Decolonisation and the African Dilemma Tale: A Feast of African Superheroes, Magicians and Beautiful Princesses

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Abstract

The African consciousness has been wholly subsumed by Western ideology and resurfaces only in misrecognition and habitual disavowal. Valorising everything European, a history of haplessly succumbing to the seductions of Western rationality and perspectives has led to the denial and erasure of self and culture. In its place, the morbid African has been birthed, confronting his othering in self-defeating acquiescence and accepting his servile status as natural and ordained. Indeed, there is no ready panacea for centuries of exploitation and domination. This article suggests that one way to counter these ideological formations is to provide pathways to recognise the self. There can be no better way of doing this than to rekindle the myth, folklore and aphorisms long extinguished on the altar of Western education. Consequently, this study explores African dilemma tales as counter hegemonic narratives that may shape our consciousness, remind us of cultural wisdom effaced by colonial authority, and afford us the opportunity to celebrate our own African superheroes, magicians and extraordinarily beautiful princesses. The tales are drawn from the Ovimbundu from Angola, the Bura in Nigeria, the Bete of the Ivory Coast, the Vai and Hausa from Liberia, the Mano and Gio from Liberia, the Krachi from Togo and the Mossi of the Upper Volta, with an intertextual reference to other tribes on the continent. Using the lens of postcolonialism (eclectically drawn from Looma, Wiredu, Said, Heleta, Fanon and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, amongst others), this article enthuses over African dilemma tales and motivates a trenchant case for its transformational and pedagogical value in our curriculum.

Keywords: African dilemma tales; curriculum transformation; collaborative learning; decolonisation

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Introduction

The current Miss Universe, Zozibini Tunzi's comments invite rumination: "I grew up in a world where a woman who looks like me, with my kind of skin and my kind of hair, was never considered to be beautiful, I think that it is time that this stops today" (Chisholm 2019). This begs the question as to why in this day and age, an amazingly beautiful woman should step up onto the world stage and have to make these statements.

Tunzi's speech at the Miss Universe pageant betrays how symbolically loaded and subjectively determined our cultural and aesthetic perceptions are. It is also a poignant reminder that people of colour are long suffering victims of collective amnesia. Eurocentric signifying practices manifest in popular culture, our curriculum, entertainment and everyday life, and reproduce and sustain Eurocentric and neo-colonial hegemony. It has fostered a virulent culture of self-hate perhaps best exemplified by Fanon's quintessential text, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), in which he chronicles how blacks are ridiculed, demonised, declared inferior and irrational as a matter of course. Drowning in a colonial mentality and afflicted with low self-esteem and a collapsed ego, the black man's displaced identity makes him fertile fodder for cultural assimilation and exploitation. Stuart Hall's acerbic thinking also points out how historically inflected practices of individuals, groups, and institutions express, shape, and regulate cultural representations and social identities (Davis 2004). These ideological formations are inextricably linked to power, which ensures these perceptions persist and correspond to European interests in an illusionary reality. As Edward Said avers, "certain texts are accorded the authority of academics, institutions and governments … [and] these texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (1978, 94). This is insightful in understanding colonial binary divides that privilege European thought, culture, economic and political life whilst correspondingly effacing the social reality and cultural heritage of Africans. African ways of making sense of the world and a healthy and progressive self-esteem founded on his/her own values and convictions have been replaced with an avalanche of stereotypes, images and narratives that coalesce into the false consciousness of the colonial subject. So successful was this that the African conscious has been wholly subsumed by Western ideology and resurfaces only in misrecognition and habitual disavowal.

