
THE STORYTELLER IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This study appraises the storyteller in society. It adopts definitions of the twin concepts of story and storyteller as a conceptual backdrop. From a folkloristic cum sociological perspective, the paper presents some examples of published stories and related research, discusses the relevance of the storyteller in society, threats to storytelling and the image of the storyteller in society. While acknowledging the fast ebbing existence of the storyteller of yore, the paper concludes that folktales remain an authentic living feature of the Nigerian culture.

Keywords: Story, Storyteller, Folktales, Society, Nigerian Culture.

Introduction

Story, a polysemous everyday word has been defined in interesting ways by different scholars. Emenyonu (1978:16) defines it as "folktale told through stylistic devices like proverbs and sayings, allegory, chanting". Hornby (1998:1177) describes the concept as "an account of invented or imagined events, etc: a love story, a short story, an adventure story for children, bedtime stories". *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1986:2253) explains a story inter alia as "an account of some incident or event; often: a tale written or told especially for the entertainment of children" (sic).

In the same vein, a STORYTELLER is given as "a person who tells stories" (Hornby 1998:1177), "a teller of stories: as A: one that relates anecdotes B: one that recites tales orally in public C: storywriter" (*Webster's ...op.cit* p.2253). Ogunsina (1992) however sees a storyteller as the narrator, the novelist, the performing artist, the dramatist and the historian with a distinct plot. From a folkloristic point of view, Georges (1980) argues that "storytelling is not an idle pastime" but

a dynamic and functional activity that enables human beings to teach, intimidate, reinforce, manipulate, and entertain each other, one that can occur in any kind of social setting from the initiation ceremony to the wake.

Definitions clarify concepts. The foregoing provide a conceptual backdrop for comprehending the personae of the storyteller and the social milieu within which (s)he operates. In this paper, we adopt the folkloristic cum sociological view of the storyteller in society within the paradigm of the Utilitarian school of Thought. We therefore present some examples of published stories and related scholarship; discuss the functions of the storyteller as well as threats to storytelling and finally the image of the storyteller in society before concluding the paper.

Some Published Stories and Related Research

Instances of published stories and related research include (but are not limited to) the following: Fagunwa 1949 a and b, 1950, 1954 and 1961; Soyinka 1968; Ogunniran 1972; Egudu 1973; Bamgbose 1974; Babalola 1979 a and b; Yemitan and Ogundele 1979 a and b; Olagbami 1988; Eso-oluborode 1991, Faleti 1993; Tsaaior 2005 and Themba 1979. Ranging from Collections of short stories, conundrums, myths, legends, fables, Ifa divination verses and stories to full length novels in English, Yoruba and Igbo media, they conform with Georges' (1980) characterisation of storytelling as

universal activities by means of which human beings characterise their perceptions, reveal their aspirations and fears, transmit to others their conceptions and interpretation of memorable events, teach and reinforce social norms and values, and occupy the leisure hours of the day.

The Storyteller in Society: What Relevance?

Universally, from preliterate to modern society, the storyteller performs a didactic function by teaching and imparting moral lessons or instructions. This is achieved through the instrumentality of poetic justice used to reform and instruct the society (Emenyonu 1978:12). As Bamgbose (1994:17) rightly observes, the didactic objective is realised through a careful selection of themes usually having to do with some vice or wickedness with the manipulation of the plot or storyline to result in the punishment of vice or the reward of virtue.

This is more so since the invented world of folktales is characteristically a moral world where wickedness is punished and virtue rewarded, with the moral of the story usually clearly drawn at the end of the story e.g. in a concluding statement like "This story teaches us that we should not steal" or "that we should be kind to our friends". The moral is usually elicited by the storyteller

from the audience at the end of the narrative to ensure a goal-driven narrator-audience rapport. From the "ancient" to the modern, a storyteller naturally employs traditional folktale narrative techniques to "minister" the "gospel" of morality to the audience (real or imagined). This is because, the stories are often didactic "texts" comprising an account of the trials and tribulations of a fellow human disguised in animal lore from whom we are supposed to learn a lesson.

However, perhaps the most apparent function of the storyteller in most societies is the entertainment function. The pleasure-giving is achieved by the way the story is narrated and also by the humorous episodes in it. From a participant observer's point of view, it is not uncommon to see the audience burst into uncontrollable laughter in spontaneous response to hyperbolic, vivid, rib-cracking imagery often painted by the narrator in the description and mimicry of actions of/or characters, the use of euphemisms in contrast to the concept of peasant bluntness, and the narrator-audience participation in songs within the narrative accompanied by clapping or beating of any sound-producing object at hand, and dancing, thus transporting the audience into the world of the story as though a real life experience. A short lived but harmless escapism? Perhaps so.

Beside didactic and entertainment functions, the narrator is a veritable agent of language education and socialisation of the child. The same way intensive and extensive reading build up the latent and active vocabulary repertoire of a reader over time, oral narratives expose the child to a goldmine of vocabulary as the audience is immersed into new vocabularies, expressions, idioms, proverbs, puns, tongue-twisters, etcetera. At the same time, the storyteller assumes the role of the community socialisation ambassador as (s)he takes the audience through the origin stories, explanatory stories, trick stories, contest stories and didactic stories (Egudu 1973). The audience is thus not only entertained and instructed, but also socialised through effective context-rich vocabulary (myths, fables, legends) immersion as well as the persuasion to choose to do good and eschew evil.

The Storyteller: An Endangered Specie?

