

Continuity and Discontinuity in Traditional African Narrative

Ethics¹

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Abstract

There is much agreement today about the varied and important human functions of the act of narrating, and there is a long history of research behind storytelling. This paper joins the discussion from the perspective of the relation between ethics and narrative in the context of West African storytelling. The paper sketches the theory of narrative ethics generally and then focuses on West African narrative ethics. The main thesis concerns the existence of two parallel narratives of and about West Africa or the whole of Africa for that matter. There is what the paper calls the “traditional” narrative, which as a result of historical experiences of domination and colonialism has been progressively replaced by a “conventional” narrative. The paper argues that becoming the story about and by Africans, the conventional narrative engendered a loss of cultural memory among many African peoples. This is seen as a discontinuity of the “traditional” African (self-reflexive) narrative. Given the major role of narrative in Africa and the significance of narrative for ethics, the paper suggests that understanding the nature of the discontinuity of West African narrative can provide a paradigm for explaining some ethical challenges in the sub-region.

Keywords: narrative ethics, identity, West African narrative, otherness

1. Introduction

This paper sketches briefly the important connection between ethics and narrative, which in recent times has become a valuable approach to the study of ethics. The stories we tell about ourselves, and those that others tell about us are so important in the formation of our identity and in what we do with and by virtue of that identity. Similar to the effects on an individual who loses memory, there are many ways in which the loss of an authentic communal narrative can affect group identity and ethics. The paper suggests, therefore, that given the importance of narrative and the power of the word among West African communities, we can postulate that understanding the discontinuity of narrative will help to explain some of the ethical challenges in West Africa. In order to make a case for this thesis, the paper subdivides into three main parts. The first explores the theory of narrative ethics generally, shows how West African narrative ethics fits into and differs from the general concept of narrative ethics, and concludes with a summary of some important characteristics and centrality of “traditional” West African narrative.

On the one hand, “traditional narrative” is used in this discussion to refer to the “story” of Africans about Africans before the experience of slavery and colonialism through the north-south contact. Traditional narrative is conceived here as a narrative act based on an intra-cultural structure, which had the capacity to generate authentic identities of Africans. Apart from referring to the quality of the narrative, the description “traditional narrative” is also used as a metaphor of periodization associated with the politics of temporality behind the manner in which African identities have been constructed in history (Appiah 2003).

On the other hand, the “conventional narrative” refers to the story of others about Africans. It describes mainly the stories of missionaries, anthropologists and colonialists, which were generally based on a politics of race. Using an

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evolutionary taxonomy, the conventional narrative created inter-cultural images of Africanness that were different from what Africans thought of themselves. By the pick of colonialism (and by the power of otherness that colonialism stood for), the “conventional” had overcome the “traditional” narrative. The former would now not only be handed on from one generation to the other as the norm, but it would also be internalized and used to a great extent by Africans at the expense of their own narrative.

The nature and role of “traditional” West African narrative is, therefore, deliberately highlighted in the first part so as to bring to greater relief the effects of the displacement of the “traditional” with a “conventional” narrative. This displacement occurred through what has been called a “politics of otherness” (Kanneh 1998). Using a combination of critical race theory (Lincoln and Guba 2000; Prasad 2005; Schwandt 2007) and a post-colonial or deconstructionist framework (Lyotard 1982; 1988; Appiah 1992; Bhabha 1994; La Capra 1991), the second part attempts to explain how Africans have internalized the conventional story, often using it by default, and so perpetrating a cultural psychology that is the fruit of historical and structural conditioning. Such conditioning, evidenced in the “... learned restrictions, compulsions and dictates of habit” (Higgs 2001:49), in the view of this discussion, is tantamount to a discontinuity of narrative, which has significant ethical implications in West Africa. The conclusion briefly evaluates the paper and makes suggestions for further research. Generally, the paper is a plea for the African to engage in a hermeneutic of suspicion (Ricouer 1977; Tracy 1987) of all superimposed identities that are carried unconsciously in contemporary narrative about Africa. Such a hermeneutic also demands a radical intra-cultural critique in the form of a “rereading of our African memory” (Ela 1988:xvi).