Valorising everything European, a history of haplessly succumbing to the seductions of Western rationality and perspectives has led to the denial and erasure of self and culture. In its place, the morbid African has been birthed, confronting his othering in self-defeating acquiescence and accepting his servile status as natural and ordained. Indeed, there is no ready panacea for centuries of exploitation and domination. This study suggests that one way to counter these ideological formations is to provide pathways to recognise the self. An important gateway to realising this is to rekindle the myths, folklore and aphorisms long extinguished on the altar of Western education. Consequently, this study explores African stories as artefacts that may shape our

consciousness, remind us of cultural wisdom rendered invisible and barbaric by colonial authority, focus our attention on an African-centred morality and value system and school us in the inherent dignity of being human and African. Recruiting the resources of postcolonialism, this article enthuses over African dilemma tales that celebrate our own conundrums, our own angsts and briefly peers into the private joys and wonder of tales long regaled by our African ancestors across the continent. This, I argue, is the first and necessary step towards emancipation from the shackles of Western epistemologies, Eurocentric hegemony and the creation of a discursive space for Africanising the curriculum.

Admittedly, there is no single narrative for the rich and complex history of colonisation and decolonisation. Colonialism did more than exact tribute, goods and wealth from the conquered countries; it restructured its economies, including its education and political systems, to facilitate and perpetuate plunder. Decolonisation itself refers to the undoing of colonial rule over subordinate countries. This is easier said than done as many people in the former colonised states are still subject to the same oppression and objectification. The first stage signified a technical transfer of governance. Other processes are indeed more challenging and involve the freeing of minds from colonial ideology in particular by addressing the ingrained idea that to be colonised was to be inferior, superstitious and barbaric.

Decolonisation offers a powerful metaphor to critique positions of power and dominant European culture. I will here use a postcolonial theory that predominantly focuses on Africa and is eclectically drawn from Looma, Wiredu, Said, Heleta, Fanon and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, among others. I should caution at the outset that we need to go beyond the familiar trope that decolonisation means replacing one body of knowledge with another. We need to be cognisant of the fact that identity and culture are complexly constituted. Whilst reimagining an alternative ontology that acknowledges and values our existence, as Wiredu (1980) explains, it would be disingenuous to reject everything Western, but we have to find a space that valorises our existence. We also have to reject colonial formulations that degrade and diminish the African psyche. Does this mean uncritically romanticising an African pre-colonial past? Oelofsen (2018) suggests that we see decolonisation as a dynamic concept with its roots in the past. Concepts should be developed and acknowledged as having meanings that are fluid and changing in order to take into account present and future situations and contexts.

Heleta argues for the end of domination by "white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews" in education and the incorporation of other South African, African and global "perspectives, experiences and epistemologies" (2016, 1). This would grant space for an African paradigm of ways of knowing and communal responsibility to gradually take root in the face of Western individualistic, capitalistic practices.

We also need to change the curriculum, which remains largely Eurocentric and continues to perpetuate white and Western dominance and privilege while at the same time disseminating stereotypes, overt and covert prejudices and patronising views about Africa and Africans. This is incumbent because schools not only control students with rules and regulations, but more importantly exert control over meaning. They preserve and distribute what is perceived to be legitimate knowledge in which is encoded a European cultural bias couched in seemingly objective phraseology. Schools therefore confer cultural legitimacy on the knowledge of specific groups (Giroux 1983), and are therefore not the "engines of democracy," as some would have us believe. On the contrary, they often constitute an anti-democratic device through which popular choice may be denied, but in which is enthroned the ideology that both preserves and enhances a particular set of structural relations (Spring 2000). In short, the school system is a manifestation of what Althusser (2014) called "the ideological state apparatus." Such education is complicit in exacerbating the divide in an unequal society beset by "a history of patriarchy, slavery, imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy and capitalism" (Molefe 2016, 32).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was much more forthright about insidious cultural assimilation. He asserts that the process

> annihilates a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves. (1986, 3)

