THE TRAJECTORY OF PAN-AFRICANISM IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: AN APPRAISAL OF FOLKTALES AND OTHER TALES IN AFRICAN ORAL LITERATURE

BY

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Abstract

Pan-Africanism is a tenacious concept for a unified nation that has existed as a political movement until the 21st century where there has been a conspicuous artistic variation of which African oral literary artists have creatively used African oral literature to foster African solidarity. Hitherto, a dearth still remains in critical researches on the significance of the Pan-African tradition in African literature and how its manifestation are striving to implement the objectives of Pan-Africanism through this literary cannon. For this research, formalism is adopted as theoretical framework for the appraisal of African folktales. The folktale genre in African oral literature is purposively chosen because of its canonical example as a tangible evidence of the collaborative energies of contemporary artists and audience across Africa and its diaspora. The methods of analysis were critical and analytical. The trickster character in African folktales is chosen for its Pan-African coverage. Each trickster in many African communities is intertwined to its scene so that it can function in its meaning beyond the character roles ascribed to it as the protagonist of the text in order to teach morals embedded in the tale. Conversely, the tale emerges as a cultural material that projects the ideas of Pan-Africanism and authenticates the African sense of struggle, unity, survival and triumph. This paper therefore recommends the use of African folktales to teach morals and foster the idea of Africanism in African communities.

Keywords: *Pan-Africanism, Folktale, Unity, Culture, Advocacy.*

Introduction

Pan-Africanism has been espoused as one tenacious philosophical concept in the studies and discourses of African culture, politics and hence, should be understood as a quest for Africa's self-understanding and self-knowledge through historical narratives. Pan-Africanism accepted the task of rolling back the frontiers of colonialism in Africa. This task assumed that the content and meaning of political independence would advance the dignity of Africa and Africans. Pan-Africanism is both a cultural and political force to globally unite Africans in the quest for liberation. This very essence is captured by Abdul-Raheem (1996) in his *Pan-Africanism: Politics, Economy and Social Change in the Twenty-First Century* thus:

Pan-Africanism can be said to have its origins in the struggles of the African people against enslavement and colonisation and this struggle may be traced back to the first resistance on slave ship – rebellions and colonial uprisings and the "back to African movements of the nineteenth century (p.22).

It is expedient to note that African literature evolved to counter European misconceptions of Africa as the heart of darkness – a place of no culture, history, literature and a backward continent. Thereafter, "oral literature emerged as a creative work of art that portends high merit and has the creative use of imagination in preliterate societies" (Ohia 2024, p.21).

The most cogent need for oral literature is the exposition it affords to the rich indigenous tradition that nurtured the refreshing vigorous creative of modern African writers, performers and the participating audience to project the African oral traditions in literature.

Through various practices, stories and performances, the younger generation in any African society is familiarised with the customs, traditions, and rituals of the past generation. This practice conscientises Africans in their various countries to assimilate the African values thereby engendering Pan-Africanism. Many mythological stories have a way of teaching morals, ethnics and manners to the younger ones. It would seem that the study of the cultural achievements in Africa that make us humans should hold a pride of place in our value system. Such cultural achievements should include the use of folktales for the education of the younger ones in order to inculcate the right value system in them as

the leaders of tomorrow. African oral literature to a large extent de-enslaves Africans, especially the younger generation from European enslavement.

Pan-Africanism came as a result of the slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean as Africans yearned for their ancestral homelands and freedom. This conceptual ideology is considered to have its origins in the struggle against colonisalism and is based on the belief that unity is imperative to the economic, social and political progress of all Africans. Langley (1993) puts it in his *Pan-Africanism and Nationalism in West Africa* that "Pan-Africanism was an attempt to create a sense of brotherhood and collaboration among all peoples of African descent whether they lived inside or outside Africa" (p.375). The concept of Pan-Africanism predates the idea to politically unite African peoples. Williams (2005) in "The Pan-African movement" validates that "in recent times, Pan-Africanism is a global movement to unite Africa and its people against racial oppression and exploitation associated with European hegemony" (p.175). Also, Drake (1993), an acclaimed Pan-Africanist, in his *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* defines Pan-Africanism as "a worldwide black consciousness that has a psychological reserve that can be mobilised to achieved local ends as well as aid others as the liberation process continues" (p.451).