2. Narrative Ethics and Conventional Ethics

Interest in the study of ethics from the narrative perspective is increasing significantly (Allen, 1993; McAdams, 1993; Newton, 1995; Barbieri, 1998; Assmann, 1999; Bujo, 2000; Gorospe, 2007; Toker, 2010). Narrative ethics concerns itself with questions of identity and morality, and arises from the belief that the stories we tell about ourselves, or those others tell about us strongly influence how we identify ourselves, and what we do with our “storied selves” (McAdams, 1993: 11). The ethical question is a core aspect of personal as well as cultural identity, since identity is attained through processes of thought, of remembering, and hoping; it consists ultimately of imaginations and actions in view of the ideals of self and in-group. Identity is possible only in a world of self- and other-experience, and of physical as well as ‘mythical’ connection to the world around us.

Narrative ethics argues that these processes are brought together and enacted in the narrative act. Thus McAdams understands myth to mean “that story which we compose (consciously or unconsciously) to pull together the divergent and sometimes confusing aspects of our lives in order to have meaning and a holistic picture” (1993: 12-13). The concern of narrative ethicists, then, is not just about the “moral lessons” we draw from stories, but about the act of “narrating”, or what Zachary Adam Newton calls “Saying.” The act of narrating brings alive the concrete contours of morality, since narrative enacts an inter-subjective relation, which profoundly taxes the speaker, the hearer, and the text. By engaging in narrative a person cannot but engage in self-disclosure – a kind of permanent or continuous “self-referencing” (Newton, 1995: 4). When truth is conceived as the fruit of inter-subjective relationship, then narrative is important in ethical considerations, since it presents a significant capacity to carry “enduring human truths” and because we come to know who we are by “creating a heroic story of the self” (McAdams, 11).

Narrative ethics consequently departs from conventional ways of doing ethics, which pay little attention to contextuality, historicity and inter-subjectivity. Conventional approaches tend to focus on meta-ethical discourse, which in turn relies on a metaphysical anthropology and theories of responsibility. This makes conventional ethics strong on the side of the formal structure of ethics, but weak on the side of content. Being more ‘propositional’ (Newton, 5) conventional methods tend to be distanced from daily experiences of people, from their pertinent desires and feelings, and from the act of “Saying” (to continue with Newton’s terminology) through which people engage themselves as moral agents. It was in reaction to this overemphasis on form and the desire for a more fruitful investigation of the tension between form and content in ethics that narrative ethics developed (Allen, 1993:32). Accordingly, Barbieri is right to observe that the proponents of narrative ethics sought in different ways “to broaden the horizons of contemporary ethics beyond its characteristic concern with moral principles, obligations and criteria for decision making” (1998: 361).

Scholars have made contributions to this quest from varied points of departure including philosophy (Bakhtin 1990; Levinas 1969), religious studies and ethics (Nussbaum 1989; Lindbeck 1984; Frei 1993; McIntyre 1990; Hauerwas 1981), psychology (McAdams 1993; Sarbin 1986; Buss and Cantor 1989), and English literature and narratology

(Newton 1995; Cavell 1988; de Man 1983). While coming from different angles, offering criticisms and counter criticisms of each other, narrative ethicists have on the whole repeatedly underscored the fact “ [T]hat narrative is central, both for individuals and social wholes, to the project of recollection and hence to the foundation of identity” (Allen, 29).