One way of escaping this cultural bondage is to rediscover African stories, myths, legends, proverbs, fables and epigrams substituted by Western education and its alien value system. This is important because history and tradition in African communities were mostly passed on through speech and performance rather than writing and constitute a rich cultural reference. Storytelling is historically an intimate and ancient art form between storyteller and audience. The narrator and audience are physically close and tone, pitch, song, dramatic silence, body language and response from listeners all coalesce to energise the tale. Storytelling may be performed in many forms: in prose, in poetic form, as a song, accompanied with dance or some kind of theatrical performance. At times masks and costumes may be used to enhance the performance. This communal experience is enhanced by the narrator's creativity, which shapes the story according to place, circumstance and audience. Listeners also experience the urgency of a creative process unfolding in their presence and they feel empowered by being a part of that creative process. Consequently, the story is made new at each rendition and is consonant with Vladimir Propp (1968) and Viktor Shklovsky's (1988) theorising on "making strange" or *ostranenie* in narratology, but with an important difference. In an oral narrative, the defamiliarisation occurs at every rendition, dependant on memory, circumstance and the creativity of the narrator.

Storytelling provides entertainment, develops the imagination, and teaches important lessons about everyday life. Equally important, Abrahams (1986) explains that storytelling is a way of codifying truths and dramatising the rationale behind traditions and social relations. It embodies the inherited wisdom (social, personal and moral) of the people whose world we see through the filter of folklore.

In an African context, storytelling is an important shared event, with people sitting together, listening and even participating in accounts of past deeds, beliefs, taboos, and myths. Communities are strengthened and maintained through stories that connect the present, the past and the future. Through storytellers, the history of a culture, codes of behaviour as well as ways of maintaining social order were passed on from generation to generation. According to Harold Courlander (1996), tribes may be united with a mainstream of African traditions and yet have stories of their own heroes, mythological idols, and unique ancient origins. This insight further collapses the monologic stock representation that "all Africans are the same" in colonial discourse. The subgenres of folktales include why-tales (tales that explain phenomena), dilemma tales, didactic tales, fables, riddles, etc.

The African Dilemma Tale

I will here focus on the African dilemma tale and motivate a claim for its pedagogical value in our centres of teaching and learning. For these tales I owe a factual and interpretive debt to William Bascom who so assiduously collected them. Dilemma tales constitute a large, diverse and widespread group of folktales in Africa (Bascom 1972). Goldberg (1997) points out that these tales were much more popular in Africa than in Europe. In fact, Thomas claims that in many tribes in Africa "they were taken seriously and considered a highly prized form of intellectual activity" (cited in Knappert 1973). Bascom describes the dilemma tale as one which presents the listeners with a choice between alternatives, such as which character deserves a reward, or which is the best. The choices are difficult ones and usually involve discrimination on ethical, moral or legal grounds. Sometimes they have a correct answer but often they do not. Usually the narrator ends his tale with an unresolved question, often explicitly stated, to be debated by the audience. Typical issues raised involve conflicts of loyalty, the necessity to choose a just response to a difficult situation, and the question of where to lay the blame when several parties seem equally guilty. Other dilemma tales, which border on tall tales, ask the listener to judge the relative skills of characters who have performed incredible feats (Bascom 1972, 143). Dilemma tales evoke spirited discussions and test the audience's skills of debate and argument. Oftentimes characters of a dilemma tale are very different to those we find in "real life," but the problems are very similar. A notable feature that separates the dilemma tale from other narrative forms is that it most often does not focus on a leading character. In fact, the source of the dilemma is often that there is no leading character: three or more people contribute equally and it makes it all the more perplexing to discriminate amongst them (Goldberg 1997, 180).

The tales are drawn from the Ovimbundu from Angola, the Bura in Nigeria, the Bete of the Ivory Coast, the Vai and Hausa from Liberia, the Mano and Gio from Liberia, the Krachi from Togo and the Mossi of the Upper Volta, with an intertextual reference to other tribes on the continent. Many of these tales share an intertextual relationship, as is evidenced from the theme entitled, "Where is my father?" Versions of this tale have been recorded amongst the Temne and Limba of Sierra Leone, the Bula of Cameroon and the Kongo and Luba of Congo. The following is a version from the Grushi of Togo, in which a chief's daughter fell in love with a python that appeared in the form of a handsome man. During the night it resumed the form of a python, swallowed the girl, and carried her off to its home in a large lake. In the morning, the chief ordered his people to follow, but they found no tracks. A man who could smell everywhere followed their trail to the lake. A man famous for his thirst drank the lake dry. A famous worker dug out all the mud, revealing a hole so deep that its bottom could not be reached. A man whose arm could reach all over the country pulled out the python. It was killed, but when they cut open its stomach, the girl was dead. A man who had medicine to raise the dead restored her to life. Now, which of these five men did the best? The narrator's answer is that they were all equally good and that the girl never married (Cardinall and Tamakloe 1970, 203–4).

