

ORAL NARRATIVES AND SOCIO-POLITICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS IN AFRICA: A STUDY OF SELECTED URHOB FOLKTALES

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Abstract

The folktale genre is one of the oldest forms of artistic reconstruction whose expression projects the people's culture and socio-political identity. Many of the tales in Africa reflect the experiences of the people, drawing on themes which address the myriads of the people's folkways, and reinforcing their quest for an egalitarian society. Thus many of the tales with human and animal motifs, explore abuse of power and condemn hegemonic institutions as well as expose oppression and injustice. This paper focuses on the socio-political idealisation of class system in two African folktales. It uses two Urhobo folktale texts as analytical materials. The descriptive-analytical method is adopted in this study. This method involves an in-depth description and analysis of the selected folktales to bring out the salient themes of socio-political reconstruction and class distinction. It adopts the Marxian theory which postulate that human society is constructed upon physical organisations and modes of relationships which serve as natural base for the construction of human history and their modifications in a bid to establish an egalitarian society. Through this theory, we are able to ascertain the fact that the infrastructures of African traditional society are linked to its economics for which the superstructure of politics, law and religion are established. The paper concludes that the storyteller (s), through his story(s), not only dubs as the cultural mediator between the people and their rulers but operates as the watchdogs of societies by commenting on negative socio-political appurtenances that are inimical to the progress of society.

Keywords: folktales; Urhobo; cultural identity; socio-political reconstruction and Marxian theory.

Introduction

This study examines the struggle between the forces of evil and good, poor leadership and resistance polemics in socio-politically depraved societies in Africa. More specifically, the work attempts a deconstructive evaluation of the cultural norms of appropriating absolute political powers to rulers, especially kings, chiefs and other feudal forces to the exclusion of the masses. It uses two folktales collected from the Urhobo ethnic group of the western Niger Delta region of Nigeria to substantiate the point that there are significant systems of counter rhetorics and resistance struggle in traditional Urhobo society that may significantly impact contemporary socio-political structures in Africa. The two tales, thus, ontologised a manifestation of counter-hegemonic resistance in precolonial society as a strategy to uphold societal values. We argue in this essay that many African folktales set in precolonial past, explore the excesses of the powerful class against the masses and enact a cultural thesis that a society where the powerful continue to exploit and dispossess the powerless will certainly glide towards a state of self-implosion.

As one of the oldest forms of artistic creation whose expression is achieved through oral narration, the folktale, despite the advent of written literature, has established itself as a cultural medium for maintaining social harmony and cultural identity. Like all forms of literature, folktales in Urhobo society, as in elsewhere, are ideological and they convey values which address certain prevailing appurtenances in the society at a given time. Many of the tales in Urhobo society are socially conditioned and they reflect the people's ways of life both politically and economically during specific period in their history. According to Jude Agho and Anthony Bamidele (2011), such tales “afford us the opportunity to see the nature of the ideology of an epoch from which it is born by revealing the inherent ruptures, gaps and contradictions”. Ropo Sekoni (2008) supports this view when he avers that “the literature of every community reflects in its totality the values and counter-values that characterise that community in a given period”. Hence, in traditional society, storytelling serves the purpose of not only relaxation but of critical review and idealisation of the

socio-political happenings in the society. The storyteller, through his tales either with human or animal motifs, challenge certain traditional and dominant social orders that are inimical to the progress of society. The stories display utter disgust for corrupt and depraved rulers and celebrate virtue. This is why Sekoni believes that, “different genres of oral social discourse – from the almost sacred divination discourse to the flippantly secular trickster-tale narrative – have pointed at the character of fiction as a discourse of persuasion of the dominated by the dominator on the one hand, and on the other, as the resistance to the values of the dominator by the dominated”. Often accompanied with songs and audience participation, the stories reflect the life of the community, drawing their themes from a myriads of the people's folk experience, traditions and reinforce the cultural norms of the society.