But how is this project of recollection achieved? From the perspective of an identity theory in psychology, McAdams suggests that narrative can serve as the foundation of identity, since it is constitutive of humanness. That is to say that narrative pulls together and organizes “different kinds of information,” and at the same time serves as the vehicle for expressing the internal experience of self and environment to others (McAdams, 27). For example, we need narrative to explain an aspect of our lives, an experience, or an event, telling why and how we arrived at one decision or another and justify our actions. Similarly, intimate conversation is impossible unless it is carried in narrative. Thus McAdams cites some scholars (Howard 1989; Landau 1984; Sarbin 1986) to confirm the growing belief that “the human mind is first and foremost a vehicle for storytelling (McAdams 28). Like the plot of a story, human beings persistently piece together the sporadic episodes of life into an organic whole, thus [conferring] upon the world and our conduct in it a storied quality” (McAdams 27). Citing psychologist Brunner’s theory (Brunner 1990) that human understanding divides into paradigmatic and narrative modes, McAdams shows how narrative is the most natural way for humans to explain events as actions over time. This perspective of time answers for human fascination for narrative (McAdams 30).

3. ‘Traditional’ West African Narrative and the Concept of Narrative Ethics

As pointed out previously, in considering West-African narrative, we can identify two distinct types. There is on the one hand the ‘intra-cultural’ or ‘traditional’ narrative (the story of Africans about themselves) and on the other hand the ‘inter-cultural’ or ‘conventional’ narrative (the narrative of others about Africans). The former can be conveniently subdivided into ‘non-formal’ and ‘formal’ categories. The non-formal could be roughly defined to include narratives used as lullabies, for folk entertainment, for passing on practical wisdom, or ‘propositional’ moral education, and teaching social skills. Typically non-formal narrative is performed under informal, familial setting. The formal narratives have a more communal function, since they bear, as it were, the spirit of the group and so define in symbol and myth those fundamental elements that constitute the group as a people. Such narratives include the community saga, migration narratives, narratives of political institutions and authority, narratives about the origins and destiny of the group. In what follows, we shall further discuss the traditional narrative and later take up the discussion of the conventional narrative in the section on continuity and discontinuity.

The sketchy delineation of the fundamental aspects of narrative ethics as expressed by Western scholars referenced above serves to outline what can be taken as the ‘genus’ (or universal characteristics) of narrative and how narrative relates to ethics. At the same time this outline serves as a film for tracing the specific difference of West-African narrative in relation to indigenous West-African ethics. We shall first discuss briefly how West African narrative shares in the general characteristics of narrative ethics and then consider those aspects that could be said to constitute the specific difference of West African narrative.

The relation of West African narrative to the general belief about narrative, ethics and identity can be illustrated (for our purposes here) in three ways; namely, narrative as a source of identity, the allegorical connection between narrative and ethics and the strong connection between personality and narrative. First, the fact that West African narrative, like other narratives, is important for the formation of individual as well as communal identity has been sufficiently captured by scholars as applicable to most African communities (Doudou Diéne 2000; Rosenthal 1998; Gyekye 1997; Nyameti 1990). Doudou Diéne does not only theorize about the fact, but he also engages in his (self-) identification in narrative:

Like most Africans, particularly those from Western Africa, I come from an oral tradition where the Word has a central place. ... We have great priestesses ... and we also have our poets. They preserve and sing the memories of each family. ... They recite my ancestors’ names, recall their great deeds and refer as well to the spirits. These troubadours, like Western writers, represent the word as memory, the word as history, the word as archive (Doudou 11).

Doudou’s observation in this excerpt is verifiable in many West-African communities in a number of ways. We can offer a few examples here. First, we can observe that in some communities, self-introduction often takes the form of a genealogy, or what might be called a clan-reflexive narrative. Among some Guans, Akans and Ewes of Ghana, for example, it is customary in communities that still enjoy considerable “face to face interaction” (Assimeng 1989:49-

50) for an elderly person to enquire about the identity of a child who had just greeted them, if they did not know the child. On such occasions, the question to ask is not the ‘*cogito*’ or self-reflexive type of question expressed in the interrogative “what is your name?” Rather, the question is formulated in a ‘*narrative*’ or group-reflexive inquiry, “whose child are you”? Once the child mentions the name of one of their parents, the elder follows with a narrative of descent, situating the child within a lineage that reaches back a couple of generations or more, and defines the extended family and clan relations to which the child belongs. Not only individuals carry a narrative identity, but also social groups. We can observe, therefore, that there are few ceremonies in West Africa without a narrative component. Different festivals of harvest, migration, victory at war, enstoolment of chiefs, rites of transition, are all situated in the context of “ritualized narrative.” These ritualized narratives recount how it came about that the group is what it is among all others. The narratives form a core element of group memory and establish the locus of group identity.

