

Folktales Among the Tiv People of Nigeria: Prospects for Combating Economic Recession

Jacob Shimrumun Ioraa

*Department of Visual and Performing Arts
Faculty of Arts, University of Maiduguri*

&

Tyodoo Iyue

*Department of Theatre Arts
College of Education Katsina-Ala, Benue State, Nigeria.*

Abstract

From year 2016 to date, Nigeria has been in recession, one of the worst so far in her economic and financial history. The attendant consequences of the recession are mass poverty, high rate of unemployment and insecurity among others. There are claims from the Buhari government that recession is over. This is far from the truth. Obviously, creative measures need to be taken to stabilize the economy and bring it to equilibrium. It is on this premise that Tiv folktales is studied in its oral form to bring to fore how it could be harnessed to strengthen indigenous norms and values to combat economic recession. In this study, selected Tiv folktales are used and the study found that folktales when communally performed its didactic quality endears it to the people. This study recommends that, President Buhari's anti-recession strategy tagged: Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) launched on 5th April, 2017 should harness folktales as a medium of communicating the designed message to the populace. The study contends that in a country degraded by greed, individualism and excessive materialism, the emphasis on solidarity, brotherly feeling and communal existence as embedded in indigenous norms and values should be strengthened in order to get the country out of economic recession.

Keywords: Economic Recession, Norms and Values.

Introduction

Nigeria is at the moment passing through a difficult period in her socio-political and economic history. In the midst of this, there are increasing wave of organized crimes such as kidnapping, terrorism, assassination, armed banditry, herdsmen versus farmer's clashes and most recently hate speeches. There also exists agitation for the restructuring of the country from eminent personalities. For instance, Tunde Thomas threatens that: "without restructuring, forget 2019 election" (42). Joseph Evans, Coordinator of Ijaw Monitoring Group while speaking on the state of the nation opines that: "Nigeria won't have peace without restructuring" (2). An elder Statesman, Tanko Yakasai asserts that: "Supporters of restructuring are pursuing hidden agenda" (46). Nnamdi Kanu, Leader of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) warns: "No Election in Anambra State, unless Nigeria gives us date for referendum" (40). Other factors such as the fall in the price of crude oil, the abandonment of agriculture as the source of revenue in pursuit of petro dollar, the greed of the ruling class and the neglect of the cherished indigenous norms and values, are all the contributory factors that exacerbated economic recession in Nigeria. As a corollary, there is need to imbibe the indigenous norms and values which uphold equality and communal solidarity rather than the modern based values of primitive accumulation and exploitation.

As a communicative art, folktales are creatively invented to inculcate acceptable norms and values in the people to avoid being caught in anti-social behaviour which often times attract specified punishment. In this way, the people are taught to either adhere to or abstain from certain actions based on the tenets of the society. The language of folktale is flexible, entertaining and educative. These attributes endear it to the people, hence the need for president Buhari's economic recovery and growth strategy launched on 5th April, 2017 to harness the medium of folktales to communicate the designed message to the populace. President Buhari explained this plan further as cited in Augustine Ehikioya thus: "We are committed to delivering on the three key areas that we promised: that is, improving security, tackling corruption and revitalizing the economy. In short, our aim is to change Nigeria and change for good" (12). The rolling plan (ERGP) will not only take Nigeria out of recession but place the economy on the path of sustainable growth. The views

canvassed by president Buhari point to the fact that, there is urgent need to create a culture where Nigerians will continuously seek ways to add value to the resources they had been blessed with rather than plundering them. It is the contention of this paper that, what is needed is to harness the communicative aspect of folktales to free the mind of Nigerians from negative tendencies like indiscipline, selfishness, greediness, intolerance, injustice, wickedness and sharp practices.

Conceptual Issues

Some key concepts in the paper are explained to place this work in proper perspective.

