

The Significance of the Tortoise in African Folktales

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Abstract

One of the oldest forms of expression is the oral tradition of folktales. Folktales move between reality and fantasy that include magic, mystery and witches. For Africans, storytelling is a part of their culture. In African folklore, a tortoise is depicted as a cunning figure who personifies wisdom in two ways. In the first, the tortoise succeeds because of its natural intelligence but in the second it falls victim to its own ploys. This research explores the significance of folktales, particularly focusing on African stories in which the tortoise is the main character. Analysing various tortoise folktales within African literature, this study highlights the complexity of the tortoise by not only portraying it as shrewd and manipulative but also as honest and intelligent. This paper deals with prominent themes such as morality, virtue and vice revealing how these folktales act as educational tools that instil important lessons in the minds of children, thereby fostering moral integrity and cultural awareness.

Keywords: Tortoise, Culture, Folktales, Africa, Persistent

1. Introduction

Folktales are traditional stories passed down from generation to generation and usually come from oral traditions of different communities. Such stories often carry cultural values, beliefs and norms of society and are used as tools for entertainment, education and preservation of cultural heritage. The origins of folktales date back to ancient civilizations and some stories have been in existence for thousands of years. With changing times and locations these stories spread to different parts of the world adapting to the cultures and assimilating pieces from various cultures. This method of transmission and adaptation has resulted in numerous versions of stories seen across a vast spectrum of cultures around the world. Folktales often contain lasting themes such as good vs evil, triumph of the underdog and moral lessons that make them popular and endearing among different generations and cultures. Folktales represent a traditional literary genre and are essential for providing insights to an

individual. The insights in turn, are closely related to the educational, cultural, religious, and social values in a particular culture or group. Originating in oral traditions, folktales are artfully composed stories told to children to impart essential truths about reality to their developing consciousness. As such, one of the main functions of folktales is educational or pedagogical, serving to inculcate numerous important lessons that encourage discipline, moral integrity, diligence, and bravery in children. Halima I Amali notes that,

Folktales are an integral part of the African oral society. They usually relate to and elucidate the various cultural and traditional aspects of the society from which they evolve. Folktales perform salient functions of the people, educating the young of the various aspects of society. Since folktales portray the values and traditions of a society, where the young and adults alike learn through the events conveyed, the function of this traditional oral genre of folktales can therefore not be overemphasized.

Vladimir Propp is a renowned folklorist and academician who postulates that folktales everywhere share certain intrinsic similar patterns. He has written about different aspects of folktales. In many folktales, one can identify archetypes such as a villain, a benefactor, a helper, a princess with her father who is a hero, or a false hero. He has identified about thirty universal motifs, patterns, and guiding principles that characterize folktales. First there is an opening situation or setup. Then, there are instances of abstention, where a person leaves or dies, usually a parental or guardian figure. Then obstacles and challenges arise. There are efforts to overcome those problems. The villain comes and creates hurdles in overcoming the problems. There is a helping party. The hero is often tricked or duped by magic to do something bad. The villain has a chance when the hero blunders. The helping party prepares a plan. The hero chooses to fight back. At this stage the hero encounters the supernatural helping agent. The hero typically undergoes a test to demonstrate his character. The supernatural donor or helper possesses some sort of magical means through which he helps. The hero is taken to a new place. The hero can be taken physically, emotionally or spiritually. Finally, the hero beats the villain, with his wits, his special abilities and depth of character. There is recognition for the hero. The false hero and the villain are punished. The end is usually a wedding.

African Folktales

African folktales are characterized by their religious content. They frequently depict one or more aspects of the relationship between humans and the gods such as a deity rewarding or punishing human behaviour or a deity teaching humans a lesson about the way of the world from god's point of view. They are passed down orally or through word of mouth rather than in writing. They typically have straightforward plotlines that make them easy to follow, incorporate simple characters particularly those

