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## ORAL TRADITION: SIGNIFICANCE IN CULTURE PRESERVATION SPECIAL REFERENCE TO AFRICAN LITERATURE

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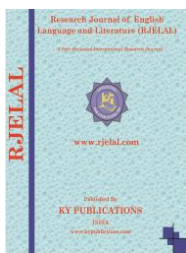
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### ABSTRACT

Oral tradition plays a significant role in African society and literature. It helps in inculcating moral values among children. These helps in building values like traditional, social, cultural and religious. Modern written literature is also the outcome of the traditional oral genre. Folktales are one among them. Folktales pass from generation to generation. They are traditionally known as tales of moonlight. These folktales teach about indigenous culture of Africa. Africans came to know their interconnectedness with nature. This study examines the function of folktales in African literature. Folktales help to teach life's lessons to people. African folktales have various lessons imbibed in them. Some of these lessons include discipline, hard work and courage. There are also lessons in these folktales that elders use to teach children about moral values which helps to shape the society.

**Keywords:** African folktales, literature, African oral tradition, African Culture.

### Introduction

Folktales serve a special purpose in African culture. These are means to handle traditions and customs. These are transferred from one generation to other generation and from there to several generations. The folktales are traditionally passed verbally. Mostly, after the whole day's hard work people gathered at night, and tell different stories related to culture, about their gods and nature. These stories were mostly narrated at moonlight. Thus, they were traditionally called "Tales of Moonlight". These stories have a lesson or moral at the end which is meant to teach children about their values and culture and prepare them for life and help them to become good human.

African Folktales are mostly related to culture. The stories in these folktales reflect African culture. The animals and birds often shape human behavior and attributes in these folktales. African people believe that animals talk, sing or demonstrate other human characteristics like honesty, jealousy and greed for things. The setting of many stories shows the landform and climate in Africa. In most of the stories the references are made to different seasons and their effect on the vegetation.

### African Folktales

There is so much of diversity in African folktales. In this modern world they let people know about traditional rich culture of Africa. African folktales don't generally explain their message, however may leave the closure for the group of

onlookers to translate. Topography and dialect expressions can cooperate as kids follow the foundations of African folktales. Folktales have been gone down through the oral convention, they were sharpened for tuning in so they were anything but difficult to recollect and share. Folktales were regularly utilized to share a typical history, to fortify social qualities or feature critical conventions.

As one investigates the different stories of Africa and in its folktales gathering, these all stories share something common that they were protected so they could be shared again and again with each new generation. Oral traditions are oral messages transmitted from one generation to another. These messages might be transferred through songs, speeches and may appear as tales, epic narratives, proverbs, and song. Oral Tradition helps the society to pass knowledge through different generations without composing. They use these folktales to teach people about important aspects of their culture.

A storyteller performs legends. These can be hours or even days long. These stories were related to history, family history, fights and political uprisings of a network. The storyteller utilizes questions, precepts and fantasies to teach and engage. Narrating is an imperative imparted occasion to individuals sitting together, tuning in and notwithstanding taking an interest in records of past endeavor, convictions, legends, and taboos. Talented or surely understood storytellers regularly rehash the story with similar words. He uses same articulations in every execution they travel. They likewise do addition to material to an old story to make it all the more interesting. It is significant to various gatherings of people.

Riddles, proverbs and myths were used by storytellers to educate and entertain the gatherings. Storytelling is a significant shared event. It is shared with people sitting together. They listen and even participate in these events, which are usually related to past deeds, taboos, myths and beliefs. There are animal characters in these folktales. These animals behave like human beings. Emenanjo states that in the African folktales " one truly requires an eager suspension of skepticism to understand and acknowledge what happens in that: with creatures

talk like humans, and with the components talking and acting like human beings, with the men, who is being conceived and achieving development inside the twinkle of an eye" (1982:61). Animals also have weaknesses like human. They don't like treachery and envy. They hate these things like human beings. Tortoise is the only creatures; who gets punishment according to guilty of evil. It plays on the intelligence in most of the stories. It represents both human beings and animals.