Economic Recession

Economic recession is a difficult time for the economy of a country when there is less trade and industrial activities than usual and more people are unemployed. The direct consequences of economic recession in the domestic economy included massive job losses, large budget deficits and a resort to both internal and external borrowing to cover the huge deficits and a loss of investors' confidence in the economy. Nigeria has been in recession since 2014, the reasons for recession in Nigeria are clearly articulated by Jide Osuntokun in the following lines:

As a country, we were involved in harvest and overtime we were eating not only our fruits, we also ate the seeds. The lack of savings led to the situation that when the price of our sole commodity- oil fell in the world market, our economy went into a tailspin. To compound matters, the militancy in the Niger Delta led to 50 percent cut in production and consequence reduction in revenue (17).

To come out of the economic recession, good governance is the key to creating strong institutions that can check the faults in the system. This is where folktales can play a crucial role in projecting norms and values that could be embraced in combating recession.

Norms

A norm is a specific guide to action which defines acceptable and appropriate behaviour in a particular situation; norms are thus rules of behaviour. For instance, rules involving behaviours that are essential to group wellbeing (thou shall not kill) are typically of greater weight than rules of personal hygiene; for instance, “brush your teeth”. Norms are classified into folkways and mores. In explaining folkways, Osundare expatiates thus: “Folkways are customs which are considered normal simply because people are used to them. In Western societies, it is normal for people to eat with knives, forks and spoons. In China, it is customary to eat with chop sticks. While in Africa it is normal to eat with one’s palm of the hand” (54). Although members of the societies cited will not consider each other’s eating style immoral, they would find them awkward. Mores on the other hand are the rules that are considered essential to the survival of society, such as rules against murder, treason and stealing. Given the fact that their non-observance poses a great threat to societal existence, severe sanctions are put in place to either punish or deter potential violators. In traditional Nigerian societies, violators of societal mores are made to undergo ritual cleansing usually in public thereby exposing such offenders to public ridicule and shame. Example, in Tiv traditional setting, when one steal, he/she is compelled to carry about the stolen item, people sing and clap as he is taken round the village square.

Values

Values are attitude and standard of judgment about what things are important, desirable and right. Every society has certain values which it espouses and holds in high esteem and expects her members to observe. These values are embedded in the mind and they constitute the qualities of an individual. The qualities that define a person’s good moral values are humility, honesty kindness, patience and love. These are the positive moral values which inform good conduct. On the negative side of moral values are pride, deception, arrogance, intolerance, selfishness, wickedness and indiscipline. These are the values which inform bad character. In the present day Nigeria, the lust for power and materialism

are the major values. Nwabueze stated this unequivocal: “Clearly when a society is populated by selfish, wicked, hypocritical people without any morality or conscience, that society descends to inter alia or perhaps heads to Carthaginian direction” (17). To curtail this ugly trend, folktales were traditionally designed to provide a model through which members of the society can verbalize the constitution of their society. This is done by portraying bad aspects of society and individuals and qualifying such aspects with certain consequences, through this way folktales helped in curtailing aberrant behaviours in the society.

Strengthening Indigenous Norms and Values through Folktales: An Overview

A folktale is an ancient traditional story from a particular community that was originally passed on to people in a spoken form. Just as no one knows when a tale took place, so also no one knows how the story was coined and through whom it came. In this way, folktales are regarded as belonging to the community itself, since there is no claim to authorship of any of them. As a result, folktale is imbued with a high level of impersonality. The impersonal nature makes folktales appear to be messages from the ancestors and is therefore taken seriously by the audience. The role of folktales to society is well analyzed in a study by Sam Ukala, titled: “Oral literature, Development and National Integration”. According to him: “In a largely non literate community all over the world, the morals of folktales perform the same functions of humanization and spiritualization, inculcating and reinforcing beliefs, morals and ethical attitudes essential for peaceful co-existence and subsequent national integration” (267). Folktales are therefore a set of unwritten laws by which the people are guided in their day to day dealings.

