

STORY-TELLING IN THE SERVICE OF SOCIETY: EXPLORING THE UTILITARIAN VALUES OF NIGERIAN FOLKTALES

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the utilitarian values of Nigerian folktales. This is with a view to assessing the role of this quintessential aspect of the country's folklore in the overall development of the nation and her people. In the main, the paper reveals that Nigerian folktales are very useful in developing the country socially, educationally, spiritually, psychologically, and the like. It is discovered that the Nigerian folktale performer is the sensitive point of his/her community because he/she expresses the longings, failings and successes of his/her people. It is further established that folktale is an early source of the imagination in Nigerian communities, and it has therapeutic, emotional, cathartic, didactic and socializing usefulness in the societies. The paper is concluded on an optimistic note that despite the preponderance of modern means of relaxation in the country, storytelling still persists in Nigeria. Contemporary Nigerian folktales are imaginatively refined for the purpose of injecting new meanings, new ideas and new values, based on the nation's contemporary historical experiences and relations. Folktale is one of the forms of Nigerian folklore. Others include myth, legend, proverb, aphorism, reminiscence, anecdote and joke. In the main, folktales comprise various kinds of narrative prose literature found in the oral traditions of the world. They are heard, remembered and are subject to various alterations in the course of retelling. This paper is set to prove that folktales perform a legion of functions in Nigerian societies, including entertainment, keeping of records, and instructing younger generations. For instance, through folktales, Nigerian culture, history, philosophy, mores, kinship systems, moral disposition, and the like could be exposed to the outsiders and the uninitiated insiders (who are yet to imbibe this culture). Therefore, this paper supports the assertion of Ezekiel Mphahlele that the African oral artist, including the folktale performer, is "the sensitive point of his community and the cultural impacts about him must, if he has the make-up of an artist, teach him to express his longings, failings, and successes of his people"¹. It is further argued that folktale is an early source of the imagination in Nigerian communities. It has therapeutic, emotional, cathartic, didactic, and socializing usefulness in Nigerian societies, and it gives an intimate account of their values.

One basic assumption of this treatise is that Nigerian folktales perform various utilitarian functions. They are capable of teaching Nigerian history, geography, astronomy, and the struggles of human beings in the society, that is, the passions and

frailties that are found among the citizens of the country today. Hence, in support of Roger Abrahams's assertion, this paper argues that storytelling is a fundamental way of codifying cultures and traditions, and dramatizing the rationale behind them². In fact, folktales are very useful in solving both existential and essential problems in the country, because each tale always ends with a message, a point and a truth to remember as one confronts life's problems. Folktales are a medium of instruction in Nigeria. This claim is supported by Abrahams thus: "storytelling itself is part of a large performing complex, one that exists not only to provide entertainment for traditional (oral-aural) peoples, but that is at the center of their moral lives as well."³

This paper is theoretically grounded in socio-anthropology and it employs analytical and descriptive procedures based on an eclectic survey of the practical values of Nigerian folktales which are subjected to critical-content analysis. The tales are situated in African oral culture, and their social relevance is discussed.

FOLKTALE : CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Folktale has been given many definitions by many scholars of different orientations. Its definition depends on its functions in a society and the way the narrator and the audience think of it at the time of performance. For instance, according to F.B.O. Akporobaro, folktale is:

an imaginative narrative (story) in prose form. The story that constitutes a folktale may have a basis in real life, but generally the story is an imaginative recreation of a memorable experience that is intended essentially to entertain rather than to record history or social experience. A folktale may be believed. Generally, however, they are considered to be untrue stories, and hence not objects of serious belief.⁴

However, M.H Abrams provides a more concise and technical definition of folktale. According to him, "folktale, strictly defined, is a short narrative in prose of unknown authorship, which has been transmitted orally".⁵ Therefore, a folktale is imaginative; it is in prose form; its authorship is anonymous, and it is orally transmitted across ages. Edward Qinn defines folktale as:

A story handed down orally from generation to generation that becomes part of the tradition of a group of people. Oral transmission allows for continuing development and alteration of the story. Once a folktale assumes a written form, it remains a folktale, but its form becomes fixed. The folktale may include a wide range of types including the fable, fairy tale, legend and myth.⁶