that are common to African people or drawn from categories that are common to them. They resolve a major conflict or issue, show decision-making skills, highlight shared values or moral lessons and are set in a natural setting. Tortoise or turtle is a symbol frequently used in numerous cultural narratives and its significance often changes depending on the specific cultural setting. Tortoise is depicted in the mythological and legendary traditions of China, India and Arabia. In Chinese folklore, the tortoise is depicted as a symbol of longevity, wisdom and consistency owing to its sluggish pace and extended lifespan. It can represent the universe or the concept of cosmic balance. The tortoise is often depicted to share knowledge, guidance or to impart lessons. In some narratives they act as protectors or mystical entities, such as in *Journey to the West* where the tortoise aids the Monk Xuanzang and his companions in crossing a river but only after requesting information about its lifespan from the Heavenly Court, indicating its profound connection with divine realms and eternal inquiries. In Indian folklore and mythology, tortoises symbolize perseverance, resolve and wisdom. They also hold crucial cosmic significance in Hindu mythology, associated with the ideas of creation and support. The tortoise is a prominent figure in the *Panchatantra*, an old compilation of Indian animal tales in which it is frequently depicted as clever and inventive. According to Hindu cosmology, the tortoise (Kurma) is one of Vishnu's avatars representing balance and support. A story from the *Panchatantra*, The Tortoise and the Geese describes a tortoise's attempt to fly by holding a stick in its mouth while two geese carry it. However, the tortoise falls when it fails to keep quiet, teaching the readers lessons about modesty and the dangers of pride. In African literature, the tortoise known as Ijapa in Yoruba culture and Mbeku (the trickster) in Igbo culture symbolize universal concepts such as truth, wisdom and knowledge. In South African culture tortoises are seen as symbols of virtue, fertility and happiness. Historically, it has been viewed as a mediator between God and humans. Even today in some Dorgon communities, tortoises are kept with village leaders to help facilitate communication with ancestors. Tortoises are familiar trickster figures in West African folktales. In some stories, the tortoise plays a vital role in defining Nigerian history values and identity. The tortoise defines Nigerian history values and identity. The tortoise is a protagonist in most African folktales. It is a renowned figure representing wisdom, knowledge, understanding and cunningness. The allegory of the tortoise folktale teaches children vices and virtues insisting on the truth and reality of their younger minds. The selected tales for research are The Tortoise, the Dog and the Farmer, The Tortoise and the Lizard, The Leopard, the Tortoise, the Bush Cat, The Elephant and the Tortoise, Giraffe and Tortoise, and The king's Daughter.

Tortoise as Foxy and Manipulative

In The Tortoise, the Dog and the Farmer, the story starts when there is famine in the land. Every animal looks skinny and unhealthy, but the tortoise notices the dog looking fresh and healthy. The

tortoise enquires about the secret of its rosy cheeks and bulging stomach. The dog does not want to reveal its secret to the tortoise. The next day, the tortoise decides to shadow and determine the dog's movements. "The tortoise thought to himself, 'With a clever tongue and a slow step, I will always find my way to a full stomach'"(Metelerkamp, 1914). The dog goes to a neighboring village and harvests yams without the proprietor's permission. The tortoise announces its presence to the dog. Both become co-conspirators and begin to steal yams from farms. The tortoise is gluttonous and therefore constantly steals more than the prior day. One day after plundering yam from the farm, the tortoise and the dog head home with haste. The tortoise with a ponderous yam in its basket is not able to walk and yells at the dog to help carry the basket. Unfortunately, the farmer turns up and finds the tortoise with a basket full of yams. The tortoise is caught red-handed by the farmer and is brought to justice. The dog, tired of the tortoise's tricks, barked, 'A day comes when even the slowest trickster is caught'"(Metelerkamp, 1914).

In this story, the tortoise is portrayed as a foxy, deceitful and untrustworthy individual. It additionally indicates the tortoise's hoggish nature because when he learns the dog's secret, he not only joins in stealing but also becomes greedier than the dog. In addition, this folktale outlines the tortoise as a deceitful character whose greed results in punishment.

In *The Tortoise and the Lizard*, both the tortoise and the lizard have a friendly relationship. The lizard is one of the king's aides and oversees the treasury. The tortoise needs to know about the keys of the king's treasure. One day the tortoise plans and gets the lizard drunk to extract the needed data. The lizard reveals that the treasure key is a necklace owned by the lizard. The tortoise takes it and steals gold from the treasury. He hides the gold, rushes back and replaces the key around the lizard's neck. The lizard is conscious but pretends to sleep. After some days the king announces a robbery in the King's Treasury. The lizard goes to the tortoise and tells him that he knows all about the robbery. However, the tortoise does not respond to that and asks him to eat breakfast with him. The enraged lizard sees the breakfast and is tempted to eat. A long bone from the meat pierces the lizard's tongue. The lizard tries to take it out but is unable to. It can only nod at everything the tortoise says. On the day of the trial the king asks the lizard if the tortoise had taken the gold. The lizard nods, and the king asks again if the tortoise did not take it. The lizard nods again. The trial is suspended because of contradictory responses. In this folktale the tortoise is portrayed as crafty and cunning. It is also shown as resourceful and manipulative because it convinces the lizard by inviting the lizard to share a meal knowing that food had often been part of their friendship.

