

THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF AFRICAN STORY-TELLING AMIDST ATHEISTIC SECULARISM

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Abstract

The world is troubled by myriads of problems. Despite modern-day advances in information communication technology, science, urbanization, etc the world is still troubled by chaos, violence, terrorism, and secularism. Secularism particularly in its atheistic form breeds relativism, social Darwinism, sexual permissiveness, violence, and rugged individualism. The world needs ethics and morals. This paper argues that African traditional story-telling has a place in a world tending towards secularism. African story-telling promoted ethical values such as love, communalism, theism, peace, order, and sociality. Through hermeneutical and analytical methods, the paper reveals that atheistic secularism is dangerous for the world. The paper concludes that traditional African story-telling should be revived and recovered more than ever before to promote a world rooted in ethical values.

Keywords: Transformation, African, story-telling, atheism, secularism, ethics.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the world has become a global village. But it is a global village that can be described as sick in many respects. In many indigenous communities before the coming of capitalist globalization, life was more calm, peaceful, communal, intimate, and hospitable. Lama (1999) expresses the situation so well when he writes that modern life, rapid industrialization, and urbanization, advances in science and technology have brought many benefits such as modern and fast means of transportation, health care, educational advancement but all these have also produced disharmony, brought crimes, and many dysfunctions of modern life. The measure of harmony that inundated traditional societies is no longer there, as Lama notes. As the world advances more in science and technology, many people believe that the world no longer needs the spiritual and ethical values that held traditional societies together. This trend can be termed secularization.

This paper argues that there is still need for moral, ethical, and spiritual values. A permissive and relativistic society will only lead to more chaos, disorder, violence, dehumanization, environmental degradation and doom. It will be a world in which might is right and the physically strong prevails. War and violence will be the order of the day. This paper agrees with Lama (1999) that the call for spiritual and ethical revolution

(values) is a call for radical reorientation away from pre-occupation with self to a recognition of the community of beings and communal interests, development of love and compassion. It is a call to live a life contrary to rugged individualism, selfishness, greed, profiteering and the military-industrial complex that promote and prolong wars and violence so that more weapons can be sold to countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The spiritual values that this paper argues for that were predominant in traditional societies were preserved and transmitted through religion, culture, festivals, rites of passage, age-grade institutions, story-telling, dances, and so forth. The painful thing is that as societies advance in both science and technology, they tend to abandon these arts and acts. Some persons and movements in the modern world tend to promote secularism to the detriment of the spiritual and moral ethos derived from traditional story-telling. This paper uses analytical and hermeneutical methods to argue that story-telling that promotes ethical and spiritual values is still relevant amidst secularism. While secularism may have succeeded in some societies, it has failed in other societies to show that religious ethical values are still important. As a matter of procedure, the paper will hereafter examine some fundamental concepts, examine the state of secularism in the world, examine African story-telling and its transformative power/role, and look at how story-telling can be used to counter secularism.

Conceptual Clarifications

Key concepts that ground this research are transformative, story-telling and secularism. The word 'transformative' speaks of changing the form or state of a person or thing. To transform is to change or alter the form or nature of a thing. Transformative is a deliberative and intentional act of bringing useful and meaningful change to the lives of human persons and their situations. This paper opines that the traditional art of telling stories in Africa and other indigenous communities causes change and gives a new sense of direction to people. Story-telling transforms and changes human persons in society. It makes society better and more humane.

What is storytelling? Literary Terms(2015) defines a story as:

.... a connected series of events told through words (written or spoken), imagery (still and moving), body language, performance, music, or any other form of communication. You can tell a story about anything, and the events described can be real or imaginary; covering both fiction and nonfiction; and leaving no topic, genre, or style untouched. There are stories about all things and all times; past, present and future. Whenever you're telling somebody about a series of events, you are telling a story, no matter what the subject nor when they occurred. As such, stories are of great value to human culture, and are some of the oldest, most important parts of life (par. 1).

In defining stories, it is important to state that there are many kinds of stories. Stories can be fiction or non-fiction. Fiction means they are imaginary and not real. Non-fiction is real and actual events that happened. Fiction does not mean they are fake and never

happened, some fiction stories are based on real historical events though told from recollection. Fictional stories include ghost stories, love stories, mythologies, folklore, fairy tales, science-fiction, historical fiction, and adventures. The following are non-fiction stories- stories of independence, historical events, biographies, family stories, etc. In every story, there is normally a central character searching for a goal or target. The main character is facing a series of obstacles or problems in the attainment of that goal. What then is story-telling? The National Story-telling Network (n.d) states that: “Storytelling is the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener's imagination” (p.1). Story-telling is a powerful art form and is also a craft. Stories are crafted.

