

RETHINKING AFRICAN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND ITS RELEVANCE IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE STUDIES OF EWONDO FOLKTALES

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Abstract

Folktales are sometimes seen as irrelevant in the context of contemporary development. Despite the general consensus on the artistic merits of traditional stories and the role played by tradition in the linguistic and cultural continuity of indigenous people, they are hardly used to improve man's socio-cultural environment. The main objective of this paper is to show that development of the rural area is impossible if it is not premised on their own historic-cultural conditions. In fact, the improvement of our traditional societies can never progress socially on the basis of unrestrictedly borrowed cultures. This work lays its foundations on the hypothesis that, traditional and popular culture can play a significant role in resolving local problems related to poverty, moral standards and education. To achieve the set objectives, the study used empirical method which required a collection of oral tales narrated in some ethnic groups in Ewondo tribe. Through direct questioning, we posed open-ended questions to our informants. The work concluded that the cultural heritage can be used for the economic growth and development in the rural area.

Keywords: folklores, culture, development, knowledge, indigenous knowledge, economic growth

Introduction

In developed and developing countries all over the world, farmers, indigenous and local communities have traditional knowledge, expertise, skills and practices related to their culture. Since its creation in 1945, Food and Agriculture organization has recognized the significant contribution and the relevance of local knowledge in rural development. Traditional practices reliance on ethical standards has been abandoned, with disastrous results for the environment. The remaining keepers of ancestor and traditional knowledge, including the ethics and ethos that helped nature preserve its goodness for life on earth, are tribal and indigenous peoples. However, the central focus of this work is to show that over the past century, there has been an extraordinary loss of indigenous and traditional knowledge since the coming and the interference of the modern culture in the African tradition. This work would bring out the nature of African

indigenous societies and raise some limitations.

Statement of the problem

Indigenous knowledge explores the unique and share knowledge of a population, people, or community. It is based on communal understanding and is rooted and conditioned by the culture of a locality in question. The development of indigenous knowledge is a byproduct of effort to master the environment and has been a matter of survival to the community. This means that, indigenous knowledge is a local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or a society; it contrasts with the international knowledge system which is generated through the global network of universities and research institutes. As such, this research poses the problem of the relevance of the indigenous knowledge found in folktale in the development of rural communities in the Ewondo's tribe.

Objectives

This work has two objectives:

1. Identify and analyze the knowledge found in the Ewondo folktales and show how this knowledge overcome challenges in improving rural people condition.
2. Establish the limitations encountered in preserving and transferring indigenous knowledge in the modern society.

Research questions

This study is guided by two questions.

1. Which knowledge are found in the ewondo's tales and how it can help in the improvement of rural people?
2. What are the indigenous knowledge strategies developed in the tales to overcome limitations in preserving and transferring indigenous knowledge?

Conceptual review

Knowledge

Knowledge is a product of education; it is a set of information, facts, ideas, skills, expertise, and awareness or familiarity acquired by a person through education or experience for the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject (Oxford English Dictionary: 2017). Knowledge will also refer to socially accepted understanding of a subject, which offers an individual or a group the ability to use it to attain a specific goal. It is the "result of empirical inquiry that solves the problem at hand" (Rohmann, 1999: 102).

Lemke (1994: 15) notes that the term, "knowledge is often used to refer to a body of facts and principles accumulated by mankind in the course of time." As mankind is dispersed across the earth, what is knowledge to a particular group might be insignificant to another in a different setting. Environmental factors, language, and biological and cultural dispositions influence what every group classifies and values as knowledge. However, knowledge is a complex body of several socially constructed ideas, validated by the dominant intellectual persuasion at each point in time (Lemke, 1994: 1). The implication is that knowledge is "always biased because it is produced from a social perspective of the analyst, thus reflecting his or her inclination towards certain interests, values, groups, parties, classes, nations," among others (Jackson and Sorensen,

2003: 248). In view of the above, one can say that, knowledge is not and cannot be neutral either morally or politically or ideologically, since all knowledge reflects the interests of the observer.

