

Research Article

The African Oral Tale: Still a Pathfinder for Youths in the Contemporary World

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Abstract: This paper argues that the traditional African oral tale, despite the destructive challenges that modern technology poses to its new habitat, has continued to be relevant in the moral and cultural development of the African youths. The resilience of moral and cultural values expressed in the traditional African tale and their relevance in the face of challenges confronting the youths of the 21st century, qualify the African tale as a pathfinder to the youths who are caught in a hotchpotch of cultures and moral crisis. It is noticed that the 21st century curricula in most learning institutions in the world are placing much more emphasis on the learning and development of technology than they do on the arts and social sciences. In the same light, African leaders see technological development as the main vehicle and perhaps the only one that will transport Africa from underdevelopment to development. The academic and socio-political emphases on technology, the excitement in the youths generated by technological advancement and the so called modernism pose moral and cultural challenges to the African youths. In a world in which the youths are fascinated and overwhelmed by the wonders of science and technology, the telling of tales that was once a sort of informal schooling in many African communities is, no doubt, drifting into anachronism. In the circumstances, the African youths tend to question the practice and contemporary relevance of storytelling. As a counter claim and with textual evidence, this paper insists that even in the face of advanced technology and its accompaniments, African folklore, especially the oral tale, still possesses the capacity to function as a reservoir of cultural information and a source of moral edification for the youths. Indeed, it possesses a searchlight into moral uncertainties and a code of cultural behaviour which should form the basis of all forms of development for the youths in the present age. This argument is underpinned by C. P. Kottack's view that in many societies, myths, legends and oral tales and the art of storytelling play important roles in the transmission of culture and the preservation of tradition.

Keywords: oral tale, folklore, modernism, technology, modernism.

The African Culture in the Oral Tale

For the sake of clarity of our claim, there is a need for a contextual definition of *culture* as the operational term in this paper. The term culture comes from the Latin word *colo* which means to "cultivate". It generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structure that gave such activities significance (www.ucs.mu.ca/zharuna/folkloredefinitions.html). Culture is a word which has been defined variously by various scholars. In a discussion on the numerous definitions of culture, Peter Burke admits that:

Culture is a concept with an embarrassing variety of definitions. In the nineteenth century, the term was generally used to refer to the visual arts, literature, philosophy, natural science and music while expressing a growing awareness of the ways in which the

arts and science are shaped by their social milieu. (Burke, 1992)

Edward Tylor also defines culture as, "that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, moral, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (qtd. by Kottack, 2000). Walter Rodney in similar terms defines culture as a total way of life. It embraces what people ate and what they wore, the way they walked and the way they talked, the manner in which they treated the dead and greeted the new born. Looking at it from a similar perspective, Leslie White adds that culture is, "dependent upon symboling, utensils, clothing, ornaments, customs, institutions, beliefs, rituals, games, work of art, language (qtd. by Kottack, 2000). Scott sees culture as, "the acquainting of ourselves with the best that has been known and said in

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the world and thus with the history of the human spirit". While emphasizing the media through which a culture is expressed, Burke (1992) sees culture as, "the attitudes and values of ordinary people and their expression in folk art, folksongs, oral tales, festivals and so on". In a commentary on culture, Roland Barthes opines that culture is a matter of convention, a convention that is restrictive and oppressive, imposing conformity upon the individual and inhibiting the capacity for free expression (qtd. by Sharrock, 2003). Barthes' description of culture insinuates that each cultural entity is constructed on bedrock of norms and values. A bulk of such cultural norms and values are, incontestably, inherent in oral tales. Cultural issues such as procedures of succession, spiritual worship, histories of ethnic origins, virtues of communalism, normative behaviour of the youths, respect of royal authority and ancestral worship are expressed in African folklore, especially the oral tale. Still within the cultural realm, some African tales depict the overwhelming power of the gods and provides reasons for spiritual worship as a cultural activity. It is clear from these examples that oral tales abundantly express cultural activities.

Despite what seems as various definitions of culture, it is evident that the word generally has to do with the acceptable way of life of a people which includes customs, language, dressing, beliefs, rituals, habits and law or the entire way of life of a people. It is for this reason that R.O. Soetan rightly notes:

The most flexible and yet comprehensive definition of culture is that arrived at during the MONDIACULT in Mexico City which has continued to be the most operationalised definition of culture: Culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material and intellectual features that characterise a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs. (<http://www.unpani.un.org/intra.doc>)

It can be gleaned from the various definitions that culture has a capacity to develop or grow and that a properly developed culture can boost other development initiatives. In his memorial lecture on *Eduardo Mondlane* entitled, "National Liberation and Culture" Amilcar Cabral acknowledges the dynamism of culture and its capacity to grow in the following words:

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that no culture is a perfect finished whole. Culture, like history is necessarily an expanding phenomenon. Even more important we must bear in mind that the fundamental characteristics of culture is its

close and reciprocal connection with the social and economic environment with the level of productive forces and the mode of production of the society which created it. (qtd. by Yosimbom, 1999)

