

# Heroes in African Folktale: Agents of Contemporary Corruption?

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## Introduction

One of the most popular traditions in Africa is the telling of stories (narratives), commonly referred to as folktales. Okpewho has decided to use the term “*oral narrative*” for the avoidance of ambiguity because earlier generations of scholars regarded the concept of folk as the “uneducated” and barbaric dwellers of small communities, and hence, folklore was associated with the irrational and unimaginative creation (Okpewho 1992:163). From the earliest times to the present, every society, every culture, and every people have told stories and these have passed from one generation to another. Adams has noted that these stories have sustained their presence for centuries because they are amusing, interesting and instructive (Adams 1990:23-35). Irrespective of the recent phenomenon of family television and home videos, telling stories orally has been one of the chief means of entertainment in the history of mankind. The most popular belief among Africans is that these stories, beyond their entertainment value, are also didactic instruments in the society.

Though this paper does not contest the positive function of folktales in the society, it takes a critical look at certain aspects of the negative contribution of folk stories to our contemporary socio-political realities. The paper observes that the emphasis on the telling, teaching (especially at the primary school level), and the enjoyment of tales involving tricksters and their nefarious activities might be a contributory factor to the present corruption and indiscipline in our society because of the psychic effect these stories may have on the young individuals. The paper posits that the lessons, which the youth learn from these stories unwittingly, help to mould their characters (in adulthood) into bullies, aggressors,

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con artists, and selfish individuals.

There is no debating the fact that African stories, using a distinctly African motif or otherwise are useful tools of socialisation, and help in the celebration of the communal ethos and pathos. Obiechina sums up the usefulness of African folktale as –

Distinctive imaginative stories told for amusement, entertainment, and education. They deal with the experience of individual human beings or of animals and often contain some morals or clinching exempla – even though they are told essentially to provide entertainment, a strong didactic purpose is implicit in them (Obiechina 1967:153)

Beyond the aesthetic level, Obiechina has succinctly pointed out that by drawing morals, we are warned against what is nauseating, and encouraged to follow what is the norm and tolerable in the community.

This latter pose is the satirical function of folklore in the human society. Satire has been used extensively to order the behaviour of people in society. In ancient times, there were no laws, nor prisons for the punishment of law-breakers. People were expected to respect the rights of other individuals in the society. They were expected to conduct themselves in a way that would promote peace and brotherhood. Those who fell short of these expectations, those who committed major crimes faced automatic physical torture, ranging from ritual execution to ostracism. Minor offences or crimes did not exact the same penalty as the major crimes. Minor offenders - petty thieves, liars, domineering housewives; lazy husbands, etc., were all singled out for satirical attacks. Since the art of writing was not in vogue then, songs, dances, acting, and pantomimic gestures were all employed in these attacks. The simplest and the earliest example of satire is the Eskimo song of derision (Hodgart 1969:14). In primitive society, therefore, satire was a manner of ridiculing, decrying and denouncing the unwanted behaviour of people in a bid to improve and amend their lives in the community. In the African society, folk stories with satirical darts are told to influence people's conduct in the society.

The setting for some of these stories is in the human world with man living and enjoying moments of fun and frolic, dying, intermingling with gods and spirits. Most of these stories, on the other hand, revolve around the animal world with its ever-accommodating fleet of animals.

Throughout Africa, there are stories that “belong to” animals like Mouse, some creature who intrudes into the human community, but continues to live in a wild state. It is Hare and Spider and Jackal and the many other small and clever creatures living near man in the nooks and crannies and on the borders, who are the carriers of such tales: Living in the in-between places, they share in both the power of nature and the products of culture, but they obey neither the rules of man nor the laws of nature. Thus, these animals thrive not only on upsetting rules and boundaries, but also on attacking the

family, friendships, and all the ways in which people have learned to live in harmony (Abrahams 1983:23).

The central character (Hero) in African storytelling tradition is often the trickster. Obiechina defines him as “a stock character that is often something of a rogue. He manages to extricate himself from intriguing and sometimes dangerous situations by a display of mental ability” (Obiechina, 154). Some of these trickster animals include *Ananse* (spider), the Akan-Asante trickster of Ghana; the *Ijapa* (tortoise) of Yorubaland, the *Gizo* of the Hausas, *Hlakayana* of Zululand, and the Calabar Rat which bites with a soothing breeze. This category of tales – mostly of animals and also of human characters – has to do with trickery and breach of faith (Okpewho 1992:176).

