ARTICLE

"CATCHING THEM YOUNG": AFRICAN YOUTH, FOLKTALE AND THE COMMUNICATION OF UNIVERSAL MORAL VALUES

Ghazala Begum Essop
University of South Africa
essopgb@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Many African youths can learn moral values through the oral tradition of folktales as these narratives are used as vehicles to communicate such values. In the past, the oral tradition was the main method of passing on beliefs from generation to generation by word of mouth. Technological and other developments, especially the invention of the book and the increase of literacy, have had an important effect on African oral traditions as previously unwritten folktales could be accorded permanent existence in the form of books. This has afforded African youths in different geographical locations the opportunity to access in their own time the oral folktale and the universal values that it communicates in the written form. Oral forms, such as folktales, are created and developed in specific contexts by individuals, and these can now be experienced by readers in different locations. The aim of this article is to highlight what African youths in different parts of Africa can gain from being exposed to folktales in their written form. For this purpose, four folktale stories by Greaves (1988) contained in the anthology, *When Hippo Was Hairy: And Other Tales from Africa,* were analysed. The selected stories are representative of certain thematic threads intended to impart certain moral values.

Keywords: African youth; communication; moral values; African oral traditions; written form; folktale

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INTRODUCTION: FOLKTALE AS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE TOOL

African oral traditions are as old as the African people themselves. The oral tradition of transmitting and communicating messages through word of mouth from one generation to the next, covers cultural narratives such as songs, folktales, myths, legends, epics, pithy sayings, and proverbs. According to Okpewho (1992), oral narratives can be distinguished from each other although they overlap often. However, critics argue that it is possible to identify a folktale. A folktale is a narrative that uses objects or animals, and even people, to represent different human experiences. In folktales, there is virtually no reference to obvious historical facts as is the case with myths, legends, and historical writings. In folktales, as they are used, for example, in a novel like *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 1958), signifiers such as animals serve as metaphors to communicate human experiences. It is as if all references to known human experience are abstracted, concentrated into a character, and then refracted through animals and objects. According to past scholarship, especially studies done by Western scholars in Africa, folktales were produced by groups of people (Finnegan 1970). This view has been revised: whether folktales are based on rural images or urban legends, they are created by individual authors. Because folktales usually communicate themes, experiences, and aspirations of ordinary people, generally known as the collective, the former (wrong) assumption was born that the collective created the folktale. The truth is that individual people's command of a particular language, their creative temperament, and their sound grasp of traditional idioms account for differences in emphasis of tone, images, and mood in folktales (Vambe 2004). This should be kept in mind as, in recent times, folktales are sometimes written down in the form of collections, as in the case of *When Hippo Was Hairy: And Other Tales from Africa* (Greaves 1988), from which the author of this article took four stories and analysed them.

When an oral story, which has been communicated to people by word of mouth and has circulated within a cultural and linguistic community of people, is eventually fixed on the page as a written folktale, several things happen to the initial story. Although the story will continue to serve as a conduit through which to communicate the moral values by which a people is defined and can even continue and renew themes already contained in stories that are found in other written cultures (Kabira 1992), the written form of the story is produced in a new context. The intercultural communicative dimension (Martin and Nakayama 2007) of the written folktale that is produced in a new written context reveals that oral stories will not die but will survive in new technological contexts. Consequently, one might argue that the new folktale acquires the status of permanent existence in book form (Obiechina 1967). This allows future generations to read the story in years to come. However, certain paralinguistic aspects of an oral story, such as gestures and the visuality of the storyteller, are compromised in the written form.

Despite the complexities of the retelling of folktales, whether in spoken or written form, every retelling creates new facts and stories within a story. Okpewho (1992), who remains the doyen of African oral narratives, has described the different types of written oral stories. Okpewho states that an oral story can be translated from one language into another. However, according to Iyasere (1975, 118), the process of writing down an oral story involves "selectively adding and transforming it to bring a form of artistic novelty to their usage." As suggested above, folktales are intercultural; they contain and seek to communicate different themes that exist in different societies.

The folktales selected for analysis in this article seek to communicate to the youth certain moral values that they can either emulate or reject. The moral values that are deemed to be negative or that have outlived their usefulness and as a result have become repugnant, can be rejected. Through the messages in folktales, people are rebuked for human foibles such as pride, greed, corruption, and deceit, whereas virtues such as creativity, resourcefulness, kindness, and love are extolled. A folktale can thus dramatise the contest between forces of evil and good, and young readers are left to decide on the best values to imitate after reading the stories. The stories are heavily didactic as they consciously seek to guide the young reader as to what is good behaviour worth of emulation. It is important to remark that the stories or folktales appeal to both young and old.