In the Urhobo society, the people express their social, political and world views in their folktales and songs. In their fictive nature, the folktales affirm the people's republican ethos and upholds the positive values of hard work and perseverance, creating a social atmosphere that discredit deceit and reckless abuse of power. Apart from functioning as a medium of cultural education, the tales serve the purpose of socio-political reconstruction. In many of the tales, there are cases of instant retribution and social justice. Evils and vices are punished while good is upheld and celebrated. Many of such tales deal with adult themes and they seek to expose abuse of power by kings and the privileged class against the citizens and less privileged. The stories are created to confront oppression and injustice, embellishing their performance objectives with educative and entertaining motifs. In other words, the African folktale, to a large extent, preoccupies itself with the projection of the cultural ethos of the society as well as the socio-political identity of the people. Akintunde Akinyemi and Toyin Falola (2014) stress this point when they note that the folktales in oral traditions, especially in pre-literate society, “served not only as a socio-political tool for enculturation but also as a people's expression and memoirs”.

In his study of Tiv folktales, Tar Ahura (2008) tells us that many of the Tiv folktales which are always couched in satiric songs, lampoons powerful members of the community who use power carelessly to oppress the weak. According to him, the purpose is to demonstrate that "...in human life reckless display of power and influence to the disadvantage of the less fortunate is wrong and that society will not condone such acts". With this cultural orientation, the established and professional storyteller in Africa adopts a posture of the voice of the society and seems to believe in Achebe's (1987) statement in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* that "...any African... [storyteller] who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of the contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant". T. S. Eliot (1962) also expresses similar view when he explains that "Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcoming and limitations of its critical habits of those of its creative genius" (1501). In other words, the storyteller serves as the interventionist force against dictatorial leadership in the society. He not only entertains and acts as the moral bastion of society, but the social and political conscience of the people.

The use of the Marxist approach to literature as theoretical base for this work is apt because the selected tales explore class structure as well as thematised the daily affairs of the ordinary people against the backdrop of political insensitivity that constitute the lots of pre-colonial African politics. Marxism as a literary approach is marked by revolutionary measures aimed at creating an egalitarian world in which the bourgeoisie and proletariat equally share the means of production and property. It is one of the major variants of the sociological critical approach to literature that makes a specific ideological demand of the artist to use his work to serve the cause of the masses or the downtrodden. Marxism in its aggressive form seeks to demolish everything that does conform to the preservation of culture and it is opposed to anti-social values like materialism, social and political imbalance so that all men would be treated as equals.

The selected tales under investigation are constructed against the backdrop of failure of leadership, political insensitivity, corruption, and pauperisation of the masses in precolonial African society. The interest of the African storyteller revolves around the people, their actions and interactions with one another. Hudson (1986) expresses this view when he argues that one of the impulses that have always generated literature is “our interest in people and their doings”. Obafemi (1988) adumbrates this role of the artist when he tells us that “for an end to societal ills, they proffer, as solutions, a restructuring of society – a radical, revolutionary change from a capitalist structuring to a socialist one”. We shall therefore examine the selected tales under the rubrics of Marxism. This is because the artistic impulse which generated the major themes in the tales are Marxist in orientation. The characters in the two tales are class based. The division is between the rich represented by the kings and their property class and the poor, represented by peasant farmers and commoners.

Resistance tale in Africa is set against the redolent attitudes of monster kings and other feudal groups. The storyteller, in these tales, challenge hegemonic groups as well as cultural orthodoxies which empower kings with undue powers to exploit and dispossess their citizens of their material goods and economic wellbeing. In tales such as these, the struggle against the forces of evil and retrogression often take various forms; it sometimes manifests through physical and ideological confrontation between the forces of good and evil, and in other cases, it is waged through metaphysical and spiritual warfare between the hero and the forces of retrogression. Kofi Awoonor (1975) expresses this view when he argues that “the contest between the hero and forces bent on his destruction provides the stuff of which the heroic monomyth is made of.”

According to him,

monster, ogre, malevolent spirits try to devour him. The eternal conflict that the principle of survival entails becomes the source of the folk hero's role. In the working out of this conflict, man comes

into contact with spirits and operates in a fantasy world that is conterminous with the waking world itself. The boundary between the spirits and men is thin. The significant point is that in the contest with spirits and even death, man must come out victorious, aided of course by deities, ancestors, and benevolent spirits whose essence is the life force of which man is the most visible and articulate expression.