For instance, among the Ibibio people of South-South Nigeria, folktales are conducted in an entertaining, recreational and dramatic mode. Through this medium, the Ibibio learn to imbibe, assess and reflect on the norms and values of their society on one hand and impact them to others. Acknowledging the importance of folktales to Ibibio children, Akpan informs that:

Ibibio children are collectively told stories during sessions which could be likened to the classroom of a formal school. A folktale session is one activity that greatly appeals to children. The appeal could be found in their desire to be told stories, in their looking forward in the story telling session, in getting their assigned chores quickly and satisfactorily done and hurrying to the session, in their keen interest rapt attention and vicarious participation in the story telling session (68).

An Ibibio folktale inspires and reinforces the norms and values of the people and provides their codes for righteous living. Again, a study by Abu Abarry on “Social and Ethical Values of Storytelling among the Berom” of Plateau State indicate that:

Storytelling is indeed a serious and dynamic art among the Berom. It is replete with interesting themes, ideas and concepts which contain the cultural and aesthetics values of the people. It is educative, interrogative, recreational and therapeutic. It validates conduct, strengthens social institutions and promotes cohesion in the society (85).

From the foregoing analysis, it is evident that folktales can be harness to strengthened indigenous norms and values for the well being of the society.

The Communicative Aspects of Tiv Folktales: Prospects for Combating Economic Recession in Nigeria

The Tiv people of North Central Nigeria have various forms of tradition and numerous ways of transmitting them to the younger ones who are leaders of tomorrow. Tiv folktales evolved from the need to transfer norms, values, history and songs from generation to generation as there was no means of written records of man’s events. Human memory was a good reservoir of man’s experiences where they could easily be recalled, expressed or acted. In Tiv society, folktale is known as *Kwagh alôm*. It is a miniaturized depository of wisdom and knowledge which is imbued

with songs, music, customs, beliefs and morals. Essentially, Tiv folktales teach moral lessons to be learnt by members of the society. A typical Tiv folktale session begins with riddle which is not only meant to test the intelligence of the audience but to give out moral lesson Iortiom Mude asserts that: “The riddle usually centred on respect for elders, the need to obey constituted authority which in the Tiv traditional setting include the older age groups, titled nobility as well as elders” (2). The moral lessons are also aimed at creating a feeling of togetherness and the desire to help one another. A typical Tiv riddle says:

Tiv: Kpuugh me hide awe.

Mlumun: Ka mtuhem.

English: If you pour me out, I will follow you back.

Answer: It is ash.

Literally put, this means that if you carry ash in a tray and throw it over into a dust bin, it will follow you back; that is some of the powdery ashes flies in the air and accompanies you as you are retreating. On a moral note, the riddle seeks to emphasize the fact that envy does not pay. This is to say that, if out of jealousy you harm your fellow human being today, the same fate awaits you tomorrow. The stories that follow the riddles seek to re-emphasize the responsibilities of the individual to society. For instance, it must have a theme, characters and song or songs to accompany it during performance. The stories must reflect the behaviours in the society and there must be lessons drawn from the stories.

Three Tiv folktales are presented as they addressed different societal problems similar to those envisioned by the anti recession growth strategy. First, “One Authority is sufficient in Every Home”. This folktale addresses the issues of security challenges in the country and cautions the people that the continued fomenting of discordant views will lead to catastrophe. Secondly, “Why the Tortoise has a rough shell”. This folktale condemns the me-centred society, marked by an increased focus on individual growth and a decline in community development. It cautions the people to eschew greedy tendencies as the consequences are devastating and horrific. Thirdly, “The Repercussion of Treachery”. This folktale affirmed that, those in leadership positions are ingratitude as they

are bent on degrading and annihilating the masses who voted them into power. The folktale is therefore, meant to deter people from paying back evil for good done them.

“One Authority is Sufficient in every Home”.

Once upon a time there lived four great animals under one thatched roof. Each of these animals was powerful in its own way, and held great authority among the other animals.

Because the space in the hut was limited, it was imperative that these four animals should come to some agreement about the laws by which they should be governed. So it was decided that each animal would propose a rule that the other three must abide by, any breach of these laws would be punishable by death.

