

EDUCATIONAL RELEVANCE OF YORUBA FOLKTALES FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Western scholars have had an erroneous belief that African literary art is nothing but a celebration of obscenity, barbarism and archaism. As an oral and literary art, Yoruba folktales have some educational values because it impacts on the moral development of a child. Our aim in this paper is to examine the educational relevance of Yoruba folktales in national development. Empirical data are collected from two villages – Badeku in Ona – Ara Local Government Area of Oyo State and Aba Ebu at Moniya in Akinyele Local Government area of Oyo State. It is disheartening to see how Yoruba folktales have been relegated to the background in national development project. The paper establishes the fact that Yoruba folktales have educational and moral values that can contribute to national development. It is observed that the educational relevance of Yoruba folktales can be felt globally if their subject matter and content are appropriated into modern technologies. Owing to the psychic effect of Yoruba folktales on Yoruba children, Psychoanalysis forms the theoretical orientation of this paper.

Key words: folktales; literature; education; domains of learning and Yoruba children

Introduction

Literature is a universal phenomenon which wears specific cloaks of language, culture, attitudes and expectations in different parts of the world (Adebayo, 2010:3). Before the advent of colonial powers in Africa, there had been one form of literature or the other. Evidence of this argument is seen in various oral narratives and performance poetry that were prevalent in virtually all African villages. What the colonial powers and their agents did through westernization of African culture and education is to change the spectrum of African literary art from the verbal mode to a written mode. Thus, “any discourse which makes claims that Africa had no form of literature before the coming of the white imperialists is misguided, false and uncharitable to history” (Idiga, 2008:1).

With the introduction of the western-form of literature, a sort of disservice has been done to African oral art with the inclusion of Yoruba folktales. The cultural and linguistic nuances of the story (particularly in the course of narration) are lost during transcription and documentation. The present writer therefore maintains that Africa did not only suffer physical colonization of its continent, but it also suffers literary colonization of its oral and performing arts. From the colonial period, different aspersions have been cast against African literature by the misinformed western and the hybridized African scholars who have biased view of their culture.

The colonization of African minds and literature has brought up various prejudicial views about the assessment and critique of African literature. The unwarranted and unimpressive attitude of African critics towards African literature is as a result of the fact that “most African critics are the offsprings of western education and civilization – indeed, a product of ‘ox-bridge’ university” (Sesan, 2008:85). Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike (1980:32) complain above the promethean view of African literature by western scholars. They complain:

This prejudice is inculcated and employed by eurocentric critics to shore up the eminence and authority they would like permanently to confer upon European literature over the minds of Africans. The scheme of their argument is as follows: oral is bad, written is good. African narrative is oral, therefore bad; European narrative is written, therefore good.

With stiff resistance from ‘true’ African scholars and critics, African literature is fairing better among worldwide literary canons.

Yoruba Folktales: Towards a Taxonomy

The open-endedness of African oral narratives, particularly Yoruba folktales has encouraged various scholarly contributions on their taxonomy. Different parameters have been adopted by scholars and critics in carrying out the “classificatory paradigms of African oral narrative”. Some western scholars began the taxonomy of African oral narratives as a mere quest into knowing the rudiments of African literature that they know little or nothing about. A reasonable number of African scholars and critics ventures into the rigours of taxonomy of African oral narratives as a quest for “alter-

native” tradition in the discourse of African literature. Despite the “genuine” interest of these earlier scholars in doing the taxonomy of African oral narratives, there have been some inadequacies and incompetencies in their classification of oral narrative in Africa. Dasylyva (1999:11) observes:

Appreciable efforts were made in the past by critics which have yielded very promising results with different classificatory models. Unfortunately, none of these models is considered sufficiently appropriate for the African oral narrative. The problems are not unconnected with theoretical inadequacies traceable largely to the protean forms, the high mobility and/or fluidity propensity of the generic constituents, and the complexity of functions of the African oral narrative.