In a more specific description, the core of this movement is the understanding that all peoples of African descent have common interests and should be unified. Pan-Africanism as a movement started among intellectuals of African descent in North America and the Caribbean as a political calling, for the unification of all Africans into a single African state; a state which those in the African Diaspora can return. Originally,, this initiative started off as the African Association (AA), a political movement in 1897 by Henry Sylvester Williams, a Trinidadian born by immigrant parents in Barbados who was then training in London to become a Barrister. The intention of the African association was to investigate and publicise the situation of black in the British Empire having thought of a political movement that would draw representative of the African race from all parts of the world.

The aim was the encourage unity and establish friendly bonds among Africans and also promote and protect the interest of all subjects of African descents in British colonies and other geographical regions especially in Africa. The scope was broadened to cover the treatment of native roles under European and American rule. In the early twentieth century, it was then decided to convert the African Association to Pan-African Association as contained in *the journal of Pan-African Studies*, the four cardinal values as stated were:

To secure civil and political rights for Africans and their descendants throughout the world, to encourage friendly relations between the Caucasian and African roles, to encourage African people everywhere in educational, industrial and commercial institutions, to ameliorate the condition of the oppressed Negros in all parts of the world (p.107).

To achieve these aims, Henry Sylvester Williams endeavoured to get peoples of black descent interested in the Pan-African Association and having them form local associations. He produced a journal, *The Pan-African* with the motto "liberty and light". Western educated people from Africa and the Diaspora were certainly interested in writing to express what they expressed as a common struggle against racial exploitation. The Pan-African Association extended upon the political advocacy of the African Association, which took towards building a Pan-African movement. The Pan-African Association helped to establish branches throughout Africa, The Caribbean and the United States. The scopes were broadened to cover the treatment of native races under European and American rule.

Pan-Africanism has consistently existed as a political movement and the early Pan-Africans engaged in political activities, speeches, activisms and other facets of human endeavour to drive their advocacy. In this dispensation, contemporary African oral artists in Africa and its Diaspora have enthusiastically adapted the idea of Pan-Africanism in their works and have developed aesthetic ideologies to stir strong emotions and powerful messages using their rendition/performance, language and other creative art forms to foster unity among African peoples, recover African culture and redefine African identity in utter negation of the European misconception of Africa and her value.

To this end, this paper focuses on an exploration of the central ideas and sensibilities of the movement, adopted and expressed in African literature, especially folktales of the African peoples to foreground literature as a repository of art which embodies oral performances. This study also aims at highlighting Pan-Africanist ideas through the performances of the selected folktales.

Theoretical Framework

Relying on Viktor Shklousky's concept of De-familiarisation in formalism to import the purpose of art, which is a sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. This paper interrogates the trajectory of Pan-Africanism in African literature, appraising folktales in African oral literature. The paper also uses Narratology by Vladimir Propp as its primary theoretical framework, while strands of Structural Anthropology were equally adopted for further analysis of the folktales.

Folktales function as a hindsight foresighting African history and part of the African folktales as the fairytale. Zipes' (2012) *The Oxford Companion to Fairytales* provides insight into the history, themes and cultural significance of fairytales from around the world. It features entries on various fairytale motifs, authors, and critical interpretations, offering a valuable resource for scholars and enthusiasts of children's literature. It supplies a wealth of information and provides readers with a detailed exploration of the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped the evolution of fairytales and their relationship with folktales overtime. Drawing on his extensive expertise in folklore studies, Zipes situates fairytales within broader socio-cultural frameworks, tracing their origins from oral traditions to literary adaptations through meticulous research analysis.

