

## THE ETHICS OF FOLKTALES IN EDO CULTURE

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### **Abstract**

*This essay examines the significance of traditional folktales in the moral development of the individual person and laments the near extirpation of this tradition in contemporary family life and the attendant toll on the moral values that are characteristically African. In an attempt to investigate this issue critically, this paper employed the critical analytic approach to situate folktales in the Edo thought system. From the analysis, part of the reason why there is deficit in our value system was attributed to the disappearance of folktale, that acted as a veritable vehicle for transmitting life's lessons that guaranteed a humane society. It called attention to the danger of departing from such a phenomenon and ruminated on the cultural splendour of keeping the folktale tradition. It concluded by recommending ways of revamping the folktale culture.*

**Keywords:** Folktales, Edo, Morality, Culture.

### **Introduction**

As a young boy growing up in the city of Benin, it was a common custom that in the evenings, usually after supper, we gathered round the elder ones, this time our uncles, aunties, and some of our elder cousins, who told us a lot of fanciful stories and the impact above all was the great lessons that were part of the story itself. For example, it was through this medium that we learnt why the tortoise had such a rough back, why the nose of the dog was black, cold and wet or moist, why the sky is so far from the earth; but above all why

it was good to be morally upright, and so on. Though education later clarified certain knowledge we had but one area that remained constant in terms of relevance and importance is morality. We always looked forward for those moments of storytelling, to the extent that whenever we had visitors coming to the house, especially the elderly ones, the first thing we would demand was a folktale, after the exchange of pleasantries. The excitement was even more when the visitors were from the countryside. It was as if a new movie was out in the market, and people are enthusiastic to get a view.

This robust tradition is now moribund even in a typical rural setting that was thought to be the fertilizing ground and the storage bank of such tales. The lamentable aspect of the current situation is the attendant toll it has had on moral and ethical values. The only one that has not suffered significant setback in this aspect is the parables that are still prevalent in everyday discussions. While parables could be seen as quintessential of such folktales, and a vital aspect of the entire folklore tradition, it must be noted that the interpretation and deeper meaning and explanation would be more favourable to adults. However since formation of minds starts as toddlers the import of folktales cannot be over emphasized, and this is the main focus of this essay.

The task of this paper is to critically examine the impact of folktales in the overall building up of moral and ethically responsible beings who make up the larger society. Why is this tradition that added so much value to the African personality no longer fashionable? What is its impact in terms of the moral value deficit? Could this revival help in the overhauling of the present state of affairs, especially as we have it in Africa? How can we make it more attractive once again?

### **The Meaning of Folktales:**

This is a general term for different varieties of traditional narrative. The telling of stories appears to be a cultural universal, common to basic and complex societies alike. Even the forms, folktales take are certainly similar from culture to culture, and comparative studies of themes and narrative ways have been successful in showing these

relationships. Also it is considered to be an oral tale to be told for everybody. Tales, overtime that become the collective consciousness of a people and an essential part of their culture. Though folktales vary from one culture to the other but generally are recognizable because of some basic features.

Etymologically folk refers to people, so the things being told are those of everyday life and common experiences of people. They are usually very simplified and could be understood by children. This is why many scholars believe that folktales originated among peasants and very common people. The last point that is also very relevant to this discourse is the fact that they usually contain some moral lessons. Folktales are very prevalent in Africa and among the Negro world, and they cover a whole range of inspirational and fanciful stories.

On the other hand, the term "folklore" can label a figurative narrative which has no sacred or religious content. Traditional stories or folklores could be told in form of apologue, fairy tale, parable, myth, legend and allegory. Each of these forms is a story passed down orally from generations and has become part of the tradition of a community.<sup>1</sup>A folk narrative can have both a moral and psychological scope, as well as entertainment value, depending upon the nature of the teller, the style of the telling, the ages of the audience members, and the overall context of the entertainment.

Sometimes there is a very tiny line between folktales, myths, legend, etc and what becomes of higher importance would be the particular significance of the story. In whichever case the message being communicated, is usually more important than the facts of the story being told. This particular point is very important so that one does not abandon the substance of the story and begin to argue over the shadows and the other less important details. The Sumerian Elish, for example was significant in explaining the origin of man and the world. The subject matter of literature is as wide as human experience itself. Myths, legends, and folktales lie at the beginning of literature, and their plots, situations, and allegorical (metaphorical narrative) judgments of life represent a constant source of literary inspiration;<sup>2</sup> that continue to pass on lessons that would help in the sound and moral development of the individual.