When we consider the many animal stories that have been collected in Africa, the main factor, which strikes some observers, is the great emphasis on animal tricksters. We see small, wily and tricky animals that cheat and outdo the bigger and more powerful ones. Ruth Finnegan observes that these smaller animals (tricksters) sometimes trick the larger ones in a pretended tug-of-war, cheat them in a race, and deceive them into killing themselves or their own relations. They sometimes gobble up their opponents’ food in pretended innocence; they also divert punishments for their own misdeeds onto innocent parties, in addition to performing a host of other ingenious tricks (Finnegan 1970:344). These tricksters are known to possess extraordinary zeal at manoeuvring every situation to their advantage. The tortoise in Southern Nigeria, we are metaphorically informed, now aspires to white-collar status and attends adult education classes (Berry 1961:14). Also, in the spirit of modernism, the spider (*Ananse*), besides being gluttonous, boastful, and ineffective, referees football matches among the Ashanti of Ghana (Nketia 1958:21). A lot of literature has been written on animal stories, suffice it to state here that for the purpose of practical illustration, very few pertinent examples that have direct relevance to the subject at hand will be cited.

These trickster figures are the mirror image of our society. Smith observed while writing on the folk tradition of the Ila people of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia):

In sketching these animals, not *Sulwe* and *Fulwe* (Hare and Tortoise) only, but all the animals in these tales, the Ba-Ila are sketching themselves. The virtues they esteem, the vices they condemn, the follies they ridicule -all are here in the animals (Smith and Dale 1920: 341)

Most of these stories, which are carbon copies of what exist in the society, reflect the opposite of the normally approved, or expected character and behaviour. Our world is corrupt and is populated by hardened criminals and wolves in human form. There is rivalry, hatred, and fighting bordering on cannibalism. In Africa for instance, whenever an unexpected or serious crime is reported, the question often asked is: where did we learn this? If a question of this nature is asked in developed countries, the answer is

often quick to come. The socio-cultural structure of the western world with its sophisticated machinery of technological expansion, open society, and the proliferation of the mass media are often held responsible.

Africa greatly contrasts with the west — many African homes are yet to acquire a television set. What then is the source of the corruption and scramble in our midst? Where have we copied the techniques of cheating, greed and perfidy? It is not enough, though it may be partially true; to conclude that the ills plaguing our society are misfortunes we inherited from our colonial past. This paper assumes that one of the most likely sources of our contemporary dilemma may be found in the tradition of storytelling involving trickster animals and their uncanny and disreputable adventures. From these stories, which are pregnant with mischievous explorations, children are dangerously exposed to the dubious techniques used by these animals to dupe and outwit their superiors. Since imitation is natural and common with children, they would want to experiment and observe how these animal actions could manifest themselves in the human situation. What these children do at the early stage of their development may not pose a serious danger to growth and peace in the community. But when they grow up, sub-consciously (sometimes deliberately), these bad habits copied from tales begin to manifest themselves with grave consequences on the society - these stories may do for the children what old prisoners do for the freshers.

In contemporary African society, words like “cheat”, “deceive”, “swindle”, and “trick” are commonly used during conversation. These words seem to be direct derivatives of trickster stories. In our society today, what seems to be in vogue is the ability of the most vicious and ‘powerful’ (the lions) to trample on the not-so-powerful; the most cunning (the tortoise or spider) plays tricks, cheats, outwits, deceives, and causes the most outrageous conflict among people of a common descent. Contemporary Africa harbours numerous corrupt politicians and military dictators. We have known of the Idi Amins, the Bokassas, the Nguemas, and all the other “giants” who strut our political arenas. Rivalry among animals in trickster stories may not be unconnected with the remote cause of perennial chieftaincy title wars in our different villages, or jockeying for political posts; it may not even be disassociated from fighting in religious circles by prophets of Brother Jero’s rank, or even riots or thuggery during political rallies by warring political factions.

Beyond the psycho-subconscious effect of trickster stories on the individual, some of these stories leave very direct unadulterated ‘immoral’ lessons for the ill health of the society. A good example is a Yoruba story recorded by Ulli Beier, “Not Even God is Ripe Enough to Catch a Woman in Love” (Gbadamosi et. al. 1968). Whatever other message may contain in this story, the spine of it is the exposure of women to the gimmicks of cuckolding their husbands. Another example pertinent to our discussion is a Hausa folktale, “Falsehood is More Profitable Than Truth”, recorded by Tremearne. We deem it necessary to reproduce the story in full:

### **Falsehood is More Profitable Than Truth (Hausa)**

This is about certain men, the King of Falsehood and the King of Truth, who started off on a journey together, and the King of Lies said to the King of Truth that he (the latter) should get food for them on the first day. They went on, and slept in a town, but they did not get anything to eat, and next morning when they had started again on the road, the King of Truth said to the King of Lies, "In the town where we shall sleep to-night you must get our food", and the King of Lies said, "Agreed".

