

FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 09 | Autumn 2009

Title	The World of African Storytelling
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	09
Issue Date	Autumn 2009
Publication Date	12/12/2009
Editors	Lena Wanggren & Ally Crockford

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The World of African Storytelling

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My favorite introduction to a discussion of African storytelling is to recall a setting that Oyekan Owomoyela sketched out many years ago from his experience in the Yoruba city of Ibadan in western Nigeria. It is of a traditional family relaxing in their premises at the end of a hardworking day.

After the evening meal, the members of the family gather on a porch and if there is moonlight, the younger members gather in the courtyard to play games like hide and seek.

On the porch, the entertainment begins with riddles. What dines with an oba (paramount chief of a community) and leaves him to clear the dishes? A fly. What passes before the oba's palace without making obeisance? Rain flood. On its way to Oyo its face is towards Oyo, on its way from Oyo its face is still towards Oyo. What is it? A double-faced drum. After a few riddles, the tales begin (Owomoyela 264-265).

The stories told in these night-time family gatherings are mostly fables: some of them light-hearted ones about animals like the hare and the tortoise getting in and out of trouble, others about young girls who get caught in misguided love relationships, or else stories about ghosts and monsters lurking around the village and scaring stubborn and adventurous youths back to their senses. Anyone who has read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* would recall one or two of these fables, like the one about the Tortoise who tricks himself into a company of birds for a flight to a feast in heaven but falls to his grief when he betrays their trust. Such fables are usually addressed to the young children gathered before their parents and elders in these moonlit family settings, and are intended as object lessons about life and its risks and rewards.

There are, of course, African tales of more serious subjects and significance told in more mature circumstances, and I will come to those later on. For the moment, however, let me digress briefly and speak about the people who tell these stories. It has become necessary to draw attention to them because the old ethnological prejudice about the intellectual competence of "primitive" (by which was meant "illiterate") folk tended to suggest that anybody in the village could tell you a story, implying that storytelling did not require any special preparation; as I have indicated somewhere, this would amount to suggesting that anyone on the streets of New York could write a Broadway play! But we know today that to be able to tell stories, there were two different kinds of training: either you formed the habit of hanging around people with proven skills in the art, which would equip you with a modest level of competence, or you underwent a period of training under a professional expert in a specialized form of storytelling. It has been easy enough to collect stories from narrators in the first category. In the second category, however, belong experts like *griots* of old who served Mandinka kings and whose work is carried on today by modern-day counterparts earning their livelihood by performing for sundry clients and audiences. The published texts of these

professionals clearly reveal that storytelling at this level is work of intricate artistry that required years of focused and carefully guided training.

Beyond fables dealing with animals and their relationships, then, there are African tales about serious experiences in human life; the origins of a people's religious, cultural, or cosmological traditions; or wars between peoples led by men of unusual qualities and powers. Let me give a random selection of such stories out of my own fieldwork as well as from collections by other scholars.

Odogwu Okwuashi, an expert narrator from my part of Nigeria, used to tell me stories of "strong men" of olden times, as a way of making the point that men of today lack the boldness of men of bygone days. One of such men was Omezi of the village of Onicha-Ugbo, known for acts of extraordinary and unbridled arrogance. I quote from my book *Once Upon a Kingdom*:

On one occasion, [Omezi] had owed someone some money. When the man visited Omezi to demand payment, Omezi asked members of his household to build a fire. When the fire was crackling with [white] heat, Omezi called his creditor to come over and have a look. In the full gaze of the man, Omezi thrust his own hand into the fire and held it steadily while it burned; the frightened creditor abandoned the debt and took to his heels, imagining what Omezi would do to him if he would do so much to himself!

On another occasion, as Omezi was on his way to the village of Ubulu-Uku, eight stalwarts jumped out of the bush and blocked his path, threatening to put an end to his life. He simply burst out laughing, declaring that God had at last answered his urgent prayers. While his assailants were looking, Omezi brought out a machete, placed one of his fingers against a tree and cut it off; the eight men turned and fled, frightened at the thought of what a man who cut off his own finger would do to his enemies! (35)

