

Kohlberg's Cognitive-Developmental Paradigm: A Systematic Application of the African Oral Tale for Moral Edification

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which the application of some traditional African tales are damaging to tender minds and, therefore, injurious to the process of moral edification in the society as some critics have argued. This paper rests on the conclusion that an unsystematic and uncoordinated application of tales to children is likely to a large extent, blight moral development and expose children to indecency and obscure moral standards. To attain the aim of this research, the functional and sociological literary approaches are utilized as analytical tools. In an attempt to proffer a solution to indecency and obscure moral standards in children, these researchers posit as a hypothetical contention that a meticulous application of Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive developmental paradigm employed as a method of selecting the right tale for the right stage of moral development, can avoid the inappropriate transmission of damaging tales or present an overdose of irrelevant tales and therefore, provide a systematic and effective exploitation of oral tale in the process of moral development. Finally, the study reemphasizes the view of other scholars that African oral tales constitute a rich source of moral enhancement to tender minds.

Keywords: Kohlberg's, Cognitive, Developmental, African, Oral tale, Moral, Edification.

Background to the Study and Aim of Research

That African oral tales contribute to development is already a foregone conclusion in the discourse of African Orature. Wolfgang Sachs, Kwesi Prah, Zounmenou M.V. in *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the African Development: the Political Roles of Oral Genres with Specific Reference to Zulu and Goun* have, from various angles, raised cogent arguments to highlight the indispensable role of African oral tradition in local development trajectories. In the same way, Dorji Penjore in *Folktales and Education: the Role of Bhutanese Folktales in Value Transmission*, Pence A. and Schaffer in *Knowledge and Early Childhood Development in Africa* and Henry Kah Jick in *Folklore and National Development: Kom and Bakweri Proverbs* have emphasized the rich moral content of African oral genres and their capacities to foster the various forms of development. However, David Boudinot in *Violence and Fear in Folktales* raises misgivings about this popular opinion. He argues that tales may seem fun and innocent from the outside but they teach children false ideas about love and gender roles and concepts of good versus evil which can lead to problems later on with extremely high expectations, depression and unreal look of life. In the same light, Jack Zipes in *Fairy Tales as Myths, Myths as Fairy Tales* contends that though fairy tales were intended to reinforce the mores and values they were so symbolical and could be read from so many different levels that they were considered somewhat dangerous. In the web of this dilemma, it is the responsibility of scholars in the areas of Orature and Moral Development, and so it is our responsibility in this paper, to prescribe the dosage of oral narratives to each stage of moral development so that their damaging capacities can be curbed.

Theoretical Framework

It is common knowledge that serious studies on moral development fall squarely within psychology's purview and mandate. It implies that the functional and sociological literary approaches that constitute the basis of textual analyses in this paper should, logically, be underpinned by psychological concept of moral development. In the opinion of Walker et al. (1995) contemporary moral psychology has been prodigiously influenced by the significant contributions of Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive development paradigm which, consequently, forms the context for contemporary moral psychology.

According to Ruth Doran:

It is important to consider child development as a contextual frame for the consideration of fairy tale literature in pre-primary curriculum. Jean Piaget's theory of developmental stages provides the theoretical underpinnings for many approaches to early childhood education and care around the world. Piaget's theory of cognition includes the notion that a child passes through in an invariant manner that is also transformative, meaning that the quality of later intellectual

behaviour depends on the quality of the experiences that preceded it. Preschool children are typically engaged in the preoperational period of human development (typically age two through seven). (www.cecde.ie/english/pdf)

On the basis of this widely acclaimed submission, this paper examines the possible contributions of the oral tale at each of the five stages of Kohlberg's cognitive development theory. According to Worthman et al. (1981:266) at the first stage of that paradigm called, the pre-convention level of moral development, a child adheres to the rules of society because he or she fears the consequences of breaking them. The child, in other words, acts "good" to avoid punishment. Russo and Willis (1988:204) contend that he or she is motivated by fear of getting caught, desire to avoid punishment by authority and develops the awareness of rules and consequences of breaking them.