The Leopard, full of pride set the rule that whenever he sits down there must be absolute quiet. Not a word was to be spoken; this would show respect for him. The Lion was vain of his grand whiskers and his regal mane, and announced that one thing he would not tolerate was raising dust about in the air. The others must be careful how they moved about so as not to stir up any dust that would settle on him and spoil his looks. The Viper did not care about his looks, nor was he bothered by pride, but he was concerned lest he hurt his sensitive tail as he slithered on the ground. So he made a law that no one was allowed to touch his short and tender tail, not even for a second. The Hyena laughed at this with his mirthless, blood-curdling laugh, and declared that no one was to touch his body at all as long as he lived, and as for him he would touch nothing living, but only handle dead things. For a short while the four great beasts managed to live together in peace and harmony without violating each other’s rules.

One fateful day, the hyena set out to search for food and came across a dead buffalo. He felt very fortunate in finding so much delicious meat, so he ate to his fill. In order to make provision for another lean day, he dragged the carcass home. As he entered the door of the communal hut, he shouted loudly with laughter at his good luck, as is the custom of hyenas. The leopard had just returned from wandering in the bush in a fruitless search for food and had found a comfortable place to sit to rest his weary legs. Because he was disgruntled at his failure he could not

tolerate this affront and leaped in fury on the hyena and bit him in the throat. The hyena in retaliation dug his teeth into the leopard and tore his flesh. The two rolled on the floor, over and over they wrestled with each other in mortal combat and a great cloud of dust filled the room. The lion awoke from his peaceful slumber and was startled to see such a commotion, but was outraged to see the dust settle all over his beautiful whiskers and mane. He roared with fury and leaped out of bed and in doing so accidentally stepped very hard on the tail of the viper that was crawling under the bed to get out of the way of the combatants. Immediately the viper spun around and sunk his poisonous fangs into the foot of the lion, the lion out of annoyance matched the viper. When all the dust had settled, and the commotion over, all four of the great animals were dead.

The lesson to learn here is that, living together as a Nation requires tolerance, understanding and respect for each other's culture and tradition. Many countries in the world have led their people to war on issues that could have been resolved at on the round table. Examples are the Nigerian civil war, the Korean War, the Arab-Israeli war, the Gulf war and the Sudanese war. As a matter of fact, war can only lead to destruction of lives and properties as is the case with the four great animals in the tale. Moreover, the story has the potentials of addressing the security challenges facing the country if properly aired. For leaders and ethnic champions will realize that the continued sponsorship of the clandestine groups to destabilize the country under whatever guise is not in the best interest of anyone. Nigeria is greater than any individual, groups or ethnic nationalities. There is strength in diversity than going all alone. The earlier captured threats and counter threats as reported by Tunde Thomas somewhere in this paper readily fit into this folktale. This, if not contained, will lead us to destruction as the case of the great animals in this story.

“Why the Tortoise has a Rough Shell”

Once upon a time, the Tortoise lived with other animals and birds in a kingdom called *Birdani*. They lived happily and were helpful to one another. The birds always got rid of anything that would come from above to harm them whereas the animals that could not fly took care of

the ground unwanted elements in their kingdom. This symbiotic relationship made the best of hunters that ever lived unable to penetrate and harm the inhabitants of *Birdani* kingdom. Now, there was this great feast in the sky above and all the birds were invited to attend the feast. Seen that they, the birds were not alone in the kingdom, they came together and devised a plan to involve at least one animal who will fly with them to the sky. The bat that is not strictly a bird or extremely an animal was chosen to accompany them to the feast, but after a few kilometers, Mr. Bat could not fly further. Bat flung its wings and came down under the gravity of nature. Several other attempts were made using different other animals but all efforts proved abortive. “I will go with them”, said the Tortoise. The animals wondered how Tortoise could fly but he still insisted in attending the feast. The birds now donated one feather each to Tortoise who flew with them to the feast.

