

From Grace to Grass: The Metamorphic Complexity of the Bakor Folktale Hero-Protagonist

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the heroic personality has undergone drastic changes over the ages. From the ancient mythological concept of the hero as a divine creature or the god-head to the modern times, the hero and heroism have been defined according to the transformations the hero has undergone through geographical, ethnic, cultural or chronological boundaries. Yesterday's hero is most likely not today's hero since environmental circumstances dictate the changing face of the hero and what constitutes heroism.

These considerations have spurred this writer into an examination of the heroic personality and the concept of heroism in Bakor society with the view to understanding what the people conceive of the hero and heroism. The method was to examine few folktales which constitute the operational dynamics of the hero-protagonist in Bakor society. The conclusion is that the hero-protagonist in Bakor is a rather complex embodiment of virtue and vice depending on the society's philosophical outlook which moulds the personality and actions of the hero-protagonist. Moreover, the hero-protagonist's actions also largely depend on the perception of the artist of the ethical values of moral stand point of the community within which the hero-protagonist is created. Manipulation by the artist during performance is therefore a common phenomenon in the attempt to reflect different facets of cultural life while at the same time, enhancing the metamorphic complexity of the hero-protagonist.

Keywords: metamorphic complexity, hero-protagonist

The development of the heroic personality has been one of controversy through the ages. The perception of what the heroic and heroism should be has never been fully resolved in all ages. Thomas Carlyle (1904) examines the notion of the hero and hero-worship in the 19th century and traces the stages of development from the divine to the prophetic, priestly, literary and lastly monarchical. Each of these ages had its own attributes or perceptions of the individual as a hero. These expectations have differed from Nordic paganist or mythological conceptions of the hero as a divine being, through the prophetic age of Mahomet in Islam; the poetic ages of Dante and Shakespeare; the Priestly puritanist or reformatory movements of Luther e.t.c. to the modernist monarchical age of the hero as king. Today, however, the concept of the hero or heroism can be applied to anyone or the ordinary person in society. In the past, heroes were leaders of men; great men who worked and lived and were conceived of as the modelers of society. They were seen as creators of whatever the generality of society contrived to be or to attain. They were seen as accomplishers of all things we see standing in the outer world. These things were seen as the material result, the practical realization and embodiments of the thoughts of these great heroes in the world. Man, created in the image and likeness of God, was the rarest emblem of nature, the overall hero in his grandiose personality. Carlyle also argues that societies of the world are founded on hero-worship i.e. "hierarchies", properly spelt as "hero-archy", meaning government of heroes. Society revered and paid allegiance to men who were wise and great and thus heroes. These great dignitaries are, therefore, compared to bank-notes which represent gold even though gold is sometimes faked or adulterated and bank-notes are easily forged. The hero is worshipped as an epitome of ethical excellence because he possesses unfathomable qualities but like fake gold or a forged bank-note, the hero can degenerate. Anything inexplicable is held in awe and in most instances worshipped. But in Bakor society the position of the hero is shrouded in ambivalence. His complex personality is open to both admiration as well as derision. Here the hero changes with changing circumstances.

We have observed that in ancient times, the concept of the hero was divine or semi-divine but in modern times heroism is determined by the hero's relationship with his society or the group to which he belongs. The society or group creates the hero to reflect their norms or cultural background. Here the hero either helps to define society or to condemn social conventions acceptable to society but at variance with the hero's vision. According to C.M. Bowra, (1969), heroes arouse not only interest in their doings but admiration and even awe for themselves. He further argues that

"Heroic poetry [and literature] comes into existence when popular attention concentrates, not only on a man's magical powers, but on his specifically human virtues"... (p. 22)

Literary artists, therefore, create heroes who are socially aware of their society's expectations. In traditional African society, like the Bakor society, the artist is the spokesman for his society who recreates the communal consciousness of his people. O. R. Dathorne (1974) describes the complexity of the traditional artist when he observes that

- ... the artist in traditional African society is a difficult figure to understand, for his function corresponds to nothing comparable in present day western society. He is at once inheritor and donor of the literature, its custodian and its liberator. He is the spokesman for the society in which he lives; sharing its prejudices and directing its dislikes (in a limited form of satire) against what is discountenanced. He is not recognized as an individual, for he has no personal voice, but he is a highly respected member of the community. (The Black mind p.3)

If the Bakor artist, as an African artist, who creates the hero-protagonist is "such a difficult figure to understand", according to Dathorne, one can only imagine how complex his creation, the hero-protagonist can be. The hero-protagonist, like the artist, becomes the link that binds art to the lives of the people, the continuous expression of a living art.

