajadi, 1999) conclude that the oral performer exhibits the traits of accurate observation, vivid imagination, and ingenious expression which characterize his performance. These characteristics are found within the repertoire of oral artistic enterprises.

Such has been the case with literary development of Africa. Thus works produced either by indigenous or foreign artists about Africa are referred to as African literature. This classification is succinctly captured by Ajadi (1994, p. 119) who justifies why this is so:

A people's culture and tradition inevitably colour their existential experience and definitely inform their creative operations in life. This explains why modern African literature is being under-girded by African tradition, and necessarily calls for a clear perception and conscious utilization of criteria appropriate and relevant to the understanding and absorbing of the values and aesthetics of African literature and the African art in general.

Broadly speaking, oral art forms are a total sum of way of life of Africa or a community that is pristinely oral which has no alternative means of communication or had the written tradition introduced to it. It is Africa's existential creed, attitude, and forms. These in turn aggregate Africa's philosophy, behaviour, psychology, and interrelationships. The oral art tradition underlines Africa's judiciary, the entertainment enterprise as well as the people's modes of dressing, speaking, eating, greeting, their disciplinary and reward systems.

It encompasses the two aspects of culture as defined by Abiola Irele (1991, p. 52) as objective culture and inner aspects of culture. In other words, the oral art forms underline both the spiritual and material ethos of the people. Above all, oral aesthetic is everything African based on belief system, values, morals, and way of life as encoded or embedded in their interactional input and output.

Folktale, Literature, and Reality

In coming to terms with the meaning of folktale, two terms or concepts ought to be delineated or clarified. One of them is "folk" while the second one is "tale". Folk refers to a people sharing tribal sentiments, traditions, craft, arts, legends, customs, superstitions, and among others. Folk also refers to common people of a country whose lifestyle reflects their origin, race, history, and culture. On the other hand, tale refers to story that is exciting and imaginary; it also refers to a usually imaginative narrative about series of events that are believed to be untrue. There is no way we discuss or attempt to explain folktale without a recourse to folklores. While folktale refers to stories about rustic people who share blood, clan, and culture, folklore refers to customs, traditions beliefs and sayings. Folklore encompasses the totality of folk culture, lifestyle, and linguistics. Its types include myth, legend, lore, tradition, etc.

Scholars have identified different aspects of folktales, such as historical, universal, mythic, trickster stories, political, satires, and anecdotal tales. To a larger extent, the moon-lit night narratives told by adults to children or those riddles and jokes sessions in which adults are engaged when they gather children under the tree, in the frontage of houses etc. have greatly influenced the writing and production of fiction, such as novels, novella, and short stories of any kind by African writers. The enrichment of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and a host of other African works of art is a testimony to such influence. Most novels printed written in indigenous languages in Nigeria and Africa share a lot of form with the folktale as abound in various cultures of the African people. For instance, novels published by D. O. Fagunwa such as *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Olodumare* (translated by Wole Soyinka as *Forest of a Thousand Daemons* and Gabriel Ajadi as *The Forest of God*) illustrate stories that present a blend of political, moral and mythic tales. Amos Tutuola *Palm Wine Drinkard* or *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is another good example of narrative that is laden with tales.

As emanating from historical narratives, Duve Nakolisa justifies the classification that such tales that tell the history of ethnic groups are historical tales. "In many parts of Africa, tales generally speaking, are the history of the ethnic group and the ethnic portrayal of social interactions within the environment of that history".

Citing the story of Bayajidda, Khalid Imam (2010) is of the opinion that tales might be telling the histories of some ethnic groups. Bukar (2013, p. 1), however, asserted that there is no such dividing gulf between history and folk tale but that both "history and folk tale are twin rivers which meet at the confluence of the communal imagination". Nakolisa (2006, pp. x-xi) went further to distinguish different types of tales in this way. Folk tales as grand tales are neither

of the origin of the people of the area, nor part of the reversed exploits of any great ancestor. They do not belong to the Canon of Myths and legends, usually associated with dynasties and illustrious genealogies. Those ones belong to history, even where some of them sound somewhat like folktales. Indeed, under open unbiased examination, many of such "histories" share canonical qualities with the simplest tale. That is why I assert that mythologies are generally the grandest form of the folktale tradition of any society, and the inspirational spring board for the ordinary tale.

Although scholars gave the various types of folktales, it must be pointed out that the types are interrelated as they share a lot in common. As an artistic material, folktale falls into the prosaic genre of literature and it is usually a piece of continuous writing that is not in verse form. The story is neither verifiable nor investigatable but one built on cause relationship. Folktale develops or unfolds through a number of factors which include characterization, speech, music, and setting (time and space). The choice of words will depend on the nature of the tale and the lesson inherent in it. In African setting, folktale constitutes a very rich sub-genre of orality which the pre-colonial or pre-industrial African community was proud of. For instance, folktale is called "alo" in Yoruba and "tatsuniya" in Hausa.

