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The Folktale and Social Values in Traditional Africa

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ABSTRACT

Africans, like people elsewhere in the world, have a set of values which they consider worthwhile and necessary for the preservation and wellbeing of their culture. In this way, it may be said that societal values are embodied in and communicated by its system of education and that the education that a society offers its youth reflects the sum total of what is held dear in that society. In many African societies, an important aspect of traditional education is concerned with teaching oral literature using folktales, riddles and proverbs which aim at moulding character and providing children with moral values like honesty, integrity, courage and solidarity. This paper examines the relevance of folktales to the promotion of social values in Africa by demonstrating how folktales can open a window of understanding to a community's social norms, values, thoughts, concepts and ideas with a view to drawing implications for positive change. It is predicated on the assumption that African folktales, with a particular focus on Cameroon, promote social and ethical values, provide human understanding, facilitate the elimination of anti-social behaviour and help with social identity construction. The point is that folktales, as a form of oral literature, draw their material from the realities of society and hence reflect people's values and worldview. As a result, folktales are often used as a vehicle for transmitting and preserving shared values and collective experience. The paper concludes by observing that despite the preponderance of modern means of entertainment in Africa, storytelling persists. Contemporary African folktales are imaginatively refined for the purpose of injecting new meanings, ideas and values, based on society's contemporary experiences and relations.

KEYWORDS folktales; social values; Africa; positive change; ethical behaviour

Introduction

We all tell stories about our lives, both to ourselves and to others; and it is through such stories that we make sense of ourselves, of the world, and of our relationship to others. Stories, or narratives, are a means by which people make sense of, understand, and live their lives. (Lawler 2000, 12)



One of the most popular traditions in Africa is storytelling. From the earliest times to the present, every society, culture and people has told stories which have passed from one generation to the next. These stories have sustained their presence for centuries because they are amusing, interesting and instructive. In other words, stories let us express and shape ourselves, interpret the world, and seek to influence others. Irrespective of the recent phenomena of television and home videos, telling stories orally continues to be the main means of entertainment in the history of mankind. The most popular belief among Africans is that these stories, beyond their entertainment value, are also didactic instruments. Thus, storytelling in traditional Africa, as elsewhere, is an important event since it provides an occasion for storytellers to transmit a people's norms, values, ideas and thoughts through the narration of folktales, myths and legends. Although this age-long tradition has been neglected in recent years because of the advent of modernity and technological developments, there is need to restore interest in oral storytelling in our homes and schools, especially in primary and secondary schools, during the formative period of our children's lives. This would help to shape our children's values, condition their moral responsibilities and help them govern their emotions and appetites, as well as stimulate their creativity. In Africa, traditional values form part of the intangible aspects of our cultures. However, these cultural values are under threat of erosion, especially among the youth, because of the forces of globalisation and other forms of modern commercial entertainment that have already reached remote areas of Africa. Our folktales could be used as a tool to challenge that because they hold much potential for inculcating traditional values in our children. As emphasised in UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), stories play an invaluable role, along with other cultural traditions, in bringing people together and 'ensuring exchange and understanding among them.' As globalisation and social transformation demand renewed dialogue among communities, educators and artists are increasingly motivated to protect and promote oral traditions and related cultural heritage. As a result, the art of storytelling enables us to integrate our consciousness, educate our minds, purify our souls and refine our sensibilities. The story speaks directly to the human heart, soul and mind, and engages our sympathy in a manner that straight forward ideas and logical arguments do not. This paper examines the relevance of folktales to the promotion of social values in Africa by demonstrating how folktales can open a window of understanding to a community's social norms, values,

thoughts, concepts and ideas with a view to drawing implications for positive change. It is predicated on the assumption that African folktales promote social and ethical values, provide human understanding, facilitate the elimination of anti-social behaviour and help in the construction of social identity. The point here is that folktales, as a form of oral literature, draw their material from the realities of society and hence reflect a people's values and worldview. As a result, folktales are often used as a vehicle for transmitting and preserving shared values and collective experience.

Methodology and Scope

The tales examined in this article are selected at random from the various regions of Cameroon. Although the term 'Africa' has been used in the title of this article, I do not lay claim to have carried out research in all African societies. Rather, I have tried to see the entire continent as a community because the elements identified in the tales I have used to illustrate my discussion can be found in tales all over Africa. In other words, what is true of the folktales of Cameroonian is also true, to a large extent, of the folktales of other communities in Africa.

The study involved both primary and secondary data. For primary data, I did fieldwork, conducted interviews, and collected, tape recorded, transcribed and translated the folktales in life and simulated performances in selected villages in Cameroon for my research project, 'Oral Literature of Cameroon.' For secondary data, I obtained information from the review of documents from both published and unpublished sources. These included monographs, journal articles, manuscripts, books and dissertations. All the sources have been duly acknowledged where and when necessary.