The next term that requires clarification is secularism. The word 'secularism' does not have a univocal meaning. There are many shades and meanings of secularism. Britannica (2022) states that: secularism directs people away from metaphysical realities and focuses on human affairs. Britannica (2022) reveals further that in the period of modern history, secularism has been seen as anti-religious and anti-Christian; though in the last part of the 20th century, some scholars have argued for a secular Christianity that concerns itself with human affairs and not just sacred other-worldly affairs. The Center for Inquiry (n.d) cites humanist author Jim Herrick to state that: “Secularism in the largest sense means that people do not refer to religion to make decisions, to adopt policies, to run their lives, to order their relationships, or to impel their activities” (p. 1). Secularism History (2023) states that:

Secularism is what is best defined as a philosophical movement that separates civil affairs and politics from religion. Secularism's goal is to keep the government separate from mythological or religious laws, dogma, and other systems of beliefs. It typically does not oppose religion itself, rather, it opposes the influence of religion in civil and political affairs. In Latin, what secular means is 'of this world.' A secularist is defined as an individual or entity, like a government that supports secularism. A secular state describes a nation or country whose government is secularist. A secular state has no official religion, equally respects all religions, and excludes clergy from influencing its political processes (p. 1).

For Iverson (2013), “Secularism is an attitude or political ideology aiming to eradicate religion from public and social life, or at least regulate and control religion, and especially limit its influence on state politics” (p. 2116). Atheistic secularism is the type of secularism that rejects the existence of God or gods and all other spiritual realities. For the atheistic secularists, values should not be based on religious texts.

The Dangers of Atheistic Secularism

Rahim (2010) avers that:

Secularism is the most serious challenge of modernity posed by the West. Its main ideology is to liberate man from the religious and metaphysical values and expel religion from the practical aspect of man's life. It presents its materialistic viewpoint, which is cut off from Divine, transcendent or supernatural principles and does not refer to revelation at all and is in fact isolated from it (p. 157).

Secularism is extremely dangerous for human society. At its face value, it may look good for society. But a deeper look reveals how flawed it is. Secularism promotes the idol of reason and science. One should imagine and know where reason and science can lead without ethical limits and restraints. The dangers of a world ruled by secular values can be seen in the philosophies of Machiavelli, Nietzsche, Marx, Spenser, etc. In such a world, the 'will to power' is what counts. In such a world, political power can be acquired by any means and kept by any means. A secularist world is a eugenic world. Euthanasia prevails in such a world. A secular world is a world based on social Darwinism. A secular world is a Freudian world where the major driving force is the fire of sex.

The advocates of secularism especially in its atheistic form will not accept a world in which traditional religious and spiritual stories are given consideration. They will fight against these stories as other-worldly and devoted to the gods that they are fighting against. They will prefer a world ruled by reason, science, and post-humanistic ideas and not traditional mores, norms, and values. Donald (2017) notes that while secularists complain that religious persons want to impose their doctrines on others, perhaps they also do the same. They want to impose their secular vision on others. Donald (2017) states that: "There is a difference between humanism, secularism, atheism and anti-theism. However, each of them wants to push religion out of public life into private life, and having done so, the anti-theists want to interfere with private life by campaigning that parents are abusing their children by raising them as members of their religion" (par 3). Extreme forms of secularism promote lack of respect for religion and the sacred. It is intolerant of religious places. It can inspire radicalism on the path of religious people who become angry that people in a secular state blaspheme their religious symbols. Secularists would want to tear down all forms of religious symbols, emblems, signs, objects, images, etc.

Secularism has grave implications for every area of life in society. Permit in this paragraph insights from Rahim (2010). Speaking of the cultural impact of secularism, Rahim (2010) writes:

It is important to be noted that secularism also affects the cultural values of each society. Under the influence of secularism, people show less concern about their cultural values because they feel that their cultural heritage is outdated and old fashioned. Culture should be protected for the new generation because it is the only element which preserves and imparts an identity, image, and uniqueness of each society and country. In the secularist point of view, people should forget their values, norms, and culture in order to achieve the standard of modern community. This justification is certainly invalid as we can still have a modern

and developed country with a strong spirit of its own culture (p. 165)

Secularism is what drives most of the old and new media today. The new media is shaped by ideas that see no place for religion, divinity, or respect for any form of the sacred. A lifestyle that is hostile to modesty and traditional values of marital values is sidelined. Immodest dressing and fashion designs are promoted. A life of sexual immorality is now the norm in many secular societies. It should be understood that the media is a very powerful influencer of value and human behaviour. Many people see everything they encounter in the media as real and true. They copy and imitate whatever they see in the media. The minds of young people are very impressionable. The media distort their young minds with all kinds of values in a secular society. The West is now a god. Whatever that comes from the West is seen as right.