**Edo Culture:**

The term Edo has an historical background. According to J.U. Egharevba, Edo was the slave that saved Oba Ewuare (1440-1473) from being killed.<sup>3</sup> So as to immortalize him, Edo became a name for Benin indigenes. On the other hand, 'Benin' is a name that serves as territorial name (e. g. Benin City, Benin Empire or Benin Kingdom) and its usage predates Edo.<sup>4</sup> Apart from serving as the indigenous name of Benin City, Edo can be used today equivocally: It is referred exclusively to the language spoken by the Benin, who historically are the Edo people as distinct from the other inhabitants of Benin Empire. It can also be used as a linguistic label comprising all the languages and dialects spoken in various communities, whose inhabitants have migrated from Benin, many years ago. In this thesis the researcher shall be referring to the people who call themselves, their capital city and their language, 'Edo.'

The origins of the people are lost in Myths and antiquity, while some hold that they migrated from Sudan many centuries ago;<sup>5</sup> the people themselves believe that the Kingdom was founded by one of the sons of Osanobua the Supreme Being.<sup>6</sup> This is precisely the point why the Oba is regarded as a demi-god; as a direct descendant of the son of the Supreme Being. Worthy of note is that today they occupy the Edo South senatorial district of Edo State, Nigeria.

**Folktales and Edo Moral Values**

Most of the knowledge we have of the rights and wrongs in the collective patrimony of the Edo people are contained, sustained, and transmitted in folktales. Unfortunately, this tradition of transmission via oral tradition is fast eroding, and this has its effect on the morality of the people. It is eroding not so much because of interaction with other value systems, but because the people are becoming less conscious and more ignorant of their own value system and moral matters. The reason for this is because the natural pedagogical School wherein all learnt via the folktale tradition is fast being neglected and no longer seem fashionable. If what Samuel Huntington prognosticated as the clash of civilization and the remaking of the world order<sup>7</sup> is anything to go by, then the

domineering effect of Western civilization is sure to swallow some of these smaller ones that have not found their feet in the world's stage (globalization), that tends to promote everything and anything Western.

However, this would be at the point of convergence that Chardin referred to as the omega point, which inspired Senghor to speak of the civilization of the universal.<sup>8</sup> But before we get to that table of discussion where all these cultures would cross fertilize each other, there is need to sustain one's own culture and hence the need to revive the folktales that are almost extirpated. No doubt a lot of epistemological facts abound to evince the moral plenitude in these folktales. The more we forget about the tales the more we forget the root and the *raison d'être* why certain things should be done the way they are done and why it would be wise and profitable to do those things; and to draw aspirations from the many lessons drawn and designed to be learnt and taught by these folktales.

Looking at the vast array of the so many folktales prevalent in the Edo cultural milieu, one could notice and deduce a lot of saturation of her philosophical depths; her traditional and customary depths; her ethical and moral depths; her religious and metaphysical depths; There are a lot we find in the maxims and idioms and above all in the parables but they are not worth comparing to the ones we find in the entire folktales. In fact the parables came as a deep reflection on the folktales that have been told and established. The parables and maxims are the quintessence of the folktales and the moral lessons of the tales. They are if you like, the summary of these folktales; the essence or lessons from the tales. It is within this contest that we can appreciate the values of honesty, respect for elders, care for the poor, respect for truth, respect for hard work, care for the elderly, love for children, good parental upbringing, esteem for virginity and decency, sanctity of the human life, esteem for elderly counsels, love for the red colour and its symbolism, kinship ties, history of the ancestral lineage, the origins of the cosmos and of the land, the origins of the peoples of the land and the world, the origin of particular places, the origin of various customs and traditions, the origins of taboos, the origins of festivals, etc. there is hardly any aspect of the socio, religious and cultural life of the

people that are not explainable or buttressed by one or more of the folktales that are prevalent in the culture. In all of these one thing stands out clearly that virtue has its own profitable reward, while vices attract a regrettable recompense as far as morality was concerned.