In the story *The Leopard, the Tortoise, the Bush Cat*, there is a famine. During that time all the animals are thin except for the tortoise and his family who are fat. The thin leopard decides to follow the tortoise to discover his food sources. One morning, the tortoise carries a heavy basket, which the

leopard suspects, contains fish. The tortoise admits he has fish and agrees to share but only if they cook it together. The tortoise proposes that they play a game in which they tie each other to a tree and when one shouts "tighten" or "loosen" the other should adjust the rope accordingly. The leopard agrees and lets the tortoise tie him up. The tortoise then tightens the rope around the leopard securing him to a tree. The tortoise eats the fish and leaves the leopard tied up, threatening to leave him there to starve. The leopard calls for help and a bush rat appears. The leopard requests the bush rat to free him, but the rat hesitates, fearing that the leopard would eat him. The bush rat agrees to help, but instead of freeing the leopard immediately, he gradually weakens the ropes allowing the leopard to free himself. The leopard attempts to attack the bush rat, but the rat narrowly escapes and receives scratches on his back. Overall, the tortoise is depicted as a selfish, manipulative and cunning character who is willing to exploit others for his own benefit, even to the point of leaving the leopard to starve. The story points to the tortoise in a rather negative light as a deceitful and untrustworthy animal.

Tortoise as Truthful and Clever

The story, *The Elephant and the Tortoise*, commences with an argument between an elephant and the Rain, in which the Rain asserts its importance. The elephant and the other animals fight for water. The elephant attempts to control the situation by assigning the tortoise to guard the final lagoon. One by one the other animals come requesting water, but the tortoise denies them, claiming that it belongs to the elephant. When the lion demands water, the tortoise hesitates. The lion hits the tortoise and drinks, giving all animals access to the water. When the elephant returns from hunting, he finds that the water has disappeared. Furiously, he threatens to eat the tortoise and does so. Inside the elephant's body, the tortoise destroys its organs, causing the elephant to die. "While the elephant relied on his power, the tortoise relied on his mind—and in the end, it was the mind that won." (Metelerkamp, 1914).

The tortoise then escapes unharmed. In all the other stories the tortoise has been portrayed as cunning, resourceful and manipulative, but this story breaks such characteristics. The tortoise in this story has been shown to be responsible, dutiful, resolute and resilient. The tortoise obeys the elephant's command faithfully to guard the remaining water, which demonstrates loyalty and a sense of responsibility.

The South African Folktale *Giraffe and Tortoise* relates the story of an encounter between a giraffe and a tortoise. The giraffe boasts of its capacity to trample or swallow the tortoise at will. Initially quiet in fear, the tortoise eventually comments that its family members were frequently gulped down and swallowed by others. Encouraged by this, the giraffe swallows the tortoise, but the tortoise holds up

the giraffe's throat on the way down, causing the giraffe to choke and die. After getting away from the dead giraffe, the tortoise visits its mother and recounts the incident. The tortoise and its mother then feast on the remains of the giraffe for a year. "Patience and cleverness can outmatch even the tallest and fastest." (Metelerkamp, 1914). In this South African Folktale, the tortoise is portrayed as an animal characterized by humility, caution and cleverness which ultimately leads to its survival and triumph over the much bigger and more threatening giraffe. Although the tortoise's response to the giraffe's threat of swallowing shows a combination of wit, resilience and resignation, these disarm the giraffe and lead it to act overconfidently.

In the folktale, *The King's Daughter*, the King has three arrogant daughters but none of them has a husband or a suitor. The king wants his three daughters to be happily married. He makes a rule that his daughters would only marry anyone who can tell their names. The king believes that in this way, they will be marrying the wisest men in the entire land. The commoners, the wealthy and the famous strive, but no one ever calls the daughters by their real names. The tortoise sneaks around the princesses without their knowledge and lives there. One day the youngest princess goes to the outskirts of the town to an uncommon sight when she sees a bike for the first time. In excitement she calls out the real names of her elder sisters to reveal the bike. To his fortune the tortoise listens to all their names, goes to the palace and informs the king. The king is stunned and has no other choice but to offer all his daughters to the tortoise. In this story, the tortoise is portrayed as a clever and quick-witted creature who uses his intelligence to solve problems. The tortoise's persistence and endurance are used to devise a clever plan to become triumphant.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, African folktales in which the tortoise plays a major role serve as educational tools to teach children valuable lessons about ethical values and culture. These stories present the tortoise as a smart and dishonest character at one time, but honest and wise at another. The tortoise in African folklore is an embodiment of a universal idea such as truth, wisdom and understanding. Although some fables portray the tortoise as cunning and deceptive other versions depict it as honest, intelligent and persevering. Overall, the symbolic depictions of the tortoise in folklore provide children with much needed moral lessons on virtue, vice, truthfulness and the world at large. These traditional tales that are so strongly rooted in oral traditions are vital in passing on values, beliefs and social values from one generation to another. They boost African culture and heritage.

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