The second illustration of how West African narrative shares in the characteristic of allegorical relation to ethics can be found in some research that is being done on West African poetry and folklore. An example is *Akpalu fe hawo* (Seshie 1991), which manifests some classical allegorical characteristics of narrative. Newton (1996:7) points to the allegorical relation between narrative and ethics when he observes that “[I]n narrative, the narrator assumes the role of “various allegorical personae” such as “mystic catalyst, redemptive scapegoat, teacher, sage, apostle, or ... skeptic.” Similarly, in *Akpalu fe hawo*, Akpalu assumes several personae. Initially he cuts a figure comparable to an Old Testament prophet running away from his vocation, and then he comes forth like a traditional priest, a sojourner, a victim of circumstances lamenting his plight, and a freedom fighter repudiating the powers that be. These personae emerge through his themes about displacement or ‘wandering’, childlessness, Christianity, lack of marriage, and death. But the main point to note is the fact that the personae Akpalu assumes in his songs or poems go beyond the literary allegory to assume ontological status by virtue of the ritual through which he was commissioned as a troubadour. Akpalu’s cultural milieu believed that a person did not just become a musician or poet by merit, but that it was a divine mystical investiture for which initiation through ritual was mandatory. Thus Akpalu is claimed to have received the commission to ‘travel’ as a wandering troubadour from the oracle during his initiation.

The third illustration concerns the strong connection between personality or personhood and narrative in West African narrative. Such connection is documented in a joint sociological study of *Mamiwater*, a religious cult devoted to a river/sea divinity, among the Ewes carried out by O’Brien Wicker, Asare Opoku, Azasu and others (O’Brien Wicker and Asare Opoku 2007). In this *Mamiwater* study, sociologist Kathleen O’Brien Wicker discusses the narrative or the personal “(hi)story” of the priest, Togbi Dawuso Dofe. O’Brien cites Judy Rosenthal who has observed that “[E]we Personhood is a travel narrative” (Rosenthal 1998:18), thereby suggesting the centrality of narrative in the personal consciousness of Togbi Dawuso. Throughout this study, one is not left in any doubt that Togbe Dawuso incarnates his narrative, not only on an allegorical, but also on a mystical – ontological level. His narrative forms a microcosm of the collective “travel narrative” of the Ewe people as a whole (O’Brien 2007:1). In Togbe Dofe’s wandering in search of “a physical and spiritual home/land” he is at once the priest, the ‘political’ head, an artist of sculpture and dance, “a great leader, visionary and a skillful operator” (Nukunya in O’Brien and Asare 2007:x). These illustrations allow us to infer, at least imaginatively, that West African narrative consistently entails processes of identity formation with great significance for personhood and ethics.

Yet, while sharing this capacity for identity formation with other narratives across the cultural divide, West African narrative ethics distinguishes itself in a way that is better captured in Assmann’s (1992: 15-25) terms. Though he was not writing with direct reference to West African narrative, the main thrust of Assmann’s study touches core elements of African narrative ethics. First, Assmann is of the view that collective and individual identities are achievable when certain socio-cultural elements like ethos, tradition, communal saga and communal remembrance function together. There is some reason to assume that West African narrative is an embodiment of the socio-cultural elements that Assmann has in view, because it is replete with expressions of tradition, religion, ethos and the worldview of the group.

Next, Assmann observes that it is not sufficient for the socio-cultural elements necessary for identity formation to function as a unit. They must also be symbolically ratified through religious rites. Finally, Assmann argues, that, once so religiously ratified, the socio-cultural elements embodied in narrative acquire the force of obligation, fulfilling two important functions. First, they bind the individual to the community, and second, they join the past of the community to its present. Assmann describes the former function as the *normative* and the latter as the *narrative* dimensions of how a people’s narrative forms collective and individual identity. Assmann’s views provide a good

framework for studying West African folklore as traditional narrative ethics, while taking cognizance of a further nuance in how West African narrative functions. The accent lies in the fact that the division of functions that Assmann alludes to unite in African narrative, given that the normative and narrative dimensions of the formation of individual and collective identity overlap in African narrative.

