

AFRICAN ORAL TRADITION: THE FOLKLORE CULTURE

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Abstract

This study explores the transformative journey of African folklore, emphasizing its role as a bridge between the cultural legacies of the past and the evolving narratives of modern society. The research highlights the decline in oral storytelling traditions, driven by modernization, globalization, and shifting cultural dynamics, while advocating for innovative approaches to preserve this rich heritage. Drawing on both primary interviews and secondary documentary analysis, the work examines the historical significance, thematic diversity, and socio-cultural functions of African folklore. It underscores the need for the integration of traditional narratives into contemporary platforms such as literature, media, and education, ensuring their relevance and resonance with younger generations. The study proposes that a collaborative effort involving governments, cultural institutions, educators, and digital platforms is pivotal to sustaining folklore in its authentic yet adaptive form. Through this lens, African folklore emerges as a dynamic cultural force capable of unifying diverse communities and enriching global perspectives.

Keywords: Folklore, Africa, Culture, Adaptation, Transmission.

Introduction

In traditional African societies, oral transmission skills played crucial role in uniting family members, communities and shaping cultural worldviews. Skilled storytellers, revered for their mastery of the art of oral narration, served as the custodians of cultural knowledge and collective memory. Their performances not only entertained audiences but also functioned as profound pedagogical tools, imparting invaluable life lessons and philosophical insights through the medium of folktales and oral narratives. To explore the intricacies of oral communication, this paper discusses one aspect of oral culture -folklore. Folklore is a rich and many-sided field that encompasses the traditional beliefs, customs, stories, songs, and material culture of a particular group or society (Finnegan, R. 2012). At its core, folklore represents the shared experiences, values, and worldviews that are passed down through generations, often through oral traditions and communal practices. *The Oxford Languages Dictionary* defined folklore as traditional beliefs. Customs, and stories of a community passed through the generations by word of mouth (google.com). It also sees folklore as a body of popular myths or belief relating to a particular place, activity, or group of people. Commenting

on the function of folklore in the society, Onah, et al stated that African folklore serve as a tool for improving sustainable resource management practices in the continent of Africa (cedirect.com). They elaborated that African traditional knowledge system sustained the continent and its people for millennia before the coming of Western knowledge, and even so, has continued to play a critical role in the advancement of Africa.

The study of folklore offers invaluable insights into the cultural identities, social structures, and historical narratives that shape the lived realities of diverse communities. African folklore according to Savory, P. (2015) refers to the rich and varied body of traditional narratives, oral histories, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, songs, and folktales that have been transmitted verbally through generations within African cultures and communities. These oral traditions, according to Finnegan (2012), serve as means of preserving and circulating cultural knowledge, values, beliefs, and customs of the society. African folklore houses a wide range of genres, including trickster tales, animal fables, cosmogony myths, creation stories, etiological legends, and tales of heroes and epic adventures (Courlander, 1996). One of the defining characteristics of African folklore is its emphasis on oral transmission (Schaub, 2012). These tales are typically passed down from generation to generation by expert storytellers, who employ various techniques such as call-and-response, repetition, and the use of idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and specialised vocabulary to mesmerise their audiences and help in the preservation of the stories (Okpewho, 1992). African folklore is deeply immersed in the cultural settings from which it arises, portraying the worldviews, belief systems, and societal build-ups of the respective people. These oral traditions often become means of communicating ethics, strengthening societal customs, and conveying cultural principles, such as reverence for elders, understanding the worth of community, the pride of virtues such as courage, acumen, and ability to withstand hardship and survive difficult situations (Makuchi, 2009).

Origins and Significance

African folktales and folklore have their roots in ancient oral traditions that predate written records. These narratives emerged from the collective experiences, belief systems and cultural practices of various African communities and societies. The roots of African folklore are traced back to the earliest human habitation of the continent, serving as a means of preserving and transmitting knowledge, values, and traditions across generations (Finnegan, 2012). The oral nature of African folklore makes it distinctive, as these stories were initially passed down through spoken word, recitations, and performances by specialised storytellers commonly known as griots or bards (Courlander, 1996). This oral transmission allowed for the preservation of cultural memory and the dissemination of tales across vast geographical spaces, even in the absence of written accounts (Okpewho, 1992). African folklore played a vital role in shaping and strengthening cultural characteristics, belief systems, and social structures

within diverse African communities. These narratives often served as vehicles for imparting moral lessons, buttressing societal norms, and transmitting cultural ideals, such as respect for elders, the importance of community, and the valorisation of virtues like courage, wisdom, and resilience (Bascom, 1965).