The emphasis in the analysis of the stories in this article is on exploring how African youths are socialised in respect of context-specific values, which are nonetheless also manifest in universal values. I argue that the significance of the folktales in *When Hippo Was Hairy: And Other Tales from Africa* (Greaves 1988) is that the tales originate from different countries in Africa. The tales moralise but in the process communicate to young readers the worldview and philosophies of those who composed them. In the stories, animals change roles, so that any one story can reveal the positive side of an animal character while in the same or another story the same animal can be portrayed as a villain or a trickster, or as being stupid and easily manipulated, in which case the animal is associated with negative characteristics. This portrayal of animal characters as protean underlines the complexity of the formal composition of a folktale because as metaphors of human experiences, animal characters inhabit and live through a variety of worlds of feeling.

In the following analyses of selected folktales from *When Hippo Was Hairy: And Other Tales from Africa* (Greaves 1988), quotations are taken from this publication and the relevant page numbers are given.

"The Dreadful Crime of Kadima the Hare" (A Hambukushu Story)

"The Dreadful Crime of Kadima the Hare" is a story from Namibia. In the story, Hare, who is called Kadima, lives with leopard, whose name is Nthoo. A severe drought makes life unbearable as the two animals are threatened with potential existential annihilation.

Nthoo has three cubs that depend on her, but whenever Nthoo goes to hunt she "came home with nothing for them to eat, and soon they were starving" (22). Kadima the Hare, who is left by Nthoo to look after the cubs, is also threatened with starvation, as a result of which Hare is forced to eat leopard's cubs one by one. This is a story of deceit as well as of misplaced trust. Nthoo is implicated in eating the meat of her own cubs. Hare further lies that Nthoo's cubs have been killed by some humans, the "young herd boys from the village" (23).

However, Hare's lie is exposed by the Bushveld Go-away bird that informs leopard that "Kadima was the wicked one who killed your children, not the good people of the village" (23). In terms of formal composition, this folktale invites a young reader to suspend belief or to create a make-believe world in which it is possible to imagine that Hare, leopard, and humans live in the same space. In reality this is not the case, but this is not the important point. The important point is the moral of the story that Hare or Kadima is "wicked" and deceitful but also, ironically, resourceful. Young readers are supposed to pick up these obvious and surface meanings. But a story does not have one moral. Another moral of this story is to warn humanity not to take human beings close to them for granted. Leopard is chastised in the story for entrusting her cubs to Kadima, and also for not suspecting that the meat leopard is eating is that of her own cubs. Furthermore, although Kadima is depicted as a negative character representative of humans who behave like this hare, there is an implicit tone of celebrating Hare's resourcefulness (Vambe 2001). Hare has the capacity to deceive such a wary and fearful animal like leopard. In short, the story of Kadima and Nthoo is one of betrayal, and it may well be described as a cautionary tale.

"The Greedy Hyena" (A Shona Story)

The story of "The Greedy Hyena," which explores the theme of greed, is collected from the Shona people of Zimbabwe. In the story, Hyena spies a female impala doe and her new fawn (40). Hyena knows that although he can kill Impala doe, she can still give Hyena problems because although she has no horns, Hyena suspects that she can "surely put up a fight with her sharp hooves" (40). Hyena then decides to kill Mother Impala first to make it easier to kill her fawn afterwards. In other words, Hyena wants to kill both Mother Impala and her fawn. Hyena represents an existential threat to the impala. Mother Impala understands this and so she deliberately runs away from Hyena. This tactic by the impala doe allows her fawn to run away from Hyena in a different direction as well. Failing to catch Impala doe, Hyena comes back expecting to catch the fawn but the fawn has also run away. As a result, Hyena fails to catch either the mother Impala doe or the fawn. Young readers are socialised to understand that there are evil and good people in the world (Niane 1965). In describing the careful planning that Hyena does, he is depicted as a character that is cunning but stupid, and because he is greedy and wants everything for himself, he ends up with nothing. In other words, the story communicates a basic fact of life. Just as in the world of the jungle, there is lawlessness in human

society, and there are some people who are predators. However, humans, like animals, who are potential victims, have evolved strategies to make sure that their kind does not become extinct. In short, in this story, material and moral greed (of Hyena) is deplored while resourcefulness (of Impala doe) is celebrated. Like animals, humans survive certain situations through being creative (Kahari 1990).

