

FOLKLORE AND THE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY REALITIES: THE CASE OF OKU ORAL NARRATIVES

Frida Menkan Mbunda- Nekang
Heads & Department of English
University of Buea,
Cameroon

The term folklore was coined by William Thoms. Alan Dundes says when William Thoms coined the term folklore in England in 1846, the folk, were considered the illiterate peasantry of a given region. He says the term ‘folk’ can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language, or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own” (19). Ben-Amos says ‘lore’ encompasses any willed, individual, creative expression, artistic communication in small groups (2).

Folklorists study forms of knowledge and expressions of culture that are transmitted from one generation to the next by word of mouth or by example. Folklore is concerned with popular culture in the present as well as in the past. Folklore according to Dundes and others includes forms such as epics, myths, legends, fairytales, fables, proverbs, riddles, songs, jokes, insults, toasts and nursery rhymes, street vendors’ cries and prayers. Games, symbols, quilt designs, and festivals are non-verbal forms of folklore (1-2).

Folklore is a shared story which has been repeated and has undergone variations through its existence and as William R. Bascom rightly points out, “no group of people, however remote or however simple their technology, has ever been discovered which does not employ some form of folklore” (26). Oral narratives like other forms of folklore embody and express the culture and history of the society, as well as the people's philosophy of life.

The first and enduring medium for exchange of folklore in Oku is storytelling. Elders tell stories to children who in their time would tell them to the younger generation and the cycle continues. This is enthralling for the storyteller often adds his or her own views to the story and because of this capability, the story evolves and spreads taking on a different persona. As to the origins of folklore, Bascom theorizes that any story must be invented by some individual, and it is either accepted or rejected by the group because it does or does not fill a need. Acceptance or rejection of an item is also contingent on its compatibility “with the accepted patterns and traditions of folklore of a culture as a whole” (29).

Though past folklorists as Mary Magoulick in *The History of Folklore* maintains, focused on salvaging texts in order to understand the past and sometimes to shape the present, (<http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/history.htm>) they as Richard Dorson points out, ‘were not especially history minded, but preferred to examine folk materials by category, such as

folktale, folksong, proverb and riddle, rather than by historical period' (12-13) or examining their role in the interpretation of history and contemporary. However, from the nineteen sixties as Ben-Amos maintains:

They were no longer content with merely collecting, documenting, classifying, and cataloguing information, but focus upon the present realities of cultural forms. They started focusing upon the relationship of individual creativity to the collective order. They were now concerned with aesthetic and expressive aspects of culture and the people and societies that make and respond to creative arts.

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In line with this new perspective, this paper aims at examining how individuals and communities conceptualize social processes in the form of narratives with leading characters, plot structures and time boundaries and the extent to which these narratives help the community to make sense of or interpret various occurrences in their lives. This study examines the relationship between the stories the people tell and their social problems and political events in their lives and environments. We will also look at what sorts of precipitating events encourage different kinds of stories to be told, stories perhaps not possible in the past. To do this, this work attempts to answer question such as: what kinds of stories are told? What do protagonists want the audience to know and what kind of information is absent or glossed over? How do people cast themselves in the stories they tell and why? Which individuals and groups can be identified as major players, and how are these characters portrayed? What sort of precipitating events encourage different kinds of stories to be told? How do popular cultural myths and history shape personal stories? What stories are told about social problems and political events and the environment? The taxonomy used in this paper is borrowed from Scott Littleton, who advocates a two dimensional classificatory scheme me based on (1) the extent to which a narrative is or is not based upon objectively determine facts or scientifically accepted hypothesis and (2) the extent to which it does not express ideals that are central to the magico-religious beliefs and ideology of the people that tell it (21). Narratives based upon objectively determine facts are known as legend. Khashim Tala defines legends as stories that 'tell us about people, who really lived; their origins, genealogies, migrations, wars, exploits and political victories. In short, they tell us the history of a people (107). Those that express ideals that are central to the magico-religious beliefs and ideology of the people and are not based on scientifically accepted hypothesis are know as myths. Chinua Achebe in *Morning Yet on creation Day* says 'myths are created by men to explain the problems and mysteries of life and death, his attempt to make sense of the bewildering complexities of existence (35). Okpewho views myths as affirmations, symbolic statements that reflect thought, devices for mediating contradictions and oppositions, forms of explanations and consciously contrive ideologies (45-66a). The narratives used in this paper, whether they are myths (tale of supernatural character), legends (tales of historical characters) or folktales (tales with humans and animals as characters) are all considered as myths because they are forms of fiction so are non-referential stories.