A figure like Omezi in the above tales would be considered a "private" hero, in the sense that his extraordinary personality is dedicated to advancing his personal ego or serving his private interests. Most heroes we know in African oral tradition are, however, men who put their personal endowments—which are usually superhuman—to the service of their community in times of trial. A story I collected from Mr Charles "Boy" Simayi of Ubulu-Uku, in the same area from which the above story comes, presents an example of what we might call a "public" hero. Kings of Benin (*Obas*) have been dying one day after their coronation, so the kingdom announces an open contest for herbalists to come over and try their skills at curing the incumbent king; whoever fails is to be condemned as an impostor and beheaded. So Ezemu of Ubulu-Uku goes to Benin to offer his services, and passes the test. Having cured the king, he is offered a princess of the kingdom as reward for his work. On his way home, however, Ezemu is stopped by the grand commander of the Oba's forces (the *Ezomo*) from taking the princess with him, on the ground that she is too good for a mere chieftain from the backwoods of the kingdom. Demurring, Ezemu lets the general have his way; on getting home, however, he casts a spell that whisks the princess and her attendant from the palace right to his house in Ubulu-Uku. Without delay, the general persuades the Oba to declare war on Ubulu-Uku. In a protracted campaign, in which this little village defended by a handful of seven charmed hunters faces an entire imperial

army (itself aided by powerful sorceresses), Benin is finally brought to its knees and begs for peace and a redrawing of geographical boundaries with the Benin kingdom.

The story of Ezemu is only a sample of many legends that may be found in numerous societies across Africa, dealing with war between one community and another and the heroes that defend their people against the might of powerful enemies. The tales often have a basis of social or political history to them and may represent a crucial point of transition in a society's life. Given the often fantastical scale of operation of heroes in these encounters, the tales have been classified as "epics" which I have defined in my book, *The Epic in Africa* (1979), as follows: "An oral epic is fundamentally a tale about the fantastic deeds of a person or persons endowed with something more than human might and operating in something more than the normal human context and it is of significance in portraying some stage of the cultural or political development of a people. It is usually narrated or performed to the background of music by an unlettered singer working alone or with some assistance from a group of accompanists" (34). Among other African epics, we may cite the stories of Sunjata among the Mandinka, of Da Monzon among the Bambara, and of Silamaka and Poullourou among the Fulani in West Africa; of Akoma Mba among the Fang (Cameroon), of Mwindo and of Kahindo among the Banyanga (Congo); as well as some other epics that have been reported in northern and eastern Africa. It used to be argued that the epic was not a characteristic form of African oral literature. But intensive fieldwork and scholarly analysis since the 1970s has not only revealed a wealth of contrary evidence but has encouraged more intensive documentation and discussion of the genre in Africa.

I have stated that these tales often have a basis in a society's historical experience; but scholars have learnt over time to qualify their value for reconstruction of a society's history. This is because their evidence is fundamentally tied up with all kinds of partisan interest of a personal or political nature. The political nature of these interests is perhaps understandable, given that many of the tales concern conflicts between peoples and the cultural, ideological, or territorial claims underlying these conflicts. The story of the war between Benin and Ubulu-Uku cited above is one such instance of territorial issues in the relations between different ethnic groups.

But personal issues are just as evident in some of these tales. Another tale I collected from the narrator Simayi brings out an interesting dimension of this. Observing a certain pattern in several tales he had told me, I asked him if he had any tales in his collection in which he was a central character. When he finally grasped the point of my question, he told me a story about the experience of his village during the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970. Soldiers from a federal garrison stationed in Ogwashi-Uku, about five miles from Simayi's village of Ubulu-Uku, had brazenly made away with some cattle from Ubulu-Uku at a time when the community was preparing to honor its grand matron with the highest female title (*Ada*) in the land and needed some of the animals for ritual sacrifice on the occasion. Afraid of confronting the dreaded federal Nigerian army to demand the return of the cattle, the leaders of the village pleaded with Simayi to lead a delegation to the garrison commanders on such a mission.

Simayi had been approached because of his position as chief herbal doctor as well as member of the privy council of the village's paramount chief. In the story he proceeds to tell me, there are several of the qualities that characterize heroes of Simayi's other tales: seasoned wit, a steady nerve, and a courage and self-assurance that characterize a man backed by mystical

powers. Leading a handful of men to the federal military camp, he makes his case carefully and methodically to the commanders, and with such manful control of his words that he wins not only their hospitality but the willing surrender of the cattle he and his men have come for (Okpewho, *African Oral Literature* 183-192)..