Theoretical Framework

This study is conceived within both the theoretical framework of Jean Piaget's (1973) social constructivism theory of learning and sociological theory. Social constructivists posit that knowledge is constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks. To them, learning is seen as the process by which individuals are introduced to a culture by more skilled members. Tala (1999, 10) notes that oral literature is a major educational tool used in traditional education in many African societies. It includes folktales, myths, legends music, proverbs, riddles and songs. This explains why oral literature is said to be the



oldest educational and therapeutic tool on earth. These forms of oral literature are very effective in imparting knowledge because they engage our imaginations, hearts and minds at the same time. Highlighting the importance of folklore in education, Tala (1989, 24) notes that

There is something in a storytelling experience for every type of learner. Stories give us vicarious experience. This is as close to actual experience as you can get because stories engage 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. Stories are food for thought; they help us discern what is right from wrong, and who we wish to model ourselves after.

Folktales are used by narrators to instruct the young and teach them to respect the dictates of their custom. As a result, a large body of moral instruction, societal values and norms are preserved for posterity.

Sociological theory examines the relationship between literature and society. The implication here is that literature provides a true mirror of society because its themes, subject matter and formal development are determined by cultural tradition and the environment. The relevance of this approach to this article lies in the fact that folktales shape and promote moral, ethical and social values, provide human understanding, facilitate the elimination of anti-social behaviour and help in the construction of social identity.

Defining the Folktale and Social Values

The folktale is a delectable verbal art that has charmed humanity through the ages. The etymology of the word ‘folktale’ indicates that it is a conflation of two ideas, namely, ‘folk’ (meaning people/community) and ‘tale’ for story or narrative. The folktale is, perhaps, the most popular form of oral literature in Africa. It is usually the first genre and most-written about form that students of oral literature discover. According to Thompson (1977, 4), ‘the folktale is employed in the broader sense to include all forms of prose narratives, oral or written, which have been handed down through the years.’ In this usage, the important fact is the traditional nature of the material. In contrast with the modern storywriter’s striving for originality of plot and treatment, the teller of a folktale is proud to hand on that which he or she has received. As the Nigerian oralist, Chukwuma (1994), asserts:

The oral tale is the traditional folktale. Its characteristics are brevity and terseness, episodic plot and action, climatic heightening of a central conflict and the limitation of character. The folktale ... portrays an aspect of life and reality through varied means. The final goal is to bring to man a knowledge and awareness of his nature and environment ... The folktale is a child of tradition, almost always apocryphal, belonging to the whole community. It enjoys abundant freedom and identifies with anyone in the community who can articulate it creditably. Plagiarism makes no sense with regards to the folktale, and for its purposes, the important feature is the performer and not the coiner. (1994, 12)

Seitel (2008), for his part, defines the folktale as,

... metaphors for aspects of social life. They are abstract, artistic statements that objectify and grant perspective on the culture they describe. They enable [a group] to hold aspects of their social world at arm's length, so to speak, to examine them, and to entertain themselves with those images of their own lives. (2008, 30)

From the above definitions, it can be said that the folktale, by its very nature, is short. It restricts its focus on a narrow bit of experience, it avoids digressions from its main intentions, it utilises easily recognisable characters, and it emphasises the moral lessons inherent in the outcome of the fictive characters' actions. In other words, the folktale focuses on the dynamics between the individual and society. That explains why folktale characters are deliberately underdeveloped and why almost anything can be a character in the folktale. In addition, the folktale is a unified artistic statement which may give pleasure and share knowledge. It is orally realised in face-to-face contact which involves the storyteller and an audience. It encompasses a great variety of narrative elements, and its actions can take place at any time and in any location.

One of the characteristics of the folktale is its ability to establish a code of conduct founded on moral and social values based on habits, rules and customs adopted by society. Social values form an important part of the culture of any society. Such values account for the stability of social order. They provide the general guidelines for social conduct. Beckett and Maynard (2012, 20) go further to say that 'social values refer to a pool of individual morals which generate welfare to the community. It works to control the individual behaviour, and set out on tolerance, cooperation, communication, love and respect for others.' Values such as fundamental rights, patriotism, respect for human dignity, rationality, sacrifice, individuality, equality, democracy, honesty, integrity, courage, solidarity, among others, guide our behaviour in many ways. Consequently, values are the criteria people use in assessing their daily lives,



arranging their priorities and choosing between alternative courses of action. Values help shape a society by suggesting what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, sought after or best avoided.

Discussion

Traditional African society subsisted on the social philosophy of the greatest good for the greatest number. In other words, the fundamental value that sustained African society was collective or group responsibility for its members' lives. Hence, people in traditional African society were less autonomous and individualistic than those in Western society. People identified with society's social and cultural outlook and acquiesced to its beliefs and customs. In this context, the individual is the personification of society's values. However, as Obiechina (1975), quoted by Tala (2013, 20) notes:

It would be wrong to interpret the concentration on common goals and the primacy of the common interest as a matter of suppression of the personality from the outside of constraints on the part of an authority. Social conformity and the discouragement of deviation from the common norms of behaviour are not the same thing as the repressive curbing of individual freedom.