The Study Area: The narratives for this study are taken from Oku Sub Division which forms the second largest fondom in The Bui Division of the North- West Province of the Republic of Cameroon. Oku occupies a stretch of land lying approximately between latitude 6°40 and 6°50 north and longitude 10° 40 and 10°50 East (Ngwa 6). The fondom is made up of thirty three villages with a population of about a hundred thousand inhabitants. It is bounded on

the north by Noni sub division, on the west by Boyo division, on the south by Ngoketunjia division and on the East by Kumbo. Oku falls on the geographical region known as the central Cameroon high-lands –a volcanic zone that runs across the country with an average height of four thousand feet above sea level (Eyongetah and Brain 4). An example of these high lands is Mount Oku or Mount Kilum, which is about seven thousand feet above sea level. The slope of this mountain is forested and there are trees like pagara rubescence, which are used for producing xylophones and other musical instruments. The lone species of the bird bannaman-bannerman's tauraco and Tauraw bannemani (known locally as Fehn) in the world are found on this mountain. Oral tradition holds that the people of Oku are related to the Nso people- one of the Tikar groups that settled in Bamenda and traced their origin to the region of Ndobu, or Tikar, or Kimi in the North of Cameroon, (Merran McCulloch 25-26). They belong to the Kovifim dynasty. As Nchoji and Warnier have pointed out:

The chiefdoms of Nso, Oku and Mbiame do not only constitute a geographical continuum but, they have also dynastic connexions, cultural, political and alleged historical links. They look to the upper Mbam region as their original homeland. According to the Nso traditions, a prince of Rifum, Jing, the founder of the dynasty broke away from the parent stock and led his followers westwards, entering the Mbo plain where he settled with them. The Oku tradition recounts the migration of the three brothers with their followers from the Tikar country after a dispute. The tradition further asserts that the Oku dynasty was founded by the eldest brother while Jing the younger founded Nso and Mbiame was founded by the youngest. The father of these brothers died while Tata (the founder of Oku) was on a hunting expedition. Jing his younger brother was enthroned; when the elder came back, he was vexed and so took a number of followers with two kibai (Ndishangong and Ndifonson) and migrated to found his dynasty. (32-33)

When Tata and his followers arrived at the present site of Oku, they met the Ntul people from whom they obtained arable land and residential sites. Tata was hardworking, respectful, and honest in his dealings with the Ntul people. As a result, the Ntul Fon made him heir to the throne. Tata was, however, to be succeeded by a Ntul person but, he and his people used their intelligence to outnumber the Ntul people, silenced them and became their leaders. Tata was succeeded by his son Mnkong Moteh, who has become a legendary figure and the protector of Oku people.

Oku society is a closely knit society so there are taboos which prohibit such deviant behaviour as incest, suicide, adultery, murder and stealing. They are also clear distinctions in sex roles. The man is the head of the family and his status is sacred and supreme while the woman rather exists as a mere docile and exotic accompaniment to the male. When unmarried, a woman is the property of her father and once married, she becomes the property of her husband. Besides oral transmission of ideas and information from individual to individual, information and news are also transmitted by the town crier and *Kwifon* (the sacred cult that rules the land). People also get to know about the happenings in the society when they listen to narratives composed about these happenings.