Indigenous knowledge

Indigenous knowledge on his part as a concept is diverse. Greiner (1998: 1) asserts that indigenous knowledge is "the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around specific conditions of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area." Warren defines indigenous knowledge as "the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society; it contrasts with the international knowledge system which is generated through the global network of universities and research institutes" (Warren ,1995: xv). Kiggundu (2007: 42) defines the term indigenous knowledge as local knowledge that exists as a result of interactions with the environment by members of a community within a geographical area. One can say that Indigenous knowledge covers all fields of human endeavor including, but not limited to, agriculture, environment, pharmacology, health, trade and economic or political systems.

Traditional knowledge and the nature of African Indigenous societies

Traditionally, Africans believe in the existence of the supernatural. At the physical demise of an individual, the soul starts to exist in the ancestral world, watching over the activities of the living. For that reason, African Indigenous societies are traditionally applied in harmony with the natural and spiritual world. Research has shown that around the world, the indigenous have a connection with the local land and wildlife which are both symbolic (that are knowledge systems based on spiritual ritual, religious practices) and experimental. Indigenous healers, for instance, have intimate botanical knowledge of the environment including plants and their healing properties. Indigenous farmers are thoroughly acquainted with the vegetation, soil, and climatic conditions of a place. Indigenous hunters have extensive knowledge of the habitat including the "location and timing of a host of biological events unknown to scientists. They know the life cycle of certain animals including the kinds of foods they eat, methods of searching for food, their pregnancy

and gestation period, natural habitat and average life-span” (Knudston and Suzuki, 1992).

In addition, the wisdom and skills maintained by the keepers of the indigenous knowledge as applied in the traditional practices of farmers, hunters, gatherers, master fishermen, artisans are based on a dynamic and sophisticated understanding of their local surrounding. For that, change in the use of this knowledge is not random, but rather predicated upon conscious efforts by people to define their problems and seek solutions through local experiments and innovation, including evaluating and learning from appropriate technologies elsewhere. By the way, one should have in mind that African traditional knowledge systems may not necessarily be better suited to making long- term predictions of change, but indigenous knowledge may have some advantages in recognizing the onset of change and finding ingenious ways to accommodate and mitigate them at early stages, within the community decision making structure. Despite the fact that these traditional or cultural practices are ingeniously designed to address local ecological limitation by maintaining a sustainable utilization and protection of commonly shared natural resources, it also has some weaknesses that we are going to raise up and some limitations we come across in transferring indigenous knowledge.

Development

According to Lansana (2011), the term development is generally understood etymologically to mean “expansion by a process of growth” or growth and differentiation of some entity along lines natural to its kind. In others words, expansion here can be seen as a process of transformation which can be viewed in moving from states of being less developed to ones of being more developed. Moreover, the idea of development is generally seen as central to any discussion of the economic, cultural, and political aspects. Nations of the West are seen as “developed” and members of the “First World”, while those of Africa, Latin America, and some of Asia are seen as “developing” “belonging to the “Third World”. In fact, Africa failed to understand that the neglect of the traditional knowledge in development strategies is directly linked to their down fall.

Zounméou (2007) puts emphasis on this when he says that “development strategies which ignore the importance of the human behavior are, to a certain extent, alienating and self-destructive. In regard Zounmenou’s approach to development, it can be said that any African community that operates on a rigorous application or a code of conduct that emphasizes African moral values is likely to develop tremendously in various ways. Nevertheless, to have a good development planning technique and succeed in the development strategies, one should first of all know the nature of African indigenous societies.

This work is based on folklore, particularly on folktales of the Ewondo community that is the reason why Alan (2007) emphasizes that for every ethnic group, folklore is the identity; for a country it is the root of the nation’s cultural tradition or national civilization. As one can see, it is clear that folklore covers vast areas of learning, but we want to limit ourselves to oral tales.

Limitations encountered in preserving and transferring Indigenous knowledge

The user of traditional knowledge faces potential difficulties when he has to put in place the two paradigms (that is indigenous and state) in the development activities. Irrespective of “scientific objectivity”, there are significant differences of perception, values and languages between those who are interested in documentation and applying it and those who possess traditional knowledge. Another aspect that makes it difficult is that, as the practitioners, guardians and educators of such knowledge, the death of key elders, particularly women, and the resulting “extinction” of their collective wisdom, presents a serious constraint to the long-term survival of indigenous knowledge.