The spirits also have significant portrayal in these stories. It is said that they have several heads. They talk through their noses. They can talk continuously. They have small legs like broomstick. Spirits have their mouths at their back. In spite of the fact that this is an image of ugliness, Macebuh advocates that " ugliness in African art can on occasion show the capacity of the radiant, unequivocally in light of the fact that it is utilized regularly as a methods for copying the disfigurement of human conduct" (1974:17). The spirits and animals inhabit landscapes much like those of humans. The spirits have their abode in far off places or land. They live and behave like human.

#### **Folktales in Chinua Achebe's Novels**

African authors use writing to advise their rich convention and culture to world and African continent. Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* recounts to an account of vulture. The sky was approached by him to request downpour. The creator utilizes this story to blast Okonkwo, one of the characters. The famous folktale in *Arrow of God* was a man having two wives. The senior wife had numerous children. On the other hand, the younger wife had only a child. This only child demonstrates to be submissive and honest. He accepts the pot loaded with each beneficial thing. Thus, he was protected by the soul of yam field. His stepbrother they resists the spirits. But they were given a pot filled with terrible illnesses and detestations. (AOG, 124)

Achebe shows the belief and significance of the yam festival in Africa. He makes beliefs an indispensable piece of the structure of his story. Further, he shows a significant component of old stories sayings and Achebe utilized them successfully. Acknowledged sayings, articulations and grins rank

first among the kinds of folklores extricated. Achebe utilizes proverbs and similes to portray his stories. In *Things Fall Apart* there are numerous proverbs used by Achebe. They are demonstrated to show among people the Unoka's shortcoming and Okonkwo's accomplishment. Okonkwo although from extremely poor family, but he became rich through his hard work. Okonkwo's pride is shown by using proverbs by Achebe in novel. Okonkwo firmness is found in the novel when he begins abusing essential communal values of African society severely beaten by him in the Week of Peace. He was severely punished for his evil deed. People said about Okonkwo:

“And so people said he had no respect for the gods of clan. His enemies said his good fortune had gone to his head. (TFA, 22)

Further, many stories were narrated for children in this novel. These narrations were mostly related to flora and fauna. Children understand the deep messages hidden in the stories were tried by children to understand. Children also learned about their original culture. Ezinma's mother narrates the story of tortoise and birds in chapter eleven. When Ekwefi finished her story Ezinma herself begins to narrate the story of tortoise and cat. Obiechina gives an in-depth analysis regarding this particular myth in the connection to the crisis between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye. He says:

The conflict between father and son, analogous to the quarrel between Sky and Earth, is built on their being so different in character: Okonkwo condemns stories and storytelling (unless they are heroic), which he regards as a symptom of effeminacy and degeneracy, while Nwoye relishes stories other than those of war and bloodshed. (TFA, 129)

Stories, regarded as great sources of moral lessons, were divided into two categories – male and female. While male stories emphasise the need to be courageous and strong, female stories stress on the emotions of the human heart. While Okonkwo wants his son to be attracted towards male stories, Nwoye displays his early rebellion by preferring female stories.

Achebe shows how the Ibos loved to tell stories. On one occasion, he demonstrates this art of telling stories with all its features. It is about an incident in Abame, a neighbouring village. Obierika dramatizes the incident in front of Okonkwo. Obierika brings the news to Okonkwo about the massacre in Abame. Achebe describes Obierika's different gestures and movements, the participation of the audience in response to the story-teller.

“Have you heard,” asked Obierika, “that Abame is no more?” “How is that?” asked Uchendu and Okonkwo together. “Abame has been wiped out,” said Obierika. “It is a strange and terrible story. (TFA, 137-138)

Hence, in *Things Fall Apart* Story telling is an integral part. It is not the story of Umuofians but Achebe shows the tradition of story telling and techniques of Africans. Oral story telling is most clearly seen in all the novels of Achebe.

Achebe shows the Igbo traditional society and their beliefs through proverbs in his third novel *Arrow of God*. Proverbs are used in reference to colonial rulers. Proverbs are used to define the reality from different point of view. Achebe also tries to show the complexity of time which forced people to be careful in interacting with other people. Ezeulu when he sent his son Oduche to whites, so that he can tell him the ways of white men. Achebe incorporated one anecdote in the first chapter of *Arrow of God*. While Ezeulu is listening to the voices of women coming back from the stream, Achebe gives the reason for their late return from the stream through an anecdote:

. . . the nearer stream, Ota, had been abandoned since the oracle announced yesterday that the enormous boulder resting on two other rocks at its source is about to fall and would take a softer pillow for its head. Until the *alusu* who owned the stream and whose name it bore had been placated no one would go near it. (AOG, 7)

Through this anecdote Achebe shows how close Africans were to nature because *alusu* means the representative diety. Africa had a rich culture before colonialism. Achebe intentionally used folktales to

his novels to show the Europeans about African culture. They misused African cultural heritage. Hence, Achebe used folktales, sayings, proverbs and myths in his novels to show African indigenous culture to the world.