"When Hippo Was Hairy" (A Ndebele Story)

The story, "When Hippo Was Hairy," is an aetiological tale in that it seeks to explain why Hippo has come to be hairless. It is told that Hippo used to live not in the river but in the bush and had a "very fine coat of glossy, chestnut-brown hair" (68). This made Hippo very proud of himself to a point where "he demanded that all the other animals should praise his beauty" (68). Hippo became rude, vain, arrogant, and insensitive to other animals. This infuriated Hare, the animal that eventually brought Hippo down. In the story, Hare decided to make a "large pile of soft, dry grass" (68) as a "warm bed" (68) for Hippo. While Hippo was sleeping, Hare set the grass bed on fire. Hippo's fine hair was burnt and he ran into the river to extinguish the fire. From that time, Hippo has begun to live in the river, only coming out at night when other animals cannot see him. Out of shame, Hippo becomes a creature of the river and is forced to come out "Only at night, when no one can see him … to walk and graze at the edge of the forest" (71). As pointed out, this story tells the young reader why Hippo appears as he is, but beyond being an aetiological tale that explains the "why" of a certain phenomenon, the story criticises the moral values associated with being vainglorious and rude. The story uses Hippo to show that humans who are self-centred can be punished. In short, in the story, Hippo (a large animal) is pitted against a small animal (Hare) that tricks him. The moral being communicated is clear; what counts is the brain of a person and not the huge body. An ironical element in the story is that Hare's punishment of Hippo seems to be excessive in that it is a life-changing punishment. One does not understand the oral explanation at the end of the story why Hippo has come to have no hair and has started to live in the river. However, the punishment meted out to Hippo does not leave the child reader with the knowledge of the extent to which this sort of punishment can rehabilitate the wrong-doer. It should be taken into account that folktales embed within their formal structures the creative principle of understatement. This observation suggests that a story can be stretched in different directions and that this can result in different and sometimes contradictory meanings (Vambe 2004).

"The Race That Was Rigged" (A Swazi Story)

In the story, "When Hippo Was Hairy," the small animal Hare is the subject of the narrative and depicted as a hero. This trend is reversed in the story, "The Race That Was Rigged" (114–18). In this story, which is collected from Swaziland, Hare challenges Tortoise to a race. Tortoise accepts the challenge but devises a clever plan: he plants

a tortoise every hundred metres so that whenever Hare believes that he is leading in the race, Hare is constantly surprised when he sees another tortoise in front of him. In this story, the character of Hare, which is depicted in other stories as a clever, cunning trickster, is reversed. In "The Race That Was Rigged," Hare is portrayed as foolish, stupid, and at the end of his wits. The moral economy of the story manifests at several levels. Firstly, young readers may enjoy not only seeing Hare's fortunes being reversed but, secondly, also seeing Tortoise, a slow and normally despised animal, being elevated as clever. The change of roles shows that in life, identities and social situations change and that nothing is permanent. Thirdly, Tortoise shows that he possesses creativity in organising members of his family to defeat Hare. The moral that is communicated to young Africans is that when people carry out a task collectively and concentrate their energies, they are bound to succeed. In most African folklore, Hare acts individualistically to outwit and embarrass other animals. Individualism is deplored in African philosophy as it is equated with selfishness. However, individuality is celebrated because it points to the skill of being creative and resourceful, especially if it is applied under hostile circumstances. Just as in the other stories analysed in this paper, "The Race That Was Rigged" is short, consisting of only three pages and also containing pictures of Hare and Tortoise. From a creative point of view, this is a formal strategy meant to keep readers enthusiastic and interested and prevent them from becoming bored with a long story.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one can argue that the narration of oral stories is a universal cultural and intercultural mode of communicating important moral values to both young and old. Oral stories, just like oral poetry (Finnegan 1977), generally circulate through word of mouth, and they are transmitted and communicated from one generation to the other. So, the argument that African oral stories will be overtaken by technology and will ultimately die is a hoax. The fact is that oral stories can continue to be told in a written form, as in the case of the folktales in *When Hippo Was Hairy: And other Tales from Africa* (Greaves 1988).

This paper focused on the folktale medium and demonstrated that this type of narrative is symbolical in that historical events are not depicted directly. The four folktales analysed in this paper enable one to debate the ways in which oral narratives impart different moral values differently. It was also shown that the thematic focus of the stories overlapped and largely used animals as characters representing a variety of values such as cunning, trickery, and heroism. The animals in the folktales were used as metaphors of human experiences, a literary strategy that is called defamiliarisation (Bakhtin 1981). This term describes the creative distance produced in the process of writing a story. This distance allows the storyteller or narrator to use the characters of animals in the written folktale to chastise errant young readers. Young readers will laugh at the foibles of some of the animal characters in the story but at the same time they

are taught sound human and moral values. Finally, one can agree with the view of Okot P'Bitek (1986) that the artist who creates folktales, whether in oral or written form, is a teacher and a ruler in the sense that through narrative the artist is able to shape and mould the minds of African youths.

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