This is partly due to the fact that much of African traditional knowledge exist in oral form, is learned from elders through shared practice, trial and error experimentation. It is also part of the complex unfolding of events stemming from the severe cultural disruption faced by native Africans during the colonial period. During this period, African tribal practices involving the use of traditional knowledge systems (indigenous medicine) which were largely ignored, under-valued or replaced by the colonial practices.

Despite the inherent incompatibility between indigenous or traditional knowledge systems and that of the state or scientific knowledge system, an important challenge is to find innovative mechanisms that serve to integrate both systems for mutual benefit.

Theoretical framework

The attempt to analyze oral art has engaged scholars from many disciplines. Each scholar attempts to use some form theory that has been proved in his area of study to analyze the Orature. In our study, we are going to make use of functionalism.

Functionalism

The functional approach was given a closer attention in the 1950 and 1960 by Talcott Parsons. Functionalist stresses that the social world can be studied in the same way as the physical world. Functionalists see the social as objectively real and their emphasis on the “organic unity” of society system exist. Kent McClelland explains: a functionalist may argue, for instance, that every society will have a religion, because religious institutions have certain functions which contribute to the survival of the social system as a whole, just like body’s survival (<http://web.grinnell.edu/courses>).

Okpewho defines functionalism as a theory which examines the peculiar network of needs in any society and the way in which the network ensures the contentment and the survival of the social system (1983:21). Approaching a literary text from the perspective of functionalism is admitting that the text, like other social institutions is created to serve a social function. The scholars who approach an oral genre from a functional perspective are often guided by the following view: the study of literary culture often involves the meticulous exploration of the direction of human movement and the way that movement influences the growth of culture and oral literature (www.sdu.dk/-media).

In the light of functionalist, each Ewondo tale is expected to perform a social function. The tale “The quarrel between the part of the body” is

crafted to discourage rancorous disunity, and promotes social cohesion and the kind of relationship that is comparable with the part of the body.

Methodology

This section presents the type of research adopted for this research work, the choice of the corpus and the method of data collection.

Research design

The study is based on a corpus, which consists of tale analysis. The study is qualitative, that is to say it is based on the analysis of oral performances. The nature of the study calls for dual approach: the functionalist and the African indigenous knowledge approaches, the latter approach is a way of thinking that uses knowledge system developed by communities to guide interactions with the environment and make decisions. This knowledge is based on cultural world views and experiences, and can be used to address a range of issues, including climate change, disaster risk reduction and agricultural innovation.

Data collection procedure

Data is collected through collection oral tale narrated in some ethnic groups in the Beti land in Cameroon. Beside the collection of tales, one of our major objectives in the field was to expose the various performance contexts in order to add verve and vitality to the work.

We also adopted the observation method. In this way, we formed part of the audience and observed all the performances during the storytelling sessions. This method gave us the opportunities to witness various aspects of the performance, especially gesture and other paralinguistic features.

Through direct questioning, we posed open-ended question to our informants. The responses which came out from men, women and children were tape –recorded and sometimes jotted in exercise books. We noticed that asking questions and getting answers is a task harder than it seems. Some responses were ambiguous and did not make them easy to get the required information.

DATA PRESENTATION

“The quarrel between the parts of the body”

The parts of the body lived happily. They loved one another and shared everything in common.

But as time went on, they began to disagree among themselves. The legs complained: “We work a lot. We are the ones who carry the whole body to the farm, to the stream and to the market. We also protect all of you from danger by running away with you”.

The arms were very angry: “What are you saying? “Asked the arms. “You say you carry us along? But when you take us to the farm, we are the ones who weed the farm. We till the soil. We do the harvesting. We carry food to the house. We cook for you and you think we do nothing?”

When the eyes saw this, they said: “you legs and arm! you better shut up! If we did not exist to show you the direction of all the places you visit, how would you find your way? We show you the direction to the farm, streams and markets. Even when you harvest, we show you what to harvest. That is why you cannot harvest the unripe foods. And you want to look down at us?”

The head laughed saying, “Look here. You better stop being foolish. Your legs, arms, and eyes, mouth, and nose, shut up. Do you know that I am the one who directs all your activities? I am the one who ask your legs to run from danger. In the same way, I ask the arms to work for us, I also ask the eyes to see and the mouth to eat. The anus too complained, “I will block myself. I will see how you can eat without passing out faeces”. After a long argument, the head said, “please, let’s try to settle our problems. We have all seen that we are all important to one another. Brothers and sisters, let’s unite and work together, for unity is one.