Thus, the human being in Africa was not viewed as an autonomous individual who should be encouraged to inordinate personal achievements, but as an integral member of the community whose aspirations for personal survival and achievement were curbed so that they should not threaten the stability of the established order. Although the community did not offer opportunities for people motivated by the desire for individual expression or the need for the attainment of personal goals, it did allow room for the individual to aspire to great personal achievement in a way approved by society.

The pattern of human existence in traditional African society was coherent and, at the same time, contradictory. Although society conducted its affairs on the basis of well recognised positive values, so too was it materialistic. Hence, the individual was called upon to balance the positive and negative values of his or her being. The individual who emphasised the one at the expense of the other was treated as a social deviant.

Oral literature in traditional Africa served as an instrument for the examination of individual experience in relation to society's normative order. Thus, the folktale was used, and is still being used in several parts of rural Africa, to comment on how the individual adheres to or deviates from the community's behavioural norms. Seen in this light, the folktale,

although a creation of the imagination, ultimately derives its material from the realities of society while simultaneously shaping people's views and constituting and constructing society. As a result, the folktale can be said to be a good mirror of society. It is also used by the community to teach, entertain and explore the life's ambiguities. The substance of human experience out of which the folktale is created is that which has made sufficient impact on the community to excite people's imagination to literary creativity. As Afolayan (1984) notes:

The individual expresses through language his joys and sorrows, his expectations and disappointments, his plans and achievements, his judgements and his reflections on things physical or philosophical, temporal or eternal. His expressions are ordinary or heightened; simple or difficult, pithy and aphoristic or diffused and discursive; poetic or dramatic or exaggerated, and easily forgotten or memorable. Whenever man has something significant to say about any of his preoccupations and he says it effectively, literature is in the making. Ideas and concepts together with the sayings that accompany them become the corporate property of the community. Such ideas may be social, cultural, political, religious, moral artistic or scientific. They in turn constitute the contents of oral traditions, stories and folklore, the components of oral literature. (1984, 10)

Therefore, the folktale as literature is a work of art, a mirror to life and an intellectual exercise. In order to survive and progress under the hard conditions of the time in which most of the folktales are set, that is, in the proximate or remote past, it was imperative for the individual to respect the social institutions which predetermined his or her individuality. These institutions encouraged in the individual the positive values of industry, prowess, courage, integrity and filial piety. While making some allowances for temperament, the institutions deplored such negative traits as cowardice, laziness, jealousy, greed, infidelity and disobedience.

In traditional African society, then, environment was character. In other words, the individual was what society made of him or her. However, society itself is basically acquisitive and to some extent, competitive. Therefore, it has to rely very much on its system of social controls to ensure internal order and cohesion. It is well integrated and governed by well-tried mores, laws, sanctions and taboos. In traditional Africa, the people are well-grounded in the principles of social conduct. That is why they acknowledge the fact that, in all human society, there is bound to be conflict which can eventually generate a series of socio-political problems. But, they also believe that irrespective of what the problem is, its resolution must take into account the welfare of the people. Hence the proverb 'no man however great can be greater than his people.' A

person's place in society, his or her rights, duties, capabilities and privileges are clearly defined. However, it is worth noting that one of the instruments of social control in traditional Africa is its folktales. The tale of *The Orphan Girl*¹ (collected from the Bakossi society of Cameroon) which is prevalent in many African oral traditions is used in this context to comment on how an individual who deviates from the community's behavioural norms meets the wrath of the community and his or her nemesis. The story is as follows:

Narrator: My story is about an orphan girl. Once upon a time, a man married two wives. The first one gave birth to a daughter and died soon after. Instead of giving the child to her mother's relations as tradition demands, the father decided to ignore tradition and gave the child to his second wife called Ma Munge. Now Ma Munge was a jealous and wicked woman. She was quick to notice that the child entrusted in her care whom we will call Ebude was more intelligent than her daughter, Epote. So, she decided to make Ebude to do all the house work while Epote went out to play with her friends. One evening after heavy rainfall, Ma Munge decided to send Ebude to the stream to wash the cooking utensils. Ebude tried to complain that the stream was overflowing because of the heavy rains, but the stepmother would not listen. Rather, she insisted that the poor orphan girl must go and wash the utensils. Ebude left for the stream crying. In the process of washing the utensils, the fast-flowing stream carried a bowl away. Ebude knew immediately that she was in big trouble. Nevertheless, she hurried home and informed the stepmother. Ma Munge was angry. She whipped Ebude and drove her to go back to the stream and look for the missing bowl in spite of the fact that darkness was approaching. Left with no alternative, Ebude went to the stream and started following its course. Since it was already dark, Ebude could not see well and soon slipped and fell into the fast-flowing stream. She was swept away. But, to her surprise, she found herself in front of an old woman's hut. The woman asked her how she found herself in front of the hut. Ebude narrated her sad story. The old woman took pity of her and allowed her to spend the night in the hut on condition that she swept the compound clean. Ebude obeyed and after her chore, the old woman gave her food and showed her where to sleep.