Also, John Hagan provides a comprehensive and critical list of the technical features of a folktale:

It has a literary convention expressed in the scheme of formal features: the introductory statements; the body of the tale interspersed with songs; the moral or etiological conclusion; the narrator-audience interaction; the use

of language characterised chiefly by repetition and resort to ideophones; the role of songs to punctuate sections of the story and to advance the plot in some cases.⁷

Story-telling takes place in the evening, the bedtime and the twilight. Actually, it is a taboo to perform folktales in day time: “The mother of the story teller will turn into a hen if he/she performs during the day”. The bedtime or twilight is chosen because of the serenity of the evening, and it is also the period when domestic drudgery ends. Stories can be told inside or outside the house, by male or female, child or adult. However, the adults perform for the children; while children perform for their own peers in the absence of the adults. Folktales are seasoned with proverbs, which are supposed to be the exclusive domain of the old. However, children can trade riddles and jokes among themselves before the folktale performance commences. The most popular performers are grandparents (the grandmother is almost an institutionalized performer of folktales in the country). According to Patrick Ebewo, “from the earliest to the present, every society, every culture, and every people have told stories, and these have passed from one generation to another”⁸. Thus, a folktale is a story that is passed down orally from one generation to the next and becomes part of a community’s tradition.

FUNCTIONS OF FOLKTALES IN NIGERIA

It is convenient, therefore, to state that Nigerian folktales are replete with inherited wisdoms, social, personal and moral. According to Sony Camara’s Manding-informants, “African stories are neither a record of reality nor pure fantasy. Although they are stories that happened at the beginning of time, “they describe things as they happen today”⁹. They also interpret the experiences of the ordinary person from birth to death and beyond. For instance, the grizzly story of Hornbill dwells on the stress laid on custom among Nigerians. This story delves into what happens when a community member loses sight of how traditions tie its members together. Once, Hornbill lived in a village, but it would not conform to the customs of his people, most especially his refusal to attend burial rites. Hence, the story’s pedagogical importance includes the shared concerns of community, cooperation, collaborative activity in farming or cattle tending-coordination of energy needed in forging community. Thus, the role of the individual in the family and community is stressed. There is an emphasis on the subordination of individual will to the good of the group – the wish of the individual gives way for societal or communal wish.

However, not all stories should be utilized in teaching virtues, as there are some that are ambiguous or contain vices rather than virtues. According to Plato, Socrates opined that stories to be used in teaching children should be selected with utmost care:

Then should we be so careless as to allow children to hear just any story made up by anyone who comes along, taking ideas into their minds that are the exact opposite of the ones they should have when they grow up? ¹⁰

It should, therefore, be stated that before stories are selected for teaching the children, they should be properly screened. This is with a view to avoiding those stories that may

impact negatively on the morals of the youths. It is an obvious fact that some stories are better left out because they contain a lot of vices, and some teach ills. Patrick Ebewo comments on this:

The emphasis on the telling, teaching (especially at the primary school level), and the enjoyment of tales involving tricksters, and their nefarious activities might be a contributory factor to the present corruption and indiscipline in our society because of the psychic effect those stories may have on the young individuals¹¹.

Thus, some folktales have the potential of breeding indiscipline and immorality in society. If not carefully illustrated, some folktales may mould children's characters to become bullies, aggressors, con artists and selfish individuals. However, if well and carefully employed, folktales stand as useful tools of socialization and celebration of communal ethos and pantheons. According to Kaschula, "oral literature exists only insofar as society allows it to exist"¹². Patrick Ebewo also supports Kaschula's advice:

Fascinating stories with unambiguous moral lessons for the good health of society should continue to flourish in African communities and schools because folktales are important arms of African culture, and we cannot afford to dismiss them with a wave of the hand.¹³