Now with a clear contextual definition of culture, we can begin to examine its role as a pathfinder for African youths in a world where things are falling apart before an ever growing technology and encroachment of alien cultures. If the African oral tale functions as a storehouse of African cultural values, then its capacity to construct a cultural framework for our contemporary youths in the current technological heat and moral uncertainties of the 21st century is indisputable. The power of culture in a child's upbringing requires that in a world where the economic and socio-political challenges are overwhelming, the youths need a rigorous cultural guide to trace a successful path. It is within this claim that R.O. Soetan avers:

If we accept the postulate that culture is an adaptive mechanism that constantly adjusts to satisfy human, biological and social needs, shouldn't we then ask ourselves whether the best way forward for Africa is to marginalise the role of culture in development frameworks and process or to use it as a platform or springboard for development. He sees culture as a tool for "a broad-based, qualitative and human-centred development." Cultural definitions are as diverse as its roles but one can aver that culture can be used to liberate or oppress, to augment or retard human growth and development. This also means that people may enrich the negative or positive images of culture according to their motives and purpose. Culture is not static and the failure to identify the necessity of cultural growth and how it impacts human experience and development can create conflicts in the lives of individuals or groups. (<http://www.unpani.un.org/intradoc>)

In cultural and social context, the African oral tale deals with the entire activities of people, their way of thinking and experiences. In terms of literary heritage, it is often linked with the search for knowledge, and it plays the most crucial role in cultural nationalism, positive self-image and in the making of the rising generation and creative thinkers. It is the basis for human intellect, a reflection of profound insights and the structure of values, norms and a highly developed moral sense (www.sdu.dk/-/media). Since the tale also corrects erring companions through satire and ridicule, this paper will analyse some oral tales in an effort to highlight some African cultural values that are reflected in the tales and how they may reconstruct

cultural values amongst the youths by confronting their deviant behaviour in the 21st century. In other words, the analysis will show how behaviour or practices that may be injurious to the culture are downplayed by the tales.

It is important to observe that the hypothetical contention of this paper also falls in line with the excerpt of a report submitted by Soetan to the African Institute for Economic Development in 2001 in Dakar, Senegal:

The new emphasis on cultural approach to development can be traced to the World Conference on Cultural Policies (MONDIACULT) held in Mexico City in 1982 and the subsequent declaration of the United Nations Decade of Culture. This global awareness has contributed to the Global reawakening to the centrality of culture in any meaningful progress in the development process. This moved the importance of cultural approach from the limited arena of cultural artefacts, arts, music and traditions to the empirical sphere. That meeting recognised the fact that socio-cultural dynamics can enhance or retard the progress in human development. This recognition is largely instrumental to the declaration of the decade of culture from 1988 to 1997.
(<http://www.unpani.un.org/intradoc/groups>)

Soetan's report underscores the view that cultural considerations should be integrated in all development endeavours and if that has to be done for the African youths then, the declining oral tale as a reservoir of culture ought to be forcefully revived in all forms. It is been sufficiently buttressed by the foregoing submissions that the oral tale can be a major force behind cultural growth. It provides solutions to cultural problems, promote communality, strengthen cultural and spiritual beliefs, trace the origin and provide the *raison d'être* for cultural practices and, promote language as an aspect of culture. On the basis of these views, it is possible to guess that when the oral tale is in decline, these values are equally in decline.

The Power of the African Oral Tale in the Reconstruction of African Cultural Values

In line with the preceding argument, this section is intended to show that oral tales are crafted out of cultural experiences and that, they, in turn, function as vehicles or repositories of that culture. In sociological criticisms, a literary text is interpreted in terms of the world it represents given that it does not fall from the sky like meteorite, but that it is an offshoot of a cultural environment. It relates the experiences of the imaginary characters and situations to the historical or cultural climate from which it

derives. It is for these reasons that Leo Lowenthal and Richard Hoggart contend that literary art like the oral tale portrays what is more real than reality itself and penetrates more deeply into human experience because it has the capacity to see not only individual instances but "deeper and more long-termed movements below the surface detail" (qtd. by Lawrenson, 1972).

In a cultural study of Bhutanese folklore, Penjora observes:

Oral tradition is a source of the country's culture and values, providing insights into the history of villages or regions. In Bhutan, as a society that has just evolved from an oral medium, and where a literary medium is still in its infancy, information on different villages and people, their habits, norms, beliefs, traditions (ethnography) still exist in oral form, and have never been committed to writing. For example, it is impossible to conduct research on a particular village without the assistance of village elders who can understand, listen and converse. Folktales help to instil a sense of belonging, patriotism and identity. The setting and plots are designed to increase children's awareness of the diversity of the culture and geography. According to William, P. Murphy, "the folks were seen as the repository of the old customs and manners of an earlier stage in the nation's history, reflecting the unique spirit and genius of the nation." (<http://www.grossnationalhappi...>)

From a sociological perspective, the African oral tale highlights cultural practices in the various ethnic groups in which they are told. They express cultural issues related to marriage, spiritual worship, hospitality, birth, death and so on. The tale points out the absurdity and risk involved in abrogating cultural norms fill cultural gaps and strengthen cultural weaknesses. The tale depicts deep insights into the cultural conditions and can therefore be exploited to stimulate cultural reconstruction for the youths in their current challenges.