Tales of this nature are very popular in precolonial Urhobo societies. G.G. Darah (2011) argues that “all classical traditions of world literature are fostered by environments where there are intensive struggles against great evils for the restoration of human dignity”. This traditional orientation which is geared towards social, political and cultural commitment find place in the thematics of the two tales selected for examination in this paper. The tales deal with socio-political issues, especially the conflict between hegemonic institutions and the masses as well as explore the dialectics of abuse of power by depraved kings. They both foreground the resistance strategies adopted by the people to redeem themselves from oppressive complexities. The tales also illustrate the degrading social and political atmosphere in many African states where the state is belligerent and afraid of the socio-economic progress of the citizens. Here, the themes of greed, human cruelty, hatred and retributive justice are well ontologised.

The first tale, “The King, two Brothers and the Old Woman” was performed to me by Mr. Udu Onowenoni of Esaba community in Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State on December 17, 2022. The tale is about a man who had two sons and at the point of death, gifted them with a very large parcel of land as inheritance. The two brothers, after burying their father, decide to engage in farming and invest all their money in the farm. They planted different kinds of cash crops: yam, plantain,

cassava and all. The farm so blossomed that people admire it even from afar. Whenever people get to the farm, they return to tell the king how big the children's farm is. 'Despite the king's huge workforce, his farm cannot compare with that of the boys', many said. Whoever gets to the farm, reports to the king. One day, the king decides to go and see for himself. He entered the farm, walked from one section to the other and is amazed of what he saw. He swallows hard, saying, 'it is true the way it was described.' When the king got home, he became restless. 'If these children sold the products of the farm, they would be richer than me in all ramifications'. He therefore sought means to destroy the children's farm. In an act of sadism, the king organised his household into a destructive force to liquidate the children's enterprising labour.

Thus, the following day, the king went and bought a charm that transforms one into a destructive animal. He fastened the charm on a stake and placed it across his kitchen's entrance. Whoever crosses underneath, immediately becomes a wild beast. He calls his wives and all his children and briefs them on the task ahead. He has seven wives and countless children. That night, they all set out to destroy the boys' farm. Whoever crossed the charm, became a beast and appeared in the children's farm. By the next morning, the level of destruction on the farm could not be described. When the boys get to their farm, a large section of it had been destroyed. They cried! 'What kind of animal in this forest could destroy a farm in this manner?' They inspected the entire farm, mended what they could mend and went home. Not done yet, the king calls his family the following day for the same assignment. As usual, whoever crossed the charm, appeared in the farm and they again destroyed a great portion of the farm. When the children got there, an entire section of the farm had been destroyed. They placed their hands on their heads and went home, dejected. An old woman who stays in the same compound with them, saw them as they returned from the farm, crying. She laughed.

On the third day, the king's family had destroyed the farm again. The old woman called the children and said, 'whatever it is that is destroying your

farm, I shall assist you to defeat it'. She asked the children to provide her with a bunch of ripe plantain, a strand of tobacco and a stone to grind it. These items were immediately provided by the boys. When the old woman saw the items, she laughed and one of her teeth fell from her mouth and got stuck on the ground. She commanded the boys to uproot it. They did and placed it back in her mouth. She then requests them to go and produce their late father's hunting gun which they did. The old woman fortifies the gun and told the senior boy to bear it as he would go to the farm to keep watch at night. She then directs the junior one to set up a bonfire in the centre of their compound to await his brother. Her instructions were simple: 'as the animals enter the farm in their straight line, he should aim at the last one. Once he kills it, he should collect the animal's heart and drop it in the fire.'

That night, the senior boy prepares himself and goes to the farm to keep watch, there, he positioned himself on top of a big tree. Before long, the animals started arriving. Their horns were dangerously twisted. After the first one entered, others followed. They spread themselves in the farm. As the last one tried to enter the farm, the boy fires at it, *kpeghwa aa aa!* When the other animals heard the gunshot, they took to their heels and ran out of the farm. The boy came down from the tree, collected the animal's heart, tucked it inside his hunting bag and left. When he got home, his brother had started the bonfire. He immediately threw the heart into the fire and it got burnt. At dawn, the news came that the king had lost one of his children and he was buried.