These earlier scholars have used different templates – plot or structure, thematic pre-occupation and characterology in doing the taxonomy of African oral narrative. Either by implication or in an expressed term, various scholars – Ruth Finnegan (1970), Ayo Bamgbose (1969), William Bascom (1943 and 1965), Alexander U. Iwara (1985), Tunde Ogunpolu (1986 and 1990) and Ropo Sekoni (1979, 1982 and 1983) among others have made laudable contributions towards the taxonomy of African oral narratives and by extension, Yoruba folktales.

In his study, Bamgbose (1969) classified the themes of Yoruba folktales into three – “moral stories”, “Tortoise stories”, and “why stories”. What is however observed in this classification is that Yoruba folktales have been vaguely classified. Critics like Dasylyva (1999) have observed this attempt by Bamgbose “to create a generalized dichotomy between the “tortoise” and “moral stories” lack a fundamental basis”.

Sekoni (1983) critiques Yoruba folktales along the line of character – types or rather characterology. His submission is an extension of Claude Bremond’s (1966) classification of character types in folktales. Unlike in Bremond’s (1966) study in which character types in folktales are categorised into three (amelioration, degradation and stagnation), Sekoni (1983) gives four character – types in folktales. He (Sekoni, 1983:5) writes:

Yoruba folktales, regardless of whether the actors, i.e. characters are animate or inanimate, and of whether character’s actions are

accomplished by overt moralizing or not, thus fall in four fictive categories; heroic, non-heroic, anti-heroic and a-heroic.

Sekoni's observation is a bit all-inclusive because it involves both human and non-human characters of folktales. This opinion is corroborated because fictive characters (human or non-human) move in-and-out of a fictive territory – human kingdom, animal kingdom, streams and the land of ghomids.

In doing the taxonomy of folktales, Ogunpolu (1986) uses the spectrum of performance. Based on its preference of the performance quality of folktales in their entirety, Ogunpolu (1986) identifies seven constituents – (i) function of tale in community; (ii) narrator; (iii) audience; (iv) traditional or local name of tale; (v) content; (vi) character, and (vii) structure. At the level genres, the critic (Ogunpolu) identifies two forms of Yoruba verbal arts – Itan (prose) and Ewi (poetry). For clarification, he further sub-divides Itan (prose) into four – Feyikogbon (moral), Yenwo (divinatory), Orirun (origin/myth/legend/aetiology), and Amusagbara (incantatory). The main shortcoming of Ogunpolu's taxonomy is over-generalization. For instance, Yenwo (divinatory) and Amusagbara (incantatory) are more qualified as poetry because of their use of imagery, symbols and figurative expression to convey their messages.

In another study, Iwara (1985) broadly classified folktales into two (non – fiction and fiction). In his study, fictional stories have seven sub-categories which include divination stories, hunter stories, enfant terrible stories, Yo-stories, co-wives' intrigues, explanatory and moralizing stories, and transformation stories. Under non-fictional stories, in the opinion of Iwara, there are historical, creation and origin stories. The perceived shortcoming in this classification is the critic's separation of historical stories from creation and origin stories. In most situations in Yoruba folktales, historical stories are intricately linked with creation and origin stories. In Yoruba loric traditions, most creation and origin stories have historical basis.

Bascom (1943), in his taxonomy identifies two forms of narrative in Yoruba oral traditions. These two classes are myths (Itan) and folktale (Alo). Myths are more valued than folktales because they are more factual and historically true and reliable. On the other hand, it is believed that folktale is fictional and factually undependable. By locating

the two forms (itan and alo) in the recital of Ifa verses, the critic (Bascom) creates a critical loop hole for his study. In Yoruba cultural beliefs, many lores, myths and legends are present in Ifa literary corpus. By tracing the origin of itan (myths) and alo (folktale) to Ifa literary corpus, Bascom has taken unmerited and uncommendable course in his classification of oral narratives in Africa.

Despite various submissions on the taxonomy of African oral narratives, particularly Yoruba folktales, there is still a continuous search for an “authentic” taxonomy of Yoruba folktales. This period is expected to reach its full maturation when African (oral) literature as a whole is canonized to fellowship among the committee of world literatures.