In a similar vein, Ohia (2025) drawing inference from Ogba folktales notes; "in Ogba communities of Rivers State, Nigeria, the connection between folktales/fairies and the natural environment in fairytales highlights the Ogba people's dependence on and respect for the forces of nature" (p.72).

The abundance of songs in African folktales speaks volumes of African rich cultural heritage especially oral literature. The dearth of scholarship on African oral literature notwithstanding, the trajectory of Pan-Africanism resonates in all facets of Africans early existence. The abundance of songs emanates from the fact that it is a natural tendency of man to express thoughts and feelings, be they of joy, sorrow, wonder and fascination in songs, for instance, in Ogba – an African ethnic nation, as it is in many African communities, people sing when they fight, work, love, marry, hate, when a child is born and indeed when someone dies. What more can explain the concept of Pan-Africanism than these?

Ohia (2025) posits: "song in Africa, especially in Ogbaland is marked out by its shortness and its repetitive nature" (p.95).

African tale with trickster motif and universal transformation as a representation of Pan-Africanism

The Tortoise and Spider are trickster characters in African tale which have symbolic universal representation across the African continent. The tales having the Tortoise and Spider as trickster characters refer concretely to the ideas of Pan-Africanism, unification and solidarity. The paper focuses on an exploration of these central ideas of Pan-Africanism in the tales with animal trickster characters. It engages in a critical discourse and analysis of tales which involve relevant and valid innuendos

employed to suggest the ideals of Pan-Africanism. The Tortoise and Spider are regarded round cultural symbols of Pan-Africanism in Africa as is evident in African oral tales (folktales).

The story of the Tortoise and Spider as symbolic trickster characters is retold in a simpler way. It re-imagines the Tortoise tale and Spider tale such that, people across African cultures can picture themselves in the narrative through the lens of the characters and view their lives from an African historical perspective, this is due to the fact that the Tortoise or Spider story is ultimately an African story. The story is allegorically recreated, incorporating the ideals of Pan-Africanism which is the spinal cord of the African continent. The tale discusses the history of Africa and the potential of the African race using the Tortoise and Spider – trickster characters as a metaphor for the western civilisation and culture though in a fictional form.

The inability of the white culture to eclipse the black culture speaks volumes and emphasises on the fact that Africa did not evolve from colonialism. The folktales offer glimpses of the historical phases Africa has been through and what it can become using the series of events in the life of the Tortoise and Spider and how other characters survived their tricks. It is also possible to recreate the animal characters with human identity, human feelings and human names. An apt example is Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*. The folktale is an innovative and educative form of storytelling in Africa with the performer playing multiple roles of guidance, lead-singer in the folktale songs, possessing leadership roles like matriarch, patriarch, motherly and fatherly qualities.

Pan-African Aesthetics in African Oral Traditions

Oral traditions form an integral part of the culture of any group of people. They are also the beliefs and customs which define a community or a people's lifestyle that dictates their code of conduct. Oral traditions also define Pan-Africanism in a way as they are verbally transmitted in uniformity in the various African communities. The invention of the print media has not eroded the oral literature; for the inability to get everything in print due to illiteracy and poverty has necessitated the oral transmission of the customs, beliefs and expectations of a race to the young by the elders of a community. Inferentially, therefore oral traditions embody the people's total way of life which invariably is their literature. It is the aggregate of customs, beliefs and practices that were not originally committed to writing but contributed to the cultural continuity of a social group and helped to shape its view.

This cuts across the boundaries of countries in the African continent. Oral literature, as a multifaceted aspect of cultural heritage, serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also a vital tool for preserving cultural knowledge and social values. Oral literature as a Pan-African literature plays an essential role in the transmission of historical knowledge, moral codes, and cultural practices in the African society using the folktale as a vehicle. Ohia (2021) views folktales as "the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of the culture and it encompasses all knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, feelings and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms through words of mouth" (p.56). Many folktales open with an opening formula which foregrounds a prelude to the main narrative while some are interspersed with songs.