In the 'African' cosmology envisaged in the narrative of Achebe (1959), for example, this unity of function is portrayed to arise automatically from the religio-spacial environment in which reality is perceived in Africa. In that 'world' the community functioned not only as an inter-subjective system, but also as a "cosmological category" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010:46, citing Okpewho 2003:3) with ontological relevance that went beyond the world of the living and those in it to include the spirit world and the yet unborn (Nyameti 1990; Doudou 2000; Magesa 1997).

4. Summary of the Concept of West African Narrative in Relation to Ethics

A summary of the main characteristics of West-African narrative in relation to ethics will include, first, the centrality of oral tradition or "verbalism." Narrative is not just the story it contains, but also a performative act, and the most ordinary of ways for enacting the strong cultural belief in the power of the word as the medium for transporting reality and meaning.

Second, to the extent that narrative in African tradition is a ritualized narration, West-African narrative ethics can be said to be at once a religious experience or "spirituality" (in the sense of a way of life). It takes up the hearers as well as the narrator into the important and all present space of ceremony and celebration, leaving little room for distinguishing between the narrative and normative perspectives of the reality carried by the narrative. Narration, especially in formal contexts, is frequently interpolated with singing, episodes of ecstasy by the narrator or a member of their audience (Doudou 2000: 13). In some cases, for example, in narrations connected with rituals of puberty or chieftaincy, a language understood only by the initiate (a ritual or secrete language) might be used. Even on less formal occasions, such as the telling of *Ananse stories* to children in the silhouettes of the fireside at night, the narrator or a listener will interrupt the narration by introducing an appropriate song at the peak of suspense and engage all present in singing, rhythmic clapping and stamping of feet or other forms of body-movement in preparation for the denouement. The ecstatic episodes are not only mystical experiences, but could also be interpreted as manifestations of the possessive or habitual character of narration, similar to what Newton (1995: 4) calls "narrative passion."

Third, West-African narrative imposes a spiral of intersubjective and trans-human linkages in a four fold chain of spirit beings, ancestry, continuity in community and identity. Doudou's example here is the naming of children after their ancestors as a practice that is meant to continue the past of the tribe into the present and give the child his or her identity (Doudou 2000:12; Appiah 1992:182). But a more common example in Ghana is the libatory prayer in which this four-fold linkage is specifically the point of the ritual narrative that composes the prayer. Libatory prayer is a typical instance of Ghanaian narrative that depicts how the past is linked to the present and the future, and how the present is meaningful only in the light of the past.

Fourth, West-African narrative is meaningful and efficacious in a given "narrative space," namely, a community that shares the socio-cultural elements embodied in the narrative. We can conveniently say that West African narrative ethics entails a cosmology. It presupposes a worldview in which its subjects are engaged. The other main specification of West-African narrative is its semiotic character, which is directly related to the four characteristics described above. West African narration is usually a combination of sound, speech and movement, which function together to give narrative the capacity to determine the rules of meaning, the actual meaning and the extra-linguistic communication of the storied reality.

Relative to the above characteristics of West African narrative, we can also summarize the discussion on some of the ways in which West African narrative ethics relates to and differs from the general concept of *narrative ethics*. In doing so we shall follow the lead of Newton (1995:7ff). As a literalist, Newton finds the essence of the phrase "narrative ethics" in its grammatical structure – because it describes the "reciprocity" between narrative on the one hand and ethics on the other; namely, that ethical discourse depends on narrative structures while also attributing to narrative discourse some kind of ethical status. But in West African narrative, a more compelling element that undergirds the logical relation between ethics and narrative is their shared foundation of mystic and "communal" psychology. It would seem that normativity of narrative in "traditional" West Africa depends significantly on the

extent to which it is capable of holding its narrators and hearers in the cosmology it presumes. This cosmology in turn helps in important ways to shape the collective and individual identity formed through narrative.