### Folktales in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Novels

Ngugi's fiction benefits from oral traditions of culture. He utilizes myths, legends and folklores. Ngugi investigates devices of oral traditions in his writings. He choose it to safeguard and projection of socio- cultural heritage and to show virtues. On 8th August, 2006 in an interview in London he has acknowledged:

...My earlier novels, say *The River Between*, *Weep Not, Child*, are very much within a certain tradition of the English novel-the nineteenth century English novel. Given the realities of Africa or the Third World of the twentieth century, realist tradition is not adequate in describing fact often enough stranger than fiction. I found the tradition limiting in terms of space and even form, in the sense that an oral tale can take a dramatic form. In an oral tale animals can talk to trees, trees can talk to human beings and there is a freer interaction between say animal life, plant life and human life. There is also a greater interaction between the spiritual and material .All those things happen in an African narrative....

The most intermittent myth in Ngugi's novels is the Gikuyu story of the production of the world and the distribution of various lands to different people. It was first related in writing by Jomo Kenyatta's book entitled *Facing Mount Kenya*. Kenyatta relates the belief of the Gikuyu in this book. The belief was that in the beginning of things when humankind began on the earth, by the man Gikuyu. He was known as the originator of the clans. He was called by the Mogai. He divided the universe. The land was given to Gikuyu by Mogai. This land had gorges, the rivers and forests. It was the game as an offer. He gave all characteristics that the Lord of nature gave to humankind.

The utilization of Gikuyu myth in Ngugi's novels, at this point, shows the writer's enthusiasm for history of his nation, Kenya. All the more significantly it is likewise a method through which he commends his people's belief in the land as a heavenly patrimonial inheritance. For this reasons, the land must not be surrendered to any invader, regardless of how strong. So, as the white man, comes to Kenya and starts to appropriate Kenyan lands, the unimportant invocation of this myth in the novels rebukes this activity, and reassures the people of the legitimacy of their interest for the full ownership of their land.

Njoroge is the main protagonist of *Weep Not, Child*. He grows up in the time of the Mau-Mau insurgency that swept Kenya in the fifties and sixties as an underground resistance to colonial repression. The power of one's attachment to the land is expressed in the novel by Mau Mau. The novel portrays the landless native's struggle against the white settlers in pre-colonial Kenya. There is a feeling of urgency and concern for a society threatened with fragmentation. The dispossession of the poor man's land forms the major theme in this novel. The land was given to the Gikyu people at the time of creation of earth. Gikyu and Mumbi were forebears. Ngugi discusses the creation:

... There was wind and rain. And there was also thunder and terrible lighting. The earth and the forest around Kerinyaga shook ....(WNC, 27)

... God showed Gikuyu and Mumbi all the land and told them, This land I hand over to you. O man and woman it's yours to rule and till in serenity sacrificing only to me, your God, under my sacred tree.... (WNC, 28)

*The River Between* offers us the idea that there was peace before the white man came to Africa. Chege told the story of Mugo to his son Waiyanki. He said:

" Mugo was born and grew up in Kameno before he went to tell people what he saw. For

he saw many butterflies, of many colors, flying about over the land, disrupting the peace and the ordered life of the country. Then he cried aloud and said: 'There shall come a people with cloths like butterflies....' (TRB, 19)

### Conclusion

African writers use old stories in their writings. They are used to safeguard African indigenous culture. Contemporary writers felt that their rich culture would vanish if these things should not be documented by them. To regain their history, African authors immediately archived fables and folktales in their writings. Achebe used Igbo proverbs, metaphors and similes used by African story-tellers. Through their writing writers show Africans and the people of other countries about their indigenous culture. Contemporary African writers use folktales, fables, proverbs, ancient myths in their writing to safeguard African culture for future generation.

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