Without any hint of physical confrontation, Simayi has acquitted himself before the dreaded soldiers no less daringly than heroes of his many tales. So we are inevitably led to ask a question not unlike those that historians have often asked about the accounts they collect: are these stories any better than a pack of lies? When we ask such questions, however, we should pause for a brief comparative reflection on material underlying written histories. How objective can we seriously expect any account to be, in which any person's or people's intimate interests are heavily invested—as, for instance, in the varying accounts of World War II by Allied and German historians? If Hayden White is right in stating that modern history is, in fundamental ways, a process of “selection and arrangement of data from unprocessed historical record in the interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an audience of a particular kind” (*Metahistory* 5), then we need see these oral testimonies as little more than raw materials of the kind from which some sort of objective history may sometime be made. Simayi may be excused his liberties with the “truth” because his stakes and his people's are closely bound in the history of the civil war, which probably justifies his raising his image to the extraordinary scale of the challenges they faced. “What is at play in these narratives,” as I have observed somewhere, “is not so much an abstract concept of truth as the right of the individual to review the facts of historical experience in the context of contemporary realities. In the process, he reinvents himself even as he redraws the outlines of his people's cultural history” (“Oral Tradition” 228).

Beyond tales with any basis in history, there are numerous stories told in Africa that endeavor to ponder the facts of human life, sometimes in naturalistic and sometimes in metaphysical terms. The story I cited earlier on from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, in which the Tortoise tricks a company of birds to lend him wings for a flight to a feast in heaven but is left to fall to his grief when they discover how gravely he cheated them, is clearly a playful naturalistic reflection on the fragmented pattern of the shell on a tortoise's back. For a deeper reflection on ethical and metaphysical issues of human existence, I would like to cite the following story from the Ijo of the Niger delta.

On a large field somewhere, the Creator God, whom the Ijo call Woyengi (Our Mother), sits on a chair with her feet on a huge Creation Stone. From a pile of mud on a table before her, she creates human beings. On creating each person, she breathes life into them and asks them to make any number of choices: what gender they wish to be; what kind of life they want to live on earth; what resources they desire (children, riches, power, etc.); and how they wish to die in the end. They all get what they ask for. Among one group of newly created people are two women: Ogboinba, who asks for unrivaled mystical powers, and another woman who desires rich and famous children. These two women choose to be born in the same town, where they later marry and live for a long time as friends.

Ogboinba's friend has a string of prosperous children, but Ogboinba has none at all. Growing dissatisfied with her lot, she sets out to return to God and demand a change of fate. Along her way she meets a succession of temporal figures—kings in their realms; powerful gods; a Sea; and the Tortoise—who offer hospitality but try to dissuade her from her misguided quest. As she bids goodbye to each of these hosts, Ogboinba demands a fight with them and, on

defeating them with her unequaled powers, kills them and appropriates their powers into her kit; some of them she revives when their wives beg for their lives.

She finally reaches the supreme God Woyengi, who has just completed her job of creation and is about to ascend to heaven. Ogboinba rushes at her and challenges her to a contest of powers. But Woyengi, who has perceived all that passed, commands Ogboinba to return all powers she appropriated on her way back to their owners. Now powerless, in fear and shame, Ogboinba flees into the eyes of a pregnant woman she meets on her way. But Woyengi, following her decree that pregnant women should never be harmed, spares Ogboinba. She remains in hiding to this day, "not only in the eyes of pregnant women but in the eyes of men and children as well. So the person that looks out at you when you look into somebody's eyes is Ogboinba" (cited in Okpewho, *Myth in Africa* 137-138).

Like the story of the Tortoise whose misguided abuse of birds results in the fragmented pattern of his shell, the Ogboinba story is one of a large class of explanatory tales ("myths") to be found across several African societies. Clearly, the latter story has a much deeper ontological and cultural interest than the former. For instance, the presence of a Creator God molding human beings out of mud and breathing life into them teases comparison with the figure in the biblical Genesis and, possibly, some questions about diffusionist relationships between the two metaphysical traditions. But, as we know from past efforts, any attempt to trace a historical connection between two societies can only be conjectural at best and may verge on suggestions of prejudice, racial or otherwise. But there is some significance to the cultural twist whereby the creator figure in the Ijo story is female rather than male in the Jewish, clearly mirroring the matriarchal traditions of the one as against the patriarchal outlook of the other. Equally significant is the idea of a pre-temporal negotiation of "fate" in the Ijo world, no doubt indicating a more humanist outlook to individual life than in the Judaeo-Christian tradition where that element is, for all practical purposes, beyond the pale of human choice. Finally, the explanatory statement about the pupil offers a naturalistic resolution to the moral problem posed by the story, of the risks inherent in an irrational or inordinate pursuit of power in human relations. In an earlier analysis of this tale (*Myth in Africa* 138-153), I also explore a sizeable body of ethnographic evidence from Ijo history and culture to interrogate gender issues raised by the story.