Within the scope of this essay one cannot afford to accommodate all the folktales that are sources of these moral norms and values, we have outlined above; one cannot even exhaust the entire moral philosophy, but suffice it to say that the entire moral code of the Edo people is distributed in these folktales with a very deep and far reaching implications for oneself, the family, the society in general, against the cosmic and karmic balance in nature that tends to ensure that whatever is sown would be reaped, good or evil. It was also within this tradition that we got to know more about nature, both plants and animals and the pattern of their behaviour. In the folktales you would find an abundance of aspects of Edo moral codes, Edo Philosophy, Edo Religion, Laws and customs, Penal Codes, rituals whether of initiation age grade, marriages, burial, and even entertainment, etc. Our focus however is limited to the moral implications in the Folktales, that are fast being forgotten, whether in terms of myths, legend, fable, parables, fairy tale, Animal tales, etc.

### **Moral Lessons of Three Key Folktales**

Here for purpose of illustration, we shall examine three folktales, of the thousands we have in Edo repertoire:

The first folktale we shall be considering is the story of *Omonsiuwa*, the only child of the parents. She was a very beautiful girl and could be considered as the most beautiful girl in the village. Many children were very fond of her and wanted to be in her company when they were recreating. The parents however were not favourably disposed to this interaction and would always drive away the lads. They did this just to make extra effort for her not to get corrupted. On one faithful day, the parents were about to go to the farm, and in order to keep her at home, gave her a sizable piece of rock to cook, and warned her sternly not to live the house until the rock was cooked and soft. When they left, as usual the kids came

calling her to follow them to pluck some fruits. She informed them that the parents asked her not to live the house until the rock was cooked. Then the kids assisted her in fanning the flames and while she was not watching, they plucked the leaves of the cocoyam plant and put them inside the pot. Very soon the leaves became very soft and cooked; and they informed her that the rock was cooked. She went to feel the leaves and thought it was the rock that had become cooked. She then followed them to the farm area to pluck some fruits.

When they got there the first child was asked to climb the tree, but he complained that the legs were too fragile. The second child also refused to climb complaining the hands were too fragile. The third one complained that the stomach was protruded. The onus then fell on Omonsiuwa to climb. It was the tree of the pepper fruit. Now while up, whenever she plucked any ripe fruit, she put it in her pocket and threw only the unripe ones to the colleagues below. This made the other children very angry and they decided to punish her. They gathered a heap of dried leaves and wood under the tree and set fire on it. The smoke choked Omonsiuwa, and she fell into the fire and was burnt to ashes.

When the parents were returning from the farm, they happened to have passed through the scene, the mother saw the beautiful ashes and she said to herself that her daughter would be very happy to play with the ashes and decided to take some for her. As she was about to take some of the ashes, she heard a song coming from the ashes; and through the song the parents became aware of the sad event and that it was actually the ashes of their beloved daughter. They reported the matter to the village elders who subsequently penalized the children for murdering their colleague, the pride of the village.

The moral lessons here would include: Obedience to parental admonitions and constituted authority, the evil of keeping bad friends, and the evil of greed and cheating.

Another folktale we shall be considering is the story of *Edamwen* (I am not pained, irritated or provoked). He was born into a peasant family and in the struggles of life lost the parents and managed to marry a wife. Very soon the village folks took interest

in him particularly because of his name and especially his character that was a reflection of his name. Sometimes they purposely would try to provoke him to see his reactions, but he always maintained a calm personality. Things escalated when they forcefully took his wife from him thinking he would not be able to bear the humiliation, but he maintained his calm.

The folks finally planned and to give him the last test of provocation, they took him to the forest and tied him to a tree and used a very sharp object to destroy his eyes and abandoned him there in excruciating pains. Edamwen remained there in acute pains but did not complain or curse anybody. As luck would have it the tree he was tied, was the very tree where witches around the village came to hold their nocturnal meetings. As usual they came in the dead of the night, and Edamwen could hear them debating and struggling over the leaves of a particular tree. The reason for the struggle was that the presenter had told the other members that it was therapeutic for any kind of blindness. It was in the cause of struggling for it that some of the leaves fell and rested on the head of Edamwen who managed to use his hand to take the leaves to touch his eyes. Immediately, his sight was restored and he freed himself from the stake and returned to the village that night. When it was day break he took his bath dressed properly and went round the village to the amazement of his persecutors, who began to imagine that perhaps he possessed some supernatural powers. Not quite long, the Village king of a neighbouring village became blind. It was in the cause of sending emissaries to look for doctors who could cure his blindness that the messengers came to Edamwen, as one who had the powers to cure blindness. Edamwen went with them and applied those same leaves on the eyes of the blind king and immediately, his sight was restored. In gratitude, the king gave the administration of half of his kingdom to Edamwen and gave his daughter to him in marriage.