Furthermore, African folklore provided a means of understanding and interpreting the natural world, as many folktales and myths sought to explain phenomena such as the creation of the universe, the origins of natural features, and the relationships between humans and their environment (Schaub, 2012). These stories mirrored the close connection between African societies and their natural environments, enveloping natural wisdom and traditional practices (Courlander (1996). Beyond their entertainment value and cultural significance, the African folktales also hold significant position as repositories of historical knowledge, ecological wisdom, and traditional practices. They provide insights into the ways of life, customs, and belief systems of various African communities, serving as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural identity across generations (Finnegan, 2012). The study of African folklore draws upon fields such as anthropology, literature, linguistics, and cultural studies. Scholars and researchers have undertaken extensive efforts to document, analyse, and preserve these oral traditions, recognising their value as a means of understanding the greatness and diversity of African cultures, as well as their deep influence on various artistic and global literary expressions worldwide (Courlander, 1996, quoted in Finnegan, 2012).

GENRE AND THEMES

Trickster Tales

A prominent genre within African folklore was the trickster tale, featuring clever and mischievous characters who outsmart larger and more powerful beings through their wit, cunning, and often comedic trickery. These stories have been an integral part of the oral traditions across various African cultures and communities. One of the most extensively known trickster figures is Anansi, the spider trickster predominant in the folklore of West Africa and the Caribbean dispersion (Pelt on, 1980). Anansi tales depicted the spider as a crafty and cunning character that uses its intelligence and deception to obtain knowledge, power, or other desired outcomes, often at the expense of larger animals or even deities (Courlander, 1996). Another famed trickster character was the hare, found in folktales athwart many places in Africa, including the Akan and Bantu cultures (Makuchi, 2009). The hare was portrayed as a small but extremely clever creature that outsmarts bigger and sturdier foes, such as lions, elephants, or even humans, through its fast thoughts and ingenuity (Schaub, 2012). In African folklore, the tortoise is seen as a constant trickster particularly in the mores of West Africa (Barker & Sinclair¹ 1990). Despite its slow and seemingly defenceless and weak body, the tortoise was depicted as a cunning creature that uses its wit and patience to overcome contests and outsmart more formidable opponents (Courlander,

1996). Trickster tales serve multiple functions within African cultural traditions. They often convey moral lessons, cautionary tales, or satirical commentary on human behaviour and societal norms. These tales also reveal intelligence and resourcefulness over brute strength, endorsing the idea that wit and cunning can triumph over corporeal influence (Makuchi, 2009).

Trickster tales, in addition to above characteristics, constantly incorporate rudiments of funniness, punning, and situational comedy, making them entertaining and engaging for viewers and listeners of all ages (Schaub, 2012). The naughty tricks and clever schemes of the trickster characters provide a source of delight and laughter while also serving as vehicles for cultural transmission and public annotation. The enduring popularity and widespread dissemination of trickster tales across Africa and beyond attest to their cultural significance and timbre. These stories continue to be retold, adapted, and celebrated as vivacious expressions of African legends, charming audiences with their wit, humour, and celebration of intelligence and cleverness.

Fables and Animal Tales

Fables and animal tales form a significant part of African folklore, where animals are personified and their stories employed to convey moral lessons, explain natural phenomena, or provide insights into human behaviour and societal values. These narratives tap into the rich imagery and cultural associations attached to several animals within African traditions. In a number of African cultures, animals are revered for their perceived qualities, strengths, and manners, which most times are employed as allegories or metaphors for human characters (Okpewho, 1992). For instance, the lion may exemplify courage and strength, the elephant depicts wisdom and patience, while the hare or rabbit indicates cleverness and resourcefulness (Courlander, 1996). These animal tales often feature animals attached with human characteristics. They speak, interact, and behave like humans, allowing the stories to serve as vehicles for public discuss, moral instruction, and transfer of culture to future generations (Makuchi; 2009). By presenting complex human experiences and dilemma through the lens of animal characters, the narratives became more accessible and engaging for audiences, particularly children.