Most other tales in the African oral tradition do not, like the Ogboinba one, offer a ready-made explanation but leave their resolution more in the hands of the audience. One class of such narratives is called the "dilemma" tale, best known from a useful collection by William Bascom (*African Dilemma Tales*). One such tale, made famous in the African diaspora by the Trinidad calypso artist Lord Kitchener's recording of it some half-century ago, goes briefly like this: A man goes on a boat journey with his mother and his wife, in the course of which a storm arises and topples the boat. While the man can swim, neither his mother nor his wife can; he can only save one of the two women, so, which should he save? Although Kitchener states his choice in the song, traditional performances of such a tale usually end with the narrator instigating a lively controversy among the audience.

Lord Kitchener has had recourse to an African tale type because Africans who endured the fateful experience of enslavement several centuries ago retained memory of their tale traditions and passed them on to their descendants. The more interesting thing about these tales is that in adjusting to life in western Atlantic societies, they have had to adopt strategies of survival

imposed on them by contingent social forces. A rather interesting example of this phenomenon is offered by one tale type purporting to explain the origin of death in the world, a sample of which I recorded thirty-two years ago from my part of Nigeria. Briefly, mankind is so troubled by the constant loss of its members through death that it addresses a plea for immortality through the dutiful dog to God. God grants the plea, and sends the dog back to mankind with the news. But the dog spends so much time on its way peeing on one spot or object after another, and sniffing each on its return, that mankind, anxious about the fate of its plea, sends a similar message to God through the chameleon, a much slower animal. On getting the same message through yet another messenger, God becomes angry that mankind is trifling with him. So he reverses his earlier offer: every human being dies when the time is due.

I have found two interesting variations to motifs in this tale here in the African diaspora. In one, a tale from Guadeloupe, Cat and Dog have an argument. Cat holds that once a person dies, that's the end of the matter; Dog argues, however, that when people die, they can rise again. The two animals decide to take their dispute to God. While Dog schemes to slow down Cat's journey by laying bits of butter along his way, Cat devises a similar scheme by placing bones along Dog's path. Cat carefully avoids the distractions laid on his path by Dog, but Dog is unable to resist the temptation to eat the bones put in his way by Cat. So Cat succeeds in reaching God first, and receives God's endorsement of his case; when Dog finally gets to God, he finds he is too late. Hence human beings die when their time is due. The second variant is an African American tale reported in a collection by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps about a father dog out on a walk with his puppy child:

They walked from place to place, and at each stop the old dog smelled an object (a garbage can, a fireplug, and so on), and the young one followed suit. Finally, they encountered a "she-dog," which the old dog smelled, nuzzled, and "jumped up on her and knocked himself off a piece." So the young one did the same. Later, when the old dog was quizzing the young one on what he has learned, the latter admitted he was a little perplexed about things. "What's the idea of being out in the world? I don't see any rhyme or reason to it." To which the old one replied, "Well son, my only advice is anything in this world you can't smell, eat, or make love to, piss on it" (see Abrahams, *Afro-American Folktales* 7).

Clearly, these Afro-diasporic tales are in fundamental ways linked with the African one, although their bonds have been disarticulated by the vagaries of time and place. They are at least united by the motif of the wayward dog located in three peculiar circumstances. While the African tale attempts a plain, naturalistic inquiry into a common human fate, its diasporic variants have been influenced by the competitive atmosphere of the slave society in which they grew. In the Guadeloupean tale the old African inquiry endures, but it is now set within a contest that transforms what was a troubled plea into a frenzied game of one-upmanship. In the African American tale, however, we are down to the naked motif which lends a rebel spirit the cutting edge of sass: here, the tale helps the enslaved Africans to take some sort of moral revenge on a system with which they have a score to settle.