Statement of the Problem

Propounders of earlier theories of folklore as Finnegan rightly observes ‘erroneously depicted folklore as survival-remnants of the cruder stages of the primitive past - passed verbatim from previous generations’ (319). This assumption is deceptive because it gives the impression that there is no possibility of expansion or contraction, mobility and variation or originality in the production and transmission of folklore thus undermining the adaptability of oral narratives or folklore to contemporary situation whereas oral narratives like other forms of literature are devices for interpreting history and contemporary realities.

Hypothesis

Haywood Charles’ observation that ‘folklore is not survival or museum, unaltered and fixed... It is a living organism still growing and developing wherever people live, struggle, hope, make merry, despair, and die (xv) is supported by this study. Consequently the research is based on the supposition that narratives are created by people who have a vested interest in defining the political meaning of events. That is why oral narratives are often new interpretations of history that will transform our self-understanding and how we view the present and the future.

Significance and Objectives

The study seeks to show how the traditional life of Oku people gives rise to the composition of oral narratives and the extent to which the content can make meaningful history and contemporary realities in Oku. The work is also out to look at the extent to which the narratives constitute Oku people’s honest, realistic and constructive perception of the society.

Methodology

This research is based on both library research and field work. The field work was done using observation and interview methods as major means of data collection and the researcher was a participant observer in all the performance sessions. Random and stratified random sampling techniques were used. The narratives were recorded on tape. Some of the narratives were recorded during pre-arranged meetings while others were recorded in the natural traditional context. Post performance interviews were conducted. The narratives were transcribed and then translated into English. In the analysis I depended heavily on perspective Danzer and Newman in *Folklore, folkway and Mythology* have proposed three perspectives for the analysis of Oral narratives and these are used in this paper. These perspectives are: the literary perspective which deals mainly with the content and structure of the story; the anthropological perspective where the socioeconomic, historical, geographical and/or societal contexts in which the stories lay are taken into consideration and the behavioral or group psychological perspective which concentrates on the purpose of or the source in creating or spreading folklore, while looking at the group and individual's behavior in relation to the purpose in the folklore item. (<http://www.units.muohio.edu/psybersite/cyberspace/folklore/intro.shtml>). There are nearly as many ways to analyze folktales as there are tales. Feminist scholars, socialist scholars, critical theorists and others can all take vastly different interpretations about the psychological meaning of the same piece of folklore. These approaches will be used when need arises but the main approach used is the functionalist approach. Here the expectation is that every proverb, tale, folk belief or poem must satisfy some important cultural, social, or psychological function. This view of the functional in folklore is parallel to Bronislaw Malinowski's position that ‘everything in human life must have a function. All folklore materials are a function of a human need, a social and structural necessity, or a device for social cohesion. Functionalism provides folklorists with a multi faceted theoretical matrix for any item in folklore. Since the study seeks to show, among other things, how the traditional life of Oku people gives rise to the composition of narratives

and the extent to which the content can be relied upon for the interpretation of history and reality, particular attention is paid to the context, the thematic range and the cultural relevance of the *narratives*.

Limitations

One of the problems encountered in oral literature research is that of translation. The difficulty of attempting to reproduce in translation the literature of one language in another has attracted the attention of researchers. The translation of the narratives was made a bit easy by the fact that Oku oral narratives, unlike its poetry and sacred songs and laments which are rendered in a dialect understood only by adults and those versed in the proverbs and idioms of Oku language, is rendered in a diction which can be understood by ordinary Oku people. During the process of translation, this researcher guided by Okpewho's remarks that 'as editors of oral texts, we have undertaken a by no means easy responsibility of reconciling two media of cultural expression, ... we owe at least the culture from which something is taken the duty not to violate our charge but to accord it as much of its integrity as the host culture will allow' (111 b), tried to preserve where possible, the patterns of thought and imagery without destroying the intelligibility of the content of the text. We must however, note that in oral literature, no written version, however accurate in language or translation can reproduce the real atmosphere of the performance. In the transcription, the following phonetic symbols were replaced

E	with 'eh' as in weh, you	Z	with 'zh' as in zhie, eat
dZ	with 'j' as in jio, water	éb	with 'eb' as in ebvii, woman
I:	with 'ii' as in ebkii, women	Σ	with 'sh' as in shike, to go to farm
tΣ	with 'ch' as in chakse, to carry.	Φ	With 'gh' as in ghone, children
ŋ	with 'ng' as in ngan, prophecy	ʃ	with 'ny' as in nyinye, to run
□:	with 'oo' as in koo, to catch	A:	with 'aa' as in ndaa, house.