A traditional African tale narrates the experiences of a princess whose jealous father underrates all her suitors and in order to stop her from marrying any riff-raff, he decides to secure her within strong impenetrable walls. Despite her glamorous beauty, many responsible and handsome suitors try, in vain, to penetrate the walls to woo the princess. Unfortunately for the King, it is the ugly and worthless Tortoise who, through witticism, scheming and intrigues succeeds in passing through the walls and getting the princess heavy with child. In the face of that utter disappointment, the king reluctantly and shamefully hands over his daughter to the ugly tortoise

but surreptitiously schemes to eliminate him. However, the cunning Tortoise outsmarts the naïve and deviant king and successfully escapes with his wife out of the danger zone. Even though this tale condemns the exotic approach to marriage, it calls for deep reflections on the cultural practice of love and marriage in some African communities. Generally, in most African communities and especially amongst the ethnic groups where the tale is told a good suitor is qualified on the basis of acceptable manners. Wealth and physical attraction are supposed to have little or nothing to do in a union of marriage. When the king sets an absurd condition for suitors, the result is ridicule and disgrace. A close study of the African oral tales reveals that each time a cultural norm is threatened by any member of the community, the effect on the deviant is ruinous and regrettable.

Some aspects of culture resist destruction because they are deeply rooted in the belief systems. There are oral tales that focus on spiritual worship in which mortals interact with the immortals and get punished once they transgress cultural norms. Our contention is that such spiritual and ancestral beliefs expressed in the oral tales, provide reasons for some cultural practices thereby strengthening their resistance against destructive forces. Oral tales touch on various aspects of culture and punishment often awaits those who break cultural rules. For instance, in some tales, infidelity as a cultural taboo is condemned and those who get involved in it are exposed to public humiliation. In Africa, charity and generosity constitute the bedrock of communal living and those who insult such virtues are made to come face-to-face with adverse consequences. The following tale is expected to condemn greed and callousness.

In the village, there was a mad man called Achibong. Achibong visited whenever he wanted. One evening, Achibong opened Yako's door while she was cooking soup. When Yako heard the knock on the door, she took off the boiling pot from the fire and hid it under a broken chair. "What have you come to do in my house?" she asked the madman and pushed him out. Her little daughter called Njema was returning home when she saw her mother sending away the madman. She sat on the broken chair. The chair gave way and little Njema fell into the hot pot of soup. Njema was seriously burnt. The little girl wept and wept.

When neighbours heard little Njema crying, they gathered to see what had happened. When Yako saw the neighbours coming, she ran to hide behind the door but her children told the neighbours everything. "Mama is hiding behind the door." All the people insulted Yako and sang a song.

*Yako, Yako, Yako
mwem mu be mu ta lam
mwem mu be mu ta cha
mwem mu be ka sah weh kilong
mwem mu be ka sah weh kisoleh*

Selfishness in the oral tales of Africa is often projected and condemned as an attitude that downplays the essence of hospitality, communalism and solidarity. Yako's notorious attitude is exacerbated when he threatens to send away Achibong who is mentally deranged and deserves a more humane touch from his community. The misfortune that befalls Njema, Yako's daughter, is the reward of selfishness. Yako must become a subject of ridicule, fit to be rejected and can be reintegrated only when she resolves to respect the norms of the society. Jealousy, hatred and baseless intrigues have no place in African cultures and are condemned in the tales. A community that is built on such obnoxious practices that deviate from cultural norms is bound to experience a sluggish pace of development.

In Africa, the oral tales of a people enable them to observe, as though through telescopic eyes, the belief patterns and customs of their people. A people's philosophy of life is revealed by way of their folkloric wisdom. An oral tale characters can make one discern how people react to cultural pressures in their environment. The voices of fictional characters, for example, provide the means for us to share the moral precepts and principles guiding social and cultural interactions (Le Roux et al 2001). It is for the same reason that the character, Princess in the following excerpt is ridiculed. Her condition for accepting marriage is exotic to the cultural practice and has to be decried:

The ruler of the land of Oha had a very beautiful daughter. Her name was Takeliba. She was the most beautiful girl in the land. Her father, King Yu, was very proud of her. He decided that his beautiful daughter would never get married. He and his wife gave their daughter a –secret name and agreed that this secret name would never be made known to anyone.

Each community has both social and moral norms that guide the institution of marriage. In most African communities, marriage is based on love between a man and a woman and sanctioned by parental consent. Any exotic condition appears grotesque and is bound to fail:

Young men and old men came out every last Sunday of the month to call the names of the Princess. The suitors stood in a long line. One after the other they tried to call all the names they had ever known. Some called

Mbong, Enam, Kwala, Keba, Ikala and so on. For many years no one ever succeeded in calling the Princess's secret name.

The most handsome prince in the land came along. His name was Yingu. He did everything to call the secret names of the princess. He was very disappointed that he did not succeed. He decided he would never get married, unless he got married to the beautiful princess. Among the suitors that came from all over the land, Takeliba loved the handsome prince. But they both could not get married unless the Prince knew her secret name.