The World Book Encyclopedia (1992:2) aptly notes that "societies are systems". Consequently, "change in one part of a society leads to change in other parts, with no one part having priority". Social change (by which is meant any significant changes in the structure of society excluding short-lived changes) has made the preliterate storyteller an endangered specie. As concisely

observed by Emenyonu (1978:16) the ever-increasing awareness of modern inventions (e.g. printing presses, radio, television, cinema, walkman, I-pods, phones (mobile and fixed), musical instruments, computer games, the internet etcetera) is rapidly diminishing the impact of folktales in modern society.

Besides, parents now give responsibility for educating their children and wards to teachers and schools. The school presently give moral instruction directly through formal, religious studies. Also, counsellors directly advise children on their behaviour. In addition, some parents also talk to their children directly through reward or punishment instead of having them learn through the morals of animal tales.

Another threat identified by Emenyonu (op-cit) is that modern African writing endangers the thriving of the folktale as a cultural phenomenon as novels borrow a great deal from the folktale tradition. Since a folktale is meant to be narrated, Emenyonu argues that writing them down is an injury because only a little of the imaginative and dramatic essence on which their ultimate appeal depends can be so captured. We cannot agree less since the real narrator-audience rapport is lost. In the context of African American oral literature, O'Meally (1997) succinctly comments:

... tales were originally invented not for the printed page but for spoken performance. Something vital is lost when we are not at the fireside... hearing the sounds, watching the tellers and their tellings, full of whispery asides, silences, dramatic clicks, calls and other story sounds.... We miss the sense of the tale as part of a process of verbal exchange that involves audience responses and sometimes a competitive round of tale set against tale.

(Gates Jr. & McKay (Eds) 1997:103)

In addition, the tales purity may not be guaranteed because of what O'Meally (op cit) describes as "the unavoidable difficulties of translations from oral to written forms", a fact of cultural relativity.

To the aforementioned threats we add that increasing urbanisation and globalisation has quickened the dearth of communal living as we now have individualistic, atomistic, westernised society where residences are increasingly becoming fortified prisons or fortresses against real or imaginary security threats. Within the walls, the internet and television seem to have effectively shut out any chance of survival of the art of storytelling.

Finally, Christian, Islamic and commercial proselytisation constitutes formidable threats to folktales. The pastime of tale-telling is fast disappearing because the "new" faiths have displaced the moonlight stories with Christian devotion/Bible studies/prayer meetings/family worship or Islamic prayers and Quranic lessons. Folktales appear to have little if any assimilation value for the new religions. Commercially, the rat race characteristic of the battle for survival especially in the cities leaves no chance for folktales to flourish.

The Storyteller in Society: What Image?

The storyteller in communalistic pre-literate society enjoys positive perception as a veritable socialisation and moralising agent in his/her non-monetised volitional service to children in the community. (S)he is trusted, respected and loved. More so, anybody could be assigned the role of a narrator at little or no notice as a strategy of teaching the young to learn the ropes.

However, contemporaneously, values have changed. All-embracing changes in society heralded by western literacy and numeracy, new religions, technology, schools, urbanisation and globalisation, etcetera, have thrown up the problem of non-communal living and mutual suspicion of one another. In such a distrusting modern setting, the storyteller is nothing but a loafer, out of tune with current reality.

It is noteworthy that the storyteller has assumed different personae and developed new sources of stories. On Radio Nigeria, Ibadan for instance; Iriri Aye ("Life's Experiences") anchored by Ogunniran Lawuyi is not a folktale but investigative journalism on human angle stories targeted at sanitising the society and arguably, promoting traditional lore and norms. Similarly, the Christian clergy, the Islamic Imam and the Ifa (Diviner) priest also tell stories (usually with the Bible, Quran and Hadiths, and Ifa verses respectively as sources) as a means of arresting the attention of the audience and laying a solid premise for the concluding moral/lesson. The Ifa priest chants stories from Ifa verses to diagnose and solve clients' problem. In this respect, they are often esteemed by their respective audiences especially when they have proven integrity.

Another interesting dimension is Pentecostal churches and groups' adoption of "testimonies" for proselytisation purposes as most evident in every Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International meetings worldwide. This perhaps demonstrates the metamorphosis of the art of storytelling in pre-literate society to suit its new socio-cultural cum religious surroundings. In sum, in every

dispensation, the storyteller, like Caesar's wife, is required to be above board. As the saying goes, (s)he who must come to equity must come with clean hands.

Conclusion

The foregoing notwithstanding, we share Emenyonu's (1978:16) opinion that folktales remain an authentic living feature of the Nigerian culture. Some schools feature folktale programmes on Premier FM Radio Ibadan 93.5 and BCOSTV among others, in English, Yoruba and other Nigerian languages. Fun Time on NTA network also features animated cartoon version of folktales. The performance is however a marked departure from the preliterate ethnography of storytelling in terms of the setting, participants, Act sequence, key, instrumentality, norms and genre (Hymes 1964:21-44, Schiffrin 1994:140).

In addition, some culture buffs and folklorists within the school and entertainment industry try to ensure that live performance of conundrums and riddles are informally integrated in schools' curricula. Tsaaior's (2005) Dissertation on *Gender Politics in Tiv Oral Narratives* is another evidence of continuity of scholarship on folklore. With the unrelenting linguistic and cultural imperialism of English with us, it may require a tsunami of indigenous cultural revival efforts to halt the fast ebbing existence of the storyteller of yore.

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