Yoruba Folktales and Education

Like other literary arts, Yoruba folktales have ethical and aesthetic values. Since education has been described by scholars and educationists as the transmission of norms, values and culture of a people from one generation to another, folktales (a fragment of Yoruba culture and tradition) can be used to transmit appropriate socio-cultural codes from one generation to another. In its mode of transmission, content and subject matter, folktales have educational qualities. In a classroom setting, a teacher is expected to attract, retain and sustain the interest of learners through various teaching methodologies and techniques at his/her disposal. In a similar vein, a narrator of folktales uses various techniques to sustain the interest of the listening audience. Ropo Sekoni (1990:141) observed that the narrator’s beautiful voice, effective use of language and how the narrator’s body is manipulated help in attracting and retaining the attention of the audience. He writes:

After the narrator’s beautiful voice, skillful use of language and effective manipulation of his body have attracted the attention of the audience to the narrative experience, the narrator still needs to retain or hold this attention till the end of the story. Although a good voice and facility with language are devices for retaining audience attention, a more important factor in this respect is the organization of the story itself.

In a normal classroom situation, teachers always utilize various physical and non-physical materials within the classroom to ensure that understanding of the concepts taught is attained. In the same way, a folktale narrator has various linguistic, paralinguistic and physical resources at his/her disposal to ensure that the listening audience enjoys the narration and eventually learns morals from the tale narrated. Among these techniques (linguistic and paralinguistic) are the use of opening glee, the use of riddle or brain-racking tale before the actual narration of the folktale and the use of songs that are in-built in the story.

In most Yoruba folktales, songs that are in-built in the narration usually help in sustaining the interest of the audience. The songs in Yoruba folktales, apart from sustaining the interest of the audience, perform additive and explanatory functions. When songs perform additive function in Yoruba folktales, they add more meaning and sense to the narration. This function of songs in folktales helps a new comer to know the content of the narrative. In the story of how the elephant is deceived to be crowned as a king, the use of song is additive. The song-text used in the narration is reproduced below:

Performer: A o merin joba (2ce)

Audience: ewekun ewele (2ce)

Performer: O dade owo

Audience: ewekun ewele

Performer: O wewu oye

Audience: ewekun ewele

Performer: A o merin joba

Audience: ewekun ewele

Performer: Elephant shall be made our king (2ce)

Audience: ewekun ewele (2ce) - a refrain to give musical quality

Performer: He wears the crown of riches

Audience: ewekun ewele

Performer: He wears the chieftaincy garment

Audience: ewekun ewele

Performer: Elephant shall be made our king

Audience: ewekun ewele

On the other hand, when songs perform narrative functions, they form the constituent of the whole narration. These songs usually help to narrate reasons for certain actions in the whole narrative. When tortoise has its nose bitten by a giant rat (asin), he sings to narrate his ordeals. The song – text is reproduced below:

Performer: Asin to n tokore

Audience: Jomijo (a refrain to give musical quality)

Performer: Awon lo jo n ja

Audience: Jomijo

Performer: Ija yi ni mo wa la

Audience: Jomijo

Performer: Ni Asin ba bu mi nimu je

Audience: Jomijo

Performer: E gba mi lowo re

Audience: Jomijo

Performer: Awo mi n be loja

Performer: The big rat and the squirrel

Audience: Jomijo

Performer: Both of them are fighting

Audience: Jomijo

Performer: This quarrel I came to settle

Audience: Jomijo

Performer: But the big rat bit my nose

Audience: Jomijo

Performer: Help me from the big rat's torment

Audience: Jomijo

Performer: Because my wares are still in the market

Audience: Jomijo

For detailed discussion of the use of songs in Yoruba folktales,, see Lilian Idiga's (2008) *Song Aesthetics in Yoruba Folktales*.

The manner a narrator closes his/her narration also shows its educational quality. In the conventional formal education, the two types of evaluation that are available are formative and summative. Formative evaluation starts from the beginning of the lesson and it progresses while the summative evaluation is used at the end of the lesson to measure the success of the teaching – learning encounter. In Yoruba folktales, summative evaluation is always used to conclude the narration. The narrator always asks questions from the audience to tell him/her the morals they have learnt from the story.