They went on, and came to a large city, and behold, the Mother of the King of this city had just died, and the whole city was mourning, and saying "The Mother of the King of this city has died". Then the King of Lies said, "What is making you cry?" And they replied, "The King's Mother is dead". Then he said, "You go and tell the King that his Mother shall arise". So they went and told the King, and he said, "Where are the Strangers?" And the people replied, "See them here". So they were taken to a large house, and it was given to them to stay in.

In the evening, the King of Lies went and caught a wasp, the kind of insect which makes a noise like "Kurururu" and he came back and put it in a small tin, and said, "Let them go and show me the grave". When he arrived, he examined the grave, and then he said,

"Let everyone go away". No sooner had they gone than he opened the mouth of the grave slightly, he brought the wasp and put it in, and then closed the mouth as before. Then he sent for the King, and said that he was to come and put ear to the grave - meanwhile this insect was buzzing - and when the King of the city had come, the King of Lies said, "Do you hear your Mother talking?" Then the King arose: he chose a Horse and gave it to the King of Lies; he brought women and gave them to him; and the whole city began to rejoice because the King's Mother was going to rise again.

Then the King of Lies asked the King of the city if it was true that his Father was dead also, and the King replied, "Yes, he is dead". So the King of Lies said, "Well, your Father is holding your Mother down in the grave; they are quarrelling", and he continued, "Your Father, if he comes out, will take away the chieftainship from you", and he said that his father would also kill him. When the King had told the towns people this, they piled up stones on the grave, and the King said, "Here, King of Lies, go away; I give you these horses", and he continued that so far as his Mother was concerned, he did not want her to appear either. Certainly falsehood is more profitable than truth in this world (Tremearne 1913: 204-6).

Assuming that a teacher narrated this story to his class pupils in the primary school, and at the end of the story asked the class the conventional question: what do you learn from this story? Besides several other variables, even the dullest pupil in the class would manage to say that the story teaches them how to play tricks and dupe people. A story of this nature should be regarded as a story that is capable of breeding indiscipline and immorality in the

society. With stories of this nature the validity of the saying, "The truth shall set you free" stands to be contested.

Another factor that baffles an alert mind and a critical observer is why stories of cheats and dupes thrill the African audiences. In the Kalabari (Rivers State, Nigeria) metaphor, *Ikaki* (the tortoise) is regarded as "the deadly old man of the forest. The amoral, psychopathic confidence trickster - the type who accepts society only in order to prey upon it" (Horton 1981:192). Why, in spite of this animal's deadliness does the village of Oloma in Kalabari determine to make their own imitation of him? Why is *Ikaki* the favourite protagonist of the Kalabari, and indeed most of the African stories? In one of the episodes of the *Ikaki* masquerade play, as reported by Horton, *Ikaki* leads his children out of the town square down to the waterside. The crowd follows him in high spirits. They are inside a canoe in the river and the crew is plunged into a dangerous confusion because of a motivated wrong paddling. Water is bailed from the river into the boat. The onlookers (audience) are reported to have abused him (*Ikaki*) "joyously". Why the oxymoroneous joyous abuse? This paper ties this attitude of the audience with the present predicament of our retrogressive tolerance and complacent attitude to corruption in our society? We feel strongly that stories such as those of the *Ikaki* have tremendous influence on our contemporary attitude and response to crime and intolerable habits in our communities. Further in the play, *Ikaki* is known to graduate from one class of slyness to another (worse perhaps), and the audience's levity graduates along with his craftiness.

As Old Man of the Forest, he is expected to take a solicitous interest in the other animals that dwell in his domain. Characteristically, however, he takes advantage of his position. He goes to the dwellings of animals whom he knows have stores of nuts or meat, and warns them that he sees impending misfortune in their households. A little later, he comes back with a native doctor, and while the doctor is attending to the alleged troubles hinted at by *Ikaki*, the latter loots the food store ... with a knapsack fuller than it was when he went in. (Horton 1981: 487)

The audience members are reportedly "highly amused". Why amused at the sufferings of others? Why sadistically amused at seeing others being preyed upon? This again seems to be a pointer to the present insensitive attitude to our contemporary predicament - the what-is-my-concern syndrome to public affairs in our present generation.