One prominent example was the extensive body of folklore surrounding tortoise, a trickster figure found in the oral traditions of many West African Communities that exploits other animals. This often illustrates moral lessons about greed, selfishness, or the consequences of deceit, while also showcasing the tortoise's exceptional wit and cunning. Furthermore, many African animal tales explore the relationships between humans and the natural world, often using animals as metaphors for understanding the intricacies of the environment and the interconnectedness of all living beings. These stories may explain the origins of natural phenomena, such as the creation of rivers, mountains, or the changing of seasons, through the actions and interactions of personified animals. By using animals as

characters, African fables and animal tales create a rich tapestry of narratives that blend entertainment, moral instruction, and cultural transmission. These stories continue to be cherished and retold across generations, serving as a testament to the enduring significance of folklore in preserving and disseminating the wisdom, values, and worldviews of African cultures.

Origin stories

Origin stories form a significant part of African folklore, providing explanations for the genesis of various aspects of the world, such as the creation of humans, animals, natural features, and cultural practices. These narratives reflect the diverse cosmogonies and belief systems of different African cultures, offering insights into their worldviews and attempt to make sense of the mysteries of existence. Many African origin stories focus on the creation of the universe, the earth, and humankind itself. The Yoruba people of West Africa have in their myth a supreme creator deity called *Olodumare*, who they believe made the earth and formed the first human beings from clay (Akintoye, 2010). Other origin tales seek to explain the origins of particular animals, plants, or natural features. In the folklore of the Akan people of Ghana, there is a story that attributed the creation of the river 'Pra' to a young hunter who by chance killed a being which they believe was divine. The spilled blood of this being was believed to have formed the river (Yankah, 1995). The Zulu people of Southern Africa have a tale that explains how chameleon came to be, ascribing its unique traits to a punishment for insubordination (Schaub, 2012). Many African cultures also have stories of origin that stated events that generated the start of cultural practices, traditions, or societal norms. For example, the Igbo people of Nigeria have a folktale that explains the roots of their complex masquerade traditions, linking them to the spirits of ancestors (Cole & Aniakor, 1984). The Maasai of East Africa also have stories that bring to the fore the origins of their pastoral life and their connection with cattle (Fratkin, 2001).

These origin stories often incorporate elements of mythology, featuring deities, spiritual beings, and supernatural events. They serve as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge, beliefs, and values, while also providing a sense of identity and belonging to the communities that share these narratives.

Heroic Tales

African folklore is rich with heroic tales that celebrate the exploits of legendary figures, often depicting their bravery, strength, wisdom, and ability to overcome formidable challenges or defeat powerful adversaries. These narratives reflect the cultural values and ideals upheld by various African societies and communities, serving as a means of inspiring and educating the audience through the exemplary deeds of revered heroes. One of the most prominent heroic epics in Nigerian folklore is the *Ozidi* chronicle, which originates from the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta Region. This epic tale recounts the escapades of the heroic figure, *Ozidi*, a skilled warrior and hunter who engages on

successive quests and battles against supernatural forces, eventually emerging triumphant and launching himself as a legendary figure (Azuonye, 2013). Another well-known heroic narrative is the Shan go cycle, which is deeply entrenched in the Yoruba cultural tradition. Shango, a powerful and charismatic figure, was esteemed as the god of thunder and lightning. The tales hovering around Shan go portray his heroic feats, his mastery over the forces of nature, and his eventual deification in Yoruba mythology (Pemberton & Afolayan, 1996).