Therefore, emphasis should be placed on folktales that can help in nation building, and those that can assist to address the situation whereby our esteemed values are steadily going towards disorder and disintegration. Hence, the stories to be selected for teaching Nigerian children should be those that can contribute to the development of the country and lead to a better upbringing of the Nigerian child. The folktales should be able to assist in inculcating the desired values of truth, honesty, hard work, discipline, loyalty, obedience and social responsibility. They should be able to "communicate contemporary and immediate ideas, lasting thoughts, and urgent concerns"¹⁴. Moreover, the recommendation of Socrates should also be considered: "We must first supervise the storytellers, accepting what is good and rejecting what is bad."¹⁵

According to J.K.E Agovi, "the true artist entertains and instructs at the same time."¹⁶ Hence, although the apparent and stated purpose of story-telling is entertainment, it is also very didactic. There is, therefore, a sense of purposefulness in performing folktales in Nigeria. It is, thus, appropriate to label story-telling as an "enter-educative" art. Abrahams captures the enter-educative function of folktales in the following words: "Storytelling itself is part of a large performing complex, one that exists not only to provide entertainment for traditional (oral-aural) peoples, but that is at the center of their moral lives as well"¹⁷. Folktale is, therefore, a rich pedagogical resource in the Nigerian educational setting in the light of the dispossession of the country, resulting from the unfortunate historical experience of colonialism and its concomitant socio-cultural and political effects. The stories titled "The Chief's Feast", for instance, can teach the virtue of honesty. The story centres on a feast given by the chief of an unnamed town. He asks each guest to bring one calabash of palm wine, but due to dishonesty, each brings a calabash of water. And they all end up drinking ordinary

water instead of palm wine. Therefore, the story can teach the people to avoid playing tricks on others, as their consequences are always unpalatable. Before the incursion of the crippling technology in Africa, folktales, including “*The Chief’s Feast*,” were told around the firesides, in the family compounds, in ceremonial settings, in the celebrations of past events, in moral discussions and in praises of great deeds.

Storytelling is also used in solving the problems of keeping family and community together. An example is the story titled “The Talking Skull”, which depicts an encounter of a man and a human skull in the bush; that is, a hunter who trips over a skull while in pursuit of game and exclaims in wonderment, “What’s this? How did you get here?” The skull replied, enigmatically, “talking brought me here.” The mere mention of the talking skull is enough to deliver its message: uncontrolled speech is a sign of moral laxity. Emphasis is on the cautionary decorum of tradition. In the story titled “Akanke and the Jealous Pawnbroker”, the audience are admonished to avoid the vices of greed, disobedience, jealousy and callousness. The jealous pawnbroker loses her only son and all her wealth because of her vices, most especially jealousy. The story is concluded thus: “Thus the jealous pawnbroker lost her son and money as a result of her greediness and jealousy”. Through the meteoric transition of Akanke and her father from grass to grace, the audience are instructed that ‘no condition is permanent’, rather, with hard work, patience and good luck, a poor person can become a rich person. Also, in the story titled, “Don’t Pay Bad for Bad”, the audience are taught to imbibe the virtues of friendship, forgiveness, and kindness, and they should avoid jealousy. In this story, Dola is used as an epitome of friendship and forgiveness, while Babi is the archetype of jealous people. Despite the fact that, out of jealousy, Babi insists on cutting down Dola’s kola nut tree, Dola has a chance of retaliating by allowing the swordsman to behead Babi’s daughter in order to get back her brass ring, but she does not believe in vengeance. Rather, she says: And I believe, if we continue to pay ‘bad’ for ‘bad’, bad will never finish on earth. Therefore, I forgive Babi all that she has done to my kola-nut tree of which she was jealous.

Hence, this story is a clarion call to Nigerians to imbibe the virtues of forgiveness and kindness. These are necessary virtues in the contemporary Nigerian societies marred and ravaged by conflicts and political intolerance.