Literature review

Past folklorists as Mary Magoulick in History of Folklore maintains focused on salvaging texts in order to understand the past and sometimes to shape the present (<http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/history.htm>). They, as Richard Dorson points out, 'were not especially history minded, and prefer to examine folk materials by category, such as folktale and folksong, proverb and riddle, rather than by historical period'(12-13). Dorson is referring to literary folklorists like Archer Taylor, Francis James and Stith Thompson who collected and categorized numerous amounts of stories, songs, and "lore." Stith Thompson for example worked on indexes and classifications in order to facilitate the process of archiving material" He produced indices by which we could trace a tale's diffusion and possible origin. Franz Boas provided tremendous amounts of empirical data that he saw as reflective of culture. Though he considered mythology to be meaningful and reflective of culture, he ignored the contemporary culture. These fieldworkers tried to present accurate, objective collections of the cultures they observed and lived among, but did not explore the role of folklore in the interpretation of history and contemporary realities.

A critic like Wolfgang Giegerich, is of the view that 'the modern psychological situation is utterly without precedent, without parallel. It is as he says 'so radically different, so logically different from the ancient mythological situation that any similarity is merely formal and thus

insignificant. He asserts that 'it is a fallacy to resort to "any ancient mythological figures" in an attempt to account for the modern situation. Ancient mythological figures, he contends, "do not suffice." They are insufficient because, he says, "even though they may display certain formal similarities" to the modern situation, "they are incommensurable" with it (175). In contrast to Giegerich, who posits a discontinuity between the ancient situation and the modern situation, Jung rightly emphasizes "continuity of history" (CW 5: 3, par. 1). For example, Freud demonstrates that an ancient myth, the Oedipus myth, continues to exist in the modern psyche as the Oedipus complex. As a result, Jung says, "the gulf that separates our age from antiquity is bridged over, and we realize that Oedipus is still alive for us." From the 1960's as Ben-Amos maintains:

Folklorist started seeing folklore as "artistic communication in small groups". They were no longer content with merely collecting, documenting, classifying, and cataloguing information, but focus upon the present realities of cultural forms. They started focusing upon the relationship of individual creativity to the collective order. They were now concerned with aesthetic and expressive aspects of culture and the people and societies that make and respond to creative arts ((<http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/history.htm>)

This focus is the right because folklore is art and art does not grow in a vacuum. Historical events entered easily into newly composed narrative. The narrator like every other creative artist looks critically at communal experiences, past and present and makes pronouncements as a warning to society. He performs roles, which range from being a spokesman, a critic, a moralist, an investigator, a spiritual therapist and guardian of the ideas and values of the society. He turns traditional beliefs and goals into good poetry and when the society changes he gives the new forms expression. For example, the world view expressed in tale one in 2007 is different from that expressed when the tale was collected in 1993. Contemporary's society's love for material wealth is seen in the type of things requested by Fegie or given to Naa as a sign of respect= cell phone and not just a title.

This is why Finnegan posits that "oral literature depends on a performer who formulates it in words and there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product" (2). Every narrative bears the signature of its narrator because the performer does not produce by rote what he has learned from someone or even composed by himself. He brings the subject matter up to date to make it comprehensible and palatable to the contemporary audience. The narratives are therefore, characterized by continuity, which links the present with the past and variations that spring from the creative forces of the individual. Narrators consciously or unconsciously adjust their stories to their own environment. In the course of retelling a story, experience shows that changes occur, and the piece is again subject to acceptance or rejection. Acceptance is only possible if the story is an interpretation of contemporary reality so each new invention is adapted to the needs of the society.

