

ORAL LITERATURE AS CARRIER OF EDUCATION AND AESTHETICS: EXAMPLES FROM DIOP'S *TALES OF AMADOU KOUMBA* AND KNAPPERT'S *MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF THE CONGO*

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ABSTRACT

Oral literature has for African societies become the bank of knowledge that emerges from the historical past to present generations. In a sense, it has become instrumental in transmitting society's moral codes, beliefs and customs as well as its views on aesthetic phenomena. Thus, a remarkable array of animal characters, proverbs, songs and visual images play a pivotal role by indirectly attacking the nasty practices of society, and at the same time luring the current generation into extracting a wealth of wisdom that lies embedded in the values of its beautiful past. In this paper, a critical survey of Diop's *Tales of Amadou Koumba* and Knappert's *Myths and Legends of the Congo* shows how oral literature, through descriptions of either punishment for societal misbehavers or rewards for those who behave well, is instrumental in bringing to light not only the evil practices of society but also the accepted codes of communal behaviour.

Keywords: society, behaviour, physical beauty, inner beauty, short story, culture

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The relevance and communicative impact of oral literature cannot be overemphasised, at least not in an Afro-centred context. Orality both as an imperceptible and perceptible cause has been a cultural mark meant to showcase the African true colours of a people's philosophy and an ethnic group's imaginative competence and identity. In oral literature, communication is achieved by speaking in a highly stylistic way, in the making of 'verbal genres' such as would encompass myths, legends, songs, proverbs and the like (Murphy 1978). In such oral expedencies, the cream and scum of society are depicted in condensed forms that are not only clear to the hearers, but also compelling and inexorable. Hearers are greeted with words of wisdom loaded with reproof, admonishment and a marked discrepancy between deviant social behaviour and respectable, ethical, appropriate behaviour. In general, the experiential and distilled verbal wisdom employed comes not from anyone but the grey-haired in society, and the words of wisdom are especially understood to have been composed out of lived and sieved experiences (Babane and Mapindani 2012; Gombe 1995).

The ensuing discourse is dedicated to capturing and extracting the pivotal social spices invested in four selected short stories. The stories, oral in orientation though in written form, come from the writings of Birago Diop, a Senegalese poet and short-story teller who is very well known for recording the Wolof people's folktales (African Success 2007); and Jan Knappert, a renowned Congolese scholar distinguished for studying, researching and teaching at various universities across Africa, with an emphasis on art, Islam as well as the religions and select languages of Africa (Edwin Mellen Press 2009). It is noticeable that short stories owe their origins to oral traditions, and are and have been the vehicles for transmitting culture, preserving memories and making sense of the world (Kim 2010). According to Mazzucco (1998), oral literature serves, among others, two important functions. First, in terms of its pedagogic function, oral literature plays a key role in edutaining both orators and listeners. Thus it takes it upon itself to point out different angles of life and its challenges, and the various ways in which the targeted populace may escape the dangers and misfortunes of life to their own benefit. Second, oral literature serves a sociological function. Society has its own rules that govern the way of life and interaction among human folk and with the natural phenomena. The sociological function of oral literature serves to authenticate and reinforce these very rules, and may be considered the mainstay of oral literature.

2. CULTURE DEFINED

Culture, being among the most important markers for differentiating ethnic groups, is a core aspect of oral literature and therefore deserves an elaborative mentioning before going any further. By way of definition, culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, values, behaviours and any other capabilities and habits acquired and embodied by man as a member of society

(Baloyi 2014; Avuruch 1998). In this regard, the phrase “complex whole” becomes the principal pointer to the ever sought after intricate definition of the term. Culture is better talked of than explained, since it encompasses not only sophisticated issues but also invisibly abstract and infinite phenomena that cannot be easily addressed or unified into a simplified whole. Following this air of complexity, Howard (1989) has the following to tell:

Culture itself is the customary manner in which human groups learn to organize their behaviour and thought in relation to their environment...culture in essence, constitute the survival strategies of a group of people transmitted over generations. The ideas and modes of behaviour that constitute culture are transmitted largely by a complex system of symbols that includes language.

The idea hinted at here, that language is a carrier and perhaps a special component of culture (Babane and Mapindani 2012), is indispensably axiomatic. This is why most oral stories populated with animal characters and conveying culture are bound to personify animals: it is done to facilitate and attain the creative license of possibly imbuing them with the quality of verbal linguistic expression, without which the folkloric imaginary world would be difficult to create.

2.1. *Tales of Amadou Koumba* by Birago Diop

In Diop’s *Tales of Amadou Koumba*, under the heading ‘Humps’, we are introduced to the animate and the inanimate world. We are told that a man who offends the ancestral spirits can be made to go insane, and indeed the same condemnation befell many people who committed sacrilegious deeds. On the other hand, Koumba, a good-natured woman who never offended the ancestors, is rewarded by having her hunchback removed. In the same vein, Gelfand (1973) in *The Genuine Shona* authenticates this very interconnectivity of the animate and the inanimate life by pointing out that the *vadzimu* (Shona for ‘ancestors’) keep an everlasting watch on their living relatives. This metaphysical view of the world by society warns people against sacrilege and disobedience to the supernatural forces, which actions usually result in severe punishment. Good deeds are also rewarded, and this advantageously gives society an optional scenario where they either opt to obey the norms for their own benefit, or disobey to their own undoing. In this sense, oral literature has a didactic value to society.