Some of the stories inform on the universal connection on which life is built, an age-long philosophy of the African tales. The African continent functions as a system of belief. The narrator takes responsibility to explain this ancestral philosophy to the audience believing that by so doing, the audience has to understand that in creating harmony rather than diversity in the human world, the underlying divinity in the continuity of life would be eternal. The narrator/lead-singer takes the verse while the refrain is taken by the audience to create a balance in the song which is in an antiphonal pattern. Let us illustrate with the story of the Tortoise and the birds in the sky.

Verse

Tortoise: Let everybody take a name.

I am all of you

All the birds take their names

The host arrives with food for his guests

The food is for all of you.

So Tortoise consumes all the food alone.

Refrain

Birds: Tortoise, return our feathers that you borrowed

All the feathers are returned

So Tortoise sends a message

To place all soft materials outside

Messenger misinforms his people

Hard objects are placed outside

Tortoise crash-lands and shatters his shell

That is why Tortoise has a cracked shell.

The tale is an inspirational message, a caution to all. In the verse, the essence of unity is expressed as a fundamental element that secures hence the birds lend their feathers to Tortoise to facilitate his flight to the sky. This speaks volumes that individual potentials like that of Tortoise fail. No one succeeds in a quest for his purpose alone; rather, unitary forces can propel a good result in the circle of life. The refrain of the folktale song is a call on people to have a rethink and embrace unity rather than individually and how this basic aspect of life is pivotal to the manifestation of any purpose. In the story, Tortoise is made to have a sense of who he is and this answers the question of his future, assuring him that he cannot succeed alone. It tells Tortoise that he is not power and divine and together with the rest of the birds in the sky and in collaboration with them there is a great chance of success. The story is the affirmation and guidelines for Tortoise's journey to discovering his limited potentials.

Oral Literature (Folktales) as a Tool for African Unity

At different times, oral narratives/tales in African society have been used by Africans to establish and authenticate societal realities and experiences in the African continent. Tales in various forms stand out as means by which Africans handled and solved serious experiences as well as other problems that bedevilled the African societies. Many folktales, myths, legends and proverbs for instance use characters that are supernatural in nature and also behave like human beings with great powers and influences. For instance, children are through the tales taught the importance of keeping secrets like the story of the talking skull, etc. Many of these oral narratives, no matter how they are perceived in these modern times continue to create a world view, which appeals to the artistic, moral and psychological being of the traditional African man. And of course the basic functions of these oral genres of literature are still there and will continue to be there throughout communities and countries in the African continent.

In the tale of the talking skull in Africa, the skull came back to life and existed separate from the body. At a certain point in time, the skull lived in a community as human, adopting human nature and lifestyle. A time came when the skull decided to marry and he married a beautiful girl in the community who had rejected many suitors. At the expiration of the skulls' sojourn on earth, he took his bride for a journey and there and then he spoke of his earthly existence and his intention to return to his abode in the beyond. The bride was stunned and left with no option than to die and follow her husband. This didactic tale is used to educate children on morals and as tool to release off pent-up emotions. In other words, they are used to provide psychological release from restrictions imposed on the individual by self/the society or his/her culture. Some of the genres are used to provide opportunities for people to talk about some kinds of behaviour that the society prohibits them from indulging in. it is expedient to state that the African society as expressed in its oral tradition (oral literature) abhors in its entirety the rejection of suitors by a spinster except in rare cases of family sickness, outcast, or that the suitor belongs to a family whose ancestors are objects for sacrifice to the deities and other extreme cases of theft history, witchcraft and wizardry. Through the use of folktales and songs for instance, emotional expression and thought that are hidden through fear can be expressed. Tales often act as criticism and social protest, while providing a psychological release. Africans use oral literature (folktales) to advocate/encourage unity and togetherness irrespective of tribe, religion and many other defining factors in society. In fact, several genres of African oral literature are artistic communication of the people who are concerned with the relationship of individual creativity to the collective order of the people. These aspects of the people's life are dynamic and effective, and cannot go undocumented. It is worthy of note to know that traditionally, in African society cooperation is encouraged and life achievements were based on unity. In fact members of different communities did things together like building, farming, trading among others, they helped each other when one was absent without expecting any payment in return.