Goizueta (2007) states that the secularist human is an autonomous human person. The person lacks a supernatural dimension. God is not involved in human history. For the atheistic secularist, there is no God and people should not look to him. Religion has a naturalistic explanation. It is merely anthropological, sociological, or psychological. Religion is a private matter and should be limited to people's consciences. Religion has no place in the social economic and political order. It is a privatized phenomenon. Religion is seen as irrational, only science is rational. Human beings should wean themselves from the influence and impact of religion. There are no metaphysical realities. To use the Protagorean paradigm, "man is the measure of all things."

The Art of Story-Telling and Its Importance in African Cultures

Utley(2023) states that: "Storytelling takes you on a journey that inspires you to learn about yourself and the world around you. It reflects social values in a culture that motivates people in their pursuit of a meaningful life. The oral tradition of storytelling makes it possible for a culture to pass knowledge, history, and experiences from one generation to the next" (p.1.) Story-telling is a classic art form through which Africans passed on their religious beliefs, ideals, ideas, and truths. African cosmologies, theologies, philosophies, metaphysics, epistemologies, logical systems, ethics, cosmogonies, anthropologies, ecologies, etc are passed on through stories. Stories are bearers of a people's customs, cultures, and ways of life. The storytelling impulse is common to all human beings and societies, though prevalent in traditional societies. Ikyoive (2011) cites Reynolds Price saying: "...a need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species Homo-sapiens... second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence" (p. 2).

Still, on story-telling in Africa, Utley (2023) states that:

Storytelling in Africa provides entertainment, satisfies the curiosities of the African people, and teaches important lessons about everyday life. It is essentially a communal participatory experience.Storytelling is a shared event with people sitting together, listening, and participating in accounts of past

deeds, beliefs, taboos, and myths. Repetition of the language and rhythm are two important characteristics of oral storytelling in Africa. Storytellers repeat words, phrases, and stanzas. The use of repetition makes the stories easy to understand and recall from memory. When the audience is familiar with the stories, they actively participate as they learn important aspects of their culture (p.2).

Stories are an important aspect of every human culture. You find stories not only in Africa or other indigenous cultures. The movies, films, documentaries, etc that you watch and delight in are all based on stories. Without stories, human cultures will be bereft of important sources of entertainment, morals, education, socialization, etc. It is the story that you say that matters. No society can deny that they have stories. This is an important reason why we should not be ashamed of our African stories. The novels and books that you read are all stories. A person's biography or autobiography is his/her story. All religions have stories. The Holy Bible is a book of stories. You have the story of creation, the Israelites in Egypt, their wandering in the desert, their settling in the promised land, the birth of Jesus, his life and ministry, the story of the early church, etc. The Koran is a book of stories. You have the story of Buddha, the story of the origin of Hinduism, etc. It could be argued that life itself is a story. Literary Terms (2015) states that: “In one form or another, stories have been a part of human culture and society for thousands of years.... They're found in the past and present of people from every culture, religion, and ethnicity; in every region and language.” (par 3). I dare say that the art of storytelling will never die out of society. It may be modernized but the art of story-telling remains the same.

The Transformative Role of Story-Telling

The role that stories can play in life is that they can transform people, their experiences, and their imaginations. Literary Terms(2015) states that: “Stories are how we learn about each other, our past, and our cultures. Whether they are created for entertainment or to recount a real-life event—new stories are being lived, told, and created every second of every day” (par 9). Travis (2011) states that: “A story is the telling of an event, either true or fictional, in such a way that the listener experiences or learns something just by the fact that he heard the story. A story is a means of transferring information, experience, attitude, or point of view. Every story has a teller and a listener” (par 6)

Stories are important for they tell the story of each of us. Every story that we watch or read, we can identify with one aspect of the story or not. Some of the most powerful homilies and religious teachings that have ever been produced are rooted in stories that speak to the human imagination. The Lord Jesus used the art of story-telling very well in weaving his parables that contain some of his greatest teachings. In a postmodern world, we all should develop the art of story-telling. Many traditional African stories teach powerful ethical and moral lessons on love, generosity, peace, kindness, community cohesion, etc. Look at the following samples of stories from Africa:

Ajapa the Tortoise: Utley (2023) states that in the Yoruba folklore, the tortoise is seen as a trickster and is a frequent protagonist in Yoruba folktales. He is lazy and does not

want to work. When there is scarcity, he relies on deception and trickery to get food. He is greedy and does not share with other animals. Utley (2023) states that: “The tortoise also plays the role of the trickster in the folktales of the Kalabari in southeastern Nigeria, where he is named Ikaki. In Cameroon, east of Nigeria, the tortoise is named Ekaga”. In one story as Utley states, Ajapa stole many yams and was eventually banished from the community. Origin of Death in Urhobo culture: Urhobo tradition has it that when the earth got over-populated, human beings decided to send messengers to God to ask him what they should do. The dog and the toad were sent to God. It was the toad who return first from God to meet humans and told humans that God said, “he who dies should go home” (Orowhuru-kokpo). That became the traditional name by which the toad is known.

On the importance of stories, Achebe (1987) writes:

It is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story ...that saves our progeny (off-spring) from blundering like blindbeggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we own the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us (p.50).

African traditional stories serve as a guide and a moral compass for the future. Tuwe (2015) citing NgugiwaThiong'o and Utley indicates that: “The main lesson behind these oral African stories is to teach and impart principles of morality and provide youngsters with a sense of identity and belonging. The young people will learn valuable lessons about life” (p. 6). Tuwe writes further that the trickster story is common in Africa. This story uses animals with human characteristics to show wisdom. Through these trickster stories, human weakness and nature are revealed for human beings to know how to behave. Agatucci (2010) citing Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* writes that:

Once upon a time, she began, all the birds were invited to a feast in the sky, as Achebe renders the traditional Igbo folktale opening into English. The story explains a cause, origin, or reason for something--gives an 'etiological explanation...at the end' (Obiechina, "Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel")--in this case, for why the tortoise shell is 'not smooth.' The story dramatizes a moral: greedy Tortoise, 'full of cunning,' manages to trick the birds out of all the food at the feast, but for his selfishness he is punished. Tortoise falls from the sky and "His shell broke into pieces. In folktale worlds, such 'naughty,' but not "irredeemably" wicked characters, as Achebe describes Tortoise (qtd. in Baker and Draper 22), are often restored and/or reintegrated back into society: in this case, 'a great medicine-man in the neighbourhood' patches Tortoise's shell together again.

African stories are aimed at building humanistic values, reconstructing society, and creating peace in society. Stories are not just told for the fun of it. There is always a lesson embedded in every story. The stories are a way of socializing the child into the mores and ethics of society. They transform the minds of people, especially younger ones and thus enable them to know how to live and behave in society.

The Place of Story-Telling in a Secularistic World

Does story-telling have a place in a secular world? Secularism itself is a story. It is a story that if followed to its logical conclusion will throw the world into chaos and disorder. Secularism argues for absolute relativist ethics and everybody being the measure of truth. To a certain degree, secularism is not new. It is a revival of Protagoras' dictum: "Man is the measure of all things." African story-telling was not rooted in relativist ethics. There are communal and theistic values that African stories aimed to preserve and transmit to present and future generations. Story-telling was a medium to pass these values and beliefs. In Africa, stories were not just told for the purpose of entertainment or fun. It goes beyond that. Story-telling is an essential aspect of African religious cultures. Story-telling can help to enforce the values and mores that matter. It can inculcate in children, youths, and even adults the values that should pervade their lives. Pedagogy and teachings are very important in African societies. Values are important. Without sound moral values, society will break down and crumble.

Stories are containers and carriers of indigenous knowledge. This knowledge includes medical knowledge, spiritual knowledge, agricultural knowledge, ecological and environmental knowledge, etc. The place of indigenous knowledge in our world is indisputable. Indigenous knowledge has helped African people to navigate through generations to the present day. The right to indigenous knowledge is a well-established right. It should be safeguarded. The United Nations (2007) states that: "Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies, and visual as well as performing arts and literature" (p. 11). Story-telling is an essential aspect of African visual and performing arts and orality. African theatre, music, drama, plays, film, and movie channels such as African Magic and Nollywood should rise up to the challenges of promoting authentic African stories. In article 13 of the above declaration, the United Nations (2007) states further that: "Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons" (pp. 12-13). Africans should not allow non-African forms of knowledge to drain away their indigenous knowledge.