Our attention is also turned to the dignity bestowed on a man as head of the family in Diop’s *Tales of Amadou Koumba*. In this story the view is that, as family head, a man has all the world to manipulate and entitled *The Judgement* control his subjects—his matrimonial counterpart included. When the elders in ‘The judgement’ ask Demba whether he has beaten his wife or not, he acknowledges having beaten her and this amounts to the fulfillment of his paternal role since he is held responsible for all the misdeeds of his family. This traditional practice of beating wives is made explicitly

acceptable by Gelfand (1973) who points out that if she does something wrong, he may take it upon himself to beat her, provided there is a sound reason. Seen this way, societies are guided by males who are held accountable for all the communal misdeeds around them. They are responsible for rectifying any mistake in order to create a home that is managed with responsibility and care. They have the right of mastery over their wives. In this regard, oral literature calls upon males to fulfill disciplinary roles for the reshaping of their families along the required decorum, at the same time inviting women to succumb to this male-governed situation.

Besides being didactic, oral literature also reveals society's views on beauty. Under the same heading as mentioned above, 'The judgement', the persona expresses the pathetic condition of Demba as he observes the breathtaking 'physical geography' of his wife's physique as she leaves the home after they have fallen out. Extrapolating from this example, society's view of beauty is connectively linked to the appetising physical temptations of the female body, as when a woman is so lovely that men find it impossible to take their eyes off her. In the words of Gelfand (1981), beauty in a man or woman is usually associated with physical attractiveness.

2.1. Extracted lessons

- In 'The hunchback' there is an application of the doctrine of retribution: the lesson is that in society, good behaviour or deeds are rewarded accordingly, following a person's way of life and conduct. Also, unacceptable behaviour is punished, as a way of discouraging transgressors and teaching those who would embark on similar forms of misdemeanor a painful lesson.
- Society needs disciplinary measures in order to function properly, but all disciplinary steps have to fall within the confines of reasonable consideration and limits. In "The Judgement" Demba was not blamed for having beaten his wife. The blame would come after discovering, if anything, that there was no sound reason for beating her.

2.1.1. *Myths and Legends of the Congo* by Jan Knappert

Oral literature's educational value is abundantly clear in Knappert's *Myths and Legends of the Congo* in the short story entitled 'The Frog Blows the Trumpet'. The short story is a depiction of how complacency may bear remorse and regrets as those who succumb to it, finally fail to accomplish their desired goal. The lizard was well aware of, and satisfied with, his external beauty as a colourful creature. From the looks of it, Lizard was so absorbed in his admirable external appearance that he never thought the kingship would bounce over him to a terribly ugly Frog whose deformities surely rendered him unsuitable for kingship. This draws parallel to Lakunle in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, who is the archetypal flamboyant youth with a Western-mindset. Lakunle is

deceived by the bombastic and flowery language of an unmarried school teacher into believing that he will certainly win Sidi's hand in marriage. To his surprise and shock, he discovers that Baroka, an age-worn, crafty individual who is suspected to have lost his potency and virility as a man, becomes the eventual bridegroom of Sidi, a 'true village belle'. This shows clearly how self-exaltation is no match for the humility of resourceful men who do not value much the impressive appearances of external beauty, but go beyond to the inner self that defines the real man. Hence, façades are of no significance, and society is warned against resorting to eye-catching visible features as would mislead them. Society is also warned against despising other people and to regard each member as complete and equally important.

The aspect of society's understanding of beauty is further expounded from another angle in the short story 'She Wanted to Marry only a King'. In this short story, we find a father whose daughters are saved from a sadistic leopard by their father's old friend, an ant-eater. An incisive exploration of the short story reveals that the father's goodness (friend-worthiness) did not only do him good but extended to save his daughters. Thus, good neighbourliness is expected in society, and other than sensual physical beauties, real beauty is composed of a person's character, personality and behaviour (Gelfand 1981). Clear as it is, society does not only view beauty in terms of the physical nature, particularly the one that gratifies the sensual zest, but goes beyond to discover and appreciate the inner aspect of beauty that is essential for social reconstruction.

2.2. Extracted lessons

- A person should not consider themselves special or more important than others, irrespective of visible or concrete evidence. Rather, they ought to be supportive in helping each other succeed or develop in life. A humble propensity is a laudable social attribute.
- Physical beauty is of little value. What matters most is a person's inner beauty which encompasses their social conduct in the promotion of societal integrity and reconstruction.
- Resourceful people catch the 'fattest worm' in life. In 'The Frog Blows the Trumpet', the frog, being resourceful, outmanoeuvred the complacent and flamboyant but dull-witted lizard.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Men should replace physical punishment of their wives with other solutions for domestic conflicts, based on mutual understanding. They should recognise the crucial role of women in the preservation of African values grounded on the principles of peace,

freedom, dignity, justice, solidarity and democracy (Helum 2007). Individuals should regard each other with due equality without either despising each other or regarding themselves as more important than others.

4. CONCLUSION

Oral literature is two-dimensional: besides delivering the didactic wealth invested in African artistic culture and traditions, it also reflects society's perception of beauty, and these two remarkable aspects contribute to the required rebirth and conservation of society's moral values. As story-telling is one of the most effective ways of teaching young people about the world, short stories can promote a better awareness, among the present generation, of the cultural and behavioural diversity and interdependence to be better exercised among themselves (Kim 2010), tapping all their living formulae from enviable oral sources. In the words of Niane (1965), 'the future springs from the past,' and only through holding on to the past can the current generation sustain and restore its glory before charting its way forward. Oral literature is Diop and Knappert's appeal to the people of Africa to maintain their own culture and ignore the attempts of outside powers to control their way of life (Ngara and Morrison 1989).

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