Yoruba folktales have its educational qualities on the simple fact that the narrator and the audience share the same socio-cultural spectrums. They (the narrator and the audience) have basic knowledge of their cultural traits and social expectations. Niyi Osundare (1981:11) observes:

All this is possible because the performer's orientation concedes with that of his audience: in other words, they are anchored in the same perspective. If both are also anchored in the same rhetorical and cultural experience, the performer may utter half statements and leave the audience to complete them, and audience participation technique much used in the uttering of proverbs.

Educational relevance of Yoruba folktales can also be seen in the moral lessons learnt from any tale narrated. It is expected that any folktales narrated should impact on the three domains of learning – cognitive, psychomotor and affective. For sustainable national development, the education relevance of Yoruba folktales should be adapted into any developmental programmes and the reform agenda in the country. Relevance of education is the dividends that any educational pursuit yield for individuals, group and government in a country. Akinpelu (1987:7) sees education as a tool for achieving personal and social goals. He writes:

Thus, to most users of education, education is a tool, an instrument, for the achievement of identified personal and social goals and objectives. Its relevance is determined by its efficiency and effectiveness in accomplishing whatever ends they are set for it.

Our simple argument, therefore, is that animal characters in most Yoruba folktales are metaphors of human foibles, weaknesses and inadequacies. When humans learn from the mistakes and weaknesses of these animal characters, national reformation of the country will be conscious from individuals instead of being enforced or forceful from the government. Put succinctly, there will be internalization of national reformation for sustainable national development by individuals. Like what obtains in our factual world, there is no world of art without an actor whose role is to spin the thread of the narrative or the text (Ibitokun, 1998: ix).

Yoruba folktales are used to teach the children to eschew the vices and other moral laxities in the society. On the other hand, this oral art is used to teach children to embrace and uphold the virtues and acceptable norms of the society. Akintunde Akinyemi (2004:473) observes:

The essence of moonlight story sessions among the Yoruba people is to tell stories that can help to shape their children's understanding of life and stories that can assist in building up a responsible being. The cardinal virtues of life that are vital for the children's future happiness are often adopted as themes for building up the moonlight stories.

It can thus be said that in the ancient Yoruba communities, folktales constitute parts of informal and life long education meant to socialize, acculturate and initiate young children into the acceptable norms and values of the society. Some sample texts of folktales are reproduced below to examine their educational values for national development.

TEXT 1

The Vulture and other Animals

Once upon a time, in the land of animals, there was a great famine. Rain refused to fall and crops could not grow. All the animals held a meeting to know who would volunteer to take a sacrifice to God in heaven. One animal after the other was giving excuses. The vulture volunteered to go. He succeeded in delivering the sacrifice to God. Before he returned to the earth, rain began to fall. As the vulture was moving from house to house, other animals refused him shelter. Consequently, his head became bald.

This story preaches altruism. For a true national development to be achieved, there is a need for our political leaders, public office holders and individual in Nigerian societies to always render selfless service to humanity. They should not turn out to be plunderers of the nation's resources. Their election or appointment to office should be seen as a genuine call to serve and because of this, they should not betray the trust and the confidence the people have in them. If this moral lesson is genuinely absorbed, sustainable national development is very much certain

TEXT 2

The Tortoise and the Snail

Snail was an in-law to Tortoise. One day, the former went to the latter's farm to steal some tubers of yam. In the process, Snail was caught by Tortoise. Without considering their level of relationship as in-laws, Tortoise tied the snail to a tree at the market square where everybody would see the latter. At the initial stage, in the morning, people were rebuking Snail for his crime. When they were returning from their various destinations in the evening, they still saw Snail in his bondage. At this time, they began to rebuke Tortoise for lacking the spirit of forgiveness.