Narrators are aware of the distance between the world they describe and their audience, and often function as interpreters. They constantly use authorial comments. These authorial comments do not seem to disrupt the unity of the narrative but enhance meaning. Each narrative matters only for what it is capable of revealing about the society from which it originates. Since narratives are symbolic expressions. The narratives contain historical information, tell us about events or sequences of events, describe situations of the past or report trends. Narratives by

creating life like settings give evidence by situations as they were observed as well as about beliefs concerning the situations. Awoonor says the narrator ‘gives body and form to the material, reformulates and realizes it within regulated and specified occasions (1). Oral literature thus still exists in contemporary society, not as survival but as vibrant means of interpreting history and contemporary realities. Besides the religious poets and court poets in monarchical societies whom we know will always be there, story telling has just shifted from the moonlit night to the radio station, the television and the classroom. Children rhymes, lullabies, dirges, praises songs, proverbs and riddles are still in the current of everyday communication in the villages and towns alike.

Themes and the Interpretation of Reality

Vasina rightly argues that ‘among the various kinds of historical sources, tradition occupies a special place. Oral traditions are documents of the present because they are told in the present yet there also embody a message from the past so they are expressions of the past. He say verbal art forms such as songs, sayings, proverbs and tales express the experience of contemporary situations or events, moral to be drawn from these occurrences or express intense emotions associated with them. The narrators do not just tell (xi-xii). Oku oral narratives as Mbunda opines, deal with subjects ranging from the mundane to the spiritual. They ‘are a vast storehouse with diverse cultural information. By extracting from each of the tales direct references to plants, animals, persons, objects, activities, techniques, house patterns, divinities, living and thinking methods, one can compile an impressive inventory of Oku culture and ideology (5). This knowledge helps us to understand contemporary events in the Oku society.

The different motifs found in the tales have meaning for the audience of all ages. One of the common motif that run through Oku narratives is that of “the maltreated orphan who through his virtues surpasses in every way the evil stepmother who denies him/her comfort and an independent and becomes rich and the pampered child who because of laziness and disobedience is destroyed. This is exemplified in tale 2. The boy’s step- mother controlled by greed, violates tradition which demands that she cares and provides for her late mate’s son tradition and continuously schemes to have the boy killed. The orphan thought aided by his grand mother and late mother succeeds through the use of his personal resources to escape his predicament and became the society’s hero. These resources are obedience and kindness. Thought told as a story of the past and hence the interpretation of history; the story is very relevant in the interpretation of the contemporary realities because it assures especially the youths who have lose faith the themselves and depend only on technology that they do not need to look out of themselves to find solutions to the knotty problems in life. The story also exposed the prejudices, and jealousy in Oku society.

Another issue of concern in the narratives is the concept of choice. The ability to choose and be responsible for one’s choice is seen in tale 1 where each decision taken has a consequence. The chose to lie by Fegie leads to isolation, the choice to obey by Naa and her mother leads to success and the choice to disobey by Naa’s uncle and sister leads to destruction and difficulties just as Naa’s husband’s choice to kill his in-law leads to his lost of his family. These choices reflect the choices we are obliged to make in contemporary society with its crusades on freedom and democracy. Emphasis is placed on the fact that every choice we make has a consequence; hence we should not rush into taking decisions.