The moral lessons would include: Patience, as a virtue could be very profitable, and also the fact that there is always a reward for being good.

The last folktale, we shall be considering is concerning a particular age group (Okpolugbe) of young men whom the king of the village sent to hunt for wild pigs, to be used as part of their end

of year ritual celebrations. On their way they passed a group of elders, and with total disregard for them did not bother to observe respect by greeting them. Later on when one of the young men who was not in the original company, because he had to meet the daily chores of his sick mother came by hurriedly, but by the time he came to the place where the elders were, greeted them respectfully. They were attracted to him, because he was different from the rest of his colleagues and beckoned on him to come to them. Upon inquiry, they discovered the mission of the young men and advised this late comer not to join, them that there was going to be trouble. Not too long they saw the young men returning, some injured some dead all wailing, as a result of a ferocious attack by a band of wild pigs. The elders then asked the other late arrival to join them back home.

The moral lesson here will include: respect for our elders, and to always heed the advice of the elders. Even the Christian bible has it in the fourth commandment God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai: Honour your father and mother that your days may be long....<sup>9</sup>

From the foregoing, the link between folktales and morality, as far as the Edo culture; and by extension African culture, is concerned; is very clear. The moral codes and what ought to be done are contained in these folktales. They also go as far as explaining the reason why things are done the way they are done. Here the motive for morality is given, since there is always a recompense for every act or inaction. In other words for one to know the reason why certain customs are encouraged, why there are certain things that are forbidden, then we should go back to the folktales were these things are very explicit. It therefore means that the more we are unfamiliar with these folktales, the more also we become unfamiliar with our moral codes, at a time of great crisis in terms of trying to establish vital links with the past, it becomes very worrisome that the implication may likely be that there is going to be grave moral set back, as we already have.

The current situation as we have it, has had its toll on morality and moral values for the Edo people. No wonder more than five decades ago Jacob Egharevba already expressed this fear, when he wrote in 1965:

Ke omuhen ghade ore emwiniremwin nidinmwinhia  
keg ha re domwande Evbo vbe otoagbon,  
domwande Evbonirhanro vbevbokegben  
Emwinirenmwin oghe evboiraneso ye ebeni ma tie  
ugbugbehia. Rhunmwundoni o kere ne  
imavbegharhieeso ma kherhe, kherhe vbe oghe  
evbomwanke ban ghakhian.<sup>10</sup>

What should have acted as the base for good moral conduct has thoroughly been neglected, and whatever that could be developed, had to also contend with the so many values, especially the negative ones that may not be at home to the African, hence some have spoken of the crisis of the African conscience.<sup>11</sup>

From the three folktales above, one could decipher the moral values of obedience to parental admonitions, respect for elders, patience, avoiding bad friends, avoidance of cheating (greed), etc. Taking a closer look at the last story, and especially the behaviour of those young men; it would seem that if those young men had observed the simple courtesy of greeting the elders they passed on the way, perhaps the mishap that happened to them may not have happened. The fact that the one who greeted the elders was asked not to proceed on the journey implies that the elders had a premonition of what was about to take place. Again the likelihood surely could have been that the elders themselves, through certain metaphysical prowess actually orchestrated the attacks by the wild pigs.