In the night, the king again called his wives and the remaining children to get prepared for the destruction of the children's farm. The boy also calls his younger brother to prepare the fire. When he got to the farm, he climbed the tree top as usual. As soon as he raised his head, the king and his team had arrived. They started entering the farm and as the last one entered, he shot at it, *koo oo oo!* The others again ran out. He came down, took its heart, and headed home. He got home, the fire was burning and he threw the heart in it. The following day, one of the king's sons had died and they buried him. That was how he killed all the king's children and

extended the killings to his wives. All the king's wives died remaining only the senior one. The senior wife protested that she won't go with the king again. The king told her that if she refused to go, she would die by his own hands. Out of fear, she reluctantly followed the king to the farm.

The old woman told the boys that the battle ahead would be a great one. She went into the bush and collected some herbs with which she fortifies the senior boy. Thus fortified, the boy went to the farm to keep watch. That night, he killed the king's senior wife. Only the king returned home alive. The king assured himself that this was a fight to finish. He then prepares himself for the battle ahead. The old woman also prepares the senior boy with special herbs and charms. This time, the king entered the farm stealthily, placed his ears on the ground and surveyed everywhere; he didn't sense any danger. 'Ha! Where was this gunshot coming from every day that killed all my family?' he asked himself. Fully assured, he galivanted into the farm and started destroying it. Suddenly, the gunshot sounded, *gbo oo oo!* The king fell down. Unknown to the boy, nothing had touched him. The boy came down, collected his machete and tried to open the animal's heart. That was when the animal rushed into him with its horns and threw him into the air. As he came down, it trapped him with the horns, and again threw him into the air but this time, as the boy was falling down, he collected his machete and lashed at the animal's horns, *kpa, kpa, kpa!* They engaged in the duel till the next morning. As the day was getting bright, the king disappeared. This was because, if he failed to get home to cross his magic wand, he would remain a beast forever.

The king got home exhausted, the boy also got home exhausted. The moment the king got home, he sent words to Ugboshò, a man reputed as the greatest fighter in both the spirit and the human world. The moment the boy got home, the old woman told him that it was not yet time to rest. She prepared special herbs and charms and fortified both boys. She asked them to get a flute which the junior one would bear to rouse the senior one as he fights on. She gave the senior boy a special machete to bear to the battle. The battle was for seven days' time. Before the day, she directed the

boys to dig a pit in the middle of the compound. The senior would go into it and would be covered with a white cloth. The younger one would seat outside with the flute and wait for a battle signal which would come in the form of a breeze—as it blew stronger and stronger, he should pick up the flute and blow it. Before long, the breeze started blowing – *ghwẹriẹn ghwẹriẹn*, Ugboshọ, the great fighter had entered the town. As soon as he entered the community, he headed for the king's palace. The king directed him to the enemy's compound. As the breeze blew stronger, the younger brother put his hand on the flute and intoned a song.

– Song –

Agbogidi greetings, Agbogidi greetings!
Agbogidi, you are the god of war
The war of the living,
The conflict of warriors is a fitting battle...
Agbogidi oo oo oo

As he chorused the song the third time, Ugboshọ appeared in the middle of the compound. He was a malevolent monster. Immediately the senior brother heard the flute, he came out of the pit with the white cloth covering his face and started macheting Ugboshọ from all angles. Ugboshọ tried to lift him up without success. He tried other means to confront him, but failed. He became dazed and took to his heels. As he ran, he called the king that the battle he invited him for was bigger than him! The king heard the distress message, collected his bag and tries to run away but before he could get out of his house, the boy had ambushed him and macheted him into two halves. He continued his chase on Ugboshọ. He got to a crossroad and could not explain how Ugboshọ disappeared. The entire place was dusty. The boy saw a dwarf wood in the middle of the path and cut into it with his younger brother trailing behind with the flute. Unknown to them, the dwarf wood was the home of a goblin. The goblin started complaining, 'since I parked into this wood no insect had bit me. How come I am being beaten by some insects?' When the goblin came out of the wood, he saw the boy cutting into the wood. He shouted, 'who is this fatherless brat?' He held the boy firmly, and threw him into the sky; before the boy could fall

down to the earth, he had prepared a snare to trap him and made the boy a palm wine tapper. The younger brother, on the other hand, had since stopped playing the flute. He sat on the ground, dejected.