The story above preaches forgiveness. After all, to err is human, to forgive is Divine. One of the human frailties in this country is lack of forgiveness. Our political leaders and other public office holders witch-hunt one another as a matter of ethnic, tribal or selfish vendetta. Any country where this happens without any measure of check is destined for doom. This nation will be a haven for all if our political leaders can forgive those that transgress against them. They should not be like a proverbial man who smashed a hen's eggs against the rock because the hen spoilt his medicine. Had Tortoise

had a spirit of forgiveness, he wouldn't have been subjected to ridicule on the return journey of the passers-by from their various destinations.

TEXT 3

The Tortoise and the Birds

All the birds on earth were invited to a feast by the birds in the sky. Tortoise got wind of this. He pleaded with the birds to take him along with them saying that he was a changed person. He swore by anything he could mention that he had discarded his old cunning ways. The birds were taken in by this. Tortoise was allowed to attend the feast with them. Each bird gave him a feather to make him fly with them. On the way, Tortoise suggested that he would bear 'Everybody' as his new name. The birds agreed with him. When they arrived at their destination (the sky), their hosts supplied food and wine to their guests (the birds from the earth) under the name Everybody. Tortoise (who was now bearing Everybody) ate to his satisfaction but the birds had nothing to eat. The birds became annoyed on their return journey; they each took back the feathers they gave to Tortoise. Tortoise eventually became helpless and hapless. At the end of the story, Tortoise suffered a broken shell.

The moral lesson of the story is that we, as individuals, corporate bodies, government agencies, parastatals and the public office holders should always shun greed to ensure national development. We should always operate with the maxim: "Nation first, and self last" in order to foster sustainable national development. The essence of telling tales with theme and motif is to warn that greed often has grave consequences.

TEXT 4

The Tortoise, the Elephant and the Hippopotamus

One day, the tortoise challenged the elephant to a duel. The elephant looked at the tortoise with total contempt. At last, a day was fixed for the rope-tugging contests. Secretly, the tortoise also challenged the hippopotamus for the same contest. He (the tortoise) also fixed the same day as that of the elephant. On the appointed date the tortoise gave one end of the rope to the elephant, and the other end to the hippopotamus. The tugging began. Eventually, the elephant concluded that the tortoise was as powerful as he was. The hippopotamus had the same thought.

The story above celebrated wit over physical strength. What can move the nation towards national development is the wit at our disposal. For the nation to be at par with other nations of the world, there is a need for adequate and full utilization of wit for technological advancement and socio-economic rehabilitation of the country. This is summarized as it is not by **power nor by might but by wit**.

The dilemma tales are also important in achieving national development. The purpose of these tales is to measure the level of intelligence quotient of the audience. It is also meant to test how individuals can think fast in time of trouble because the participants in the tales cannot avoid racking their brain for obscure answers to a question posed at the end of a narrative. This kind of story always has inconclusive end because the answers given by the audience is not an end in itself but usually a means to an end. All these tales (moral, dilemma or explanatory) play essential roles in national development because all the three forms of human development – a catalyst to national development are incorporated in the narratology and the narrative experience. In the view of development psychologists, human beings experience three forms of development – cognitive, psychomotor and affective.

The cognitive development of a child is reflected in how the child quickly thinks in response to questions asked at the end of the story. This is a good measure, in the ancient time, to measure the level of precocity or retardation of a child. Clapping, singing and beating of drums, in few cases, also measure the psychomotor development of a child. The affective development is measured through the influence the tale has had on the individual audience. A total human development – morally, spiritually and physically will undoubtedly promote national development. The morals learnt from folktales can help in socialization of Yoruba children to grow into worthwhile adults that can contribute meaningfully to national development.

Conclusion

The study has examined the educational relevance of Yoruba folktales to national development. In their subject matter and content delivery, the educational relevance of Yoruba folktales cannot be ignored. Since folktales contain the philosophy, mores and values of a society, the morals learn in them should be appropriated into various

developmental programmes aimed at national development. Efforts should be made to promote folktales in the country in order to promote and protect our cultural inheritance for posterity to learn from. It is concluded that African culture is besieged by westernization and civilization and only committed interest in all that is African can salvage our culture from perpetual obliteration.

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