At this juncture, is very pertinent to quote William Bascom at length, with a view to further foregrounding the educative function of folktales in Africa, in general, and Nigeria, in particular:

A function of folklore is that which it plays in education, particularly, but not exclusively, in non-literate societies. The importance of the many forms of folklore as pedagogic devices has been documented in many parts of the world, although perhaps most comprehensively in Raum’s study of education among the Chaga of East Africa. Here Ogre tales, like Bogey-man stories, are used in the discipline of very young children, and lullabies are sung to put them in a good humour. Somewhat later, fables or folktales incorporating morals are introduced to inculcate general attitude and principles such as diligence and filial piety, and to ridicule laziness, rebelliousness and snobbishness.¹⁸

Nigerian elders often employ folktales to teach moral values for the promotion of an upright life. The exegetic use of folktales assists in clarifying certain issues (moral values, social skills and social messages). Folktales contain much educational wisdom; they are didactic tools in child rearing. They teach the virtues of general human experiences, and they are pedagogical tools even in modern societies, especially among family members and at schools. Abrahams argues that “even as the subcontinent urbanizes, folktales have been maintained as effective devices for passing on the knowledge and wisdom of the ancestors.”¹⁹ Although traditions and norms are passed through many other means, including books, radio, television, the internet, observation and common experience, folktales are still relevant in cultural transmission.

In fact, folktales are effective devices for communicating wisdom about human nature and the world at large. According to Akinwumi Isola, folktales play “a servicing and monitoring role to all the other aspects of culture in traditional African society.”²⁰ Folktales celebrate the full spectrum of African culture and speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Africans. Therefore, the selection of folktales for Nigerian youths should be guided by their relevance. Local stories which are appropriate to the specific locality and culture and are characterized by predominantly realistic images should be considered. These stories will actually appeal to the child’s sensibility by depicting his/her immediate natural, social and historical experiences. However, universal stories should not be totally jettisoned in Nigerian schools and homes. This is because they are also replete with folkloric, fantasy motifs, such as those common across cultures. They offer an attempt at expressing universal truths. Universal tales appeal to universal identity, and they are full of generic human experience which can re-educate African sensibilities with positive effect, and building upon this foundation, they can encourage creativity and nurture a more universal human identity which is *sine qua non* in the present global world. Actually, universal tales can increase Nigerian students’ cultural awareness, thereby encouraging them to transcend cultural boundaries.

Folktales also play vital roles in the process of socialization in Nigerian society. For instance, Nigerian folktales teach the children the proper way to live and show them how the ancestors lived in the past. Apparently, folktales are used in the country to encourage the youths to continue the traditional African ways of life. According to Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang, folktale “provides a passageway through which society confirms its strengths and growth strategies, while inducting new generations to its life-flow.”²¹ Folktales are also used to cleanse the country’s image and move the nation forward in the right direction. Folktales are, thus, a quintessential means of redeeming the shattered past of the country; they chronicle the past of the country in order to restore the grandeur of the old. According to A.A. Majasan, folktale is an instrument of education among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria²². Ontological philosophy and religion are enshrined into the narrative in a highly lucid manner. For instance, most Nigerian folktales are replete with beliefs in spirits, gods, goddesses, and the like. Nigerian folktales are used to comment about the way of life of Nigerians. They are used to highlight the way in which the people share a close bond with the elements of nature – animal life, vegetation, rivers, forest and mountains. Nigerian traditional religions are depicted in most of the tales; the audience encounter traditional religions where God, man and nature are fused, and where

people have reverence for all things natural. Thereby, nature is immortalized through Nigerian folktales.

Moreover, in support of Akporobaro, in Nigerian folktales, exciting situations are used

to generate pleurably imaginative episodes in terms of which moral lessons are carried into the heart and mind...moral lessons are transformed into exciting image patterns, which touch the heart causing fear, sympathy or love of the good and hatred of evil.²³

The motif of retributive justice is, therefore, famous in Nigerian folktales, most especially in the lack-and-the-norm-violation narratives, which evince the triumph and transfiguration of one character, and the failure or punishment of other characters. Examples of these tales include “A Jealous Woman’s Fate”, The Tortoise and His Wily Ways”, “Akanke and the Jealous Pawnbroker”, and “The Baboon and the Tortoise”. This reveals that African culture affirms and reinforces the values of politeness, meekness, patience, perseverance, selfless love, compassion, resourcefulness, and intelligence, while rejecting opposing values.