There was a wretched man called Wafumah. He was the poorest in the land. His toes were eaten by jiggers. He wore rags. Whenever Takeliba went to the stream, he always followed her without her knowledge. He would follow Takeliba closely and hide in the bushes to watch her bathing. One day Takeliba carried her secret name on her head. She tied it with a head scarf and went down to the stream. As usual, Wafumah followed Takeliba closely as she walked to the stream. He admired her. He sometimes tried to walk like her but jiggers disturbed him a lot. There was strong wind that day. It blew the headscarf off Takeliba's head and the secret name came out and shouted, "My secret name is Sangele. My secret name is Sangele." Takeliba ran after the secret but it was too late. Wafumah had heard the secret name.

When the princess caught the secret name, she said to herself, "I am lucky because there was no one around. My secret name would have been known today." Takeliba did not know that Wafumah had heard the secret name. "Aha," Wafumah told himself, "I am the lucky one. I will be the one to marry the princess."

It is noticed that oral tales are repositories of African cultural values and can promote communal living, strengthen cultural and spiritual beliefs and act as references for cultural practices and beliefs. In the circumstances, they deserve to be considered in the discourse of cultural development in Africa.

Oral Tales and the Concept of Cultural Development in Africa

This section argues that a properly developed African culture expressed in the African tale can boost other development processes in Africa and that the cultural values embedded in oral tales can consolidate

African cultural values and pave a way for genuine development endeavours. It is known that for a long time development trajectories in African communities have been explained by reference to economic history and human capital deficits. Rarely has local culture been seen as playing a significant role in the development outcomes (www.edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy773). Today, specialists in the discourse of African development are unanimous on the view that such perspectives miss an important aspect of the development process. They have gone further to consider the understanding and interpretation of a community's folklore as a reflection of past events that fit into the demands, sentiments and interest of those in the present. Folklore provides a sense of identity for rural communities and facilitates understanding, traditions and values that are central in the identification of plans of action to improve well-being. The following argument by Sol Obotetukudo also buttresses the view that genuine development should consider environmental realities:

The African mind is a product of the "cultural edifices" and "cultural streams" arising from the African cultural traditions and environmental conditionings. These are not peculiar to the African. Every civilization or culture is a function of its environment. But what makes the African ways of seeing, perceiving and communicating its development, aspirations and features unique, is the commonality of themes of development that cuts through all of African languages and cultures, as well as in the ways they interpret and relate to development. These are made known in the languages or proverbs referencing hospitality, friendliness, consensus and co-operation, hardwork, perseverance, tolerance, sympathy, social cohesion, responsibility, honesty, dignity, and a sense of community as opposed to individualism. (<http://www.grossnationahappi>)

The main function of the oral tale among any particular group of people regardless of their race or location are to entertain, record the history of the people, teach principles of life and morality, provide them with some explanation of their origin, provide patterns for problem solving and give a sense of identity to the people. These are some of the virtues that could give a sense of definition to the African youths even in the hotchpotch of technological growth. However, despite the abundance of cultural values therein, oral tales are scarcely considered in efforts geared at cultural development. According to Brennan (2007), it is crucial for community development practitioners to consider the importance of culture in efforts to improve local well-being. There are evidence that local cultures can serve as a valuable tool in shaping the effectiveness

of development options and local actions (www.edis.ifas.edu/fy773). Folklore and particularly oral tales can preserve and provide cultural values that should be transmitted and integrated in the trajectories of contemporary African development paradigm for the youths.

The African oral tale provides vital cultural values which find relevance in the contemporary society and may occasion various forms of change and growth. A study of the African oral tale reveals that it is narrated for the purpose of conveying cultural values and attitudes that can occasion the growth of culture. The respect to gods which is characteristic of all African cultures is forcefully expressed in the tales.. The tale, no doubt, emerges from a culture in which gods are supreme. Emphasizing that all oral tales emerged from the bedrock of cultures, Rosenberg corroborates this opinion when he avers:

While oral tales, myths and legends have their universal and personal aspects, we must proceed more carefully with regard to what they appear to reveal about the cultures that have produced them. It is true that because myths, legends and oral tales and all stories about human or human-like relationships, they inevitably share certain building blocks, or motifs. It is also true that in order to build something that suits its world view, each culture uses these building blocks in its own way. Therefore, small differences between apparently similar stories can reflect important cultural differences. (Rosemberg, 1996)

Rosenberg's submission underscores the view that oral tales are borne out of culture and they must, reflect the cultural values of those who tell the tales

It seems that the African youths have much to gain if they continue to hang on to their heritage even though the heritage is gradually being eroded by increasing forces of modernism. There is definitely a need for the youths to complement relevant elements of their cultural heritage with relevant elements of intrusive cultures. Birth and death ceremonies, marriages, succession, farming, hunting, traditional administration, greetings and even dressing ought to be guided by cultural norms. However, the cultural values have been on a wane since Africa started embracing Western values and philosophies. The African youth is caught in cultural and moral uncertainties that breed socio-political chaos and poverty. Nevertheless, African oral tales, though scarcely told nowadays, still function as the carrier of various cultural values. They still function as an information pool or a form of education. The storytelling sessions bring a people together to share knowledge and information about their immediate environment and it is, partly, through such sessions that

culture is developed. This knowledge abundantly expressed in the oral tale can define identity and guide the youths towards a destiny. It is in the light of the information role of oral tales that Chukwuma (1981) explains:

Through oral communication you transmit information, you narrate your experiences, you give vent to your feelings in song either of happiness or sorrow, you correct erring companions through satire and ridicule, and you tell your ideas through imaginative stories couched in animal characters and set in a never-never land. Every oral enactment serves a purpose. (Chukwuma, 1981)

Given that cultural values expressed in the African oral tale ought to be integrated in the conceptualization of African development, the tale may continue to be useful to the youth. The oral tales transmit values that create African consciousness and enhance social relation and curb the erosion of solidarity on which African development efforts ought to be based.