The survival of the African oral narrative tradition is equally guaranteed by its appropriation into traditions of modern creativity on both sides of the Atlantic. Amos Tutuola's grotesque romances led the way brilliantly in incorporating the folk narrative into modern literature despite shortcomings in his use of the English language, and writers after him have

made equally remarkable contributions. Part of the spirit of resistance to colonialism in Africa was the determination by its writers that though they were going to use the new medium of communication (English, French, etc.) imposed by European imperialism, they were never going to turn their backs on the literary traditions of their land. Chinua Achebe was obviously among the first writers to interlace his fiction with African folktales and tale motifs. Oral narratives are equally the foundations of fictions like Taban lo Liyong's *Fixions and Other Stories* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari*, while Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* is built on the well known picaresque structure of Amos Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard* and the motif of the *abiku* (a child who repeatedly dies and is reborn). In several works of fiction and drama, Wole Soyinka has exploited the Ogun myth among the Yoruba in examining the predicament of the postcolonial African state, and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* is a history of Africa's colonial woes told in a collective oral narrative voice. Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa* uses the folktale type—notably found in Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard*—of the young woman who, insistent on marrying a man of her own choice, ends up with a husband who brings her to grief.

Writers from the African diaspora have also looked to their African folk heritage for inspiration. Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* is an anthropologist's treasure trove of African-inspired folk narratives related by her southern informants. In *The Last of the African Kings* the Guadeloupean writer Maryse Conde, who lived for a while in West Africa, deploys the voice of the *griot* in exploring the de-centered cultural sensibility of the New World African. In his *Folklore in New World Black Fiction*, Chiji Akoma examines representative fictions by four Afro-diasporic writers—Guyanese Roy Heath and Wilson Harris and African Americans Jean Toomer and Toni Morrison—to show the intersection in them of African oral narrative aesthetics and New World literary sensibility. But perhaps there may be no greater evidence of the intricate survival of the African oral narrative sensibility in New World black consciousness than in two tales of return to Africa that have achieved classic status in our times: Alex Haley's *Roots*, about the reconstitution of an African family from scattered narrative sources, and Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, in which a poor St Lucian fisherman undertakes a metaphysical journey to rediscover his identity and family name (“Afolabe”) in Yoruba society.

I have frequently used the word “tradition” in reference to the sources from which these writers draw, and I think it is only fair that I draw attention to some of the unwarranted prejudice to which the word has often been exposed, and hopefully restore the sheer vitality of the material that has inspired the creativity of the writers. The word “tradition” has often come to us in the form of narrative texts from which their defining “oral” qualities have been eliminated in the editorial process; just as often, the modern writers appropriating them are understood to have “refined” the material to suit them to the needs of a “sophisticated” cultural outlook.

To correct this unfortunate impression, let me return to the initial paragraph of this paper, where I have invoked the atmosphere of a storytelling event in a traditional African family compound. That these tales are told in the familial environment of elders and youths does not compromise the quality of the artistic intelligence required in telling them or the intellectual awareness needed to engage them. Indeed, it is precisely because they require a high level of mental preparation that the narratives are prefaced by riddles designed to test and sharpen the minds of the audience. The mental preparation is equally necessary because the images and dramas of the tales, though mostly set in fictive realms, are intended to be translated into the

conditions of daily life. Traditional storytelling is thus no trifling engagement nor does it define a primitive sensibility.

The prejudice, as I have suggested above, is largely traceable to the fact that most of the tales that have been put to print are a poor reflection of the circumstances in which they were told. An oral narrative performance in a traditional African setting is normally a very lively event. There is constant interaction between narrator and audience, with the latter responding emotionally and sometimes challenging the choices—of details as well as moves—made by the former at appropriate points of the performance. The narrator is in turn driven to adopt various paralinguistic techniques—dramatic, kinesthetic, etc.—to supplement the narrative text of the tale and thus record an intricate artistic achievement. The best edition of an African tale that reveals the near-operatic dimensions of a lively performance is *The Ozidi Saga*, an epic tale from the Ijo of Nigeria's delta recorded and translated by the acclaimed poet-playwright John Pepper Clark[-Bekederemo]. In more recent times, thanks to the ethnopoetic revolution in the recording and study of oral traditions, scholars are giving greater attention to the need to represent storytelling in its proper form. As we come to know more about storytelling and the ways it addresses the world in which we live, we are becoming better disposed to respect the art, whether in traditional or modern settings, as a necessary ingredient in education and in life.

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