The following day, she thanked the old woman for her generosity and got ready to continue her search for the missing bowl. The old woman asked her to go behind the house where she would find some eggs. Those eggs that shout, 'take me, take me,' she should ignore. But she should take the egg that remain silent. She followed the instructions given to her and took the silent egg. The old woman then told her that when she got home she should enter her late mother's hut, close the door and break the egg. Once again, she did as the old woman instructed. As soon as she broke the egg, several nice things including the missing bowl came out. She took the lost bowl to her

stepmother and then invited everybody in the house to come and see her good fortune.

Instead of her being happy, Ma Munge became very jealous. She asked her own daughter, Epote to go to the stream and deliberately allow the stream to carry away one of the bowls and then she should follow the same itinerary as Ebude. Epote did as she was instructed and eventually arrived at the old woman's hut. She was given the same chore by the old woman but she refused to obey. The old woman did not mind. When Epote was about to leave, the old woman instructed her to go behind the house where she would see some eggs. She should ignore those eggs that shout 'take me, take me' and take only the silent one. When she went behind the house, she decided to take the first egg that shouted 'take me, take me.'

When she arrived home, she gathered her mother, father, and brothers in the house and closed the door leaving out Ebude. But when she broke the egg, snakes and all deadly diseases came out and wiped out the entire family. Only Ebude survived, got married to a prince, and they lived happily thereafter. That is the end of my story.

The internal logic of the tale centres on the wanton use and abuse of power. It is also about wickedness, greed and graft. In Cameroon's traditional Bakossi society, for example, the home is considered as a sanctuary in which love, peace and harmony prevail. When the story opens, Ebude has just lost her mother. The death dislocates the normal family relationship existing in the home and creates a gap in the girl's social and emotional life. The immediate issue at stake revolves around how to fill this gap. Tradition demands that under the circumstances, the girl should be placed in the care of her mother's people because they can better play the role of her dead mother's surrogate. Achebe, commenting on a similar situation among the Igbo of Nigeria in his epic novel *Things Fall Apart* opines that

'It is true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats a child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. (1958, 94)

The act of handing the girl over to her stepmother implies an overt transfer of power and the accompanying responsibility. It is this power that Ma Munge wantonly abuses. The story's main problem can therefore be said to centre on the lack of restraint in the wielding of power. Tala (2013, 60) holds that '... power, as we all know, is dangerous in the sense that it is both corrupting and corruptible.' That is why those who



control it, as is the case with Ma Munge, are expected by society also to recognise its obligatory moral nature.

In traditional African society, the individual is called upon to balance the positive and the negative values of his or her being. This is what Ma Munge refuses to do. Rather, like Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, she decides to treat Ebude with a firmness that borders on callousness. Her deviation from the traditional norms of behaviour is a flagrant disregard of the proverb: 'If you bring up a child successfully in your youth, she will care for you at your old age.' Furthermore, in the traditional worldview, once a child is placed in your care, that child becomes your child and must be treated as such. Hence the cautionary proverb: 'A child's fingers are not scolded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts in its palm.' Thus, the insensitive stepmother, in total disregard of societal norms, not only creates disorder but also arrogates unto herself the role of a superordinate, establishing and maintaining power in her relationship with her underling through the effective and continuous use of coercion, punishment and withdrawal of privileges.

The degree of Ma Munge's lack of qualms and the margin of her deviation from the normative structure becomes evident in the senseless act of sending Ebude away at night in search of the missing bowl. The atrocious act of sending her away from the physical and spiritual protection of the home also marks the height of Ma Munge's irresponsibility and the story's turning point.

In the course of her perilous journey down the stream, Ebude is exposed to the dangers of the hostile and unfamiliar territory through which she is obliged to pass. Her outward movement ends in front of the old woman's hut which serves as 'the place of foreign sojourn' and which also marks the rite-of-passage phase. Her successful return with the egg, which serves as a boon with which she restores order and makes a positive difference in her society, is indicative of the victory of good over evil.

It can be implied from the above analysis that the qualities which society admires are used to characterise the heroes, while the traits which society deplores are possessed by the villains. In most cases, however, the trickster character, as seen in the folktales below, is used as protagonist because the figure embodies the ambivalent characteristics of humans and is 'essentially amoral, possessing for potential use both the positive and negative dimensions of man; being simultaneously capable of externalising either good or bad behaviour' (Tala 2013, 63). In the tales, however, the trickster usually externalises only one aspect of his dual

nature. Hence, trickster tales can easily be divided into two broad categories. The first category is made up largely of tales in which the trickster character emerges as winner or suffers only temporary setbacks, while in tales belonging to the second category, the trickster protagonist ends up as loser and is usually punished.

An example of tales in the first category is *Tortoise and Antelope*² collected from the Bamenda Grass field region of Cameroon. In this tale, Tortoise goes around boasting that he is the fastest animal in the kingdom and that if the other animals have never seen him run it is simply because there is nobody to compete with him.

One day, Antelope walks up to Tortoise and tells him that enough is enough and that if Tortoise persists in his claim then he will be left with no alternative but to challenge Tortoise to a race. To Antelope's surprise Tortoise readily accepts the challenge and a day is set for the race.