Many years went by and the boy continued to tap palm wine in an unknown land. One day, an *agbrorhe* (talkative bird) flew in and perched on top of the palm tree and shouted at the boy: "Is this the message you were sent? Is this the message you were sent? Just slip and fall, just slip and fall, just slip and fall". Immediately the boy heard the bird, he removed his hands from the tree and fell down. As he fell down, he met his brother there. Seeing him alive, the younger one put his hands on the flute and started singing. The senior one collected his machete and swooped on the goblin. The goblin tried to fight back without success. He tried to get hold of the boy, but failed. The goblin became dazed and took to his heels. The boys chased him until they ran into the spirit world. In the spirit world, whoever ran out to welcome the goblin was macheted. They macheted everyone until they got to a compound and met a man who sat outside in the middle of the compound. He pleaded with the boys and addressed them thus: 'my children, stop the rage; when one fights, he ends the fight'. He then used his hand fan to calm the boys. The man was the boys' father who died many years ago. He assured them that they had fought well and after giving them food, he asked them to leave the spirit abode. He took them to the middle of the town, used his hands to touch their backs and they suddenly found themselves in the middle of their town. They walked into their house. The following day, they hired labourers who assisted them to harvest the remaining crops in the farm which they sold. They became prosperous and never did farm work again.

The tale above foregrounds the socio-political condition of precolonial Africa with all its deformative tendencies and the resistance strategy adopted by the people to survive oppressive regimes. In this society, the worlds of the living and the ancestors are not far apart. There is constant interaction between the two worlds. Thus, the social imbalance of the one intricately affects the other. And since justice constitutes a universal

dictum, the victims of oppression and subjugation often gain help from the metaphysical world. Also, because the major purpose of African folktale is to artistically envision a unique world where there is social balance between the strong and the weak, the rich and poor, the crown and the people, the plot sequence is usually structured between vice and virtue, evil and good, with God as the sole arbiter.

In the tale, for instance, the king is prefigured as evil and brutish, one who could go any length to pull down his subjects to a state of abject poverty. On the other hand, the boys represent the communal ethical essence of good and progress. The old woman typifies the spiritual arbiter in traditional societies who mediate between the forces of good and evil. As the writer (2012) noted elsewhere, the old woman is like Oreame in J.P. Clark's *The Ozidi Saga* and “depicts sundry supernatural personages that often bear the burden of the oppressed in time of injustice. She is represented, in the tale, as the God of justice”. Unuajohwofia (2018) expresses this point when he notes that in the stories of the Urhobo people, the essence of good and evil which exist in both reality and romance as objectified images “are used to represent good in the physical and metaphysical realms”. According to him, such forces of good and evil are represented in stories with such images as “old woman, spirits, benign creatures in both the physical and metaphysical worlds, and Almighty God”. Thus, in the tale, greed is portrayed through characterisation and socio-political institutions like the king and his household underscore its full cycle. The king is greedy and detests healthy competition. He is not satisfied with his political powers in the community and, so, quests for economic space at the expense of the social equilibrium of the community. His greed and depraved disposition are sustained by malevolence. And because he is insecure and emotionally naïve, when he is told of the boys' success in their farming enterprise, he becomes restless. Instead of celebrating them for their agricultural ingenuity, he decides to persecute them. He organises his household, which is representative of the oppressive ruling class in contemporary African society, into a destructive force to fight against the young boys who

represent the forces of good and progress. Thus pitted, the forces of evil and good are embroiled in an eternal warfare.

A significant aspect of the tale is the manner in which the king's destructive forces are dismantled from the smallest to the mighty. In the quest to destroy the children's farm, the king decides to acquire a charm that makes it possible for him and his household to be transformed into destructive animals. However, in his craze to destroy the children's farm, he ends up destroying his entire family and himself. This is made possible by the combined courage and resilience of the children in their redemptive quest to save their investment and by extension, dismantle all forces of oppression in the land. Fortified by the old woman with spiritual powers, the boys are able to resist the devilish and destructive onslaught on their farm, killing the king's children from the least to the great including the king's wives and the king. The image of the man (the boys' father) in the spirit world who stopped the battle in the tale, typified the image of God. As has been stated earlier, in the folktale culture of the African people, God is the sole arbiter. At decisive moments in battles between life and death, especially involving the physical and the metaphysical worlds, his intervention is often summoned as a form of *deus ex machina*.