Folktales are used to portray how one can identify oneself and the community to exhibit the society's belief systems that make sense to life. They are used in Africa to give a sense of identity to children. Africans in common tell stories that depict communal relationship, sense of collective responsibility for the general well-being of the community or social binding which all help to identify who one is. A tale or a song which contains some fundamental elements of being and societal belonging are told and sung for emphasis. They not only entertain but also teach the need to be proud of one's background and root. For instance, the African (Ogba) tale "why the crab has no head" has been used several times

by African narrators to caution the young ones about the circle of friends they keep to call on them to be humble as they grow without any negative influence from peer group. In some instances, through adaptation, African writers in the print medium adopt the use of skillful management of fantasy to achieve a heightened sense of creativity in the young audience.

Achebe himself is not above this as witnessed in the pall beginning of *The Drum:*

Long, long ago, when the world was young, all the animals lived in their families in one country. In those days there were not many tortoises as there are today but only one tortoise, *mbe*… (Achebe 1985, p.28).

The flute though in the same key-signature, has by contrast a more energetic and a more arresting opening:

Long, long ago, there was a man who had two wives. The senior wife had many children but the other had only one son. One day, as the season of the rains draw near, the man and his family set out on their farm… (Achebe 1985, p.56).

In Africa, tales are used to entertain and teach children moral lessons of the society they live in. They usually feature animals, people, fairies and reflect the past. Folktales are told by parents, grandparents, elders and others mostly in the local dialects in all African communities to teach good manners to the upcoming generation. The African folktales play significant role in shaping the communities' understanding of their cycle of life and death. The Pan-Africanism in the tales is that through reciting them, African peoples pass down their beliefs, values and experiences generally. They provide comfort and solace to those grieving, helping them to cope and find meaning in life and death. Therefore, a tale is an interrelated concept of art of literature that connects with traditional beliefs, customs, stories and practices passed down through generations within a people or culture throughout the African continent.

Chinua Achebe shows the importance of African oral literature in his consistent incorporation of myths and folktales in his novels, exposing community values in both content and form. For instance, the tale about the earth and sky in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* serves as cross-cultural themes in the novels with continental resonance. This validates the concept of Pan-Africanism. Achebe conceives of his writings as allegories, which teach moral lessons derived from right ideals of human conducts while showcasing the conflict between ethical standards of life and evil conducts. He shows how folklore acts as verbal shorthand in communication in his works.

In like manner, Jaja (1992) in his article "myths in African concept of reality" views myths as "constructs meant to interpret reality which portrays the African way of thinking and serves as vehicles for preserving and transmitting valued knowledge of philosophical and moral truths" (p.68). Legends are something distant from myths. They are stories about famous heroes or heroines of the past. Supernatural beings might show up, but they are not the main characters. The stories may be epic in scope, but they do not involve events as grand as the destruction or creation of worlds. The stories of the Trojan and Odysseus for instance, are non-African legends. African legends comprise the Oduduwa story (Yoruba), Oguaro story (Ogba), the Ogiso and Igodomigo stories (Benin), Ekwensu story (Igbo), etc. All these legends thrive in the various regions in Nigeria as larger collection of stories that are generally regarded to have same order and consistency.