The artist's manipulation of the tale and its hero-protagonist is dependent upon the role he perceives in society since the manipulation must be appropriate to the social context required and accepted by the community. The artist interprets history by recounting it while the audiences are judges who evaluate the literary process and experience. The complexity of the hero-protagonist is therefore part and parcel of this experience, known to the community and forming the totality of the Bakor ethical, literary and cosmic view point. Dathorne again argues that

- ...the idea of alienation is totally incongruous and foreign to the African traditional artist, [since] art, like life is whole and both artist and audience were interested, not only in the transposition of the experience from the absolute to the representative, but also in the complete restructuring of that experience (Dathorne p.5)

The restructuring of that experience gives birth to the complexity of the hero-protagonist as he is continually being manipulated to reflect the various facets of Bakor cultural life. The only formal limitation to the manipulative skill of the artist therefore, is the tradition as the artist has to draw from it as well as reshape it for posterity, through the effective portrayal of the different faces of the hero-protagonist. Harold Scheub (1975) therefore maintains that among the xhosa

- ... artistic tools are the traditional core images, the contemporary milieu and the audiences. The demands of these audiences and the artistic efforts of the performers have combined to create a set of aesthetic principles on which the art is executed. (Scheub p.1)

Therefore, with the inter-relationships between the constituents of a performance i.e. the tale, the images within the context of performance and effective audience participation, as well as occasions for rendition, the Bakor artist is able, through his skillful manipulation of resources to create complex yet plausible hero-protagonists who embody societal values; heroes who can inspire human imitation; who possess admirable moral qualities of intelligence, foresight and wisdom but whose characters are sometimes questionable and un-acceptable in society. Heroes who sometimes stand against society in their courageous and uncompromising opposition to injustice, and who fight to maintain the integrity of human life; yet at times becoming the perpetrators of this injustice. Through the tale and the multi-faceted hero-protagonist, the artist strives to attain the ultimate of creating perfection in human society. The Bakor people view the folktale and the hero-protagonist as the means to an understanding, modeling and shaping societal relationships as well as the portrayal of man's eternal link with nature and his environment including human psychic dispositions.

Frederick Garber (1969) therefore, argues that the concept of the hero and heroism are not stable since the hero is a composite picture of society. The hero, he says, does not always "Play a consistent role because of his shifting feelings towards the role that he chooses to play". (p.218)

R. P. Blackmur defines heroism as that which:

We give to those to whom we turn for strength in the effort to find ourselves a motive or in the worse effort to create in ourselves a conscience. (p. 220)

Therefore, the job of the literary artist in every society is to deliberately create heroes who are representatives of the conscience of the society. As the society's conscience, the hero is conceived of as a social creation who personifies the socially approved norms to the satisfaction of society. He is a model who contemporary society invests with their admiration and sympathy. He thus becomes someone, who, like the preacher or artist is perceptive of societal inabilities and inadequacies. He possesses a certain degree of power and responsibility to influence society by being better or living above societal norms. The hero forces society to emulate his objectives and lifestyle rather than succumbing to societal prescriptions.