The ideological polemics in the tale, therefore, is a collective and total resistance of oppression in all its ramifications, especially in its institutionalised form. What the storyteller, Udu Onoowenoni has done with this tale is to present a picture of a degenerate socio-political institutions and the need to reform society for the betterment of all. Thus, the destruction of the children's farms rather than soothe the king's ego, brings great sorrow, disaster and death to his household. The image of the king in the tale is that of brutality, subversion of justice, insensitivity to the plight of the commoners and corruption. The boys' determined efforts to challenge oppression in a hostile environment is necessarily a means to an end. This is in tandem with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1972) statement that "violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery: it purifies man".

The second tale, “Ogiso, Umurhehwere and the King” performed to me by Mr. Oyibo Gabriel Odjugo of Ewu town on Friday January 13, 2023 begins in once upon a time context in a nameless community. In this community, there were strict laws that impoverished the people. A man named Ogiso lived in the community. He was so poor that he relied on snail gathering to survive. There was also another woman in the community called Umurhehwerhe who was also poor. Because snail eating was regarded as worthless food in the community, it became the staple for the poor. As the world was not devoid of wicked men, Tortoise went to the king one morning and reported the poor people in the land to him. Based on Tortoise's information, the king called his messengers and announced that everyone should assemble in his palace in seven days' time. As the seven days of the spirit was never difficult to come, it soon reached. The entire citizens of the community assembled at the king's palace and they were all asked if there was anyone in the village who still ate snail as food? At this point, Ogiso was still holding a portion of a snail he was eating in his hand. He told the king that he was not as rich as others. The snail was the only food he could find to eat. 'Then you do not belong here. I will not allow you to bring disgrace to my kingdom', the Oba said and Ogiso was banished from the land.

The following day, after a great down pour of rain, Ogiso stealthily went to the Oba's dumpsite to scout for snail. The poor woman, Umuhwerhe also went there to gather snail. As they were gathering the snails, the Oba saw them and sent his guards after them. Both of them started running. As they were running, the woman thought it was Ogiso who was pursuing her. Ogiso, on the other side, thought it was the woman who was after him. Unknown to them, those pursuing them had since returned to the palace. But they kept on running. Both of them ran and met each other at a T-junction. One was breathing heavily, the other was breathing heavily. 'So, it was you', Ogiso said. 'So, you are the one pursuing me?' the woman responded. As God had purposed the man and the woman, they both got married in the bush and built a small hut there. That was where they lived. After sometime, the woman became pregnant. Her due date came and she gave birth to a child – *chuwa*!

In that same forest, an old woman also lived there. She has a well. The moment the refugee woman gave birth to the child, the old woman became angry. Wickedness was never scarce in the world, the old woman got okra, prepared them into a slippery mash and plastered the woods around the well. After the birth of the child, they could not find any sharp object to sever the mother's umbilical cord from the child. The woman then suggested that she would go to the house of the old woman to borrow a machete to cut it. She got there, greeted the old woman and told her her mission. The old woman asked her to get her water from the well before she could give her the machete. The woman was unaware of the old woman's plan. She collected a calabash and went to get the water for her. But as soon as she stepped her feet on the well, the okra slipped her and she fell down and died. The husband waited, waited and waited; she did not return. He went to the old woman's place to look for her. There, he saw his wife already dead close to the well. He collected the pot from her and tried to fetch the water, the okra slipped him and he died.

The child was left alone in the hut. As whatever God does cannot be wrong, a mighty rain fell. The entire hut became flooded and the child started floating on it. Whenever the water dried down, another rain would fall. If the child turned this way, he drank water. If he turned that way, he drank water. One day, the mother of the child came visiting from the spirit world. By this time, the child had grown but his umbilical cord was still dragging on the ground; the mother used a knife to cut it. When she got to her spirit abode, she informed her husband that their son was still alive. The husband doubted her but promised to go with her see the child on their next market outing. As the market day of the spirits does not take long to come, it came and they went to the market. They bought all their wares and left to see the boy. When they got there, the child was sleeping. The child's hairs were bushy and they shaved it cleanly with a knife. When the child woke up, there was no hair on his head. He touched his head, not even a single strand was on it. He ran to the back of the house; he could not find any one. He ran through the foot path; yet he could not see anyone. He was surprised. Another market day came and the parents came with a

spiritual object. They placed it on his hand. They then conjured the object to teach the child how to eat, how to talk, how to bathe and how to take care of himself. When the child woke up, the object was on his chest. He picked it up and surveyed it. He called, 'father, father, mother, mother,' no response! No one answered him; the object then called him, 'Nurubo' 'You are the one known as Anurubo. It told him that it was his father and mother that gave him the name, Anurubo. It told the child that whatever he needs to survive in this life has been given to him. It taught the boy everything and the boy became learned. Whatever the boy requested was provided. He became very rich and influential.