Also, like myths, people of the past genuinely believed some legends. This is because legends often have a quasi-historical basis, though it might be very faint. Some legends are very much based on facts even if the details are untrue. This speaks volumes of the trajectory of Pan-Africanism in legends as oral tale in African oral literature. The point is, despite these embellishments, legends served a purpose and were meant to in some way reflect the genuine past. They are perceived in this way in the African continent. Some of the oral tales explain the African traditional religion. Mota (2009) notes that "African traditional religion remains the only religion indigenous to Africans". This may be the reason he writes: "we need to explain the word "traditional" (p.69). For this purpose, many scholars subscribe to "African Traditional Religion" instead of African Religion. This is because the word "traditional" helps scholars to distinguish the religion from other religions that have existed in Africa for centuries, like Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Zorasterism and others. The African Traditional Religion is highly rooted in African Oral Literature.

We cannot easily separate African Traditional Religion from oral literature. Many African oral tales (folktales) are rendered, speaking of African religious practices, especially the proponents of the African Traditional Religion and their adherents. The observable commonality is that most of them do not have a written Holy text for references. Therefore, it is different for any westerner or non-African to have a piece of in-depth knowledge about them because their beliefs and practices have not been canonised as was the case with the Bible when the council of Nicaea met under the auspices of the Roman Emperor Constantine 1 to initiate the writing of the scriptures. It is also difficult for Africans living in the Diaspora to bequeath the religious traditions to their offspring due to lack of scriptures.

However, overtime, the mastery of the oral practices has created unity of purpose for Africans worldwide. The religion has one major feature, that is, as Africans way of life and Africans' Modus Operandi are inextricably intertwined with their religions.

The only slight distinction one can notice is between the more religious and the less religious individuals in terms of the frequency of their visits to the shrines and temples, or lack thereof, to consult with the diviners, perform rituals, or transmit messages to the ancestor. In so far as these traits exist in African Traditional Religion, their oral literature still sticks to mind. These oral kinds of literature come in different forms of oral traditions in African religion. There are many forms of oral pieces of literature used in African Traditional Religion among these are but not limited to Storytelling.

Africans are rooted in oral cultures and traditions; therefore they have admired good stories and storytellers. Since ancient times, storytelling in African culture has been a way of passing on traditions, codes of behaviour, as well as maintaining social order and this to a large extent has created Pan-Africanism – the unity of Africans in diversity. In times past, writing was not developed in Africa, but there were ways for Africans to transmit their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. The Africans utilised various forms of art, myths, ceremonies and storytelling. The tradition of African storytelling is one of the most ancient in African culture and this has brought unity to varied cultures in the continent.

Conclusion

Africans oral literature as an art is dynamic. It is able to be adapted to any form according to the needs of the society. African oral artists have adapted the ideology of the early activists of Pan-Africanism and eventually integrated to an advocacy for Pan-Africanism. African literature in general and oral literature in particular is multifaceted in its utility and it is now regarded as cultural materials to globally create black bonds and such is reflected in folktales. African folktales are successful in fostering solidarity among Africans to express Pan-African imagination, project African cultural heritage and create a safe space for Africans to be expressive. The evidence of this success is in the growing genre of Pan-African oral tale.

Recommendations

Orality persists in oral literature (folktale); however, oral literature can move across boundaries of the immediate cultural environment to get to other parts of the world. The tortoise tale exemplified in this paper is useful, in the first instance to the immediate indigenous culture and environment of Africa;

and globally relevant to the prose of the world. Therefore, there should be a conscious effort to de-emphasise euro-centric criticism and blend it with African literature generally to move on with the trend of globalisation. African oral literature should be reconstructed and deconstructed to conform to the formal rules of prose-narrative. To achieve this would involve an extensive research. Onuekwusi (2017) notes that "more than any other genre of oral literature, the prose-narratives fulfil the cardinal function of literature namely entertainment, education, information" (p.75). Obviously too, a revitalisation of African cultural heritage is necessary, government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) should collaborate to provide grants for such an endeavour. This would require collection, collation and preservation of data. Documentation of the African oral tales should involve celluloid, video and print since these technologies are available. If these recommendations are adopted, Pan-Africanism in African literature would be accessible to scholars; and they will improve people's knowledge of the oral art and contribute immensely towards further research in African oral literature and other world literatures, because of their enduring capacity and relevance to humanity.

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