5. Continuity and Discontinuity

Is there “A Dynamic Continuity between Traditions”, as the title of Doudou’s (2000) essay suggests? Is it the intra-cultural narrative that helps to define the “African” identity in the twenty-first century? For Doudou these questions are to be answered emphatically in the positive. This makes Doudou a good representative of one half of the divide in the debate on the formation and evolution of “African identity.” The second half of the divide argues from a post-colonial analytic perspective that the situation is not as simple as suggested by the tradition Doudou represents. Critical race theorists like Bhabha (1994), Fabian (1983), Onoge (in Jestel 1988), and Appiah (1992), consider that it would have been desirable to believe that narrative ethics, in its traditional West African variant enjoys the fullness of the ideal and romantic state depicted in the tradition of Doudou. Yet, for several reasons, such a conviction does not sit well anymore.

The first reason is the importance critical theory attaches to a hermeneutic of suspicion. Being critical of the role of traditional narratives is not a denial of the importance of narrative in Africa, particularly in relation to questions of identity and ethics. The suspicion is rather directed towards the subtle disregard for the “politics of otherness” that affects the communal remembrance of many African communities, which in turn makes the “traditional” construction of African identity problematic. In the light of a critical theoretical framework, which seeks to reveal how narration as a formative act of personhood and identity has turned into a political act of power and domination, an uncritical projection of the value of the traditional narrative will inadvertently submit to the “illusion of race,” which it seeks to abandon (Appiah 1992:28-72). The fallacy arises from the fact that such projection (see Doudou) is oblivious of and runs parallel to other historical experiences of Africans that have induced the creation of African identities. Yet, as Kanneh (1998:vii) points out, the history of the “African past” plays an important role in the construction of African identities, and it is important to pay attention to the meanings of the histories associated with “African storied selves.”

The second reason, which is closely connected to the first, is the fact that the identities composed in (both traditional and conventional) African narratives are understandable only as a construct that is meaningful within specific historical contexts. Appiah (2003) has identified three main contexts for understanding African identities. The first is the period preceding the European – African contact. This period ties in with the traditional or intra-cultural narrative, because the narrative was an authentic story that held the storyteller and their traditions together. This period was followed by European domination of Africa, which we can describe as the period of the conventional or inter-cultural narrative. During this period, the traditional narrative was overruled and replaced with a narrative of otherness. The effect of such displacement (deconstruction) of narrative was a separation of Africans from their narrative, issuing the subsequent third period of self-alienation. This last period spreads from the time just before, during and after independence (Appiah 2003:58-62). By this time, it was evident that ‘a story about the story of Africa’ had become the myth from which to derive “African identities.”

This new myth was no continuation of the intra-cultural tradition. It did not only separate the story-teller of the intra-cultural tradition from their story, but also succeeded in bequeathing the African with a narrative that was not their own. From then on the story of and about Africans would be a kind of parody, a story detached from the lived experience of Africans, but told, all the same, over and over again from generation to generation. Appiah (2000:96; 2003:60) illustrates this conventional African narrative by pointing out the corruption of indigenous names into Western names, where “Mensah”, for example, becomes “Menson” or the corruption of ‘Antorey Appiah’ to ‘Anthony Appiah’ (Appiah 1992:158). Other examples are the authoritarian structure of social relations that mimic the colonial structure, the misplaced socio-political priorities and the less than heroic story that Africans compose about themselves. A particular illustration of interest here is the reference to the letter of gratitude from the Ghana Council of Churches to the “Mother Churches” during the centenary celebrations of missionary work in Ghana:

“These kind people [the missionaries] carried our church from her infancy to almost manhood (sic). They sacrificed their lives ... to bring *our benighted race* (my emphasis) the light of the Gospel and civilization” (Parsons 1963:18; also cited in Appiah 2003:61).

