

Revisiting Moonlight Storytelling for Reclaiming Foundational Traditional Yoruba Culture in Nigeria

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Abstract

Storytelling is one of the important subgenres of the prose form of oral literature. Being a verbal art used in traditional African society for entertainment and didacticism, its usefulness in inculcating in children values, mores and cosmological beliefs of traditional African society cannot be downplayed. In recent times, however, the art seems to have suffered atrophy since it is rarely told by parents to their children. Traditional folktales play an important educational role in African societies. They express cultural values through metaphorical narratives and. They contain covert meanings and messages that are both amusing and thought provoking. Yoruba is rich in culture, and these cultures are full of moral values, some of which are got from moonlight tales. If the young children are taught these moral values in schools, all the decadence we are witnessing today among the youth of our society will be minimized if not totally eradicated. Therefore, moonlight storytelling is relevant to the shaping and reshaping of the life of the people living within a community and even in the world at large. Government at both the state and the local levels should see to the revitalisation of the art of storytelling by incorporating oral delivery of traditional tales and stories into the school curricula. Again, professional storytellers can also be commissioned to go round the schools, especially at the primary level, to narrate important tales to pupils in these schools

Keywords: moonlight, storytelling, foundational, traditional, Yoruba culture

Introduction

Oral literature is a unique discipline in view of the enormity of cultural tropes that shape it and the non-verbal mode of its conception, delivery or realisation. Similarly, the amount of attention it has received among scholars within and outside Africa over time also attests to its importance as a vehicle for the preservation of a people's cultural patrimony and traditions. According to Akporbaro (2005), oral literature is "the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk-beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to another" (Akporbaro 2005).

Moonlight tales form part of Yorùbá culture. This is the reason why differ-

ent scholars, have at one time or the other, written on the significance of this Yorùbá cultural practice (Adedeji, 2016; Isola, 2015; Akinyemi, 2004). Moonlight tale or folktale has a very great value in the Yorùbá environ. It is a past time practice among the Yorùbá. It is especially common during the moonlight period. Hence, there is the nomenclature “moonlight tales.” The setting is always in front of the house or within a large compound. Children, because of their curiosity always form the larger number of the audience. An elderly person, whether a man or a woman, normally tells the story. Although the setting always comprises and is inclusive of family members, people from the neighbourhood also form part of the listening audience. Barber’s (1991) comments become relevant here.

Àlọ are the most communal, domestic and democratic of Yorùbá verbal art forms. They used to be told within the compound in the evening after work with the entire household present. All were entitled to tell a tale if they wished, even the youngest; and all were expected to support the others’ performances by supplying a chorus to the songs. The moral values which are the issue in these stories are correspondingly those which make for harmonious communal living. Good neighbours, loyal friends and faithful wives are contrasted with tricksters, betrayers and deceivers. The important point is not so much that the Àlọ are didactic, imparting values to the young... but that the ground and framework of every story are the values of everyday, ordinary human world. What is tested, experimented with and sometimes imaginatively abolished is the morality of communal living, based on common decency, humanity and generosity. This is the scope and the field of the discourse of Àlọ. In telling the story, the narrator must be eloquent, versatile and must be able to carry his audience along in the story. Akinyemi (2004) buttresses this when he says: The enjoyment of Yorùbá moonlight stories is usually attributed to the ability of the storyteller to instantly create the stories as he narrates them along... A story ends well when its inherent moral values become apparent to the audience. He must be able to tell the story in such a way that the listeners will understand the lesson inherent in it

Essentially, storytelling is the art of transmitting societal norms, values, ethics and etiquettes through the use of words, sounds, kinesis and mimesis that create images and imagery in the mind of the audience. It is a tradition passed down from generation to generation through the spoken word. In other words, it is communicated through word of mouth. As an oral product, the fluid, evanescent and temporal nature of storytelling explains its flexibility. Also, the basis of its articulation is performance, and this elicits the multimedia mode of the senses. Because of its transient nature, the storyteller needs an active memory to operate. S/he thus enhances his/her memory through the use of

mnemonic devices like symbols, rhythms, codes and so on. Hence, the raconteur deliberately encrypts, summarises, formulates, and repeats the thematic thrust of a tale so as to reiterate the rhythm of the inherent didacticism in his/her narrative.