In the Igbo tradition of South East, Nigeria, the heroic figure of Eze Nri holds a prominent place in folklore. Eze Nri is celebrated as the legendary founder of the Nri Kingdom, one of the oldest and most influential kingdoms in Igbo history. The tales surrounding Eze Nri illustrate his wisdom, his ability to overcome adversity, and his role in establishing the cultural and spiritual traditions of the Igbo people (Isichei, 1976). The Oshie Clan in Agbaja Udi, also has the legendary story of Oshie, their founding father, his movements and feats that finally resulted in their settling in where they live today around the Udi Hills without molestation from hostile communities (Aniago, 2024). Another striking example of heroic legend is the Shaka Zulu epic, which archives the life and exploits of the great Zulu king, Shaka Kaenzangakhona (Gunner, 1986). This heroic narrative shows Shaka's rise to power, his military exploits, and his role in transforming the Zulu kingdom into a formidable empire through his innovative tactics and leadership (Courlander, 1996). In the folklore of the Maasai people of East Africa, Olonana is celebrated as a heroic figure. He was popular for his bravery and cunning in leading his people against their enemies, principally the Laikipiak (Mol, 1996). The tales of Olonana's strategic victories and his ability to outsmart adversaries have become emblematic of Maasai cultural values and their warrior traditions.

These heroic narratives serve multiple purposes within African cultural traditions. They celebrate the virtues of courage, resilience, and leadership, while also providing moral lessons and examples of how to navigate life's challenges (Okpewho, 1992). Additionally, heroic tales often reinforce cultural identities and promote a sense of pride and belonging among the communities that share these narratives. The study of African heroic tales offers insights into the cultural ideals, social structures, and belief systems of various African societies. By analysing the actions, qualities, and symbolism associated with these legendary heroes, scholars gain deeper understanding of the values, aspirations, and world views that have shaped the diverse cultures of the African continent.

Storytelling Traditions

Folktales and folklores in African cultures were traditionally shared through vibrant oral storytelling traditions, often accompanied by music, dance, and other forms of performance art. The act of storytelling was a highly revered and skilled art form, with specialized storytellers, known as griots, bards, or praise singers, playing a crucial role in the preservation and dissemination of these narratives across generations. Oral storytelling was deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of African societies, serving

purposes that extended far beyond mere entertainment. It functioned as a means of conserving collective memory, imparting moral lessons, reinforcing cultural values, and fostering a sense of community and shared identity (Finnegan, 2012). Storytelling sessions were communal events, bringing people together around fires or in designated gathering spaces, creating a shared experience and strengthening social bonds.

The art of storytelling in African traditions was highly sophisticated, with storytellers employing various techniques to captivate and engage their audiences. These included the use of call-and-response patterns, repetitive phrases, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and specialised vocabulary (Osei-Tutu, 2023). Such devices not only made the stories more engaging but also aided in their memorisation and accurate transmission across generations. Additionally, music and dance were often integral components of storytelling performances, adding layers of auditory and visual richness to the narratives. The rhythmic accompaniment of drums, rattles, or other instruments would create a vibrant and immersive atmosphere, while dance movements and gestures brought the stories to life, enhancing their dramatic impact and emotional resonance (Courlander, 1996).

In numerous African cultures, storytelling was not merely a recitation but an active performance art, with storytellers employing various vocal methods, such as changes in pitch, tone, and rhythm, to evoke different emotions and bring characters to life (Schaub, 2012). Skilled storytellers were highly respected for their ability to captivate audiences, convey moral lessons, and preserve cultural heritage through their artistry. Furthermore, storytelling traditions often reflected the specific cultural contexts and environments in which they originated. For example, storytellers in pastoral communities might incorporate references to their surroundings, using metaphors and imagery drawn from the natural world and their relationships with animals, reflecting the close connection between these communities and their milieus (Courlander, 1996). The incorporation of music, dance, and other performative elements into storytelling traditions not only added richness and depth to the narratives but also created a multisensory experience for the audience. These performances allowed for the active participation and engagement of listeners, fostering a sense of shared cultural identity and promoting the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values.

Setting for story telling

Storytelling sessions were often held during special occasions, such as festivals, gatherings, or at evening times highlighting the significance of these narratives in the cultural fabric of African societies. Festivals and ceremonial events were prime occasions for storytelling performances. During these celebratory times, communities would gather, and skilled storytellers and other members of the assembly that have soothing to offer concerning the tradition and customs of the people would captivate audiences with tales that reinforced cultural values, honoured traditions, or

commemorated significant events in the community's past (Courlander, 1996). The festive atmosphere, combined with the shared experience of storytelling, fostered a sense of unity and collective identity among attendees.