On one particular market day, Tortoise went to gather palm kernel in the bush and saw the boy's city with beautiful and well planned mansions. He wondered what time a city like that was built in the kingdom without his knowledge. He assured himself that he was going to see for himself. He got there and saw the place was as beautiful as paradise. He was marvelled at what he saw. When he got to Anurubo's house he was surprised at his sense of luxury. Anurubo called him, 'Tortoise'. He said, 'yes, master!' 'Do you want to eat food?' He answered, 'yes'. Anurubo then directed the object to provide food for Tortoise. The object asked Anurubo to sing his praise song. This section of the tale is performed through song. As Anurubo sang, the object provided all that Tortoise requested. Different assortments of foods were brought. Tortoise ate to his full and collected all the leftovers. Outside this, he was given a full cow to take home to feed his family.

As the world was never lacking of evil doers, Tortoise got home and went straight to the king. He informed the king a little brat had stolen his late father's money-making wand which he has used to acquire stupendous wealth in the forest. The king was surprised and he sent people to the boy's city. When they got there, it was really a marvel. They returned to the king and said: 'it is not a secret; the child actually stole it. If you get there, you will marvel as all the wealth of the Ewheridos cannot compare with the child's. In rage, the king ordered that the boy be brought to him. The child

obeyed and came to see the king with his magic wand in his hand. The king ordered him to immediately return the magic wand which is the symbol of authority in the kingdom. The boy told the king that the wand was a gift from his late parents. But the king refused to listen to him. Tortoise insisted that the object belongs to the king and he must give it back to him. The child told the king to be ready for the consequences if he is forced to part with the wand. The king insisted that he should drop it. The child looked at the king, the people, shook his head and then placed the object on the ground. The king collected it, it was a small snail shell, very small. The king then asked Tortoise, 'is this the magic wand my father left for me, you said? This ordinary shell?' Tortoise said, 'yes.' He said the king should command the child to sing for the shell and he will see the magic of the shell. The king did and the child started clapping his hands and sang in wonderful tunes. The entire episode which was rendered in songs saw the king, his wives, Tortoise and the entire villagers disappeared into the forest to wander as slaves there. After they had all disappeared into the bush, the boy's anger became calm. He became sorry for his action and begged the object to forgive the people and return them to the community. The boy sang the song in a reverse order and the king and his subjects returned to the community. They were all in tattered clothes and looked like mad people. The king became sorry and apologised to the child. He got hold of Tortoise, out of anger, smashed it upon a stone and his shells splattered into two halves; one fell into the river, the other fell on the earth. This is why there is land tortoise and river tortoise.

This tale vividly foregrounds the wickedness and insensitivity of the privileged class in their ambition to rid the society of the poor and underprivileged. As it always manifests in contemporary African societies, the poor are seen as mere fleas in the land which must be routed out because they are not expected to co-exist with the wealthy and propertied class. Hence the enactment of the law to remove them from the community was swift. This is a classic tale of class struggle and material dialectics in traditional society. The story opens with a clear distinction of

the class system in the community. The penurious situation of Ogiso and Umuhwerhe placed them in perpetual hunger and lack which necessitated their resort to seek snail protein for survival which, in the estimation of the community, is a heinous crime against the integrity of the land. In many traditional societies in Africa, those who feed on snail are regarded as slaves or lazy.

In this tale, the king, Tortoise and the chiefs represent the rich and privileged class. They are the privileged group that enjoys economic advantage over the citizens. This class detests the poor and continued to enact laws that not only dehumanise the people but place them in the lowest ebb of existence. Ogiso and Umuhwerhe are the disadvantaged and underprivileged group who wallow in abject poverty. They are never meant to co-exist with the bourgeois class. The tale explores the fact that in many African societies, despite the fact that poverty has been fostered on the people to keep them in check, they are never allowed to make progress through personal efforts and struggles.