During their journey to the sky, Tortoise advised the other birds, as he was now a bird with wings to choose for themselves nicknames. According to Tortoise, it was not wise to disclose one’s true identity to strangers, and since they would be strangers in the feast it was wiser to go by nicknames. The birds choose nicknames, one for each, and when it came to Tortoise, he chose to be called **All of You**. The birds asked what the name meant and he explained that he was given a feather from each bird, and the only way he was going to appreciate them was by saying he was ‘all of you’. At the feast, the steward who had been very tired now, brought food and placed it amidst the birds without actually serving them.. The steward simply told them “the meal is for all of you”. As the birds were already very tired Mr. Dove came closer to serve himself, and that was when Tortoise who was now **All of You** sent him away claiming ownership of the food and telling them that theirs was not brought yet. You can imagine how hungry and disappointed the birds would be as they watched Tortoise ate all the food to his out-most satisfaction.

Dejectedly, the birds decided to punish Tortoise for his greed and trickery. They collected back their feathers leaving the food intoxicated Tortoise with his bare smooth body. It was already getting dark, and the striking birds started their journey back home. “Please tell my wife”, Tortoise pleaded, to bring out all the soft items from our house and keep them outside so that I can jump from here and land on it safely. The birds

accepted his pleas and flew back home. When they were flying they used the last drop of strength in them to sing thus:

Tiv

Hoo ayie- o

Or ker ikyaa

Oo-Hoo ayie o

Or aker ikyaa i ker nan (2x)

Translation:

Hoo ayie! o! If you look for trouble

Ho ayio oo! If you look for trouble

Trouble will look for you! (2x)

Upon their arrival to the *Birdani* kingdom, parrot who was badly affected by hunger as a result of Tortoise's action flew straight to Tortoise's house and informed his wife that her husband had been crowned a king in the sky, therefore he, the husband had sent a message for the wife to bring out all the hoes, cutlasses, spears, arrows and all the other farming and hunting equipment so that by dawn, the animals could go out en-mass and harvest all the food crops and hunt for meat in preparation for the feast of his coronation. The happy Mrs. Tortoise brought out all the equipment as she had been told and sourced from other women in her neighbourhood all the farming and hunting equipment and heaped them in front of the house. By the second cock-crow, Mr. Tortoise started his journey from the sky back home. Slowly and steadily, Tortoise descended to the earth. Closer and closer and closer, Tortoise came down and down, and landed very hard on farming and hunting equipment in front of the door. Some pierced him, others pinched him and better still the others cut him up. It took the best medicine men of the time a great deal of effort to stitch his body together, leaving him with scars, in form of a broken back. That is why it is not good to be greedy and trickery.

The foregoing is an apt example of folktales that caution people against spurning others or taking them for granted. This is because everyone has strength in different areas in that if they are slighted, they might start to put spanners in the works thereby, becoming stumbling blocks to the attainment of the desired goals. Furthermore, in Tiv

folktales, the animal characters are used to depict weaknesses in human character so that the foibles so criticized would prompt the human audience to take note and amend their bad ways accordingly.

The Repercussion of Treachery

Once upon a time, there lived a great hunter called *Achakpum* who was an expert in hunting expedition. One day, he set-off to *Ukuusu* Mountain in search of games. As he approached the foot of the mountain, the hunter saw a Python being trampled down by heavy stone. The Python screamed, "Roll back this heavy stone, else I will die for I had been here for several days but no living creature looks sympathetic enough like you to help me out". Thus, the great hunter *Achakpum* felt compassionate and therefore rolled back the heavy stone that trampled the Python. As the Python got relieved, it turned against the great hunter requesting to swallow him to regain its lost energy. Regrettably, the great hunter *Achakpum* sang a fascinating song to appease the Python thus:

Tiv

Or ngu a yimau nan soo we
Ikyume gema mem wer amoo
dem ase ga
ikyume mzamber we

Translation

He that helped you loves you
But Python pays me with contempt
Leave me alone
Python, I beg you.