At this point, the personality of the hero becomes complex and difficult to comprehend. The hero must deviate from conventional action and tow a path of perfection which then affects others to admire, eulogize and observe in heroic terms. In the absence of semi-divine or superhuman heroes, traditional society, like the Bakor society, creates folktale heroes who are admired for their moral and ethical rectitude. Sean O’Faolain in his *“The Vanishing Hero”* (1956) feels that the development of large cosmopolitan centres does not leave much room or does not favour the semi-divine concept of the hero. Today, traditional society creates a phlethora of folktale hero-protagonists who embody human achievement and heroism as well as debasement and degeneration. Satire has grown chiefly as a genre aimed at the exposition and correction of human vices. This shows the complex nature of man as God’s creation. His capacity for good and evil are equal and unfathomable. To grasp these complexities, humanity has evolved institutions and disciplines like Literature, psychology, religion, philosophy science and social anthropology which attempt to decipher the workings of the human mind or the psychic potential of man. In the same vein, traditional or pre-literate society has developed its own methods of understanding man in his relationship with his environment and with his fellow humans. The Bakor folktale hero-protagonist thus becomes a complex embodiment of vice and virtue, often difficult to understand yet sometimes naively simple and ethically pleasurable. It is for this reason that scholars have argued that the hero-protagonist in stories is sometimes referred to as *“the good guy”*, but it is entirely possible for a story’s protagonist to be the clear villain or anti-hero, of the [narrative] piece (Wikipedia.org/wiki/protagonist). In Bakor folktale repertoire, the hero embodies both personalities. He is good and he is bad, he creates and he destroys, he kills and he saves.

The embodiment of a dual personality in one hero-protagonist is what I have termed a metamorphic complexity and it arises out of the fact that the metamorphosis is made possible and easily achievable either in a single tale where he plays a dual role of the *“good guy”* at one point and the *“criminal”* in another or in two separate tales where he plays different or contrasting roles. Again over a long period of time, the stories have been subjected to several revisions as the community evolves and the people of each era have built in details that reflect their own experiences, attitudes and aesthetic standards all of which help them to find more meaning in the stories. The hero-protagonists have equally evolved through the ages to reflect different societal needs, all of which contributions have helped enhance both the stories content and artistic appeal. The point to note is that generally, the stories represent the crystallization of the wisdom of the ancestors of the Bakor, handed down through generations and helping to mould the consciousness of the people while serving as veritable sources, not only for the education of younger ones but also as mobilization strategies for ruling elders and chiefs in the onerous task of governance in the land. This is so because, the degree of metamorphosis notwithstanding, the roles of the hero-protagonists still contain an inherent lesson despite all the shifts in their personality traits. The audience must decipher these lessons for their edification or the lessons are drawn out for them by the story-tellers and older members of the society. What comes to light here is the importance of the folktales and subsequently of the hero-protagonists to the community. Consequently, whether the hero-protagonist is heinous or admirable is really beside the point. What matters is the lesson to be learnt or the moral to draw at the end from the actions of the hero-protagonist, his position or role in the story notwithstanding. This is what Joseph Campbell (1949) posits when he argues that myths and epics are linked in the human psyche, and that they are cultural manifestations of the universal need to explain social, cosmological and spiritual realities. I would like to add that the folktale is akin to the myth or epic in this parlance which is why anthropologists like Malinowski (1926), Okoi Arikpo (1957) and The Herskovits (1958) have averred that societies without folk narratives cannot be said to be truly conscious of their existence or even the continuity of their posterity. But the folktale is not reality, neither is it a description of reality. It is, instead, a symbol of psychological happenings which require proper responses to become relevant and meaningful in society as solutions to adolescent problems. Folktales provide a psychological frame of reference for the evaluation of reality. The folktale hero-protagonist’s exploits are only relevant when viewed and properly interpreted in the light of existential realities prevalent and peculiar to the environment within which the hero operates. For this reason, the folktale is well known, throughout the history of literary creativity, as not only a means of entertainment but also a reservoir of ethical values for the education or instruction of younger generations on the ways of the society. The audience is the direct beneficiaries of this juxtaposition of artistry and functionalism in folktale rendition. The artist or skilled narrator must be aware of societal demands and so relies on the performance context to highlight communal experiences. The artist’s or narrator’s job is to adequately portray or point out a moral for his audience’s emulation or take away. In this setting, therefore, the hero-protagonist is a product of societal expectation and open to skilled manipulation by the accomplished artist to reflect good or evil; vice or virtue; builder or destroyer depending on the artist’s emphasis or vision.