Tortoise returns to his house and assembles all his family. He tells them how he has provoked the Antelope to a race knowing fully well that the Antelope is fleet footed. He then reveals to his family his plan for outmanoeuvring his rival. His family endorses the plan and promises to cooperate.

On the day of the race, the animals assemble in two groups. The first group at the starting point and the second group at the finishing line.

At the sound of the whistle, Antelope takes off like an arrow and disappears from sight while Tortoise has merely taken the first few steps. The other animals are happy that someone is going to humiliate Tortoise and silence him once and for all. Antelope himself is so happy that he has been given an opportunity to prove to his fellow animals that he is the fastest and the best in the kingdom. But as he raises his head to see how far he has gone, he is surprised to see Tortoise ahead of him. He doubles his efforts and overtakes Tortoise but when he raises his head again he is shocked to Tortoise ahead of him. Unable to understand how Tortoise manages to be ahead of him all the time, Antelope redoubles his efforts and runs as he has never run before. When he finally manages to reach the finishing point, he is amazed to see that Tortoise is already there.

Antelope collapses out of sheer exhaustion and dies while Tortoise is carried shoulder high and declared the winner. In this story, Tortoise takes off from a position of weakness. He knows very well that he cannot genuinely compete with Antelope. But he also knows that he is cleverer than Antelope. The trick of assigning his family members to particular spots on the race track and instructing them to come out wherever they see Antelope coming and to return to their position as soon as Antelope overtakes them works out very well, and Antelope is outsmarted.



The above tale evokes the laughter and the admiration of the audience because the intelligence of the protagonist is harmless. It is true that Antelope dies in the end, but his death derives solely from the fact that he is outsmarted by his rival.

An example of a tale in the second category is *Gizo and Goat*³ from the Bamenda Grassfield region of Cameroon.

In this tale, Gizo and Goat, two very good friends live in a village in time of famine. Everybody in the village suffers from the famine except Goat and his family. Gizo tries to find out the sources of Goat's supply of food and fails. One day, he walks up to Goat and says:

'Look, my friend. You and I were born in this village around the same time. We grew up together and we are both family heads today. There has never been any secret between us. How come it that you hide the source of your regular supply of food from me?'

Goat looks at him for some time before answering.

'All what you have said is true. If I have been reluctant to reveal the source of my food to you it is because I know how greedy you are. If I show you now, you will eat up everything and all of us will suffer.'

Gizo replies in pretended innocence.

'Oh my friend! I know that my enemies are at work again. They must have poisoned your mind. Please give me the opportunity to prove them wrong.'

Goat is finally convinced and agrees to take Gizo to the barn farm where he gets his food. Upon reaching the barn, Goat takes cassava from it and asks Gizo to do the same. Gizo refuses saying that he must eat his fill first before he can even think of what to carry home. Goat pleads with him but he refuses and starts to eat. After pleading in vain with Gizo, Goat returns home leaving Gizo by the barn. After eating to his satisfaction, Gizo becomes drowsy and decides to sleep a bit before returning home. Shortly after, the farmer who owns the barn arrives and catches Gizo. He takes Gizo before the King and Gizo, in self-defence says that only helps Goat who owns the barn. The King sends for Goat but the messenger returns to say that Goat has gone to the neighbouring village to attend the funeral of his father. The King then tells Gizo that he has lied. Thus, Goat is acquitted while Gizo is punished severely.

In the above story, both Goat and Gizo violate the norms of their society by stealing. But, while the former steals out of necessity, the latter's theft is coloured by greed. The goat exercises a sense of moderation and consideration while Gizo poses a threat of starvation to Goat and even to the rightful owner of the barn. That is why Goat is set free while Gizo is punished.

Apart from the fact that Goat is more moral than Gizo, he does not willingly enter into competition with Gizo. Rather it is Gizo who originally sets out to outsmart Goat but is in turn outsmarted by Goat.

Another popular folktale which doubles as an anecdote in African lore is *The Feast in the Sky*⁴ where Tortoise and the birds live in a traditional society. This is how the story goes:

Once upon a time, there was famine on earth because of lack of rain. As a result, there was nothing for Tortoise to eat and he was dying of hunger. One day, he overhead the birds discussing about the feast in the sky. He approached them and politely asked to accompany them to the feast. The birds agreed very reluctantly because they knew Tortoise well. But he managed to convince them that he would be of good behaviour. So, they lent him a feather each to enable him to fly with them to the feast in the sky.

On their way to the party, he convinced the birds that they should take a name each. He went on to tell them that his own name was 'All of You.' The unsuspecting birds agreed and they continued their journey to the sky.

When they reached, they were well received in the party. Tortoise was highly impressed by the sumptuous dishes placed on the table that he immediately devised a means to outwit his companions. As soon as they were invited to the table, he asked the birds if they remembered the name he took on the way. They naïvely chirped in unison, 'All of You.' He then asked their gullible host, for whom the food was served. The unsuspecting host replied, for 'All of You.' Tortoise then reminded the birds that since that was the name he adopted, it meant that the food was for him alone. He advised them to be patient and wait for their own share. So, he sat down and greedily consumed all the food while the birds watched in silent anger. When he finished eating and nothing was forthcoming for them, the hungry and angry birds decided there and then to make Tortoise pay for his mischief. They took back their feathers and flew to earth leaving Tortoise stranded in the sky.