In an Ovimbundu tale from Angola, a girl sent her three lovers to bring back something never before seen in her village. One brought a casket of dreams, one a bow and arrow and one a snuffbox. The first dreamed that the girl had died; the second supplied a magic arrow on which all returned; and the third put snuff to her nose and she sneezed. Which man should she marry? The king said that their claims were equal, and he married the girl himself (Ennis and Lord 1962, 89–91).

A number of dilemma tales involve the mother-in-law motif. The following example is from the Bura in Nigeria (Helser [1930] 1972, 39). A man, his wife, his mother and his mother-in-law were all blind. He found seven eyes and gave two to his wife and took two for himself. Then he gave one eye to his mother and one to his mother-in-law. He had one eye left in his hand. Here was his mother with one eye looking at him. There was his wife's mother with one eye looking at him. To whom should he give the one eye that he has left? If he gives it to his mother, his wife will never forgive him; if he gives it to his mother-in-law, he will be ashamed before his mother, besides a mother is not something to be played with. This is very difficult indeed. What shall he do? Here is the sweetness of his wife and the sweetness of his mother. Which would be easier? If this thing would come to you, which would you choose? Your mother or your wife's mother—choose! This is a real problem. Dare any man choose?

Another version is from the Bete of the Ivory Coast. In the course of crossing a river a canoe capsized and a man found himself in the water with his wife, sister, and mother-in-law. None of the women could swim. Which should the man save? The narrator added the following commentary (Bascom 1972, 150): If you save your sister and leave your wife, you will have to pay labola again; if you save your wife and abandon your

sister, your parents will overwhelm you with reproaches, but if you save your mother-in-law, you are an idiot!

In a Vai tale from Liberia (Ellis 1914, 217–8), a man's helpless mother was fed by his wife. One day she bit the wife's hand and would not let go. Not knowing what to do, the man asked the village judge, and the judge asked the people. The young people said, break the old lady's jaw. The old people said, cut off the young women's hand. The judge was unable to decide. What would you do?

Another motif is that of the incredibly handsome man. This tale is from the Hausa in Nigeria. Our protagonist borrowed a spear from a friend, who said he could have it as a gift. He drove the spear through an enemy chief, who fled with the spear through his body. The protagonist was honoured and handsomely rewarded, but his friend became jealous and demanded his spear back. The young man set out to retrieve it accompanied by his fiancée, who said that if he were killed, she would rather die with him. They met the enemy chief's eldest daughter, who gave him the spear, declaring her love for the youth and the three of them fled from their pursuers. When the ferryman refused to take them across the river, he was killed by his own daughter, who declared her love for the youth and took them across the river. On the other side of the river, the handsome youth died and his three wives mourned him. A fourth girl revived him magically, on condition that she became his fourth wife. Now, which of these women should be his chief wife? The narrator adds they are still discussing this subject and still unable to decide (Bascom 1972, 152).

A Sierra Leone tale (Bascom 1972, 28) speaks of three brothers named Large Ears, Large Eyes and Long Hands who set out in search of a new crop. Returning home with one millet, they crossed the river in a canoe. In midstream, Large Ears said he heard something fall into the water. Large Eyes saw it in the sand on the river bottom, and Long Hands picked it up. They planted the seed and had a plentiful harvest. The king held a feast and announced that he would give his beautiful daughter to the man who had made his kingdom a land of plenty. The three brothers began to quarrel over her. Who do you think deserved to marry the princess?