The song was rather appetizing for the Python to devour the hunter. When the great hunter realized that the demand of Python was irreplaceable, he then beckoned the Monkey to come for his rescue. Monkey however worsens the situation by saying that human beings are sectionally inclined; they have no regards on other creatures so the python should go ahead and devours him. *Achakpum* again called Mr. Horse for objective adjudication but Mr. Horse said human beings are

domineering and very wicked. For as gigantic as he is, they sit on his back and at the same time flogged him to run faster. Kill him! Mr. Python, kill him without delay! Mr. Horse uttered.

Lastly, the great hunter called Mr. Dog to intervene. After listening from both parties, Mr. Dog assured them of his impartial judgment. Mr. Dog instructed that the Python should lie down in the position as he was before *Achakpum* came in. The Python obliged as instructed. Mr. Dog then ordered *Achakpum* to roll back the heavy stone and place it in the same position as it were, *Achakpum* willingly carried out the directives of Mr. Dog. Mr. Dog who presided over the case finally passed out the verdict that *Achakpun* should leave the Python alone since he does not deserve any help. Thus, the Python was left with a heavy stone trampled on his neck. That is why it is not good to be treacherous.

The lesson here is that leaders should always appreciate the good things done them, by doing so the people will be spurred to support them. But in a situation where the good deeds are treated with contempt the people are caught within the web of either to be good or not. As applied to the condition in Nigeria it is appalling, the reason being that the people who are failures and of bad conduct are making it in terms of decent living by their evil acts. While the creative, educated and good ones are relegated to the background. In such a situation how will the society have role models as to enable them cope with the challenges of the 21st century? The tale is therefore designed to perform the therapeutic function to enable leaders imbibe good virtues so as not to be like the Python in the tale.

Conclusion

Nigeria is our pride. In her diversity lies our strength and in her unity lies the basis of our struggle. The failure of Nigerian state to address the basic needs of her citizens is due to poor leadership recruitment process. We allow ethno-religious considerations to interfere with and distract our leadership recruitment process. As a result of this, our institutions cannot work maximally, since in most cases we have wrong people in the right places. Another problem is attitudinal challenges. There is nothing like ethical integrity in the way Nigerian leaders conduct issues, the change they are advocating must start with them and tickle down to the

followers. The contributions of folktales in this regard are obvious in terms of character training, honesty and diligence. If lessons learnt from folktales which project norms and values in our society are embraced Nigeria will be better for it. With this, the tenets of ERGP will be imbibed by both leadership and followership of this country and nothing will stop Nigeria from getting out of recession and may never get into it if sustained. But if the present economic crunch (recession) is allowed snowball into depression it may lead to aggression which will be difficult to contain, as such, the following recommendations are found pertinent.

Recommendations

1. Government at all levels should build wild life parks, so that the people will be opportune to have a look at some of the animals mentioned in the folktales. This will also serve as tourist attraction and a source of revenue for the Government. This is another way of diversifying the economy which ERGP advocates.
2. The Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism in conjunction with the thirty six (36) States across the country should organize performing arts festivals in their respective areas of jurisdiction. One of the ways our diversity can be managed is by ensuring that cultural activities are organized periodically to enhance social interaction.
3. Nigerian parents on their part should be encouraged to expose their children to folktales activities as lessons contain therein will help reduce incidence of moral decadence in the society.
4. Folktale artists on their part should organize and form themselves into association in order to attract Government and corporate patronage and to also share ideas for mutual help and perpetuation.
5. Folktales should be made part of Civic Education which is now a compulsory subject in Secondary Schools. From here, the future leaders will be exposed to norms and values that inculcate discipline. This will nurture their morals for a better society.

Finally, folktale artists are basically dependent on expressive skills which enable them to inform, educate and entertain with real vernacular effect with a view to change their society. This makes it necessary for the

folktales to be studied and applied in areas of relevance and aired on Radio or Television for the benefit of the majority.ss

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