Setting and the Interpretation of History and Reality

Every work of art is set in time (historical period) and space (geographical location). The setting of a story as James Pickering says ‘is very important because it helps the reader visualize the action of the story. Setting creates verisimilitude by helping to create and sustain the illusion of life (69). Oku oral prose narrative is usually set in the past as marked by the formulaic opening ‘once upon a time or a long time ago’. This past is usually long time ago when activities considered impossible today are possible. Since they are set in the past, one could be tempted to believe that the narratives are only expressions of and interpretation of history but the remote past provides the opportunity for the narrator to commend on and interpret contemporary realities, to satirize vices in the society without been taken to court for libel. Geographically, the narratives are set either in the natural human habitat, the spirit world or in both and in the animal world. Stories set in the human world are either on the farm, in the village or at a stream and in them, the narrator commends on man’s love/hatred, his cleverness/stupidity, and his strength/weakness etc. In tale 1 for example, events take place in the animal world, the human world, and the world of the spirit. In this tale, the setting serves as a means of revealing characters and enforcing themes. For example, the fact that Naa’s mother and uncle reacted differently to the injunctions given them in the land of the dead portrays the difference in their characters and reinforces the view that obedience to, and respect for other people’s culture breeds harmony. This is a warning to contemporary society where globalization means poor countries giving up all their cultural values in favour of western values. It also emphasized the needs for man to show some restraint in his reckless destruction of nature because there is a link between man, animal spirits and plants. Naa in tale 1 is advised by a bridge and her mother and uncle are taken to the hade by some trees. The destruction of nature will therefore, be detrimental to man. This is very relevant in this age of our where global warming is leading to climate changes that are detrimental to the whole universe.

Oku narratives as metaphors

Narratives are forms of art and art as Jan Vansina says is ‘metaphor and form’ (11). Artists do not speak literally about the world but metaphorically so all forms of literariness like symbols, irony, personification etc are considered in this context as metaphors. The Encyclopedia Americana defines metaphor as ‘an implied comparison between two dissimilar things that imaginatively identifies one object with another and either ascribes to the first qualities of the second or invests the second with connotations inherent in the other (vol 9). Metaphors are therefore symbolic. Metaphorical expressions are usually witty, they appeal to the faculty of intelligence and inventiveness. Metaphors create freshness because they renew language.

Discussing the symbolic nature of narratives especially myths, George Whalley says myths are direct metaphysical statements beyond science. They embody and articulate structure of symbols or narratives. They are a vision of reality. A myth as he continues is a condensed account of man’s being and attempts to represent reality with structural fidelity (44). Ian, Watt also believes ‘mythical stories are in some way symbolic that is, they stand for larger and more permanent meaning than their represented actions literally denote (xv) They are reliable sources of communing, examining and mirroring social realities. The narratives are symbolic of what takes place in contemporary society. Awoonor commenting on the metaphorical nature of narratives says that ‘the animal stories are stories sometimes of real events which occurred in the life time of the people, but in order to avoid embarrassing the participants or their off-springs and

to keep group solidarity in tack animals become characters (76). Finnegan in the same light says:

What often involve in the animal stories is a comment, event a satire on human society and behaviour. In a sense when the narrator speaks of the action and characters of animals, they are also representing human faults and virtues some what removed and detached from reality, through being presented in the guise of animals, but nevertheless with and indirect relation to observed human actions (351).

The tortoise symbolizes the weak and helpless who can make it only through their resourcefulness as seen in tale 2, while the antelope symbolizes the vain and boastful who is always destroy by their pride. The cat and the hawk and the old woman in tale 3 represent the benevolent in society. The children Naa's sister brought forth symbolize the evil that emanates from evil. The wicked step mothering in tale 3 represents the heartless leaders in contemporary African society while the greed, the inhumanity and betrayal expressed in these tales are reflexive of the ills in contemporary society.

Hyperbole which simply means gross exaggeration is another metaphor used in Oku narratives. Hyperbole in the narrative is either used to ridicule as in satirical narratives or for serious effect as in heroic narratives. In tale 2 for example, the foolishness of the antelope is exaggerated to ridicule while in tale1, Naa's ability to get what ever she desires is exaggerated to commend or praise the virtue of telling the truth. For example, she desires that a grain of corn and one melon seed become much, be ground and make ready for consumption and got her wish because she did not support her mother in her evil deeds. The aim of the narrator is to make the audience know that the truth shall set us free and that we will never suffer for telling the truth. Hyperbole like repetition is an effective weapon of securing the audience attention to the subject and reminding them of their expected roles in the community. It makes the satirical narratives sarcastic, the victim is infuriated not because he is ridiculed but because his art is exaggerated.