According to Anny Wynchank, “a society expresses itself through oral tales. These, in turn, reflect that society and its beliefs”²⁴. Nigerian folktales are employed to teach virtues, such as endurance, honesty, kindness, diligence and obedience. In Nigerian folktales, miscreants and violators are swiftly punished. Hooliganism, cultism, prostitution, examination malpractices, robbery and the like are condemned with a view of enlightening the youths of the country on the adverse effects of engaging in such vices. Thus, folktales are antidotes to social vices in the country, and they are used to encourage the youths to grow up to become responsible and patriotic citizens. Folktales are also useful in assisting the youths to achieve their dreams of becoming great leaders of tomorrow. The virtues of courage, endurance and obedience manifested in Akanke, in “Akanke and the Jealous Pawnbroker”, are enough instructions for Nigerian youths in their efforts to achieve their life-long ambitions. Also, “Ogueji in Search of a Marriage-Cow” is a potent story that can teach Nigerian youths the virtues of courage and, determination and doggedness.

Trickster tales are very useful in teaching Nigerian youths some morals. In the main, the trickster figure is a central character (hero) in African story-telling. According to Obiechina, he is “a stock character that is often something of a rogue. He manages to extricate himself from intriguing and sometimes dangerous situations by a display of mental ability”²⁵. He is represented by a willing and tricky animal that cheats and outdoes the bigger and more powerful ones. Variants of the trickster hero in African folktales include the following:

Ananse - spider of Ghana

Akan-Asante - trickster of Ghana

The I jaḗpaḗ (Tortoise) of Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Edo, Itshekiri and Kalabari people of Nigeria.

The Gizo of the Hausa.
 Hlakayana of the Zululand.
 The Calabar Rat (who bites with a soothing breeze).

The foregoing, therefore, affirms Remi Adeoti's assertion that:

Trickster tales are almost a universal element in African thought system. They are borne out of some perceived socialization needs, judging from their encapsulation of societal norms and values, which the child is brought up to uphold."²⁶

It should be reiterated that Nigerian trickster folktales teach and fortify; they are moralistic and didactic. Hence, in Nigerian folktales, the trickster figure plays a vital role in the beliefs and customs of cultures throughout the world. In the main, the trickster character is an allegorical figure used to condemn the vices of selfishness, libidinous, powerful appetites and bodily functions. The trickster figure deceives others, but he overreaches what he can realistically attain and often becomes the victim of his own scheme. Thus, Nigerian folktales celebrate the nation's tradition and boldly confront issues of morality in a time when doing so is becoming increasingly passé, yet paradoxically increasingly relevant.

The trickster figures always trick the larger ones in a pretended tug of war and cheat them in a race. At times, the smaller trickster figures deceive the bigger ones into killing themselves or their own relation. In most Yoruba folktales, the trickster figure (I jaṣpaṣ) is an extremely cunning animal which regularly outwits stronger, faster, bigger animals, as we find in the tortoise outwitting the baboon in "The Baboon and the Tortoise", and the tortoise outsmarting Yemoja, the crocodile and the tiger in "The Tortoise and His Wily Ways." According to Adeoti, the Yoruba trickster figure is a recidivist and humbug, an archetypal figure who demonstrates the realities of human existence.²⁷ The Tortoise depicts the socio-political superstructure in the society, and he is used in Yoruba satirical tales for reformatory, retributive and pedagogical purposes. Very often, his trickery, overarching, dishonesty and greed work against him, and he receives his due punishment, but at other times, he gets away with it, proving that brain is better than brawn. He is enthralled for his superior intelligence and cunning; and he is repulsive for his duplicity, evasiveness, greed, unrealistic ambition, gluttony, and self-centredness. The trickster figures signify trickery and breach of faith.²⁸ It should be affirmed, however, that no African folktale endorses the vices of the trickster figures, rather, their virtues are esteemed, while their vices are condemned, and their follies are ridiculed.

Nigerian folktales also teach the virtues of courage and endurance. Through folktales, protagonists, through a deeper understanding of *self* (and consequently, the nature of their relationship with others), transcend the mean and oppressive circumstances in which they find themselves. This understanding of *self* allows the protagonists to create their own roadmaps toward achieving greater self-acceptance and empowerment. This may be in the form of evolution from downtrodden to ascendant, and it consequently teaches the virtue of the inextricable link between self-acceptance and achievement of personal happiness.