Invariably, the storyteller performs before a live audience, unlike in written literature where the audience is atomised. Ostensibly, during a storytelling session, there can be a homogenous or heterogeneous audience. The homogeneity or heterogeneity of the audience may be determined by demographics of age and sex. In many African societies, elderly people often serve as raconteurs who narrate traditional tales to children and youths. The gender of these elders is irrelevant, but elderly men practise this art more than women. The reason is that most women may be busy with home chores or prefer doing other duties deemed more feminine than narrating stories. This, however, does not indicate that women do not narrate stories or partake in storytelling performance. Finnegan (2012), for instance, comments on the gender and age of storytellers or raconteurs, noting that in some African societies men often serve as raconteurs, while in others it is women who gather people together to feed them traditional tales.

Conceptualizing Storytelling

Storytelling can be understood as narrative, folktales, culture and their history. Storytelling is interactive; it involves the use of language, action such as vocalisation, physical movement and/ or gesture. Storytelling encourages the active imagination of the listeners (National Storytelling Network,). Oral storytelling is a story spoken to an audience. Oral storytelling has taken many forms including songs, poetry, chants, dance, masks, and so on. A good story is at heart a seducer, with the storyteller and audience building a unique dialogue and interaction as they participate in the creation of living art. Traditionally, a storyteller has been associated with a healer, a spiritual guide, a leader, a cultural secret keeper, an entertainer and a jester, and the storyteller can either seek to console or amuse (Gentry, 2013).

In some settings, storytelling is dramaturgically underpinned. Propp (1968) states that a story (especially a folktale) is composed of three stages: first, peaceful society; and, second, break-up of the community, often seemingly caused by a villain figure. Also, Campbell (1949) states that a story (especially a heroic legend) is composed of how the hero/heroine goes on a journey, obtains a sacred object; and third, returns to the community with the sacred object, thus revitalising the community. Carl Jung's Theory of psychological integration, which he often called "individuation," states that stories are composed of two stages: first, elements apart; and second, elements integrated (Miller, 1996). In the

Golden Age of Modern Western Drama, according to this theory, stories revolve around conflict: (1) exposition (situation background); (2) conflict develops; (3) crisis; and (4) resolution. According to Sogol (2014), storytelling can serve as a cost-efficient advocacy tool to amplify the voices of the marginalised and ensure their representation in discussions on issues that impact their lives. It can also transcend borders. Storytelling can work as a mechanism of change, for example, in the slums of India, the Favelas of Brazil or the rural villages of Uganda (Sogol, 2014).

The inhabitants of Oyo Kingdom share the same language, culture and tradition. They also share symbols and gesture. The inhabitants of the Kingdom use folktales, story by moonlight and songs. Storytelling in the Oyo Kingdom is culturally accepted (Laitin, 2016). It is a form of communication among the people. It remains an important aspect of the Ife Kingdom's culture. It remains a "cultural capital" in the Kingdom with the advent of electronic communication, such as the Internet, satellite TV, social media and smart phones.

Significance of Storytelling for Contemporary Nigerians

In writing about adult education in Nigeria, Onyenemezu (2012) acknowledged that the country is facing challenges in the 21st century. Recently youth and young adults have been restive in the Niger Delta region resulting in violence and youth militancy in militias. More recently, Boko Haram is wreaking havoc through bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations. Onyenemezu argued that examining adult education could help to alleviate the instability and increase political and economic development. Oddly, when Zuofa and Olori, (2015) recently researched adult learning methods in Nigeria, they did not include storytelling. Evidence suggests that it would be an effective method of adult education in Nigeria. Whether in formal, informal, or non-formal learning, telling the stories of historical facts and cultures are significant aspects of connecting adult learners with their cultural heritage.