To further dehumanise the poor, the property class, headed by Tortoise goes to the king and forces him to enact a law that bars people from eating snail in the community. Thus, the masses in the tale are subjected to a life of extreme lack and deprivation. They are therefore pitted, at the individual level, against the privileged class of tortoise and the king. This is the class dialectics in the tale.

The condition of the people in African is so precarious that they are pitted against themselves. Ogiso and Umuhwerhe are further subjected to sub-human conditions where they live at the mercy of nature. Unlike the old woman in the first tale, the old woman in this tale adumbrates the sundry inanities that the poor are faced with in their effort to exist. Instead of her to take pity on the poor couples, she hatches plans to kill them, leaving their only child to fate and the benevolence of the supernatural forces. Here, the storyteller seems to affirm the fact that without the supernatural, the human community would be in great chaos. Thus, through the help of

his dead parents, the little child is able to survive to the extent that he is able to create an empire that competes with that of the king and the hegemonic class. However, the trickster, Tortoise after enjoying the young boy's generosity, tricked the king into believing that the snail shell that produces wealth for Anurubo belongs to his late father. The aim of Tortoise is to dispossess the boy of his divine gift in order to perpetuate his hegemonic class. This is why Julia Udofia believes that as part of its characteristics, the trickster is “greedy, cunning, mischievous, boastful, ambiguous, pretentious, and deceitful” (21). She expresses this idea further when she tells us that the trickster in African folktale is “also selfish, treacherous and appear in comic and often disgusting situations...” (21).

The second tale therefore highlights the primordial political culture of oppression of the powerless by the man of authority and power. The king is a man of power and authority while the young boy, Anurubo is a commoner who through dint of luck and supernatural assistance is able to rise above societal conditioning. Through the nudging of Tortoise, the king uses his political powers to compel the boy to surrender his magical wand. Here, falsehood is used as a motif to enhance the plot of the tale. Falsehood in the tale as told by Tortoise leads to more falsehood. The Tortoise lied that the object of wealth belongs to the king, as it is his late father's symbol of authority. Instead of investigating the veracity of the claim, the king accepted the falsehood and compelled the child to part with it. This communal involvement in Tortoise's crime results in the destruction of the entire community. Through some metaphysical maneuvering, the king, the queen, tortoise and all who were against the young Anurubo were transposed into the spirit world to suffer eternal condemnation.

Our discussion above has shown that African oral narratives constitute a reformative platform for the overall socio-political progress of the African society. The two tales investigated in this study highlight socio-political issues of class difference between the rich and the poor. In the

first tale, “The King, two Brothers and the Old Woman” for instance, the requests for political and economic space at the expense of the social equilibrium of the community caused the king his life and family's. The king is greedy and depraved. He detests economic competition and thus represents the oppressive ruling class in contemporary African society. The young boys, on the other hand, typified the working class. They constitute the forces of good and progress in the society. In the second tale, “Ogiso, Umurhehwere and the King”, the king, Tortoise and the chiefs represent the rich and privileged class. They are the privileged group that enjoys economic advantage over the citizens. Ogiso and Umuhwerhe are the disadvantaged and underprivileged group who wallow in abject poverty. They are never meant to co-exist with the bourgeois class. The two tales therefore explore how many African societies use poverty as a weapon against the masses. In other words, for the progress of the society, the masses have to resist these oppressive tendencies in all their ramifications.

Conclusion

The two tales under study explore the issue of social justice as a primordial theme in African oral literature. It projects the people's quest for freedom and social justice. In other words, the storytellers in traditional Urhobo society who dub as cultural mediators and the watchdogs of society, use their tales as an interventionist tool to comment on various social, political and economic expressions that are inimical to the progress of society. In the conflictual setting of these tales, the people always triumph over the forces of retrogression and oppression. Through a critical evaluation of two African tales, the study examines the systems of class differences in precolonial Africa and to a very large extent, allude to contemporary political systems in Africa. The two tales show that the role of the storytellers of old who, through their tales, served and operated as the watchdogs of society and advocates of the state and her citizens not only ensures social and political harmony but formed the nucleus of resistance literature in Africa.

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