“The Overzealous Farmer Boy”

In those days of old, the people had farms very far away from home. The farms were located in the forest lands because the soils were fertile. Although the yields were good, there was a lot of work to be done on this farm. From the planting to the harvesting season, there was little time set aside for the rest as people were constantly needed on the farms. They had to work very hard to keep watch over the field else birds of prey and wild animals would destroy the crops. Men and women did the farming but the boys and girls kept watch over the fields. The boys and girls set out early and returned sometimes in the evening. Where there were huts for sleeping on the farms, some slept there. In large field requiring many boys on the farm they oftenest out in the morning in group and returned in like manner except in situations some people expressed the wish to stay away.

“The tortoise and the rabbit”

Once upon a time, there was a great famine in the village of Nkoala’a where the tortoise and his friend the Rabbit lived. As a result of the famine, the animals became thinner and thinner every day since they did not have enough to eat. So, one day, Rabbit initiated a plan to get a lot of food. He dug a hole which linked his house to the market place and through this hole he was able to get the foodstuffs of the market women which they always kept at the market store at night. The Tortoise was surprised that his friend the Rabbit was growing robust while the other animals were still getting thinner as the day progressed. So he decided to embark on a fact –finding mission in Rabbit’s house. On getting there, he was astonished to see the large quantity of food in his friend’s house.

DATA ANALYSIS

The following case studies provide insight into some of the lesson learned based on a better understanding of indigenous organizational structure, soil management and wisdom through beti folktales.

Folktales and educational development

“the Tortoise and the Rabbit”

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This folktale is didactic to both the young and the old alike. It is an act of constant reminder that those who plan evil for some other people have evil waiting for them at their door steps as is manifested by the fate of tortoise who wanted to pay good act of generosity with evil intentions. Through this tale, we understand that education helps individuals within a society to understand their lived reality. The individuals must learn from experiencing real life in order to develop freely and be able to contribute to the development of a society. The structure of this tale, which is seen in terms of succession of experiences and enterprises having a maximum of likeness for the learner with a view to giving that development, must be helpful in meeting and controlling life situations.

-Folktales and the development of moral values

An educational system constitutes a good medium for the development of social values. In the traditional society, folktales are considered as a unique educational medium deeply rooted in African philosophical thought. In other words, an important function of folktale has been to educate as the older generation imparts knowledge to younger members of the family (Gale, 1996: Xiii).

Let us examine this tale: **"The quarrel between the parts of the body"**

The parts of the body lived happily. They loved one another and shared everything in common.

But as time went on, they began to disagree among themselves. The legs complained: "We work a lot. We are the ones who carry the whole body to the farm, to the stream and to the market. We also protect all of you from danger by running away with you".

The arms were very angry: "What are you saying? "Asked the arms. "You say you carry us along? But when you take us to the farm, we are the ones who weed the farm. We till the soil. We do the harvesting. We carry food to the house. We cook for you and you think we do nothing?"

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This tale expresses communal living in Africa as fundamental. It teaches us that a community that is constructed on constant arguments, disagreements and rancor lacks the strength of unity and a sense of focus that should characterize a communal people. In fact, we can see that communalism as a product of African philosophical thoughts is projected in the tale in which separated parts of the human body are personalized and presented as indispensable to the entire human anatomy. That is, while attributing the decline of moral African values to exotic cultures, (Masquelier, 1999) says: "Mawri legends and tales are replete with explicit allusions to how human greed and selfishness have progressively

destroyed the fruitful symbiosis that existed between people and the spirits. The past is always constructed as an idyllic world where no one was wanting because the spirits took care of everyone's need so long as people trusted them and care for them." The folktale provides therefore a guide for our children to choose between positive and negative, rational and irrational in order to arrive at an appropriate synthesis that can foster the moral.

If we examine the tale title: "The stubborn girl", the lady is been swallowed by the black river due to her disobedience. In fact, she refuses to follow the rules and regulations given to her by her father who advised her to not give herself to

any boy before marriage. The tale dramatizes the possible repercussions of misconduct and moral depravity manifested in the disrespect of parents.