In order to re-instate the place of story-telling in Africa and its importance to the global community, there are obstacles that need to be combatted. These obstacles include globalization which tends to destroy indigenous cultures and values and that is why there is a big anti-globalization movement worldwide. The values of capitalism are often against the humanistic ideals of indigenous cultures. African stories build and foster

relationships among humans and with the natural world. Namfua (n.d) writes that:

African Village Storytelling is all about people and language. Talking and listening allow people to share and learn from each other. Good village storytelling is about relationships; it is about making connections between people. Village storytelling besides being the oldest form of entertainment, may well be the oldest 'method' people use to transfer culture and to discuss moral dilemmas. The rural areas of the developing world still abound in stories, hidden in people's heads and seldom told to strangers (p. 7).

Another obstacle to the continuity of the tradition of story-telling is a colonial educational system. In much of Africa, the educational curriculum is Eurocentric and Western-oriented. This ought to be corrected. The content of the curriculum in Africa should be more than 80% African-based indigenous knowledge. It is time to devote research, selection of project topics, class assignments, and academic papers in books and journals to African indigenous knowledge. There is need to recover the tradition of story-telling at moonlight in African villages more than ever before. Even in cities, parents and elders should devote time to gathering their family members to tell them stories and instil in them the ethical values from those stories. The media should be harnessed as a vital medium and resource to propagate African traditional stories. It is true that some television stations have devoted some space to tell African stories, but much more need to be done. African stories are not only for children or youths. It is for the entire society. More books need to be written promoting African stories. Much of what you may need to know from traditional Africa can be gotten from African stories.

There is no place for God or religion in secularism. There is no place for religious ethics in secularism, whereas African stories promote and propagate God and religious-based ethics. Man is not the measure of all things. Ethics must be communalistic, and not simply what solitary individuals agree on. If God is removed as the foundation of ethics as secularists desire, then ethics has no foundation. The paper does not deny that reason has a role in the making of things, but reason cannot be its own god or absolute reality. Reason can err, so it is important to continuously search for a metaphysical foundation for ethics. If followed to their logical conclusion, the secularist ethics promoted will plunge the world into all the evils previously listed above.

Just as one can use homilies, sermons, books, movies, films, journals, etc to teach and propagate ideas and messages, so also stories can be used to teach, instruct, and transmit lessons and messages about life. Take for instance the following story as told by Oamen in this paragraph. He narrates that there were two good friends, Aisiralemen (evil person) and Ekelekhomen (one who is not annoyed). Both of them were subsistence farmers who planted kola nut farms. When the farms produced, Ekelekhomen's farm yielded in abundance, his friend became envious and at night went and cut down the kola nuts. Ekelekhomen did not know it was his bosom friend who destroyed his kola nuts. He decided to go into animal farming and his friend also joined him. Ekelekhomen's goats became pregnant, but his friend did not. His friend became angry and killed all the goats

in one night. Ekelekhomen was a patient and loving person and never cursed anyone at the seeming failure of his project. During this period, some strangers came from another land inquiring that they wanted to buy goat. He told them his goats were dead. But the strangers replied that it is dead goats they wanted to buy. The strangers bought the dead goats and equally bought the dry kola nuts trees. Thus, Ekelekhomen became very wealthy and rich. In the meantime, his wicked friend had traveled. He used the money to build a magnificent house. When Aisiralemen returned home and saw the magnificent house of his friend, he fell down and died. A vital lesson from the story is that those who do evil will reap evil, and it is good to be of good character and shun envy and wickedness. African stories carry powerful lessons and are a good and viable vehicle of moral education and humanism. African literature, theater, music, dance, etc are now powerful means to tell African stories. These should be encouraged by all. There should be no university, school, or educational institution in Africa without an African theater, music, or performing Arts department or units.

This paper is not naïve or parochial. It does not in any way imply that every belief and practice in African culture found in stories should be uncritically appreciated. There are many African stories that promoted patriarchal values that degrade women, violate their human rights, promoted slavery, dictatorial leadership, human sacrifices, etc. Stories like these should be deconstructed and reconstructed. This does not in any way erode the power that African stories carry.

Conclusion

There is need to return to the art of story-telling. It is a vital antidote to secularist values. Story-telling held African and indigenous communities together. Amid the ravages caused by European invaders, slave dealers and other obstacles that African ancestors faced, stories provided principal means that empowered generations after generations to hold on and never to give up their cultures and values. For those who are Christians, the Judeo-Christian tradition is rooted in story-telling and memory. The Passover story gave hope to the Jewish people amid trials and tribulations. Traditional stories inspire, motivate, encourage and empower, and they should never be abandoned. Africans should never allow their traditional stories to die. Secularism is about beliefs and ideas of how the world should be organized and of how human beings should relate. This author is not an atheistic secularist. All who are anti-atheistic secularists should fight against the ideas they uphold and never allow them to take over the world.

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