There is also the use of personification, a figure of speech in which inanimate objects as Chukwuma, says 'are not only animated but are often concretized by the "human" activities they are made to perform. In this way they "play off accepted cultural association of objects surprising the audience as well as communicating ideas" (201) for example, the bridge in tale 1 is given human qualities and Naa's sister is said to have been delivered of appalling things-snakes, chameleons, dogs and sticks.

Irony, a language device in which the real meaning is concealed or contradicted by the literal meaning of the words is also used. It is a form of indirection that avoids overt praise or censure. Irony is a common device in Oku narratives. There are several ironies of situation and these are out to mock the oppressor. For example the antelope is humbled when he is ironically defeated by the tortoise just as the step-mother who had wielded much authority after her step-son is compel to bow to him when he is made king. The irony of situation is a warning to contemporary leaders to be mindful of heir acts because no situation is permanent; the oppressed can become he oppressor. Metaphors enable artists to clothe at will the most abstract ideas with life. Besides noting likeness and evoking association between objects and being used for embellishment, these metaphors add beauty and concreteness to the descriptions making meaning clearer.

Characters

Characters in Oku narratives reflect the nature of the society. They range from spirits to humans plants animal and objects. All these are found in tale 1. Some of the characters are stereotype and universal so are given ticket names like a boy, a certain woman etc so show that they are symbolic of humanity. There are stereotype like the trickster, the quest heroes, villains or persecutors and helpers. The trickster is usually imbued with both attractive and unattractive qualities. He succeeds through his mental agility and deception as seen in tale 2. The quest hero encounters disaster but comes out successful due to the aid of chance, divine intervention or his virtues as seen in tale 3. Villains range from wicked step-mothers to kings and monsters. Examples are in tale 3. Without characters they can be no story because action in the story evolve around the characters. The characters offer life models which are appropriate to the time in which live so when times change the nature of characters change.

Functions

Every society depends in part on folklore for the maintenance of its continuity so folklore has served several functions throughout much of man's history, and it continues to predominate today. Nigel, Thomas is of the view that:

Whether it deals with every day situations- such as the telling of a joke to put one's audience at ease, or the employing of witty verbal hostility in lieu of physical combat or finding refuge in the myth rather than embracing the anxieties of the unknown- folklore has its momentary as well as perennial functions (11).

Folklore validates certain aspects of culture and justifies its rituals and institutions. Narratives like myths to Weigel ‘

Relate the creation of the world and sometimes, its future destruction as well. They tell how God created the world. They depict the relationship between various gods and between gods and man. They provide a moral code by which to live. Myths treat the lives of heroes who represent the ideals of a society (9).

Myths and legends validate doubted pattern and warn of subsequent consequences when accepted practices are violated and provide rationalizations when institutions and conventions are challenged. For example tale 4 is a mythic legend which justifies the worship of Mnkong Moteh as the god and protector of Oku people and at the same time praise the exploits of Mnkong when he was alive. References are made to Oku history and names of places are mention. Mnkong fearlessness and honesty are qualities that exalted in the tale. Okpewho is therefore right when he says:

In myth, the imagination focuses on actualities past or present and endeavors progressively to derive from them certain essences which liberate them from the bond of time, on the other hand it grapples with mysteries by seeking to explain them in terms of observable reality without however destroying their supra-empirical quality’(114).

This tale tells us about the distant past, (a long time ago, when Oku and Nso people still lived as biological brothers and struggled for supremacy) and reveals some realities of the present (Oku people's present view of the Nso man as a cheat to whom they would not give their daughters in marriage and even the similarities in the two cultures).The tale also portrays Oku people's belief that humans and spirits are interrelated. The narratives help in reconstructing and

re-emphasizing the history of the Oku people. This is because through the narratives we get knowledge of the past and compare it with the present to have a vision for the future.