Folktales are also very useful means of acculturation and enculturation in Nigerian societies. It should be stressed that Nigeria and other African countries are rich in traditions and customs. Folktales are effective weapons of transmitting these traditions. Roger Abrahams confirms the preponderance of cultural traditions in Africa. In his words:

Like any such huge geographical region, there is a tremendous range of size, character, and complexity in the societies and cultures of Africa - a range that runs from the elegant and sophisticated ancient city cultures to the forest and desert people who continue to live by the simplest hunting and gathering techniques. Immense kingdoms and nations co-exist with very small hands; all with their own deep and venerable traditions.²⁹

Folktales provide Nigerian people with an enhanced view of this bewildering amalgam of cultural traditions. They show the culture in the past and in the present, in how people live and relate with each other. Folktales are used to illustrate the colourful heritage of a unique nation. In fact, Nigerian folktales are often very much a fundamental part of cultural transmission. They are a weapon par excellence for acculturation and enculturation. Folktales assure members of the culture of their ability to adjust to their circumstances. They affirm and reinforce the culture's self-definition in its active engagement with the changing universe. According to Bruno Bettelheim, the message of folktales is:

To get across to the child in manifold form: that struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human experience – but that if one does not stay away, but steadfastly unexpected and often unjust hardship, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious.³⁰

Therefore, folktales are used in Nigeria to validate traditional ethics and ethos, procedures and beliefs in teaching children and adults. Little wonder, Felix Boateng calls for a return to traditional education in Africa- rich heritage of oral literature (fables, myths, legends, folktales and proverbs).³¹

Also, according to Taiwo Oladele, “to understand the culture of any part of Africa, one must read or listen to the folktales because they illustrate the simplicity and superstition of the rural African peoples, and they reflect the stage of development of a particular society.”³² Indeed, Nigerian folktales are replete with a fierce sense of justice of Africans, beliefs, virtues of patience and endurance, and they are acquainted with the customs, traditions and religions of the people. Nigerian folktales are also reflective of contemporary lifestyles. These include the strategies of coping with life by attempting to make the best out of present circumstances - coping ability, strengths and endurance. The folktales are always full of characters who struggle with life in poor and oppressed rural communities. However, despite the rural settings, the stories contain elements of material culture that reflect fundamental aspects of contemporary society. The characters struggle against oppressive conditions and are really embittered by the living conditions which frame their lives. Actually, the measure of a folktale is the degree to which it aids the establishment of good life-building.

The virtues of courage and endurance are common motifs in Nigerian folktales. The characters always maintain their strengths in the face of struggles with which the contemporary audience can identify (issues like sex, money and love). The characters always avoid becoming victims; instead, they manifest the kind of strength that allows them to discover the fine-line of bearing their oppressive circumstances without accepting them as their lot in life. The characters are required to possess the virtues of patience and endurance to fortify them against the harsh realities of life. At the end of the narrative, they finally get the opportunity to reap the positive seeds they have sown. For instance, in stories involving trickster figures, the characters always eventually transcend the conditions which frame their lives at the opening of the stories. They are compensated for their powerlessness through the use of creative strategies (trickery) “which are employed as they navigate the process of discovering and embracing self.”³³ For instance, a child in a Yoruba folktale finds strength to confront the unknown in search of happiness, by enduring the loss of his parents.

In Nigeria, mental alertness is developed through folktales. This is mostly found in the inculcation of the art of debate through dilemma tales, which encourage discussions or formal debates. This claim is attested to by William Bascom: “even when they have standard answers, dilemma tales generally evoke spirited discussions, and they train those who participate in the skills of debate and argumentation.”³⁴ Dilemma tales raise interesting puzzles that can build the mental development of young people. The psychological function of folktales, in Nigeria, in line with the theorizations of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, cannot be overemphasized. Folktales perform therapeutic function to ease emotional tensions and to express, dissolve and resolve repressed anti-social passion of anger, hatred and jealousy which currently bedevil the nation. The psychological function of African folktales is illuminated by Agovi, thus:

Through his imaginative art, therefore, the literary artist should lead man to forget his daily preoccupation and worries. And, in the process, he should arouse in men the thirst for life, the sudden urge to live, to enjoy and to delight in their existence.³⁵

Nigerian folktales are a quintessential means of affording an enjoyable escape from reality. This is always done by involving the audience in the dramatic activities in a story, including singing whereby the audience join in singing, accompanied by a lot of hand clapping. The audience perform multiple roles in folktale performance. They serve as listeners, active participants, commentators, actors and singers during folktale performances.³⁶ Thus, to make his/her tale have psychological importance, the artist should:

Create a psychological atmosphere which would enable the audience to participate in the action of the story both mentally and emotionally and, in the process, move his audience out of this world in a ‘beautiful’ way.³⁷

Nigerian folktales open new ground not only for understanding the community but also enriching it. This is with a view to bringing about the community’s self understanding and promoting a good life for the individual. Actually, folktales serve the community by promoting happy life. The storytellers partake of taking up responsibility toward uplifting lives in their communities; people’s minds and spirit are fed, and their spirits are helped out

of mediocrity. Essentially, most of the folktales in Nigeria promote human flourishing. It is apt to employ Alasdair McIntyre's conception of human beings as dependent rational beings, beings that necessarily need a community in order to thrive and to explain an understanding of human flourishing.³⁸ The African idea of U'Buntu, "I am because you are", is relevant here. This is to assert the pre-eminence of community in the lives of individuals. This is also relevant to Alain Locke's conception of literature as being in communities.³⁹ Hence, African folktales are ethical because they advocate the understanding and flourishing of life, speaking to the sense of responsibility of both the teller and the participatory audience. Therefore, Nigerian folktales provide an ethical challenge for building individual community and the world community.

Also, Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of literature as an ethical challenge is relevant here. The story-teller exposes a world so that the audience might be moved to decision and, consequently, to action. It is, therefore, apt to claim that Nigerian folktales challenge response. According to Sartre, a piece of prose must preserve the freedom of the artist and the audience. It appeals, not directly the way political speeches do, but indirectly, subtly, with due respect to the freedom of the audience. Therefore, Nigerian folktale is a social leveler. This claim supports the view of Opoku-Agyeman:

The tale may be seen as social leveler in the sense that during the performance of the tale, barriers that would separate the sexes, classes, and age groups in other social contexts are broken. As a result, one finds children, women and men, the rich and the poor gather at the same venue, to share in this ancient oral literary art.⁴⁰

Essentially, folktales provide a privileged realm of communication and a public voice for the masses, the womenfolk and youths, in the community who do not ordinarily speak publicly. They use folktales to communicate, obliquely, their views on topics which are too sensitive to be treated in other ways. Anyone, regardless of gender and social standing may narrate, and no offence is taken. In fact, story-telling is a privileged realm of communicating, an avenue or forum for the public airing of the community's problems, which are usually presented obliquely.

Nigerian folktales are also used for narrating the nation's cosmology and beliefs. For instance, the complex cultural diversities of the people are foregrounded in Nigerian folktales. These include human interactions with animals, fantastic stories involving heroes and their terrible enemies, impossible quests, transformation from human to beast or bird, immortality in all kinds of form, and many other empirically impossible phenomena. Folktales represent an attempt to distill wisdom, a summation of ideas and insights that have remained relevant over time.⁴¹ Central to Nigerian culture is the relationship between those alive (the living) and the spirits of the dead ancestors. This belief is central to the understanding of man's position and role in the universe. This cosmology always finds expression in Nigerian folktales. Indeed, the place of the power of the ancestors in maintaining the proper balance of all nature and between nature is a common thematic preoccupation of Nigerian folktales.