Although Achebe first wrote of the impact of colonizers on Igbo clans in 1959, as recently as 2014, Nduka expressed concern that the Igbo culture will be lost. He lamented that when fathers do not know the history and stories of their own culture, it is a tragedy that they cannot answer the questions of their children about festivals, the indigenous calendar, the age-grade or age-group system, chieftaincy within the community, or meanings of proverbs.

Storytelling is useful for members of the African diaspora not just to remember their own history, but to adapt to their new homes. Tuwe (2016) studied African communities based in New Zealand and argued that the oral tradition of storytelling was useful when dealing with work-related challenges.

Storytelling and Peace building

Storytelling has become a method of peace building and an acceptable tool among academics and professional peace builders. Storytelling is therapeutic (Kalisa, 2006). It assists victims and communities in transition to come to terms with the past. Storytelling has been described as a part of transitional justice mechanisms that has assisted in the area of truth finding, prosecution, accountability and reparations.

Storytelling has been found to be a useful peace building tool in deeply conflict rooted communities; it has been experimented with in a number of countries moving from conflict to peace or those becoming free from totalitarian authorities in the last two decades. Examples of countries where storytelling was used included Timor-Leste, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Mexico, Mozambique, Israel and Palestine, and South Africa (Guthrey, 2015). The most publicised case was the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Storytelling provided a form of psychological healing for victims of the Apartheid era (TRC, 2005). According to the TRC (2005), the objectives of the commission are “to promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts of the past by examining the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights that were committed during the apartheid period including the rights of the victims and the responsibilities of the persons that committed the violations, the granting of amnesty and accountability for the fate or whereabouts of victims, and by restoring the human and civil dignity of such victims.”

Peace building through historical narratives grows out of the knowledge that in the periods of intractable conflict, storytellers tend to teach their listeners their own narratives as the only correct one, while completely ignoring their enemy’s narratives (Chaitin, 2003). If they do include the enemy narrative, it is always presented as being wrong and unjustifiable. These ideas, which also include community-legitimised knowledge such as murals, days of commemoration, memorials and statues, convince the listeners that there is a necessity to remember the victims of the conflict (Chaitin, 2003).

Stories, narratives and storytelling are central aspects of all cultures (Chaitin, 2003) and they play key roles in de-escalation of intergroup conflicts. In order for the storytelling to be effective, it must engage the self and others, and provide a narrative that is both cognitively and emotionally compelling. While denigrating myths of the other and self-aggrandising myths of self can refuel the winds of hate, the open and honest recounting of one’s life story, and the willingness to be an empathic listener for the other, even if this other has

caused the group suffering and pain in the past, can open the door for peacebuilding and coexistence (Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005).

Storytelling and Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interaction, like storytelling, is an interpretative understanding of human behaviour. Both depend on sharing of meaning, and the use of symbol and gesture. In this study, symbolic interaction provides a macro-sociological explanation to the understanding of peacebuilding processes from gender perspectives. Storytelling and symbolic interaction provide ontological understandings of behaviour by “getting inside” the reality of the actor, although substantial divisions remain within these perspectives (Ritzer, 2009).

The epistemology of sharing of meaning could be traced to the work of W.I. Thomas on the definition of situation, which states that: “if situations are defined as real by the actors, they are real in their consequences.” The main idea of symbolic interactionism is that human life is lived in the symbolic domain. Symbols are culturally derived social objects to share meanings that are created and maintained in the social realm. George Herbert Mead’s *Mind, Self and Society in Action* had a profound influence on what was to become known as symbolic interaction. The term symbolic interaction was coined by Herbert Blumer, one of Mead’s students. Blumer who did much to shape this perspective, specified three basic premises:

- a. Humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them
- b. The meanings of things derive from social interaction
- c. These meanings are dependent on, and modified by, an interpretive process of the people who interact with one another. The focus here is on meaning, which is defined in terms of action and its consequences (reflecting the influence of pragmatism).