Folktale has its universal appeal because of its artistic richness. Folktale entertains just as it is well adaptable for moral and political lessons that the audience or reader may draw from it. Usman (2013, p. 1) proudly referred to folktale as Africa's legacy to the entire world. He traced the spread of folktales to the other parts of the world through transatlantic slave trade and transactions. And that through forceful capturing of Africans into slavery, the culture of folktale was spread and dispersed.

The history of Africa, which includes forceful transplanting of a huge number of its population into slavery on other continents, helped greatly in transporting and transplanting African tales, which many scholars rightly observed, were told with little variation in those foreign climes largely because the tales were spread by word of mouth. Folkloric tradition is

thus a very rich and fertile legacy that Africa bequeathed to many parts of the world especially North America, South America, and the West Indies.

Folktale serves as a means of preservation of culture and tradition and a means through which young ones are nurtured and weaned. Story-telling is also a form of entertainment and relaxation. The audience which could be diverse—children and adult usually share a moment of emotional and moral reflection on their life, race, and experiences. Through the telling and retelling of stories, the African is able to protect the cultural milieu of his people since folktale encompasses all aspects of tradition and civilization of a particular ethnic group.

Folktale remains one of the processes or narratives with which orality/literature engages the society. As a cultural product, the literary artist immerses himself in the culture of his people, and that of others for the coloration of his product in order to reflect their sensibilities and mode of interaction. Folktales and other oral practices are imbued with artistic aesthetics which are transmuted or transposed beyond surface manifestation of the lore. These are psychological, socio-cultural, political, and spiritual references that define human interaction and realities of existence. In the hand of an oral/literary artist is the folktale being harnessed as parallels for symbolic, allegorical, and metaphorical interpretations and references. The utilitarian form of the art must reflect reality but not as history or sociology. The artist veils his reference through imaginative suggestions but without losing sight of the target. Thus, folktale in its rich and multiple form is readily available for the artist (oral or literary) to tap from and adapt for societal consumption.

Tales and Methods of Data-Gathering

Two tales have been selected for the study. These tales were sourced from Pa Maliki Pajepolobi. On the author's part, the tales are being narrated in English to cater for translation. Since the tales have been handed down in oral form, the main job here is to translate and transcribe by narrating them in English. The other major assignment here is to explore didactic lessons perceived to be inherent in the tales.

1st Tale: Mr. All of You

Once upon a time, Mr. Tortoise and his friends who were mainly birds travelled to the heavenly Kingdom. They include the one who is among the tribes of birds such as eagle, parrot, and dove. Others were Aiyekoto, Agbe, Aluko, Kolikoli among others. They were about 20 in number that travelled with Mr. Tortoise as the only strange specie and the leader of the delegation. On their way to heaven, Tortoise had requested that the birds borrow him feathers, so that he could fly like them. This request was granted and Tortoise was not only able to fly along with his bird friends; he also became the most decorated and most beautiful person among the delegation.

As they reached heaven, Mr. Tortoise came up with a shocker in a rare show of his another moment of treachery and cunning. He told his friends that he would like to be given the title "Mr. All of You". The unsuspecting team agreed to grant him the title without questioning. And so they reached their place of destination and were warmly welcomed by their hosts. No sooner they got there than Mr. Tortoise's treachery began to unfold. The first time they were served food, it was served under the title "All of You".

Steward: I have been directed to serve this food to All of You.

Delegates: Thank you.

As soon as the steward disappeared, Tortoise turned to his friends addressing the delegates.

Tortoise: Friends, this food is meant for me alone as it to steward had said that the food was meant for All of You, and you know that is my name. Don't worry, yours will soon come.

Tortoise had put up the same attitude and antics throughout their seven-day stay in heaven. The birds had to go out looking for what to eat in the neighbourhood throughout their stay. Mr. Tortoise, in his greed and selfishness, was fed beyond measure as he treacherously cornered all manners of food served the delegates. He became greedy that he had a lot to waste even to the disappointment and amazement of his friends and benefactor.

However, nemesis caught up with him when it became difficult for Mr. Tortoise to return home at the end of the visitation. Guess what could have happened! His friends and now victims requested that Tortoise return their feathers that he borrowed from them.

Birds: Mr. All of You, could you please return our feathers?

Tortoise: Friends, why? How? You won't do this to me, your bosom friend?

Birds: You are All of you and not All of us. So return our feathers, please.

Mr. Tortoise was forcefully stripped of the feathers which he had borrowed from them. It was a disgraceful moment for Mr. All of You as the once most beautiful leader of delegation became naked, revealing his ugly torso. The travail of Mr. Tortoise assumed a tragic dimension when he had no option than to jump down from heaven. Unfortunately for him, he did not only crash land, and he also smashed himself against a palm tree stump injuring himself in the process. It is no wonder that Tortoise goes about in such a dilapidated torso owing to the injury he sustained in the incident.