Analysis of Tales

The repertoire of African oral tales readily provides appropriate tales that can be beneficial for the development of morality at the pre-convention level of moral development or that can be tapped to stimulate the development of morality at this stage. Some African tales demonstrate the possible repercussions of disobedience and that stubbornness manifested in the disrespect for elders usually culminates in physical pain and regrets. Tender minds that belong to this level of moral development are encouraged to indulge in actions that are motivated by avoidance of punishment. They recognize the fact that what is regarded by those in power is good and what is punished is bad. This view is corroborated by Worthman et al. (1981:265) in the claim "that children behave morally because over the years they are reinforced for good behaviour and punished for bad behaviour and they are also provided with moral models to imitate". African oral tales couched in retributive justice that highlight the painful aftermath of crime and disobedience, especially those that take an etiological dimension are most appropriate at the pre-convention level. Doran further explains the psychological impact of tales in the moral development of such children as follows:

The term "preoperational" is used precisely because children have not yet reached the point of engaging in logical or operational thought. In this stage, children are egocentric, meaning that they have not learned to consider things from another's perspective, rendering objectivity impossible. Young children also attribute life to inanimate objects believing that they have a mind of their own (animism).....children engaged in the preoperational stage do not think abstractly, objectively, or in a logical sequence. As explained by Piaget, these developmental hallmarks of the preoperational stage preclude young children from the strategies necessary to properly distinguish fantasy from reality, as developmentally, their ability to process information is structurally limited. Instead, reality consists of whatever is felt, seen or heard at any given moment. (www.cecde.ie/english/)

At the second stage of moral development, human relations are governed by concrete reciprocity. Russo and Willis (1988:204) explain that the second stage comes with the awareness that morality has something to do with human relationship. There is an understanding for reciprocity on a tit-for-tat level. Actions are motivated by desires for reward or benefits and possible guilt reactions are ignored and punishment is viewed in a pragmatic manner. The etiological African tale which explains why the Tortoise has Cracks on its Shell fits into and reinforces this stage of moral development. In this tale, the birds decide to punish the tortoise because of its wickedness demonstrated through excessive greed during a party in the sky. Mr. Tortoise' greed has clouded his thoughts and he has forgotten so soon the love and generosity the birds demonstrated to him by lending him feathers to fly and attend a party in the sky. Secular tricksters like the Tortoise often project the kinds of evil forces and bad behaviors against which the human community must contend to survive and which must be kept in check. This goal is rehearsed and achieved in communal performances of African proverbs and folktales, wherein the trickster's bad anti-social behavior like that of the Tortoise are usually punished, and the evil forces unleashed are controlled or defeated. The central theme of the tale which is the reward of excessive greed stimulates the second stage of moral development as it depicts, especially to tender minds, the reciprocity of human action through the indelible cracks on the tortoise's shell:

When the bird went down, he told the tortoise's wife to put out all the kitchen utensils, hoes, cutlasses, spears, axes and all other tools in the yard and cover them with plantain leaves. Tortoise's wife unsuspectingly obeyed and did as she was told. Then tortoise looked down from the sky above and saw that all was set. He jumped out and started falling. He fell, fell and fell until when he finally

touched the ground, his shell shattered into pieces and he felt great pain all over his body.

When some of the birds who were hanging around on tree tops heard the great noise, poom!, they were frightened, but when they discovered that it was the tortoise that had fallen, they chirped away in great joy. They were happy with the way things had turned out. "it serves you right" they chirped away. Luckily for tortoise his wife quickly gathered the pieces of the broken shell and invited a herbalist to come and cure him. The herbalist succeeded in curing him but could not succeed in bringing back the tortoise's shell into its original shape. Thus it has remained cracked, up till this day.