Theoretical Framework

Structuralism is critical to this research because of its strategic role in exploring the full significance of oral storytelling to the society that owns the verbal art. Its significance is underscored by the fact that it helps to foster an understanding of the social relevance of oral narratives in the society by portraying oral art as an integral part of the society that produces it. Structuralism is a critical theory that seeks to “understand in a systematic way the fundamental structures that underlie all human experience and, therefore, all human behaviour and production” (Tyson, 1999). Being a “method of systematizing human

experience” (1999, 198), rather than a field of study with specific propositions, structuralist criticism is used in many fields of study, including the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. It started as an intellectual movement in France in the 1950s with its popularisation by Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes (Barry, 1995).

According to Barry (1995), structuralism should rather be conceived as a knowledge-based theory that holds that “things cannot be understood in isolation, they are to be seen in the context of the larger structures they are part of” (1995, 39) in order to “provide an account of all social and cultural practices, in a range that includes mythical narratives, literary texts, advertisements, fashions in clothing, and patterns of social decorum.”

To Blackburn (2008), structuralism is “the belief that phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through their interrelations. These relations constitute a structure, and behind local variations in the surface phenomena there are constant laws of abstract culture” (2008, 353). Blackburn’s “surface phenomena” and “abstract laws” are what Tyson (1999) calls two fundamental levels of the world that humans inhabit: the visible and the invisible. The visible world, according to him, “consists of all the countless objects, activities, and behaviours we observe, participate in, and interact with every day” (1999, 198). The invisible world, on the other hand, “consists of the structures that underlie and organize all of these phenomena so that we can make sense out of them” (198). Structuralists believe that the configuration of a structure (society) is altered when an aspect of it is tampered with. Since the thrust of structuralism is on the interrelatedness of different aspects of a structure (society), if a part is affected it can have adverse effects on the whole structure. Using the theory helped to identify those “invisible” or “abstract” factors underlying the continued practice of oral art in the two locales where the research was carried out, though its existence is also threatened there. This identification is critical to the sustainability of the verbal art in the present context. Thus, the study explored how oral art has co-existed with writing and virtual technologies, despite the danger they pose to its existence. This study has implications, not only for the scholarly fields of oral literature, but also for the related disciplines of education management, philosophy, psychology and sociology.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it was revealed that traditional folktales play an important educational role in African societies. They express cultural values through metaphorical narratives and. They contain covert meanings and messages that are both amusing and thought provoking. Yoruba is rich in culture, and these cultures are full of moral values, some of which are got from moonlight tales. If

the young children are taught these moral values in schools, all the decadence we are witnessing today among the youth of our society will be minimized if not totally eradicated. Therefore, moonlight storytelling is relevant to the shaping and reshaping of the life of the people living within a community and even in the world at large.

Recommendations

Based on the above points, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government at both the state and the local levels should see to the revitalisation of the art of storytelling by incorporating oral delivery of traditional tales and stories into the school curricula. Again, professional storytellers can also be commissioned to go round the schools, especially at the primary level, to narrate important tales to pupils in these schools
2. Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria, broadcasting stations and, even individuals should do everything possible to promote interest in Yoruba culture and oral literature. This will be to ensure real 'life' and preservation will be given to Yoruba oral literature and culture and transmitting it to other parts of the world will be easier.
3. Education steeped in the cultural heritage of the people, especially in folktales, could go a long way to ensure the attainment of national literacy objectives.
4. A cultural element should be employed to enhance the teaching and learning of reading, writing, numeric and digital skills, which would result in teachers who are capable of fully grasping the requisite pedagogy to teach folktales to pupils/students.

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