Hegel states quite blandly that Africa had no history and therefore could not lay claim to any aesthetics. Also, Hugh Trevor-Roper, then Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, said in a TV broadcast in Britain in 1963: "perhaps in the future there will be some African

history to teach. But at present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness...And darkness is not a subject of history.”⁴² However, according to Achebe, it is the duty of African artist to tell the people where the rain actually began to beat them after African societies had been ravaged by decades of colonial rule.⁴³ Therefore, Achebe’s assignment of the role of the artist as a teacher is very relevant in this discourse. Actually, the relevance of folktales in restoring the lost image of Africa cannot be gainsaid. In most Nigerian folktales, there are correct images of the nation, with a view to correcting the wrong and jaundiced notions about Nigeria and Nigerians that are found in most accounts about the country given in Western media. Therefore, it is possible to use folktales in re-writing the history of Africa which will counter the one we have in European imperialism and colonial enterprise, with its educational mission.

Nigerian folktales are useful weapons in the on-going effort to re-brand the country. The accompanying negative stereotyping of Africa and black peoples as primitive and savage is given a fresh and positive expression in most Nigerian folktales. In the folktales, children are presented with images that are potentially restorative of the dignity and cultural self-worth of the country and her people. They, therefore, appeal to the sensibilities of Nigerian youths by depicting their immediate natural, social and historical environments. Truly, the cultural lens of the storyteller is a major factor in the imaging and consequent recording of Nigerian history. Nigerian folktales provide “a true reflection of the true state of affairs in the society.”⁴⁴ For instance, etiological tales offer Nigerian perspectives of the origins of certain beliefs and ideas. In the story titled “The Baboon and the Tortoise”, the audience/listeners come across why the tortoise has never lost his sad look and nobody has ever seen a tortoise smile or heard him laugh. This perennial gloomy outlook of the animal is traced to the betrayal he once suffered from the baboon and a robin that dispossessed him of his ripe figs due to his inability to climb trees. Also, in the story, the audience are told why baboons have always been frightened of guns and why they have always been scratching themselves; why bees, wasps, snakes and tortoises have all been friends together; and why bees have been mad about fruits and anything that is sweet.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it has been established that African folktales feature human or non-human actions; they are anthropocentric. They are vignettes on the vicissitudes of social life which comment on human nature and its effect on interpersonal relationships and social cohesion. As a form of entertainment, the tales are also powerful vehicles of social cohesion, through which people are warned that, at base, humans are self-seeking, and that unless they submit to an ideology, which emphasizes reciprocity and moderation, they will live in a state of isolation. Thus, carefully selected tales enhance acceptance and tolerance among the people in Nigerian communities. They also provide information about African social values – historical and contemporary.

This paper has also revealed that Nigerian folktales function in the socio-historical and political discourse of the nation, and they are always positioned in the service of the society. The folktale performers assume the position of educators of cultural knowledge. A keen analysis of the tales reveals that, from time immemorial, Africa has had a popular, mythical, collective, conscious, unconscious and lived philosophy. It has also been established that

folktales are a concise record of folk wisdom in Nigeria; they have the power to delight, inform and guide the people along life's many paths.

Also, the paper has discovered that Judeo-Christian values and modern ways of life are indeed encroaching on the traditional values and customs of most Nigerians. There is no question that story telling may eventually come to an end, as the traditional environment in which it thrives is engulfed by modern nations with their cinemas, television, missionary Christian centers and formal Western schools. Christianity and Islam especially foster, by de-emphasizing, and sometimes by outright disparagement, an attitude of uncertainty, even embarrassment about the values of story-telling and often traditional practices. Folktale performance is declining in the country due to the creeping effects of modernization. Its educational and entertainment roles are being partly superseded by public schools and the growing significance of television and home video. It is also negatively affected by changing economic and residence patterns in most communities of the country, which have altered the occasions for story-telling.

It is, however, apt to conclude on an optimistic note. This is because despite the preponderance of modern means of relaxation in the country, storytelling still persists in Nigeria. In the main, folktales are always recast in the country "for the purpose of injecting new meanings, new ideas, and new values based on contemporary historical experiences and relations."⁴⁵

Endnotes

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³ *Ibid.*, .9.

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⁵ M.H.Abrams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981). 66.

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⁷ John Hagan "Influence of Folktale on *The Marriage of Anansewa*: A Folkloric Approach". *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing*. Nos 27 and 28. (1988), 19.

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