Perplexed, Tortoise begged the last bird that when he reached earth, he should tell his wife to bring out all the mattresses and pillows and lay them in such a way that he could land on them safely. The bird agreed. But, on reaching earth, he told Tortoise's wife to spread all her available hardware.

Meanwhile, Tortoise was watching from the sky. When he saw that his wife had spread out what he thought were mattresses and pillows, he jumped from the sky and landed heavily on the hardware thereby cracking his shell — an event which explains the Tortoise's appearance today.

The ideological matrix holding the society in the folktale together is collective or group responsibility for its member's wellbeing. It is the community-oriented thinking which prompts the birds to try to save Tortoise



from the effects of the famine. Of course, the birds know Tortoise for what he is, an ingenious trickster. They also know that underlying his suave appearance is a calculating ruthlessness. But, since their culture makes room for temperament, especially when it does not threaten the stability of the established order, they try to accommodate social misfits like Tortoise. But Tortoise — who is the equivalent of the social courtier of times gone by and who gets his way through seduction, deception and subtle strategy — is not guided by the interests of the group. Rather, he is an extremely individualistic and ethically non-conforming character. That explains why he appears as a single and often isolated character.

By taking the name 'All of You' Tortoise acts in self-promotion. By allowing him to take that name, the birds unwittingly transfer power to him thereby making him their leader. Tortoise, on his part, is quick to accept the power, but refuses to recognise the responsibility that goes with it. As a result, he feels that he can ignore the birds from which he derives his power. He however forgets that in social relationships everything which disrupts the group's orderly life must be removed. That is why, when his code of behaviour which is based on unmitigated egotism poses a threat to the birds' wellbeing, they decide to punish him by dissociating themselves from him.

Tortoise symbolises human beings in their most primitive and animal state, and gives the impression that humans are congenitally wicked and evil. There is no doubt that humans' environment is hostile, requiring great intelligence and ingenuity for survival. But it is precisely in this struggle for survival that people expose their negative traits. In the tale under discussion, Tortoise is faced with the natural feeling of hunger which might eventually lead to starvation. Therefore, he uses every means at his disposal to procure food for himself in order to assuage his hunger. In trying to justify his desires, however, he overreaches himself and crashes. The bitter truth here is clear. The negative attitudes portrayed by Tortoise are not only prevalent in many African societies today, but are caused by the same instincts of survival and self-preservation which led Tortoise to overreach himself. Africans, like their counterparts elsewhere, want to live in opulence and ostentation. In Cameroonian society, for example, people want to send their children to prestigious schools. They want to own landed property, vast mansions, flashy cars, and well-furnished bank accounts. In order to achieve their goals, they are ready to cheat, defraud and steal. In short, they seek maximum rewards for minimum efforts. But, in trying to satisfy their greed, they abuse the rights and privileges entrusted to them. The point must however be

made that traditional African society, which produced such trickster tales, was not against the inordinate acquisition of wealth. In fact, it was basically a materialistic society. But as Okoh (2008), as quoted by Tala (2013, 103), points out:

A man's position in society was usually determined by his wealth. All the four titles in my village were taken not given, and each one had his price. But in those days' wealth meant the strength of your arm. No one became rich by swindling the community or stealing government money. In fact, a man who was guilty of theft immediately lost all his titles. Today, we have kept the materialism and thrown away the spirituality which should keep it in check.

The Tortoise story therefore raises one important question; namely, how do we pursue our goals and achieve our objectives in life? The answer surely is not by following the covetousness, wanton greed and gross immorality of the outrageous Tortoise. Rather, it lies in the right values like dignity, humaneness and other positive attributes contained in our oral literature. The story also calls on us to discard the Machiavellian adage that 'the end justifies the means' and replace it with the traditional wisdom that the means of achieving goals are as important as the goals themselves.

In all, the folktale *The Feast in the Sky* is told to reinforce group solidarity. It encourages people to develop a strong sense of belonging. All the folktales mentioned in this paper comment on the conditions of people and the state of their society. Finally, they suggest ways of improving society.

Some scholars like Kehinde (2010) and Akanbi (2014) are of the opinion that the folktale serves exclusively to uphold the social norms of the society from which it emanates and in which it functions. However, some folktales become a social force and, as such, naturally contain sentiments that are sometimes antagonistic to the ideology of the dominant social order. The three-trickster tales discussed above are good examples. These tales, which sometimes express cynical or anti-social views, are also used to transmit the bitter lessons of experience, even if such lessons conflict with accepted societal norms. As Sone (2009, 163) points out, 'storytellers use trickster tales to orientate their audience toward realising that although the structure of social relationships in the community is tight and desirable, it is not immutable and unquestionable.' As a result, the tales present the potential of individual freedom and initiative within the framework of community/individual dialectic.