Most African folklores also transcend the entertainment realm, hold deep and stimulate philosophical truths. These stories were undoubtedly both recreational and educative, cutting across disciplines, including: philosophy, literature, law, psychology, music, drama, arts, and sociology. One can say that some stories and legends are didactics in content, emphasizing the correct and the acceptable moral conduct of the society.

Folktales and economic development: Division of labour

The indigenous in Africa viewed labour very much the same way as land, a communal enterprise where responsibilities and profits are shared accordingly. Labour was extracted from within the extended family, and the larger the extended family then, the greater the productivity. Unlike the Western concept of productivity where labour has been “thingified” or depersonalized, and therefore can be mindlessly expropriated, the African indigenous system of thought places a lot of respect on labour and considers investment in human capital as a worthwhile venture. For example, in my village, (Nkoala’a in the South region of Cameroon), on occasions when labour demands were beyond the ability of the extended family to supply, cooperatives were organized within the village to assist. This was usually the case when the need arose for heavy farm work or for special projects such as building a house. The work groups involved “pooling together members of the same age group, kinsmen, or all male or female members of a village.

Among the Beti’s, a man can invite his relatives, his friends or the members of his club, depending on the size of the task, to form a working bee (*ikwean*). He provides food and drink for the group at the end of the day’s work, but this is not considered payment; others participate because they earn the right to call upon their host for help under similar circumstances. No strict accounting is made of an individual’s participation; but if someone calls for working bees without taking part when others called them, it is noticed and others will fail to respond to his

invitation.

Farmers could also agree to labour exchange by taking turns to work together on one man’s farm until all the farms of all the group members are cultivated. This brings about rapid development in the village.

In beti rural area, agriculture is the main occupation of nearly every body, and the source of livelihood. Here, there is a strong division of farming labor by sex and the type of crops. The men’s farm, which is known as cash crops: cocoa, coffee; while the women’s farm, is what the family consumes, hence the appellation, subsistence farming. Children are closely integrated into the household production systems. As reflected in oral tales, men, women and children has separates roles to play at various stages of the cultivation throughout the year.

Let us take the example of this tale: **“The Overzealous Farmer Boy”**

In those days of old, the people had farms very far away from home. The farms were located in the forest lands because the soils were fertile. Although the yields were good, there was a lot of work to be done on this farm. From the planting to the harvesting season, there was little time set aside for the rest as people were constantly needed on the farms. They had to work very hard to keep watch over the field else birds of prey and wild animals would destroy the crops Men and women did the farming but the boys and girls kept watch over the fields. The boys and girls set out early and returned sometimes in the evening. Where there were huts for sleeping on the farms, some slept there. In large field requiring many boys on the farm they oftenest out in the morning in group and returned in like manner except in situations some people expressed the wish to stay away.

The tales encourage hard work, perseverance, cooperation, industriousness. African philosophy of development must be, seen and found from within. When the inner self is satisfied, that is, by the exteriorization of self-development in its contact and interaction with others, the other selves benefit.

Many tales are narrated to transmit such values. The expectation is that any community that is sufficiently rooted in such norms possesses

greater potentials for economic development. Alan Pence and Jessica Schaffer in “Knowledge and Early Childhood Development in Africa” (2009) arguing in favor of the economic potential found in oral tales said:” Several arguments have favored the use of indigenous knowledge in development practices, ranging from the philosophical and ethnical to the utilitarian and pragmatic. Indigenous knowledge with its roots in reciprocal and redistributive cultures, is perceived as providing the basis for an alternative to the dominant economic and moral system of the West.” In other words, well cultured and rigorously disciplined people possess a greater capacity for economic growth than a community of rancor and anarchy. This story shows us that a

genuine economic progress requires absolute hard work. And beside hard work, a moral commitment and cultural norms also boost economic development.

Conclusion:

The work highlights the traditional knowledge inherent in oral tales and contends that the tales can be of great economic advantage to a people. The lacunae that exists within the moral, cultural, social and economic life in Africa can, to a considerable extent, be filled by sound and practical knowledge of their oral tales. Indigenous knowledge is the knowledge that many Africans are acquainted with, but it is not incorporated in teaching curricula and research agenda across the continent.

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