This type of self-denigration undertaken by Africans on behalf of Africans cannot be lightly dismissed as mere circumstance of history, nor will it be true to say that Africans no longer think of themselves in this paradigm of the

politics of otherness. We can test this proposition by collecting certain popular slogans in Ghana, which excuse some forms of negativity, because “we are in Africa.” One would often hear statements such as “the African stomach fears no germs,” or “the African time” as an excuse for lateness. Wiredu (1980:13) has pointed to the perennial difficulty of Ghanaian mechanics to prefer the rough estimation of measurements and so provide poor mechanical services when they work of themselves. Yet the same mechanic would use appropriate measuring instruments and produce an excellent job when working under the supervision of “a European supervisor.” Wiredu was using this example to illustrate what he sees as the unanalytic or unscientific and, hence, “traditional mode of understanding, utilizing, and controlling external nature and of interpreting the place of man within it” (Wiredu, 11). Unfortunately, in offering this illustration, Wiredu himself fell into the spiral of a non-critical theory of race, observing that the “(traditional) mode is common ... to the whole African race”(Wiredu, 11). Such a view makes the “traditional mode” a function of modernity, defining the “typically African” in a frame of the politics of temporality (Kanneh 1998). It seems better to read Wiredu’s illustration as part of an altered state of a cultural psychology that allows the African to excuse negativity as a differential for specifying the African identity. Appiah (2003:60) likens this narrative of self-denigration metaphorically to the amnesic condition of Thompson, the main character of Oliver Sack’s, *The man who mistook his wife for a hat, and other clinical tales* (1987:108ff, cf Allen 1993:26). So bad was Thompson’s amnesia that he had no sense of time any more. Lacking a past left him with neither a consciousness of the present, nor an awareness of self or the other.

It is in the light of this altered cultural psychology that current critical theory seeks to expose how the present of African identity is constructed by “histories connected with the domination, imagination and interpretation of Africa; ... histories that have constructed a range of political and theoretical parameters around race” (Kanneh 1998:1-2; Appiah 1992:3-72; Mazrui 1986:96). The question is whether intra-cultural West African narrative is still capable of forming African identities that are not completely trapped in “the curious intersection” of tradition and modernity, or of the dialectic of otherness, since “the movement between African and European contexts reveals how Africa and its identities have been crucially informed by the impact of knowledges and interests from outside the continent” (Kanneh, 1).

The third reason for being suspicious of a continuity of narrative is the fact that the dialectic of otherness referred to above poses as a pretentious encryption of African identities. Kanneh (1998:3-4) expresses this idea of pretentious encryption when, in view of the politics of otherness, he argues that African history is no more than the “dominating narrative destiny, intent on overriding and writing over what is ... essentially African.” In this dialectic, discontinuity is experienced as “narrative uncertainty” (Kanneh, 3-4), superimposed normativity (Appiah in La Capra 1991), and as a displaced cosmology (Asamoah-Gyadu 2010). Naturally, then, the conventional narrative of and about Africa creates a problem of interpretation, since every encrypted text must be interpreted, if it should be meaningful. Referring to Naipaul’s novel (1979), *A bend in the river*, Kanneh explains why colonial discourses that have an effect on a modern understanding of African reality all culminate up in “a problem of cultural interpretation.” The problem arises since the external narrative about Africa forcefully establishes an implicit dialogue between “(evolutionary) times and places” (Kanneh, 1) and interprets ‘African otherness’ as a tempo-spatial reality to be salvaged from dying out because of its tardiness on the time axis. Kanneh illustrates the point by referring to one of Naipaul’s characters, Father Huisman, the embodiment of the European re-writing of “what is essentially African.” Huisman’s approach to reconstructing the ‘Africa’ that was at the verge of dying was to collect African artifacts and set them up in his museum on the European school compound and interpret what ‘real Africa’ is from these ‘African masks’ (Kanneh, 6).