In a Mano tale from Liberia (Dorson 1972, 152), a woman asked a man to set a trap for a deer that was eating rice on her farm. When the deer was caught in the trap, she ran and told the man, and then she ran back to the deer, undressed, and lay down beside it. The man had sex with her, and the deer escaped. Was it the man or the woman who let the deer escape?

In a Goa tale (Bascom 1972, 33), a blind man carried a lame man, who shot a monkey. When they returned home, the lame man cooked it and ate it all. When the blind man found only his bones, he hit the lame man's knees with them and his lameness was cured. Then the lame man threw the soup in the blind man's eyes and his sight was restored. Which man had the stronger medicine?

In some dilemma tales magic and skill are privileged over moral and ethical issues. These tales are distinct from arithmetical puzzles, such as how can a man cross a river in a small boat with a leopard, a goat and a yam? Illustrative of magical dilemmas is a Krachi tale from Togo (Bascom 1972, 31). Three travellers came to a large river. One said he could walk across it on his magical sandals. Another said he could cut the water with his magical sword and walk across. The third said that all this was too much trouble; he had a magic thread on which all could cross the river. Which of the three has the most power has never been decided. This particular tale also shares an intertextual relationship with a similar tale from the Vai of Liberia, the Mossi of the Upper Volta, the Hausa of Nigeria, and the Bula from the Cameroon. Similarly, a Mossi tale speaks of how one day God picked up a man and tied him to a star by a cord. The man's first-born son had sharp eyes and saw his father. The second son threw his baton, thus breaking the cord. The third caught his father when he fell. Which of his sons should the father thank?

In a Lyele tale (Bascom 1972, 33), one man was so small that he mounted a horse of his own size and entered the house through the cat's hole in the door. The other, suffering from heat, took shelter under a man's big toe. Which one was smaller?

The Pedagogical Value of African Dilemma Tales

I submit that the pedagogical value of African dilemma tales clearly has a place in an African curriculum. These are tales populated by diverse Africans, with African conundrums, astounding feats of magic and courage, rooted in an African landscape. These tales are significant decolonising tools because they are narratives in which Africans students can recognise themselves. Moreover, the superhuman feats of the protagonists promote positive images of Africans as superheroes who are resilient, possessed of amazing powers and extraordinarily successful. Of note is the Hausa tale of "The Incredibly Handsome Man" (Bascom 1972, 152) who is able to attract a slew of wives by his good looks and bravery. In a society emerging from the debilitating horror of apartheid that stereotyped Africans in grotesque and dehumanising ways, it is profoundly liberating to immerse oneself in a fictive world of African superheroes, African magicians, African princesses of amazing beauty and charm and wise sages of community and tribe.

These tales also tax our students' cognition as they leave the resolution of the tale to the listener by posing a question. This stylistic feature of these narratives stimulates participatory learning as students are creatively involved in the co-construction of knowledge and exposed to diverse perspectives and ideas. It is important to point out here that the sharing of these ideas is not prescriptive but open to critique and reflection. Too often in our teaching regime teachers succumb to prescriptive teaching, which tells students "this is the way things are" or "this is the correct answer." Not only does this expose a tyrannical, myopic power relationship between the teacher and the students, it also shuts out alternative thinking and reflection. In contrast, the dilemma tale invites a critical scrutiny of ideas and values and is much more consonant with developing critical

thinking. The tales involve moral, ethical and philosophical reasoning. They demand marshalling of evidence in support of a claim and require rhetorical skills of persuading an audience.

It is a far cry from rote learning, mindlessly regurgitating the contents of syllabi and teaching and learning to a test, which, to be candid, is precisely the anathema afflicting our teaching and learning today. The African dilemma tales are invaluable resources for problem-centred approaches to learning that tax individual and group resourcefulness. Students are invited to draw inferences and test their ideas in a group. This also dispels the notion of learning as an asocial, solitary activity. Students are motivated to think critically, critique the veracity of their ideas against the submission of others, process information, interpret and analyse in various active learning scenarios.