Oku is a communal society so each member is responsible for the solidarity and continuity of the society. Narratives are used either to express social approval of those who conform to societal norms or to satirize those who violate these norms. This is what Dundes terms maintaining conformity. Dundes' notion emphasizes the way folklore acts as a controlling factor. Oku narratives are weaved around the motif that virtue is always rewarded and vice punished. This is very relevant in our contemporary society where greed and corruption are seen as icons of success. Irresponsible parents like the step-mother in tale 3, thieves like fegie in tale 1, pride and oppression in tale 2 are presented as anti social forces that need to be destroy; while commitment to one's kinsmen as seen in the united action taken by the tortoise and his kinsmen in tale 2 to triumph over the antelope, virtues like hard work, perseverance obedience are praise. The narrators are satirists who like Igbo satirists have one aim "to expose the victim. Everybody is brought into full knowledge of what the person did so that his spirit would fight an internal battle with him and he would spend sleepless nights worrying about himself". Satirical songs are meant to castigate the culprits for benefit of society as a whole. Nwoga (230).

Providing an escape from the frustrations, social repressions and geographical and biological limitations into fantasy is also one of the relevance of Oku narratives in contemporary society. The struggle to achieve maturity is particularly geared to the adolescent and is well depicted in tricksters and other tales where a giant is in conflict with an ordinary person. Here the point emphasize is reason winning over emotions and strength. The heroes in these tales represent characters in contemporary society. The tricks are abhorred but the wisdom and ability to accomplish a deed that seems impossible teaches the audience how to wriggle themselves from out of difficult situations. The narratives also educate. They teach the history of the people as well as cultural norms such as diligence, respect, perseverance and humility. Some of the tales explain how things came into being and why certain things are done. Tale 4 for example, explains why Mnkong Moteh is worshipped and why Oku people take oaths by him thereby linking the contemporary audience to their custom, beliefs and philosophies.

Conclusion

Oku like every society in the world depends in part on its folklore for interpreting history and contemporary events and for the maintenance of its continuity. Oku oral narratives as Mbunda opines are a vast storehouse with diverse cultural information and by extracting from the narratives direct references to plants, animals, objects activities, persons and divinities, living and thinking patterns, one can compile an impressive inventory of Oku culture and ideology. This knowledge helps people to comment on or grasp contemporary events in the Oku society.

Since Folk or traditional cultural expressions tend to be associated with specific groups whose identity is either defined ethnically, by religion, by gender, by geography, by occupation, Narrators unconsciously adjust their stories to their own environment so often function as interpreters. They regularly explain items that they realize or suppose are unclear to the audience. Each individual brings his or her own experience to his judgment in his interpretation of the history and reality expressed in the narrative. Tala is thus right in asserting that 'if we examine the structure of the variants or versions of the same narrative, we are likely to notice that the structural features exhibited by the oral narratives can be traced to the performer's manipulation of his material (82). Bascom thus theorizes that:

Any story must be invented by some individual, and it is either accepted or rejected by the group because it does or does not fill a need. Acceptance or rejection of an item is also contingent on its compatibility “with the accepted patterns and traditions of folklore of a culture as a whole. In the course of retelling a story, experience shows that changes occur, and the piece is again subject to acceptance or rejection. “As this process continues, each new invention is adapted gradually to the needs of the society and to the pre-existing culture patterns, which may themselves be modified somewhat to conform to the new invention. Accordingly, folklore spreads from one society to another. It is then again subject to acceptance, rejection, or adaptation (29).

Jick Henry is thus right to conclude in his study titled folklore and National Development that modern technological inventions and philosophical views of life do not obliterate but lead to the coinage of more proverbs(79). The folklore usage should be encouraged because as Campbell says

We need to tell our story and to understand our story. We need to understand death and to cope with death, and we all need help in our passage from birth to life and then to death. We need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious to find out who we are... It helps to put your mind in touch with this experience of being alive ((4-5).

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