The positive impact of this tale on the moral edification of children is tremendous. It dramatizes the regrettable accompaniments of greed by pointing out that such a moral blight attracts indelible and far-reaching consequences. Framed as an etiological tale, it holds up to scorn people who are wily, dishonest, greedy and irascible. According to Doran, children who naturally, do not distinguish between fantasies and realities are expected to get morally transformed when their young minds are introduced to practical consequences of sin. (www.cecde.te/english/pdf)

Bettelheim provides copious reasons why children from eight years and above benefit from oral tales. They provide a venue for children to grapple with very big issues while defining the boundaries of the "id" in their psychoanalytic framework. To Bettelheim, in oral tales, we are able to come to grips with universal problems (aging, death, sibling, rivalry, narcissistic disappointments, oedipal dilemmas, self-worth, and moral obligations) in ways that are personally adapted and interpreted by each learner. Contained within most oral tales are the omnipresent issues of good and evil, and the duality these issues represent state the opportunity to elicit moral resolutions. Many children in modern society develop without extended families or being part of a well-integrated community. To Bettelheim, oral tales help children to navigate through their anxieties and transform fears into a confident approach to life, as they learn resolutions through archetypal transmission of models through oral tales. The oral tale is suspended in time and place. It starts out with "once upon a time" and ends with the real beginning. "Once upon a time" and "in a place far away" meaning that it happened once, somewhere, and it could happen again, now or in the future. This circular structure gives children a window into another world, outside of their reality, yet inside of themselves. In an oral tale, internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figure of the story and its events" (Bettelheim, 1979:162). Oral tales can provide the beacon which illustrates a pathway towards the resolutions of the normal anxieties encountered in the developing child. Happy endings, which are typical in oral tales, provide a positive backdrop of overcoming a dangerous or adverse situation.

The third stage of moral development falls within the conventional level. The child is concerned about winning the approval of others and meeting their standards and expectations. He or she is often inclined to follow the dictates of established authority. There is a conscious desire for social approval by living up to good boy or girl stereotype (Russo and Willis, 1988, p.204). Good behaviour is judged on the basis of social conformity. The success of the heroine in *Abztchi* (a tale told in Kom in the Grass field of Cameroon) comes as a result of the protagonist's patience, humility and absolute respect for elders. The tale is fashioned after the tradition of Cinderella. Variations of the Cinderella have been told around the world for thousands of years. The theme and plot of the story seem to have appealed across a myriad of cultures and times. In this tale, the heroine is presented as an orphan treated by her aunt with exceeding grudge in the scornful company of her half sisters who are favoured and pampered by their mother. The central theme of the tale which is the struggle to win social approval can be used to foster development at the third stage of Kohlberg's cognitive developmental paradigm:

After the delicious meal, the hag gave Abztchi the lost bowl. She was very thankful. When she was leaving the hag gave her an egg and advised her to break it when she got home.

As soon as she got home and handed the bowl to her foster mother, she secretly went behind the house and broke the egg. She was surprised to notice that as soon as the egg was broken, huge sums of money appeared. Besides, houses, dresses, shops etc. appeared and in a twinkling of an eye Abztchi becomes a very wealthy girl.

Obedience, patience, respect and humility that combine to underpin the protagonist's moral life are demonstrated as elements of success and progress. She is portrayed as a wretched and abandoned girl who is

raised in callousness by a foster aunt but whose moral vim provides a path to success. A well-fortified and story-enriched moral imagination helps children to move about in their expanding world with moral intent and ultimately with faith, hope and charity. We all would like good triumph, evil punished, justice prevail. This is most common in children's literature. Their sense of justice and fair play is rewarded in the story of Abztchi. She is treated badly by her family, her aunt and sisters but, though they seem to be in charge and be "winning" at the beginning of the story, they are relegated to misery and disappointment at the end. Those who treat others badly do not prosper in African oral tales. Good stories are like scaffolding in a child's mind in which truth will grow up firmly until it is strong enough to stand apart on its own. Too young to see the graduations from good and evil that adults see in the "real" world, children can relate to the simplicity of the oral tale which helps build a moral universe that strengthens and guides. Children, like all human beings need meaning in their lives. Storytelling satisfies this need and desire by intending an intelligible, coherent meaningful world. Abztchi's moral integrity is pitted against impudence, arrogance, hatred and pride exhibited by cousins and the triumph of virtue over vice is forcefully demonstrated.