In literature, however, hero-protagonists are of different kinds. There are national and culture heroes. The national, or mythological or even historical hero is one who is known to be the founder of a nation like Sundiata and the Mali Empire or Chaka and the Zulu kingdom e.t.c. these are heroes with semi-divine or superhuman attributes. The culture hero is a tribal hero responsible for immense assistance to his tribal group like Oduduwa and the Yoruba people and Trickster cultural heroes like Nana Triban of the Sundiata legend in Mali. In this paper, however, I am concerned with the type of hero usually described as the folk-hero. The folk-hero is seen simply as an ordinary individual with special skills which the hero utilizes mostly to the benefit of but sometimes to the detriment of his/her community. This is the folktale hero-protagonist who, in different societies or circumstances, is open to several kinds of transformation. Robert M. Tilendis rightly observes in his review of Joseph W. Campbell's classic *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, that the hero is many things to everyone in the society within which he is created says Tilendis,

- The central image, of course, is that of the hero: creator, destroyer, conqueror, and savior. He ...and sometimes she... is the agent of transformation and so represent the forces of life. (p.1).

I would like to add that he, the hero, is not just an agent of transformation but is himself, subject to transformation in the perception of the audience and the accomplished artist to whom he, the hero, is simply a creation of their collective consciousness or experiences. He changes according to the wishes of the people especially as an embodiment of their cultural norms, their likes and dislikes and so is difficult to comprehend as he translates from one role to another. At one level, he is what Jonathan Gottschall et al define as

- A character who plays a central role in the action for which the audience is led to root predominantly for rather than predominantly against. (p. 368)

Here he is what is generally known in literary cycles as the "good guy". At another level he becomes the false hero or antagonist, a criminal who goes against societal expectations and causes untold problems to his community. Here he is the "bad guy" who disrupts the established order thus bringing about a transformation in his society or even becoming transformed himself.

In Bakor oral narrative repertoire which represents the repository of information on the lives and experiences of the Bakor people, the hero-protagonist arouses complex and diverse responses from the audience. The numerous roles and complex personality traits he embodies either endear him to his audience and earn him applause or present him as a loathsome figure open to intense criticism and often times outright or total rejection as a deviant and undesirable element in society. The situational or environmental changes to which the hero-protagonist is subject are possible because as Jonathan Gottschall once again observes,

- ... the details of heroes "faces" may change as the investigator crosses geographical, ethnic, cultural and chronological borders.

Again I may add that the faces change, not only from one geographical or ethnic culture to another but also within the same culture as the hero changes roles or as he transforms from one phase to another. So it is a matter of "changing phases, change the face" of the hero-protagonist.

Perhaps it is noteworthy to point out that the Bakor hero-protagonist, as a folk hero, is not necessarily super-human or supernatural. He is, instead, seen as a creature of high morality but who sometimes degenerates to bestial actions. He embodies or epitomizes a wide range of virtues and vices as the perception of the narrator or environmental circumstances dictate. As folk hero also, he is an embodiment of what society cherishes or abhors. His personality and deeds remain alive in the community's popular consciousness. These folk-heroes are thus the subject of almost every kind of folk narrative in the community. Bakor society also has folk heroes who are not necessarily historical or public figures. Bakor folk-tale characters consist predominantly of animals like hare, tortoise and spider and any other animal, all of whom interact easily in the human society and act as human beings. Any of these could become a hero-protagonist since the narratives are not always based on historical events. The animal folk hero imbibes human qualities and is imbued with speech and other human attributes and characteristics. The arrangement serves as a form of objectification of action thus aiding the reduction of emotional involvement of audience members while enhancing or heightening participation. The hero protagonist thus appears at the onset of a tale as an ordinary character but through some significant action gets transformed, often in response to certain perceived forces in the environment. The hero-protagonist may retain his ethical qualities from beginning to end of a narrative or become a deviant at some point, acting against the laws acceptable to society which to him becomes oppressive. This is what Frederick Garber describes as the hero's "shifting feelings towards the role that he chooses to play" but which I'd rather say he, the hero, is chosen to play by society.