Oral tales as Solutions to Cultural Problems

According to Maulana Karenga, "culture is the basis of all ideas, images and actions. To move is to move culturally, that is by a set of values given to you by your culture (qtd. by Yosimbom, 1999). Armando Heredia and Norbert Francis have noted that legends, myths and folktales have long been an important aspect of the history and culture of indigenous people; vehicles to preserve, carry and teach historical events, religious beliefs, ethics, and values to the young and old (www.jan.ucc.nau.edu/jar). Even though the African oral tale may not be able to perform all the functions suggested by Heredia and Francis, they can act as a tool of communication and provide strategies for social interactions, playing an important role in social life. Communication is not restricted to surviving generations; future generations can communicate with the dead through folktales despite it being a one-way communication. The African oral tales is therefore, bearer of the wisdom and philosophical views of the ancestors.

Given that lessons found in oral tales form the essential force in our cultural heritage, they can be viewed as therapeutic and developmental cultural imperative for young children (www.cecde.ie/english/pdf). In order to justify that the oral tale is a vehicle of culture, Octavia Utley posits:

Africans are rooted in oral cultures and traditions; therefore they have admired good stories and storytellers. Since ancient times, storytelling in the African culture has been a way of passing on traditions, codes, behaviour, as well as maintaining social

order. Writing had not been developed in ancient Africa, but there were ways for Africans to transmit their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. Africans utilized various forms of art, myths and ceremonies. The tradition of African storytelling is one of the most ancient in African culture.

(<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/nationalcurriculum>)

The African oral tale provides answers and solutions to cultural questions and problems of the contemporary world. In other words, no genuine development endeavour can be carried out in a state of chaos, panic and pandemonium or cultural vacuum.

Oral tales that speak directly to the people's minds transmit messages that vigorously condemn disorder, rancour and war. It is certainly for this reason that Chukwuma (1981) notes that, "Ancestry and lineage form a prevalent subject of espousal and this is so because of its specific and extended relevance to the consumers of oral art". On the basis of the cultural force stored in oral tales, Courlander posits:

Folktales provide a look at a culture's customs and morals. Since Africa has had a long oral tradition, examining the folktales is necessary to understand the literary history of the continent as well as the customs and morals. By hearing and reading African folktales and the folktales of the Diaspora, the children can see how African culture was retained both on the continent and abroad despite the European intrusion and subjugation and the resulting African Diaspora. They can discover how the stories were adapted to the storytellers' new environs in the Diaspora. The commonality of African world view that is shared across the African continent while at the same time allowing for the unique aspects of individual ethnic groups is well summed up by the following: "Thus the oral literature of African reflects ideas, themes, suppositions and truths that are widely shared at the same time that it reveals creations unique too, and particularized by, a tribe, village or region."
(<http://www.chatham.edu/PPT/c>)

The African oral tale can have lasting appeal to the youth because of the enriching responses it provides to cultural questions. Rosenberg (1996) notes that oral tales normally provide answers to questions that young people ask, such as:

How can I gain control over my own life? Given the dangers of the world in which I live, how can I succeed without the help of parents? What must I do in order to survive,

and I hope, thrive as an independent person? How can I cope with people who would use their greater physical strength or their greater power against me? What is likely to be my greatest sources of personal happiness and how can I attempt to achieve it?
(Rosenberg, 1996, p.XXIII)

The African oral tale provides answers to similar questions, especially on matters of culture. The oral tales provide apposite solutions to such difficult questions, making sure that cultural norms are not abrogated. They answer questions relating to death, marriage, witchcraft and so on and can render the youths morally, intellectually prepared to surmount the numerous obstacles and challenges of human progress

A proper collection and a systematic application of the African oral tale will definitely provide authentic solutions and approaches to perennial questions related to death, marriage, birth, rites, development. This means that young people who are caught in a world of variegated cultures can refer to the oral tales of their ethnic group for a genuine cultural redress. Consequently, through the oral tale, cultural values of a people in which socio-economic and physical development efforts are rooted can be effectively taught and projected. Our conclusion here is also strengthened by the following assertions by Penjora:

Similarly, rural oral societies have played a big role in preserving our unique culture. In doing so, people do not make a concerted effort; they do it by merely living their daily lives. Any action, work or participation in daily life is equivalent to living the culture, and, even more, to transmitting the culture and values to the next generation.
(<http://www.grossnationalhappi...>)

Oral Tales and Reinforcement of Cultural and Spiritual Beliefs

Spiritual beliefs reinforce cultural dictates. Wayland Hand has noted that:

Folk beliefs and superstitions are found among people all over the world and apparently have always been a part of man's intellectual and spiritual legacy, if not to say his residual thought and mental baggage. Even with the advancement of learning and the rise of education in most cultures, these ancient mental heirlooms persist and even flourish. (qtd. by Blakeslee 992)

African cultural and spiritual beliefs are generally remnants of ancestral wisdom that have stood the test of time and have continued to shape and adjust indigenous knowledge systems in Africa. They need to

be developed given their relevance in African development endeavours. In some African communities, cultural practices and beliefs are still persisting and there are oral tales that justify their origin and relevance. The African oral tale may reinforce cultural practices on matters of death, birth, life, politics, religion, rites, and beliefs and so on. This opinion is clearly expressed by Thomas Tenjo-Okwen when he remarks:

In a country like ours whose culture is essentially oral, the development and promotion of literature for the children drawn from its rich and diverse folklore is certainly a cultural asset, for children's literature if well developed will inculcate in a child cultural values that cannot be acquired otherwise. Besides, children's literature will, in many ways nurtures the child's intellect and enhances its rapid development. It will, among other things, increase the child's thinking imaginative and creative capacity. (Tenjo-Okwen, 1996, pp.304 – 309)

Dundes notes that “the strength of such beliefs is that people can live and die by them”. Edward A. Ross (1969) also emphasizes the important role which belief in the supernatural, ceremonies, public opinions, morals, art, education, law and related phenomena play in maintaining the normative structure of society. Given that cultural beliefs stemmed from the past, Carlos Fuentes writes that, we must go forward, because the present is unjust and insufferable, but we cannot kill the past, for the past is our identity, and without our identity we are nothing (qtd. by Hallow, 1987). The African oral tale often points to the past of the various ethnic groups and help in the construction of identity of the youth who listen to and tell the tales

In the bid to justify the existence of some cultural practices, the African oral tale often depict a mysterious past when man was in a close physical relationship with the gods. In this light, the cultural practices are believed to have been ordained by either the gods or the ancestors and no one should muster the courage to defile them. Following Fuente's observation, youths of each ethnic group are expected to see the past through their oral tales and they see that past as their identity and that without the identity, they are nothing. Commenting in a similar perspective, Chevrier holds the following contention expressed in French:

Au niveau du monde des ancêtres la littérature orale traditionnelle fait partie du patrimoine ancestral légué aux vivants et sa répétition ne fait que consolider les liens étroits qui unissent les morts et les vivants, elle montre aux vivants en quoi ils sont redevables aux ancêtres; elle permet de

concilier les forces du bien et d'exorciser les forces du mal. On comprend donc l'importance qui est attaché à la parole bien dite, car à certains moments la parole a véritablement valeur d'acte. (202)

(In terms of the ancestral world, traditional African literature connects one to the ancestral world and its themes provide the relationship between the dead and the living, it demonstrates the differences between the forces of evil and virtue. We therefore understand the importance attached to a properly articulated speech given the significance it sometimes has on our actions).

In the light of Chevrier's submission, the African oral tale establishes a cultural link between the dead and the living. It constitutes the forum for indigenous wisdom and enable the youths to choose between good and evil. It partly, forms the basis of a people's identity. It is in line with the cultural and traditional validation that Emmanuel Matateyou contends:

...that storytelling is an integral part of the cultural life of the African people in Cameroon. "Storytelling like rhetoric is the exercise of the mind. The words have great power." In Cameroon, folktales keep the community united. They help preserve the knowledge, wisdom, and techniques which are part of the society. The narration of the tales takes place at night after the evening meal. The oral folktale can be recited, sung, and adapted to various circumstances. Taboos in many cultures of this area prevent people from engaging in any serious work at night. Each tale retold enlightens the consciousness of the audiences. In the western region and south of Cameroon, night-time gatherings provide an opportunity for the affairs of the land and family to be discussed or planned. Problems are resolved through recourse to folktales (http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/nationalcurriculum).

The following African tale entitled, “Why People Die and Never Come Back to Life” seeks to justify the belief in the supernatural power of the gods and establish a close relationship between the dead and the living:

A long time ago there was nothing on earth except the spirit of the Gods that roamed over the whole universe. The Gods, out of good-will created man and gave him all the gifts of the earth. All men had the gift of

everlasting life. There was really no need to die since all initially lived in peace and harmony. The early man spoke the truth and loved each other. As they lived on, evil entered their hearts and they began to commit evil deeds. Then the Gods took away the gift of everlasting life and punished man with death. As a consequence of this, people began to grow old and die.

On a whole, the African oral tale, especially etioloical tales, provides justifications for the existence of cultural beliefs and practices. In the absence of writing, folklore may preserve details of history, genealogy and provide the *raison d'être* of cultural practices. It is for this reason that Clifford Geertz sees culture simply as “ideas based on cultural learning and symbols”. In the same light, Malinowski opines:

Myths were primarily if not exclusively, stories with social functions. A myth, he suggested, is a story about the past which serves as he put it, as a charter for the present. That is, the story performs the functions of justifying some institutions in the present and thus of keeping that in being. (Malinowski, 1926)

Even though Malinowski narrows the validating role of folklore to myths, it is evident that the African oral tale like “Why People Die and Never Come Back to Life” also justifies the existence of beliefs and cultural practices. Our opinion is that indigenous African communities are generally committed to their religions and beliefs, and when cultural practices are underpinned by belief systems, they are resistant to exotic values. Religions and beliefs consolidate our cultural values which can facilitate development efforts in various ways.