Humans are by nature social animals. Decolonising the curriculum should ensure that collaborative skills are both taught and assessed. Collaborative skill sets are important social assets in the working and personal lives of students, and it is confounding that our curriculum is mostly silent on this. Attributes such as helpfulness, appreciating alternative viewpoints and responding in a constructive manner, practising healthy interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution and good communication skills are important pedagogical spin offs that accrue from the teaching and learning of the dilemma tale.

The dilemma tale also motivates one of the fundamental aims of education, the willingness to be open-minded. Open-mindedness is the willingness to search actively for evidence against one's favoured beliefs, plans, or goals, and to weigh such evidence fairly when it is available. This would entail responsiveness to diverse perspectives, ideas, and values and a willingness to learn from others by seeking and providing constructive feedback as well as identifying the rationale that informs alternative views. This is particularly important in a world beset by fanatical thinking, blind and uncritical adherence to perspectives that defy logic and which constitute an assault on humanistic values. Open-mindedness also enables one to resist manipulation and polarisation, both empowering and liberating life skills for our students.

Another pedagogical feature that the dilemma tale can promote is that of active listening. Active listening is fundamental to learning, yet students are rendered passive recipients for large parts of the curriculum. Setting the stage by telling students that they will be required to pass judgement/make a decision at the end of the tale signals to student that they have to pay sustained attention by actively listening. This ensures that students are receptive to the tale and respond in appropriate ways. Active listening allows students to be more successful in integrating information, drawing inferences, grasping the main idea and generally promotes productive and permanent learning.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the African dilemma tale is an integral part of moral and ethical education in many African societies. As Bascom (1972) stipulates, they are not only intellectual puzzles that sharpen our wit and promote discussion, they also point out that in human affairs there are often no satisfactory answers, only hard choices—which call into play conflicting moral values (Bascom 1972). The dilemma tale is not only an ancient form of African storytelling; it presents a unique and memorable approach to stimulate cooperation, change, cultural innovation, reflection and out-of-box thinking in a low-anxiety zone. It helps establish social bonds in groups and connects students of different mindsets. The synergy derived from this process empowers new and reflective viewpoints and a heightened sense of critical judgement.

African dilemma tales are positive affirmations of African culture and social life that step adroitly between fantasy, reality and the spiritual and disavow colonial perceptions premised on ignorance and bias. These dilemma tales demonstrate African cultural capital—rich in stories, positive representations of Africans, community wisdom and history. They are culturally relevant texts that validate African lived experiences and are restorative and resistant to stereotypical representations of othering. They subvert the stigmatisation, group labelling, and social exclusion of dominant Western discourses and unmask the fallacy that the West is the sole trustee of knowledge and civilisation. Indeed, Teffo (2000), Vilakazi (2002), and Seepe (2001) make the point that much of what is taken for education in Africa is in fact not African, but rather a reflection of Europe in Africa. Our curriculum is a site where the English language is sacralised, and the internalisation of bourgeois European values is interpreted as an index of progress. This must stop. African knowledge systems are grounded in community practices, in Ubuntu and provide a counter narrative to Western Enlightenment assumptions about individualism and capitalism. The African dilemma tale, in its utility and narrative rupture, is a poignant illustration of this. It is time we supported the humanism and historicity of Africans. It is time transformation, social justice and inclusion are writ into our curriculum. It is time to disrupt a hegemonic knowledge economy that reproduces pathologising interpretations of Africans and their social systems. It is time we exposed our students to a feast of African superheroes, magicians and extraordinarily beautiful princesses. In the words of former president, Thabo Mbeki (1999), "[i]f the next century is going to be characterized as a truly African century, for social and economic progress of the African people, the century of durable peace and sustained development in Africa, then that success … is dependent on the success of our education systems."

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