If by the concept of the hero and heroism we accept that the hero has the power and responsibility to influence society and invest society with his own lifestyle and objectives, we can start to comprehend the complexity of the Bakor hero-protagonist and his dual personality. This is in the sense that in Bakor folk narrative parlance, the hero-

protagonist and the entire concept of hero and heroism will conflict with classic and superhuman connotations of hero and heroism. In Bakor, the hero, who often times is the protagonist of the folk narratives is an ordinary person who may operate in extra-ordinary circumstances and whose actions may or may not impact positively on society. The hero is what people see of him, think about him and want him to be. He is simply a mirror or projection of societal foibles and so can be created in any form relevant to societal experiences and wishes. Roma Chatterji (1986), therefore, posits that

- The hero or more generally protagonist is first and foremost a symbolic representation of the person who is experiencing the story...; thus the relevance of the hero to the individual [and to society] relies a great deal on how much similarity there is between the two.

Roma Chatterji's position summarizes the place of the hero as protagonist in Bakor folktale repertoire. He symbolizes the society's collective experiences, their communal ethos; what they abhor or cherish. He is the epitome of the life force and the totality of their religious or cosmic beliefs as well as the dictator of their moral and ethical standards. To understand his role and functioning, the hero-protagonist must be carefully analyzed in context to understand what role he is playing in a particular narrative. The performance context of the Bakor folktale, like any other performance context, serves as the only avenue for a proper perception of the role and personality of the hero-protagonist. In modern parlance, the conception of the hero and heroism have developed several connotations. Anybody can be a hero. Anyone who displays exceptional capacity in the handling of a deteriorating situation could be eulogized as hero; anyone who makes sacrifice for the upliftment of others is a hero; anyone who shows compassion about the plight of others is a hero; above all, any individual who is bold, daring and devoted is often regarded as a hero and his deeds heroic. However, it is on record that people have often gone against the run of societal expectations and yet been acclaimed heroes and so the Bakor hero-protagonist is all and all; the builder and the destroyer; the hero and the anti-hero, but in all these faces, he is always the reflector of the people's wishes, their successes and their tribulations. For lack of space, an analysis of very few Bakor tales will help to bring out the place of the hero-protagonist. The hare and the lion, two prominent Bakor folktale characters, are often cast as never do-wells. However, in the story of the friendship between lion and fire, it is difficult to apportion blame even though hare comes off as a good helper of the community. In summary, Lion decides to be friendly with everyone especially fire. He accuses fire of not visiting. Fire accepts to visit but says he can only sit on the roof of lion's house. Lion agrees but when fire starts razing his house, he attempts to extinguish fire from the earth. He gets tired in the process of collecting water from a stream to put out fire and falls asleep. Hare comes and carries him away; claiming lion has been killed by fire. Lion wakes up and tries to kill hare but hare throws him down and runs away. Lion feigns death and invites hare for the funeral. Hare is suspicious and on arrival points his dane gun directly at lions face pretending to fire. Lion gets afraid and blinks. Hare sees and in a song, warns others to be careful because lion is alive and pretending to be dead so as to trap unsuspecting people. Lion jumps up and goes after hare who again escapes. He then tricks Lion into an ant-hill and there kills him, thus ridding the society of a killer. Lion is however resurrected in another complementary narrative. At the onset, Lion's friendship is a sign of goodness and is appreciated but the burning of his house restores his evil ways. Hare the mischief maker, starts off by giving the impression lion is dead even though he knew lion was alive. However in the end, hare becomes more heroic because he warns people that the lion's offer of friendship is fake. He also foils Lion's attempt to destroy fire which is why mankind still has fire today. In the same way the monkey, another anti-social creature and non-participant in all community functions becomes a positive hero when he tames the elephant's greed. Elephant seizes people's property for himself. He seizes monkey's wooden gong. Monkey seeks help from a fortune teller who prepares a magic wire-trap for him. He manipulates the trap unseen and traps elephant's scrutum which he squeezes. Elephant is forced to renounce all seized property to the rightful owners with a promise to be good and never torment people with his size. In another story, hare and guinea-fowl are engaged in a game of wit and trickery. Hare invites guinea-fowl to assist him convey goods from his in-laws. Guinea-fowl claims the goods as his own with the only proof that his bald head is as a result of carrying this "his" load about. Hare is beaten but not out. Hare knows the Guinea-fowl flies to his farm and so has no bush path to the farm. He quickly creates one to the farm and claims the farm as his. The required proof of ownership here is the path to the farm which hare has but the fowl hasn't. Hare wins the farm and so on. Here each trickster is wronged by the other and each one appears as a hero and anti-hero but the underlying message is a warning against greed and the need for trust in one another in societal interactions. In yet another narrative, the crab, a friendly and otherwise harmless creature is forced through an injustice to unleash his anger on the community. In a hunt, crab lures animals to his path with a piece of yam and ends up killing more animals than all the other hunters put together. On sharing, however, crab is given only the heads of the butchered animals. Crab goes back home and tells all the wives to the hunters to use a large measure of pepper to cook soup. He then decides to collect all the