Tale II: Mr. Wise

It happened that Mr. Tortoise, not done with Mr. All of You incident, decided to prove to the whole world that he was the wisest person on earth. In his self-styled wisdom, he decided to pack the available pieces of wisdom into a gourd for keep. He was giving to hang the gourd on the tree top so that no man would be able to have access to wisdom without taking permission from Mr. Tortoise.

Unfortunately for him, he had hung the gourd around his neck with the big guard resting on his belly which prevented him from climbing the tree. For several hours spreading into days and days spreading into months, Mr. Wise could not climb the tree let alone hang the gourd on tree top.

One day when it was apparent that Mr. Tortoise had become helpless when the snail came to his rescue:

The Snail: Tortoise, what are you doing under the tree? I have observed you for quite some days but I could not figure out your mission there.

Tortoise: Don't mind me; I have caged "all wisdom" in this gourd hoping to hang it on the tree top for my keep, but for almost three months now, I could not climb the tree with the gourd.

How do you mean? Cage "all wisdom" for your keep? You must be crazy! How come that you couldn't climb the tree?

Tortoise: I don't know! Can't really understand.

It was at that point that the snail instructed him to swap the gourd to his back for him to be able to climb the tree. The snail scolded him for ignorance pointing out to him that there was no way he could place the gourd in front that he would not have the gourd between him and the tree stem.

Mr. Tortoise became disappointed in himself. He headed the snail's instruction and climbed up as directed. Bout of annoyance, it was when he got to the tree top that he violently threw away the gourd instead of hanging it as planned letting out the "guarded" wisdom escape to the surface of the world. This was how wisdom became spread with no man to lay claim to its ownership.

Lessons

Folktale is a form of education borrowed from the traditional or pre-colonial or pre-literate society into the modern time. Though largely taken to be false, it is adaptable for moral lessons. As remarked by Joy Bell (2013, p. v),

Fiction is written with reality and reality is written with fiction. We can write fiction because there is reality and we can write reality because there is fiction; everything we consider today to be myth and legend, our ancestors believed to be history and everything in history includes myths and legends...

Everything about us is a story—our politics, our religious practices, and our interpersonal relationship—all will later become story in another moment to come. The utility of the tales narrated above resides in their formal and functional values. There are pieces of fiction with realistic flavour if explored. They have been narrated just as Aleksandra Wootton (2013, p. v) remarked that: “The more stories I study, the more I begin to suspect that there is only one story, and that we are, all of us, engaged in telling it”.

In terms of form, the tales given to the study present four different characters whose roles are interwoven. Mr. Tortoise towers above them and he is at the centre of the tales. Instead of us to refer to Tortoise as the hero, he ends up as the villain and the antagonist. Many of our political leaders—village head, Obis, Obas, Emirs, etc., fall into this clans of tortoise. In the modern era of democratic governance, the governors, legislators presidents, etc., are not better at all. They assume the position of “MR. All of You” even in democracy. Our traditional rulers and democratic or elected leaders are antagonists and greedy fellows who superintend over communal largesse and nation’s wealth, appropriating such for their household.

Just like Mr. Tortoise, these leaders feed fat on the commonwealth and at the expense of the citizenry; they covet and gluttonously devour what should have gone round the citizens on equity basis. Their language and antics resemble that of tortoise. Mr. All of You. These are despicable characters who push themselves to the corridor of power and headship, but they are morally bankrupt and unfit to be leaders men.

In the second tale, it is no relief as well as the tale alludes to some individuals and a few of us who assume superiority of knowledge. Some persons delude themselves by arrogating authority and wisdom to themselves (the nobody-else can do it passion). And this syndrome abounds everywhere—governance, teaching, administration, legislation, name it. They are as ignorant as Mr. Tortoise because no one owns the universe and let no man delude himself that he has the sole control of the instrument of power, talisman or the control of violence.

The tales about Mr. All of You and the Wise man illustrate that the tales might be lies, they allude to truth. Nobody, no nation, no habitation is an island unto itself, it needs others. Solutions to problems confronted by humanity are unending and cannot all be supplied by a single person, or a single race. The story goes on as life is on the continuum.

Conclusion

The paper has succeeded in exploring the value of the tales in relation to man. It has afforded us anecdotal narratives pointing towards the value of our corporate existence as human being. The interdependence codes are real for man to interact with his fellow human being and control his environment for the benefit of all.

The heterogeneous nature of Nigeria remains the strength of Africa’s most populous nation. Our leader should strive to harness the diverse cultural resources, religious dimensions and human capacities with which Nigeria is endowed. There should be neither Mr. All of You or the wisest man, among our leaders, followers and the ethnic groups.

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