Another scholar, Dundes (1992, 4), using the making and breaking of friendship as a structural frame in African folktales, observes that

...the fact that contracts are violated means that the folktale against the binding nature of interpersonal obligations of the kind imposed by formal or quasi-formal institutional friendship pacts. Here is an excellent example of what Bascom has termed the 'basic paradox of folklore' in that friendships are prominently displayed as cultural ideal norms but at the same time, the narrator and audience can identify with the trickster who blatantly ignores these norms.

The folktale, then, is sometimes used by the people as a kind of safety valve for the release of socially repressed emotions. In other words, the tales provide people with 'vicarious rituals of rebellion against the community framework of order and uniformity' (Tala 2013, 62). Furthermore, some of the tales describe actions such as making love and use words such as 'vagina' which are forbidden by the normal standards of cultural behaviour, thereby providing socially approved outlets for the repression which cultural mores impose on the people.

Apart from suggesting that the moments of individual liberation from community-imposed inhibitions, though necessary, should be on a micro- rather than a macro-basis, the tales also present certain characteristics that were extolled as virtues in the protagonists created by our forefathers, but which can hardly be enforced today. This is particularly true of obedience to parents in the arrangement of marriage partners. A case in point is the familiar tale of the *Wilful Girl*⁵ who refuses all the suitors proposed to her by her parents. When she finally chooses her own man, and marries him, she finds out, on their way to her conjugal home, that he is a malicious spirit in the guise of a skull. Her ordeal is supposed to impress on young girls in the storytelling audience the virtue of obedience to parents, especially in the choice of marital partners. But parents are finding it increasingly difficult to get their daughters to accept their own choice of marital partners. The girls today prefer to make the choice themselves.

Nonetheless, since the folktale is a mode of communication which is realised in a face-to-face setting, involving the narrator and an audience, it provides an excellent forum for socialisation of all concerned. That is, a storytelling session fosters group solidarity and a sense of belonging among the participants.

It also provides a form of relaxation and evening entertainment, especially in the rural areas. As Mbiti (2004, 12) observes:

Storytelling is another form of entertainment which draws everyone in. Stories contain singing, drama, sadness, joy, surprise, and suspense; the interest and intrigue the listener, and a good storyteller will even sandwich jokes between parts of a story. Since the telling of a story is enlivened by actions, the audience is entertained not only by the narrative, but also by the facial expressions, the

'gimmicks', the singing, and the dramatic performance of the storyteller as he tells the story, imitating amazement, old age, or sorrow as the case may be.

Nevertheless, most of the virtues extolled by African folktales are still admired today. For instance, the protagonists who find satisfaction in serving their communities are still highly regarded. Balogun (1982, 17) elaborates on this point, saying that

The central ideal of the great heroes of our oral literature was not sectional morality but universal morality- morality in its truest sense. Hence while there are heroes in our folklore who are valued for great personal achievements, the heroes esteemed the most highly are those who are highly moral. These are held in high esteem because they had dedicated themselves to the humane task of defending the innocent and the weak, because they had committed themselves to righteousness and because they had put their courage, powers and all their resources to the service of humanity.

The African folktale then contradicts the unexamined assumption that there can be no universal morality. It advances the view that the true hero is one who takes an uncompromising stand against injustice, one who fights relentlessly to preserve life and the integrity of man.

The folktale's sapiential value depends on the dominant age group in the audience. If, for instance, the audience is made up mainly of adults, then it is likely to be already familiar with the folktale's realities. In that case, it will be incorrect to say that the folktale will teach new values to an already knowledgeable audience. Rather, an adult audience is reminded through the folktale medium of the dialectical character of the interaction between individual and community. Among a youthful audience, however, the folktale is used to promote a society's positive values. That is, the folktale is used as an instrument for indirectly socialising the youth in culturally practised dynamics. Thus, while the folktale serves to teach the young, it is also utilised to refresh the adult mind of the potential within the framework of a community-individual dialectic.

The folktale in Africa therefore performs a wide variety of social functions and it is beyond the scope of this paper to treat them all in detail. The present discussion has been limited to the basic functions which include education, entertainment, social control, provision of a safety valve and maintenance of group solidarity.

Scholars are right to say that storytelling sessions no longer occur as frequently in African societies as they used to in former times, but the reasons they give are only partially true. For instance, one group of scholars thinks that the spread of Western education is responsible. There is no doubt that

the spread of Western education has meant a decline in the relative position of oral literature, which, however, has not shown any sign of becoming extinct. In fact, there are good reasons why oral literature should survive despite the changes induced by the introduction of a Western literacy tradition. It is to be noted that by far the largest number of Africans are still illiterate and live in traditional village communities which enjoy relative cultural homogeneity, where old and new tales continue to be told, and where songs are a constant feature. Even those Africans who have been influenced by a Western literacy culture and live in town have not lost touch with their oral tradition. They often return to their villages to visit their relations and, in so doing, are further exposed to the influence of oral culture.