At the fourth stage of moral development, there is a larger social system that regulates the behaviour of individuals within it. In this case, authority or the social order is the source of morality. There is consciously, a sense of duty or obligation to live up to socially defined role and maintain existing social order for the general good of man. A good number of oral tales in Africa are efficacious and can fit neatly in the process of moral development at this stage. The conditions set by the sisters in an African tale entitled, "The Seven Proud Sisters" result in lamentable consequences because they are not in conformity with the social order:

Once upon a time, a "Fon" had seven daughters who were so proud that they thought nobody was good enough to marry them. Nobody out of the royal household knew their names. They promised to marry any man who could tell all their names

The proud and self-conceited girls are held up to scorn by finally getting married to the poor, wily and ugly tortoise. When the girls, out of sheer pride, attempt to abrogate the rules guiding social order in the community in which the tale is told by introducing exotic and childish prerequisites for marriage, the result is utter humiliation and regret and no tender mind in the audience desires such a painful aftermath.

The fifth stage of moral development belongs to the post conventional level which is not reached in childhood. It is attained by only a few adults. A person at this level recognizes that universal ethical principles can transcend the specific laws of a society. Failure to adhere to these principles brings self-condemnation and loss of self respect. Actions at this stage are motivated by internal commitment to principles of conscience, respect for the right, life and dignity of all persons. In any case, there are African oral tales that can be exploited to enhance development at this stage. Achuo's actions in a tale entitled, "Achuo the Wise King" are determined by conscience and wisdom. His level-headedness, wit and moral judgment on issues of leadership transcend communal authority and appeal to the universal demands of good morals and can be used to foster moral development at the post conventional level of Kohlberg's developmental paradigm:

Achuo was surrounded by wise councilors. They advised him to take the right decisions in times of troubles. Luckily, Chief Achuo listened to his councilors because he was a humble man. He grew wise and popular. For over twenty-five years all the neighbouring clans were involved in inter-tribal wars except Chief Achuo's clan. Most often the wars started over land disputes. Chief Achuo had warned his clan that fighting wars was not the best solution to problems. He believed in dialogue. The other clans provoked him several times to fight a war but they did not succeed. "if I go to war and my people are killed whom shall I rule?" he always asked. The other clans mocked at his clan for being the weakest in the land. Chief Achuo told his people not to be worried. Though he did not go to war with neighbouring clans, he played an important role in making peace between warring clans. Most often, he failed because the clans that fought the wars were ruled by proud chiefs. They did not want to accept defeat.

The tale tackles the lamentable repercussions of social conflicts and wars from a universal perspective. It goes beyond condemning interpersonal tension and squabbles to issues of world peace that are most properly and adequately appreciated through long standing experiences and wisdom of elders. In this case, the importance of

peace in human development is expressed and it has the tendency to stimulate development at the post conventional level.

Conclusion

Generally, given the relevance of oral tales at each stage of Kohlberg's moral development paradigm, it can be submitted that African oral tales can be used to foster moral development. In other words, African oral tales have an impact in the moral construction of the human mind. Bruno Bettelheim provides a satisfactory explanation of the psychological processes of the human mind in contact with fictional stories which deserves to be quoted extensively here:

In order to master the psychological problems of growing up, overcoming narcissistic disappointments, oedipal dilemmas, sibling rivalries, becoming able to relinquish childhood dependencies, gaining a feeling of self-worth and a sense of moral obligation – a child needs to understand what is going on within his conscious self so that he can also cope with that which goes on in his unconscious. He can achieve this understanding, and with it the ability to cope, not through rational comprehension of the nature and content of his unconscious by becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams, ruminating, rearranging and fantasizing about story elements in response to unconscious content into conscious fantasies, which then enable him to deal with that content. It is here that fairy tales have unequalled value, because they offer new dimensions to the child's imagination which would be impossible for him to discover as truly on his own. Even more important, the form and structure of fairy tales suggest images to the child by which he can structure his daydreams and with them give better directions to his life. (qtd. by Grugeon and Walden, 1978, p.36).

This paper has corroborated the claim from some skeptics that some oral tales portray tyranny, savagery, and outright inhumanity of human actions and may rather be detrimental to the process of moral edification. However, as a solution to this dilemma, the paper has provided copious reasons to justify the view that if African tales are prudently selected and systematically applied to tender minds in consonance with the five stages of Kohlberg's cognitive developmental paradigm, their moral content would be strengthened and their ruining capacities curbed.

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