In “Multiculturalism through African Folk Tales and Mayan Myths”, Rebecca Brown provides justification for a strong belief in narratives:

Knowing religion and laws through myths and oral tradition is an integral part of the learning that can be derived from this unit. Most peoples in tropical and Southern African accept the idea of a “high God,” or rather, a sky god who is often associated with thunder or lightening. The earth, the sun and the moon, are the most prominent gods; the sea gods are worshipped among the western tribes. These are good gods, although the sun sometimes has a double: it causes life but also drought and so death. Earth is always a femal deity who favours those who worship her but metes out inexonerable punishment to the disobedient and neglectful. The forest is a mysterious

deity, elusive and whimsical. The forest contains almost everything in inhabitants need, game, wood for buring as well as making tools and furniture, bark for clothes, leaves for vegetables, lianas for the rope and for snaers, roots and juices for medicine and strong drink. (<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti>)

The African Oral Tale as a Reference Text for the African Youth

Our contention in this section is that, like reference books in the library shelves, The African oral tale also habours time-tested cultural values and can be consulted by young Africans and applied, if necessary, to reinforce their moral and cultural values in the contemporary world. The following quotation corroborates this view as it confirms that storytelling in Africa has been a way of passing on the traditions and beliefs of a particular society from one generation to the next:

Ever since ancient times, storytelling in African culture has been a way of passing on the traditions and beliefs of a particular society from one generation to the next. It has also been used as a means of passing traditions and codes of behaviour, as well as maintaining social order. African tales are told and retold under the shade of a tree or around a village campfire, passing on the history, philosophy, and moral laws of the people. Although writing had not been developed in ancient Africa, there were still existing means for Africans to record their thoughts, beliefs and feelings. These means included various forms of African art such as artefacts, myths and ceremonies. The tradition of storytelling is one of the most ancient in African culture; this tradition is rich with many stories, songs, poems, and religious and tribal customs due to the diversity of peple living in this vast continent. Entire complex cultures have been carried down through the centuries by the spoken work. (<http://arted.osu.edu/kplayground/storytelling.htm>)

J. Lin Campton highlights the same view when he describes oral literature as “unwritten” but “living”. He argues that this form of literature is used as a vehicle for transmitting the history and culture of a people:

The unwritten, but 'living' literature of a people often provides a sensitive reflrection of their values and world view. This form is often used as a vehicle for transmitting, both generationally and geographically, the history and culture of a people. This may take the shape of folk tales and may be said to represent a creative drive and artistic

expression in verbal form. Such stories are usually widespread and research indicates that a great deal of accuracy is obtained in re-telling them. In Africa, the telling of folk tales is a primary medium, skill in which is developed by an individual over a number of years through an unapprenticeship arrangement between an elder and a young aspirant. There are many different types of social occasions at which the 'telling of tales' takes place. Frequently, tales are interspersed with song which all know and in the singing of which all join. For the performer, the presentation of the tale is a bit of acting in itself. (Campton, 1980)

A study of the African tale reveals that besides its moral content, it can as well be used as a reference text for cultural practices of the various ethnic groups in which it is told. The oral tale and oral historical traditions have been the best and most effective means of transmitting events of the past to the present. Often one finds by the fireside at home, an elder telling folk stories to a group of children. It appears that in the early days, story telling was more organised; the elder would come prepared; more involved and stories of the past were recited. In the absence of any written document, oral tales and oral historical traditions remain the sole links between the past and the present. It is perhaps, for this reason that L.I Tambo (2003) observes that, "The legend and story constitute a particular kind of history; as historians will appreciate, history is eminently useful". In a similar perspective, Mcdaniels observes:

Folktales can be used in virtually all disciplines to convey knowledge and communicate ideas. Historians, for example, while questioning the historical accuracy of a tale, acknowledge that much information is contained in them. Folk history reveals a lot about behaviour during the historical period, and certainly the views of 'folk' give insight into the time and the prevailing attitudes held by the people. Anthropologists can study the cultures and traditions of a group. The behaviour of the characters and the deeds performed reveal much about the lifestyle and beliefs of the cultures. (<http://www.yale.com>)

This means that the African oral tale provides the ways in which communities understand and learn their past(s) and how people know who they are. In this way, common storytelling provides the link between the past and the present. At a time when African cultural practices and attitudes are on the wane and many Africans are increasingly becoming ignorant of their original cultural practices, African folklore, especially the oral tale, can be used as a reference texts to reconstruct those crumbling values that are still relevant

and needful in the contemporary world. Commenting on oral tales as references for cultural values, Joanne R. Pompano notes:

Oral traditions, throughout the ages, have provided societies with means of conveying and preserving their history, values, rituals, traditions, spiritual practices, genealogy and other important collective knowledge and experience. Oral traditions helped societies make sense of the world and were used to teach children and adults the important aspects of their culture. In addition, storytelling provided entertainment, developed the imagination, taught important lessons about everyday life, and passed on this information to the younger generation. Oral traditions were important in all societies, but for some societies they became the preferred means for conveying this information to the community for various reasons. Storytelling developed in oral cultures because it was easier to remember information as a series of events instead of as a set of facts. Without libraries or archives, it was the responsibility of the oral historians to keep records and orally pass on the information to the younger generations. (<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum>)

The original African cultural are falling apart. An application of the cultural content of the oral tales would help in revamping the cultural values from their fast decline in the face of Western values. While considering the impact of oral tradition and cultural values to a society, Anthonia Kalu stresses:

Nullification of the role of African narrative practice in contemporary literature poses anthropological questions for the creative writer ...recognition and exploration of African identity embedded in the oral traditions of people of African descent occupies a significant place in continental and African Diaspora Scholarship. (Kalu 1998).

The African oral tale explores the pattern of cultural life of her various ethnic groups. It is, therefore, necessary to recognize the relevance of some cultural norms inherent in the oral tale. It is for this reason that Kalu recommends:

That Africans in general and Africanists in particular should rise to the project to (re-member and re-deploy African thought, African traditions. Further, the political implications of the encounter demand immediate deployment of the artifacts of

these archeological endeavours. (Kalu, 1998)

The African oral tale provides a view of life of a people, unwritten laws governing cultural conduct and models of expected attitudes, moral values and behaviour and the youth can, therefore exploit it as a reference texts for cultural development. There is no doubt that with the intrusion of Western cultural values in Africa, which has, inter alia, occasioned the need for massive migration, many Africans are ignorant of their cultural practices. What is evident from the study of the African oral tale is the fact that each African ethnic group should enhance their knowledge of culture by studying the tales of their area of origin. The tales address issues of marriage, birth, death, witchcraft, punishment, reward, farming, hunting, wars, leadership, heroism and so on and the cultural norms guiding them. It is generally agreed in African literary discourse that in the last one hundred years, Africa has been experiencing a process of cultural erosion that is leading to what others have described as the collapse of traditional culture and ethics. The impact of globalization whose propelling cultural and economic elements are predominantly alien reinforces this scepticism and justifies the need for African cultural development. Today, as we realize the gaps of Western conception of development in Africa, there is need to revisit the past in order to develop new conceptual paradigms and find for African development a strong ethical content based on the view that culture is the source which nourishes all human activities in the traditional society (www.crvp.org/book/series). One of the greatest sources of such values is the oral tale. Jaime Riasco emphasizes this view in his study of Latin American storytelling movements as follows:

These broad culture groups or genres of storytellers continue to exert power and communicate values to their communities by means of orally transmitted knowledge and entertainment. In small villages, especially in those where TV and radio have not dismembered the communities' natural cohesion, they continue with their oral narratives and preserve traditions and cultural identities.
(www.crvp.org/book/series)

The aforementioned examples confirm the fact that the African oral tale is carrier of culture and can be consulted as a text on cultural practices and attitudes. This view holds good with L.I. Tambo's opinion that the telling of stories and the way we tell them situate, (dis) empowers us and reveals our prejudices (244 – 245). The absence or decline in the knowledge of ones folklore is, no doubt, a threat to an effective practical application of some cultural values and practices. Odetola and Ademola report that:

Kofi Awoonor blames the malaise and instability of contemporary Africa on the failure to maintain an organic continuity with the past. A complete divorce from the old values has led to sterility and imitation.
(Odetola and Ademola, 1990)

The African oral tale transmits ancestral wisdom and maintains the organic unity with the past. It provides references and may revive some cultural practices and values which otherwise would wither and die. They maintain continuity by explaining the origins and systems of marriage and inheritance and preserve the modes of thoughts of their ancestors. Looking at Literature as a source of information, Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs opine:

Literature helps us grow both personally and intellectually. It opens the cultural, philosophical and religious practices of which we are part. It enables us to recognize human dreams and struggles in different places and times that we otherwise would never know existed. It gives us the knowledge and perception to appreciate the beauty of order and arrangement. It provides the comparative basis from which to see worthiness in the aims of all people. (Roberts and Jacobs, 2000)

Finally, a study of the African oral tale has revealed that the tale provides references for cultural practices and such a function can enhance, in the youths, personal and intellectual growth and experiences. Systematic references to oral tales can also help to salvage and reconstruct in the young people the crumbling identity of the Africans. In the context of globalisation, cultures of less sophisticated peoples, like many African ethnic groups, are endangered in that they may disappear in the face of the so called superior cultures. African cultures have experienced a tremendous wane and deserve to be salvaged and promoted. The African oral tale possesses the cultural wisdom, which can still be useful in the contemporary development of these cultures. It means that the malaise and instability of contemporary Africa can, partly, be redressed by an appropriate preservation and transmission of the African oral tale in particular and folklore in general. In all, as part of the remedy for the moral and cultural dilemmas, the African youth needs the African oral tale to surmount the challenges of the 21st century. Indeed the African youth must agree, like Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington that "culture matters" and "values shape human progress."

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