Furthermore, oral literature in Africa, as elsewhere, is subject to contemporary influences in both content and style. As a result, its future will lie not only in its dynamic creativity but also in the transfer of a great quantity of it into written literature. This transition is already being facilitated by such modern African writers as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Linus Asong, T.M Aluko, Florence Nwapa, Elechi Amadi, Kenjo Jumbam, Joseph Ngong-wikuo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ebrahim Hussein, Penina Muhando and Mugayabuso Mulokozi who have demonstrated their awareness of the significance of oral literature as an integral part of African culture. By incorporating African orature into their creative writing they have succeeded in giving an atmosphere of authenticity to their works and established a consciousness which is fundamentally African. Thus, the written form is not opposed to the oral form in Africa. For not only do the two exist side by side, they often interact. Those scholars who argue that radio, television and cinema have superseded storytelling sessions as forms of entertainment seem to forget that there are several societies in Africa where television is still non-existent and where radios and cinemas are the prerogatives of a lucky few. It is true, however, that some oral literature genres have lost their relative popularity. But that is only natural. For when some forms lose their popularity, other forms are likely to gain it. Furthermore, these changes in literary taste, as Finnegan (in Simms 1991, 34) remarks,

need not therefore lead one to the extreme conclusion that oral literature as a whole is on its way to extinction in (Africa). On the contrary, it is likely that in a whole variety of contexts it will continue to flourish for the foreseeable future.

It is obvious from the above that, in spite of the changes that have taken place in African literary taste, the folktale continues to be a living, dynamic phenomenon rather than a fossilised form of a primitive past of African

culture. The reasons for this are not hard to find. In fact, Sekoni (1994, 23) sums them up in the following lines:

African societies do not seem to have experienced the clean break that the Western man often claims for his society between the concept and mode of thinking about life by unlettered one that now seem to dominate society. The cultures of the spoken and the written words as metaphors for traditional and modern civilizations have in the (African) context been forced into a heterosexual relationship, having had to share each other in spite of apparent differences in their anatomy. The fact that folkloric mode and the modern mode in (Africa) have had to share the same space and time has made the study of traditional cultural 'productive' systems in isolation from its modern counterpart an inadequate if not dishonest intellectual practice.

Implicit in the above statement is the fact, that since parallels exist between traditional and modern contexts in Africa, the norms and values extolled by the folktale can be put to good ideological use in contemporary social practice. Furthermore, since the issue of an individual-community dialectic seems to be ever-present in human affairs, the modern audience, like its traditional counterparts, deserves to know the difference between negative and positive challenges of community norms, between sheer frivolity and genuine desire at transformation. The modern audience also deserves to know what in the community's values should be respected and what should be challenged.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to establish the intricate relationship that exists between the folktale as a form of oral literature and traditional African social values. I have also highlighted the various functions which oral literature performs in African society and noted that the folktale is often used as a vehicle for transmitting and preserving shared values and collective experience. It has been observed in this paper that, despite the preponderance of modern means of entertainment in Africa, storytelling still persists. Contemporary African folktales are imaginatively refined for the purpose of injecting new meanings, ideas and values in the audience, based on the society's contemporary experiences and relations.

I made the point that the storyteller in traditional African society concerns him- or herself with the state of affairs in his or her society. The storyteller, as I have shown, lives in a homogenous context and the worldview which he or she shares with his or her fellow villagers is circumscribed by



his or her immediate cultural setting. Criticism, if there is any, is mainly at the private level. That is, the storyteller uses satire or innuendo to castigate social deviants.

From the examination of our folktales, it can also be gathered that they are aimed at developing in the audience a sense of communal responsibility as well as outlining the basic philosophy of life of their society and providing them the knowledge and skills to solve some of life's immediate problems. It is also clear that some of the folktale characters possess qualities which a community is expected to emulate. This is because a people's stories help to answer questions about their identity and values. They touch on the very core of who they are, both personally and corporately.

Based on the above observations, the paper recommends that Africans must be ready to rehabilitate their folktales and press them into service to raise society's level of consciousness in order to provoke positive change. More so, parents must encourage folktales at home. In order to bridge the generation gap between the elderly and the young, parents must encourage folktale activities in their homes. Children must be made to compose and tell their own stories to their siblings. This will help them improve their speech and communication skills inherent in the telling of folktales. Finally, this paper has highlighted the danger of extinction facing our folktales in particular and our oral literature as a whole, due to the forces of globalisation and commercial entertainment. The threat is real if we do not take timely action. This timely action that we need to take is to preserve and promote our oral literature by using digital technology to create a comprehensive and dynamic database.

Notes

1. The story was collected and translated by the author of this paper during his research trip in Bakossi-Cameroon in 2007 for his research project on the 'Oral Literature of Cameroon'.
2. This story was collected and translated by Tala Kashim in the grassfield region of Bamenda, Cameroon. See Tala's collection of folktales in *The Oral Tale in Africa* (1989).
3. This story was collected and translated by Tala Kashim in the grassfield region of Bamenda, Cameroon. See Tala's collection of folktales in *The Oral Tale in Africa* (1989).
4. This story was collected and translated by the author of this paper during his research trip in Bakossi-Cameroon in 2007 for his research project on the 'Oral Literature of Cameroon'.
5. See Tala's *The Oral Tale in Africa* (1989).

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