6. Ethical and Moral Implications of the Discontinuity in African Narrative

As noted earlier in connection with Newton’s theory (1995:4ff), narrative ethics is not so much about “propositional” morality. It is more about the “positional,” ethical processes of self- and other-consciousness, where daily experiences of people, their pertinent desires and feelings, their aspirations for transformation and fulfillment are enacted through a “heroic story.” The ethical import of such a story will depend on its ability to establish “narrative inter-subjectivity” through processes of recollection. Such inter-subjective relations will be a “permanent self-referencing” because of narrative’s capacity for identity formation. Yet a narration that has ethical implications cannot efface the distinction of narrator, hearer and text as distinct components constitutive of the act of “Saying” (Newton, 4ff). As Kanneh (1998:6) observes, however, the cultural history of Africa does not allow Africans to engage in a self-referencing narration. The politics of otherness tends to incorporate the narrator, the interlocutor and

the text into one and the same agent. This agent was initially, the “Western-other,” only to be mimicked later by the African as a result of many years of imbibing the lesson that the “Other” was the norm. Since the narrator had become their own cultural interlocutor, a dysfunction between interpretation and observation occurred. Instead of “a transcendent narrative penetrating knowingly into pre-colonial African societies,” we rather have in post-colonial African societies an experience of narrative transfixation, and narcissism, in which the European narrative order functions as the Medusa of an African narrative. In this way narrative discontinuity induces moral discontinuity, since the question of identity in narrative ceases to be an ethical one and becomes one of power. The new question is not “what is my identity,” but “how can I be like the other so as to be acceptable?” Here narrative ethics collapses into the power of identity.

The ethical implication of the discontinuity of narrative therefore finds accurate expression through the imagery Kanneh uses in referencing similar notions of Naipual; namely, the metaphor that whenever Africans pose as narrators, they also pose as victims of their narration (cf. Kanneh, 4-5). Appiah (2000:132ff; 2003:61-63) has identified political leadership in Africa as a good illustration of how Africans experience themselves as victims of their internalized identity. In doing so, he suggests that a good portion of the African experience of political dictatorships, oppression, and in some cases, general dysfunction may be interpreted from a psychological perspective of narrative ethics to be partly the result of a unconscious expression of an internalized colonial identity in the form of a “habit of (self) humiliation.”

7. Review and Suggestions for Further Research

According to David Tracy (1987:25), “all theory of interpretation – like all theory itself – is an interpretation as good or as bad as its ability to illuminate the problems we discover or invent and its ability to increase the possibility of good action. Good theory, after all, is both an abstraction from, and an enrichment of, our concrete experience.” Given the growing research interest in West African narrative, a contribution to that research from the perspective of narrative ethics is a complementary effort. By adopting the critical race theory, the discussion has attempted to reveal the tacit but real parallel progression of the traditional and conventional narratives in the formation and definition of African identities. Research into West African narrative could itself be trapped in the spiral of the politics of otherness, unless conscious efforts are made to identify how the conventional narrative surreptitiously modulates the motivation of West African narrative research. Above all, this discussion obtains its significance from the overwhelming consensus on the importance of narrative among African communities in the formation of communal as well as individual identity. Given the significance of the identity question in ethics, it makes sense to want to explain pertinent ethical challenges in West Africa by way of building a robust theory that is reliable for testing the correlation between the superimposed identity of otherness and ethical or rather non-ethical practices.

Further research may therefore want to conduct a proper categorization of West African narratives. The question of continuity and discontinuity can be studied from a broader and interdisciplinary perspective that incorporates fieldwork so as to reduce the weakness of abstract theorizing. Consequent upon such fieldwork, further research can aim at transforming the dichotomous paradigm of reading West African narrative from the two separate angles of the traditional versus conventional forms, and identify liminal spaces in which Africans are successfully deconstructing the conventional narrative and instituting traditional forms that are less trapped in the politics of temporality. In the words of Kanneh, the direction of further research envisaged here will be to explore possibilities of resolving the identity dilemma of “Africa (as) split between a dying, traditional past which is at once hugely intrusive and obsolete, and a banal modernity which is obsessed with interpreting an ‘idea’ of African identity” (Kanneh 1998:6).

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