Evening gatherings around the village square or the family obi or open space, were also common settings for storytelling. As the day's work drew to a close, families and communities would congregate near "fires", and the flickering flames would set the platform for storytellers to steer their tales (Schaub, 2012). These intimate settings created a sense of intimacy and fostered intergenerational bonding, as elders shared their wisdom and cultural knowledge through folktales and myths, transmitting them to the younger generations. In some African societies, storytelling sessions were integrated into rites of passage or initiation ceremonies. During these crucial instants in a person's life, stories were used to impart valuable lessons, reinforce cultural values, and mark significant transitions, such as coming of age or entry into adulthood, parenthood, or maturity (Okpewho, 1992). The narratives shared during these occasions served as guideposts, preparing individuals for their new roles and responsibilities within the community.

The physical settings for storytelling were often carefully chosen or prepared to create an atmosphere conducive to captivating performances. In some mores, storytellers would gather around chosen trees that provided shelter from moon light and which protruding roots can be used as seats by the audience and artistes or construct provisional shelters or huts precisely for the determination of storytelling (Finnegan, 2012). These spaces were infused with cultural significance and provided an enabling environment for the oral transmission of folklore. Besides, the timing of storytelling sessions was so often symbolic or planned. Some communities would hold events of folktales at night, when the darkness and silence made a sense of mystery and increased the audience's attention (Courlander, 1996). Some other societies would plan sessions during definite seasons or celestial activities or ceremonies, aligning the stories with natural cycles or spiritual phenomena. By integrating storytelling into special occasions, festivals, and carefully curate settings, African cultures elevated the art of oral narratives, transforming them into communal experiences that fostered social cohesion, cultural transmission, and the reinforcement of shared values and traditions.

Cultural Diversity and Unification of Theme Across Africa

While overarching narratives, themes, and motifs that resonate across the continent unify African folklore, tales from different regions and ethnic groups also exhibit distinct characteristics and perspectives that reflect the diversity of cultures and world views present in Africa. At the core of many African folktales are universal themes that speak to the shared human experience, such as the struggle between good and evil, the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, the importance of family and community, and the enduring quest for understanding the natural world. These common threads could be found woven through narratives from various African societies, reflecting the

fundamental values and existential questions that have preoccupied human civilizations across time and space.

However, the specific manifestations of these themes, the symbolic representations, and the cultural lenses through which they are explored often vary among different regions and ethnic groups. For example, as trickster figures like Spider or tortoise may have themes of wit and cunning across multiple traditions, the specific details of their adventures, the animals they interact with, and the lessons injected can vary significantly depending on the cultural context. Likewise, stories of origin and creation myths, while sharing the common purpose of explaining the beginning of the world and natural wonders, present diverse cosmologies and belief systems entrenched in the exclusive world views and spiritual traditions of diverse African communities (Courlander, 1996). Moreover, the physical and environmental contexts in which varied African communities have lived and thrived have fashioned their folktales and oral narratives. Tales from animal rearing societies may present prominent animal characters and metaphors drawn from their close relationship with the natural world, while stories from land agricultural communities may incorporate themes and symbolism related to farming and the rotations of nature (Courlander, 1996).

Folklore a Dead Culture?

The study of African storytelling traditions has gained increasing attention from scholars and researchers, who recognised the vital role these oral practices play in preserving cultural heritage, transmitting knowledge, and shaping identities. However, in the face of rapid modernisation, urbanisation, and the pervasive influence of globalisation, the once-vibrant culture of African folklore finds itself in a precarious state. Many of these ancient traditions are gradually fading into obscurity, as younger generations are becoming increasingly disconnected from their ancestral roots and oral storytelling practices. The elders who are the traditional custodians of these folklore narratives, are often the last remaining links to this invaluable cultural heritage. As they pass away, their vast repositories of knowledge and oral traditions risk being lost forever, severing the connection between the present and the past. Furthermore, the allure of modern entertainment and technological distractions has captivated the youth, leading them to abandon the age-old practice of gathering around the fire to listen to the tales of their forebears. Added to the above was the busy nature of life practised in modern times. For instance, some children go to school early in the morning and come back to their houses late in the evening. The reason was that school work now extends beyond official school time. Many schools organise extra-mural lessons that leave the child little or no time to attend storytelling events. The child in this manner grows up without experiencing the great story telling actions or concerts. Some pupils and students now use the little available time they have after a tedious day's school work to attend to their home assignment and read their book or revisit what they were taught in the school. Some others helped their mothers to cook