In our time when the communal touch is fast giving way to the individualistic disposition, it is very possible for us not to greet anybody, no matter the age, as far as we have no business with such a person. In this connection we shall experience more often the culture of not showing courtesy to anybody we do not know. However this is contrary to the spirit and the morality of showing respect for elders as enshrined in African communalism in general. It is in this regard, that Nwoko would averred:

African traditional society is a society where the individual is always considered a free, integrated member of his community, a communion person. It is a society where individualism is considered

a taboo, where each member takes the interest of the community as his own. His pride is community is power. The more united he is to the community, the more he sees the community as a mere extension of the family<sup>12</sup>

Here the community is seen generally as the family extension and the respect and courtesy one shows to the elderly members of the family is also extended to other members of the community. Some of our people have also imbibed the slogan of respect is reciprocal. But from the folktale respect is the due we pay to elders. In our advancement into the realm and era of modernity, we must bring along into it the great values we have, as epitomized in the so many folktales in our culture. Otherwise the fear of Fanon<sup>13</sup> would become very evident in our time. In this situation what would be there would be a very confused personality. This is just the issue of respect, and no doubt a small microcosm of the entire issues as regards the morality in our society. The example is just to show that there is urgent need to revive this tradition as it gives a better foundation for right conduct than we can get even from other Western or religious sources.

It is my highly considered opinion that with this tradition of folktales revamped there is going to be a serious development in terms of self-assertion and the gradual elimination of the inferiority complex that is felt by the average black man. The inferiority here lies in the fact that the average African feels inferior to the Westerner and everything Western. In this connection, the values in this folktales would become assets for the society and would help to revive an ailing society, and in resolving the problems of vices and the challenges of the future. The resuscitating of the folktales tradition would certainly act as a philosophy for ameliorating the current state of affairs with regard to high level of immorality on the part of Africans. In this case it could really act as a remedy designed to improve the current existential situation particularly of a society coming to terms with so many problems like corruption, bad leadership, acute greed for wealth, and all other forms of exploitation of man by man and other related vices.

Folktales would certainly help as far as morality is concerned, to re position Africans to a kind of primordial mode that

gives possibility to that desired change in their present ontological conditions. By its existential approach to reality, our folktales, mediated by the high moral content would become a philosophy of social action and societal rejuvenation.

### **Conclusion**

In bringing this essay to a close it is good for us to see some ways our folktales that carry within them our moral code, could as a matter of urgency be revived and enhanced. The urgency here lies in the early target of the young. So that once brought up in this robust tradition, with high moral value, it would be hard for them to lose grip of their personality when confronted with future challenges from other malevolent systems.

The first recommendation in this regard is the documentation, as much as possible, of all the folktales that we have in the various cultures and a robust articulation of the moral codes they convey; for things written they say remain. This would enable none to be lost in this regard.

The second recommendation would be the work of scholars to do in-depth analysis of these folktales and bring out the undercurrent. This would enable us to improve upon the patrimony of our ancestors given the fact that we live in a fast changing world. These analyses would enable the moral codes to accommodate the current trend of work and the changing face of societies. It would also take care of the challenge of globalization and all the attendant effects it has on modern African life. Knowledge is dynamic and we know there are certain things we know now, that were unknown to our ancestors. Eboh captures this point when she averred that “It behoves us to reconstruct and philosophise on as many stories and witty sayings as possible. They may prove useful in future. We ought to produce knowledge because we are the venerable ancestors of tomorrow.”<sup>14</sup>

Another recommendation is the formalization of these folktales in terms of injecting them into School curriculum. Children learn very fast and those whose environment makes it hard for them to benefit from the oral transmission could still benefit from them in the Schools. This is with the presumption that all the children would

have access to quality Education at least at the primary and secondary levels.

For most African countries and cultural societies, political independence has been attained, but not cultural, economic and ideological independence. This has given possibility to a moral crisis. The moral crisis comes from the fact that Africans have shifted away from their own value system and the moral values that go with it, to other value systems underpinned by other metaphysical foundations. The consequence of the shift in values is that the African is no longer defined by who he is, but by what he has acquired by whatever means. The task, therefore, is how the moral crisis caused by this shift can be dealt with in reviving our folktale. Our folktales no doubt emphasizes a virtue ethics, with a capacity of redeeming the African value system and is geared towards the formation of the concept of the human being as a `being-with-self` and a `being-with-others.

By revamping our folktale heritage, this could be a kind of formalization of a beginning of cultural independence, a potential opening, if not a total breakthrough for our moral value system. When all these have been attained then, in the words of Frantz Fanon, there will be "not only the disappearance of colonialism, but also the disappearance of the colonized man."<sup>15</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

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