water in the land into a deep hole where he now resides. The hunters come home to eat but there is no water to drink. Crab is transformed from a skillful benevolent hunter to a wicked hoarder of water and eventually destroyed. The point here is that an injustice is melted out to crab, he retaliates but his crime is on a larger scale than what is done to him. As hunter, he is a hero who is wronged but in Bakor society, an individual can never grow above his community. Even Chiefs are subject to communal will. The hero, crab, is thus broken and subjected to the society's will. He must pay for his crime, the injustice done to him notwithstanding. Again the he-goat, becomes a hero in a tribal wrestling contest in which he brings down every other contestant. He is begged by his wife to return home and celebrate his victory but he refuses and vows to conquer the whole world. Unfortunately, he is defeated by a yaw-infested lad who carries him off to slavery. He serves a term and through tricks is able to buy his freedom again. As earlier observed, each story has a message and the hero-protagonist is only a means by which the message is put across. Tortoise's defeat only shows that one should not be proud of success or overreach oneself. All Bakor folktale characters who serve as heroes or protagonists have two sides to themselves; they are either good or bad as circumstances dictate. The point, therefore, is that the hero-protagonist in Bakor folktale repertoire can metamorphose as circumstances require and always according to the perception of the audience or narrator and as the cultural ethics dictate. The hero-protagonist can move from grace to grass as he is easily exalted at one level and at another denigrated and spat upon by the same people who had admired and sung his praises earlier. His simplicity or complexity derive and depend on geographical locations, historical epochs or levels of cultural complexity of the societies responsible for the creation of the hero-protagonist. In Bakor society, the hero-protagonist is more or less a Christ figure to whom the people sang "*Hosanna*" at one point and shouted "*crucify him*", soon afterwards. As earlier observed, his personality defies easy analysis and comprehension except within the socio-cultural context of performance when the roles he is made to play can be observed and analyzed in relation to societal expectations and demands. This analysis is the job of another research project and will require extensive fieldwork in Bakor community to properly and effectively follow and document the various phases of this complex metamorphosis.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one can surmise that the Bakor people, like any other human species, need heroes but they find that the heroic ideal is not sacrosanct, that the hero is subject to environmental and natural vagaries. Psychologically speaking, everyone needs heroes because they are the heart of our fantasies particularly in folktale traditions in traditional societies but our heroes change with the times. Rodney Standen buttresses this point when he asserts that

- Yesterday's hero, John Wayne could punch and sashay his way across the western plains. Today's John Wayne is a master of martial arts... here ... is a single example of the changing face of the hero...

And Victor Brombert in recognizing the usefulness of the anti-hero, opines that

- Though they fail by design, to live up to conventional expectations of mythic heroes, anti-heroes are not necessarily failures. They display different kinds of courage.

The Bakor hero-protagonist is both a needed embodiment of cultural norms and an anti-hero who displays a different kind of courage. Bakor creative consciousness fuses the two into a complex personality capable of metamorphosis as the environment dictates.

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