while the younger ones wash plates. All the above leave little or no time available for storytelling sessions. These have become a challenge to the continuity of this ancient tradition. Other forms of modern entertainment like the Nollywood shows, also provide easily reachable alternatives through families' television boxes and phones. All the above strangled with other factors have reduced the tempo of the art of storytelling, once a revered tradition. They have gradually been replaced by contemporary forms of entertainment, such as television movies, what Sapa and other social media. However, the media mentioned above are sometimes manipulated to disseminate cultural values.

Efforts have been made to preserve and revitalise African folklore but that has faced numerous challenges, including the lack of documentation, the decline in speaking indigenous languages, and the reluctance of some communities to embrace change and adapt to new methods of cultural preservation. Despite these obstacles, there are individuals and organisations dedicated to safeguarding this invaluable cultural legacy. They recognise the importance of African folklore as a means of fostering cultural identity, promoting inter-generational bonding, and preserving the rich tapestry of African wisdom and traditions. It has been recommended that through initiatives, such as storytelling festivals, cultural centres, and educational programmes, advocates should strive to re-ignite interest in African folklore, ensuring that these timeless tales continue to be shared, celebrated, and passed on to future generations.

Recommendations

In order to save the folklore culture from extinction, writers have carried on modern adaptations strategies (Osei-Tutu, 2023). The adaptations and retellings have undergone various forms, finding their ways into many children's books, films, animated productions, and others. This process of adaptation has both preserved and re-invigorated these ancient oral traditions, ensuring their relevance and accessibility to modern audience while also sparking debates around cultural representation and the appropriation of indigenous narratives. One of the primary media through which African folktales have been adapted is children's literature. Publishers and authors have understood the richness of African folklore as a valuable source for storytelling, resulting in an explosion of children's books production that retell and reimaging these traditional tales (Yenika-Agbaw, 2011). These adaptations not only introduce young readers to the vibrant narratives and cultural wisdom of Africa but also foster intercultural understanding and appreciation for diverse perspectives.

However, the process of familiarising oral traditions into written and photographic forms has raised worries regarding the authenticity and cultural integrity of these narratives. Critics argue that the spirit and tinges of these stories, deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts and oral performance traditions, may be lost or diluted in the process of transformation and reworking (Ukala, 2010). There are risks of over-simplification or the imposition of Western tale patterns and viewpoints,

potentially undermining the rich complexities and symbolic connotations inherent in the original stories.

Furthermore, the commercial success of adapted African folktales has sparked debates around cultural appropriation and the ownership of original narratives (Hunt, 1969). While these adaptations have increased the visibility and appreciation of African folklore on a global scale, there are concerns about the lack of recognition and compensation for the communities and storytellers who have preserved these traditions for generations (Makuchi, 2009). Advocates for the preservation of African folklore argue that adaptations should be undertaken with utmost respect and collaboration with the source communities, ensuring that the narratives are authentically represented and that the cultural contexts are accurately portrayed. Responsible adaptations could serve as powerful tools for cultural exchange and education, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation for the rich heritage of African oral traditions. As African folktales and folklores continue to captivate audiences worldwide, their contemporary adaptations will undoubtedly spark debates around cultural preservation, authenticity, and the complexities of cross-cultural exchange. By embracing these discussions and prioritizing respectful collaborations with source communities, the rich heritage of African oral traditions can be celebrated, shared, and passed on to future generations while honouring the cultural contexts from which they emerged.

Conclusion

African folklore and its modern adaptations hold immense significance in preserving cultural heritage, promoting understanding and appreciation for diversity, challenging stereotypes, and contributing to the global artistic and literary landscape. By keeping these narratives alive and accessible, we not only honour the past but also shape a more inclusive and culturally rich future. African governments and education ministries should pull the bull by the horn by championing these laudable endeavours.

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