Stories about tricksters are so popular in Africa that even the gods descend from their exalted heights to assume the role of tricksters. In the Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey), the trickster god is called, *Legba*. Herskovits and Frances call him, "arch individualist", and proceed to add that he is -

The personification of the being who loves mischief, know no inhibitions, recognizes no taboos, dares to challenge injustices, even on the part of the creator and to expose them. He is a moralist only when it suits his whim. (Herskovits and Frances

1958:36)

And yet, he is highly regarded, respected, worshipped, adored, and admired by the people. In the folktale of the Azande people, *Ture* is the name of their trickster god. This trickster appears as:

a monster of depravity, liar, cheat, lecher, murderer, greedy, treacherous, ungrateful, a poltroon, a braggart. This utterly selfish person is everything against which Azande warn their children most strongly. **Yet he is the hero of their stories.** (Emphasis mine) (Evans-Pritchard 1967:28)

In the Yoruba society of Nigeria, *Esu-Elegbara* is the trickster god. Like the *Winnebago* trickster of the North American Indians, he is a creature of great instinct that serves a dual role in society. Like Hermes, he is associated with change and possibility. Beyond this, he is an awful intermediary between man and the gods. *Esu* does good as well as evil. He is responsible for man's troubles - he often tricks man into offending the gods; he also makes sure that god accepts sacrifice for atonement. *Esu's* behaviour is probably the origin of the double standard tradition in contemporary African society.

The behaviour of our contemporary politicians and military dictators very much resembles that of *Esu*. Can we safely say, therefore, that some of these stories have in a way instructed corrupt hero-worshipping in our society? The fact that people do not abhor the behaviour of these gods is enough to say that the people are either complacent or insensitive to the painful problems of the society. Achebe has in strong terms condemned the masses and accused them of complicity in the corruption that has beset the society. He attributes the non-chalant habits of the people to their unwillingness to check the excesses, and reprimand their corrupt colleagues. In his satirical novel, *A Man of the People*, he feels that the masses' indifference and cynicism give birth to people like the corrupt Chief Nanga.

Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you ... if you thought a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth. (Achebe 1966:2)

Another example worth mentioning is Efua Sutherland's storytelling drama, *The Marriage of Anansewa*. The play is fashioned out of the Ghanaian storytelling tradition known as *Anansemem*. This involves a body of stories dealing with Ananse, the trickster. The play deals with Ananse's attempt to make as much money as possible through his daughter, Anansewa, by promising her hand in marriage to four different chiefs. Right from the beginning of the play to the end, Ananse is portrayed as "liar", "crafty", and "cunning". The word that describes him best is Machiavellian. The playwright says that

Ananse appears to represent a kind of Everyman, artistically exaggerated and distorted to serve society as a medium for self-examination. He has penetrating awareness of the

nature and psychology of human beings and animals. He is also made to mirror in his behaviour fundamental human passions, ambitions and follies as revealed in contemporary situations. (Sutherland 1975: v)

Marvellous as this play is as a piece of experimental theatre, the playwright has not articulated her artistry well enough for the drama to act as "a medium for society to criticize itself." Throughout the play, Ananse spins his "spider-web" and traps innocent persons, but escapes unhurt. We feel that a definite punishment should be given to Ananse in order to deter others from following his evil path. We refuse to admit that the expression, "Exterminate Ananse, and society will be ruined" is artistically good enough a medium for society to criticize itself. To our mind, the desired effect or meaning of this expression does not come out successfully. Even laughter, which is supposed to be "the main social response to Ananse as a character", is miscarried. It must be noted that laughter which comedy evokes is different from satire's laughter. The former evokes laughter of pure enjoyment and uncontrolled merriment while the latter provokes grim and bitter laughter. This play, contrary to the playwright's intention, merely thrills and amuses the audience, with no after-taste of derisive bitterness. In fact, the play ends with Storyteller trying to sing Ananse's praises while the Players "sing joyfully". Satire exerts a complex emotion which is compounded by amusement, contempt, disgust, and hatred, and whose effect is generally destructive. This complex emotion is what *The Marriage of Anansewa* should have exerted on the audience. But it has failed in this endeavour. The play rather seems to humour Ananse as a positive hero, in spite of his evil designs.

### Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyse the negative lessons that children and adults could draw from African folktales involving tricksters. It has argued that some of these folktales may influence people's characters and turn them into hardened criminals or agents of contemporary corruption. An impatient reader, or a folklore jingo may see our position as a transposition of the censorship debate about the corrupting effect of television violence and pornography upon young people onto the Africa oral literature setting with the amoral trickster as the villain. Our stand may seem to come down hard on trickster tales, maybe with the intent of having them banned. Far be it. We have neither lost sight of, nor ignored the fact that folktales can be very constructive, and help to develop the society. Tales have a definite didactic side to them. But this paper wishes to suggest to the educationists, policy-makers, and teachers to restrict the spread of notorious folktales involving tricksters. As Kaschula observes, oral literature exists only insofar as society allows it to exist (Kaschula 2001: xii). It is the interrelationship between context and text, which permits it to flourish. It is not a static literature, but remains ever changing and dynamic. Fascinating stories with unambiguous moral lessons for the good health of society should continue to flourish in African communities and schools because folktales are important arms of African culture,



and we cannot afford to dismiss them with a wave of the hand.

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