

Environmental Crisis Management and African Indigenous Coping Strategies

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Abstract

African cultures employ certain strategies based on indigenous knowledge, especially those embedded in folklore to preserve natural endowments and manage crises emanating from the interaction of man and nature. Among the Yorùbá people, for example, folktales serve as strategies to engender such societal and behavioural norms that have helped build and protect the environment. This paper therefore examines how through folktales the Yorùbá have integrated into their society's psyche an eco-friendly culture, thereby evolving a pre-emptive environmental protection strategy. Using J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory, this paper intends to analyse a set of Yorùbá folktales as instruments through which the people have ensured a harmonious man-nature interaction and sustainable environment.

Keywords: environment, crisis, folklore, folktale, man and nature

Introduction

The focus of this paper is to explore the environment as conceived by the Yorùbá in their oral literary genres. The aspect



that draws the attention of this discourse is Yorùbá folklores which include forms such as folktales, legends, myths, taboos, proverbs, maxims, idioms, anecdotes, incantations and storytelling. The work, however, dwells only on folktales. The Yorùbá folktales are primarily entertaining but covertly and systematically address important and salient social, psychological, political, economic and environmental problems. They serve as non-formal approach to inculcating in the youths who are predominantly the listeners, the virtues of good character and level attitude known as ‘Òmọ̀lúàbí’ among the Yorùbá.

The environment has attracted the interest of scholars from almost every field of scholarship, from the humanities, to the social sciences, pure science and applied science such as engineering. Most universities even have faculties named after the environment which they dub ‘environmental sciences’. However, the key courses offered are mainly architecture, surveying (land and quantity), planning, building and sometimes, geography. These courses are assumed to be primarily and directly focused on the study of the environment, but then, just the physical aspect of it. In most African worldviews, the environment is not limited to the physical; it includes the flora, the fauna, the human beings and even the elements of the spiritual realm, and their interactions with one another. This is the nature of the environment as conceived by the Yorùbá people of Southwest Nigeria. This worldview is entrenched in the material culture and the literary genre of the people. In various modes of material culture such as burial

ceremony, chieftaincy and age-group systems; and in occupations such as farming, smithing, hunting and visual arts; the issue of nature relationship is glaring and primary.

The Yorùbá Language and their Culture

Yorùbá is one of the three major language groups in Nigeria. The other two are Hausa and Igbo. The Yorùbá are located in the Southwest axis of Nigeria where they contiguously and wholly occupy six of the thirty-six states of Nigeria. The states are: Èkìtì, Lagos, Ògùn, Oṅdó, Òṣun, and Òyó States. They partly occupy three others namely, Edo, Kogi and Kwara States. Put together, going by 2006 census, the Yorùbá people number about thirty million, close to one-fifth of the entire population of the country. The people share similar culture and traditional belief system while they have also accepted the two main world faiths: Christianity and Islam.

The Yorùbá language has a standard variety which is commonly used by all speakers for the functions such as education, broadcasting and governance especially in the state where they constitute the majority. Almost every speaker uses the standard with their dialects. The dialects have been studied extensively to show their groupings and affinities (Adetugbo, 1982; Adeniyi, 2006). Yorùbá is one of the three major languages named as national languages by the 1999 Nigeria Constitution (section 55). It is important to note that these languages have the unique status of being used for legislation in the National Assembly along with the English language. Even as Nigerian linguists have provided technical preparedness FGN (1991, 1999, 2004); NERDC (1990); Olateju (2004); Owolabi (2004, 2006)); the



country is still awaiting its implementation. Legislation is still being done in English language alone in most states and at the national level. As regards the Yorùbá language, efforts of linguists and other stakeholders have yielded some results. Lagos and other states in the southwest where legislation is done on certain days of the week in the Yorùbá language are good, commendable and heartwarming examples.

Theoretical Framework

The major theoretical perspective to this work shall be drawn from the Speech Act Theory as postulated by J.L. Austin. This theory sees utterance production as locutionary act, the function performed by the utterance as illocutionary act and the causative effect of the theory, therefore, puts ordinary meaning of an utterance in its referent and real meaning in contexts such as speaker's intention and objectives in speech situation. In other words, an utterance has an overt and a covert meaning. The overt is the surface meaning relating to the truth or falsehood of the utterance and basic information based on ordinary meaning of the utterance. The covert brings out the performance of functions such as values and vices relating to man and his environment. Austin's locutionary act is the act of tale narrative, his illocutionary act is primary information relating to the entertainment as the tale is narrated to listeners at sunset, a perlocutionary act is synonymous with the serious non-formal educative lessons drawn from the tales; lessons that are internalised by the listeners and which he invokes at every junction in his life journey. This theory aptly captures the roles of folktale in Yorùbá society. While entertainment is the

immediate pleasure derivable from folktales, lessons relating to maintenance and the sustenance of the environment encapsulate the communicative value. Two of the Austin's Speech acts namely, illocutionary and perlocutionary are going to be the background on which we base our analyses in this paper.

Data and Methodology

The data are drawn from some published collections of folktales viz: Babalola (1979), Amoo (1987) and Ojo (2005). They are also drawn from some native speaker sages and culture enthusiasts. The researcher's introspection as a native speaker also serves as primary source. Yorùbá folktales have two broad modes namely: narrative mode and quiz mode. I am concerned with the narrative variety which is in three categories: tortoise-based, non-tortoise-based and cyclic chain type known as *àrò* in the language. They are narrated to children at moonlight as non-formal form of education primarily for entertainment and also to teach morals. The themes almost always include the environment. The work will present four folktales for analysis.

Presentation

Tale 1: Àgbìgbò bird and co-wives

Two wives were married to one husband. Both had one child each. The senior one was rich but the junior was a pauper. One day, the junior wife went to the farm to pick food items and some crops for basic subsistence. As she commenced her chores, she laid her baby on a piece of cloth beneath a tree. On completion, she could not find her baby. She searched desperately and discovered that the Àgbìgbò bird had carried



the baby. She pleaded profusely with the bird to return her baby with the following song.

<i>Ẹyẹ Àgbìgbò bá mi gbómọ mi o</i>	<i>Àgbìgbò bird, return my baby</i>
<i>Ẹyẹ Àgbìgbò</i>	<i>Àgbìgbò bird</i>
<i>Aládé orí igi</i>	<i>Crowned on the tree</i>
<i>Ẹyẹ Àgbìgbò</i>	<i>Àgbìgbò bird</i>

The bird dropped a bundle of expensive beads instead of the baby. Then the junior wife continued her song thus:

<i>Ẹyí kò tòmọ mi o</i>	<i>This is not as precious as my baby</i>
<i>Ẹyẹ Àgbìgbò</i>	<i>Àgbìgbò bird</i>
<i>Aládé orí igi</i>	<i>Crowned on the tree</i>
<i>Ẹyẹ Àgbìgbò</i>	<i>Àgbìgbò bird</i>
<i>Bá mi gbómọ mi o</i>	<i>Return my baby</i>
<i>Ẹyẹ Àgbìgbò</i>	<i>Àgbìgbò bird</i>

The bird again dropped a bundle of gold and other jewelries instead of the baby. The woman continued pleading with the bird insisting that she would rather have her baby instead of the expensive gifts being showered on her by the mysterious bird. After many gifts had been dropped by the bird and the junior wife persisted in the demand for her baby, the bird released the baby and the woman became very wealthy with the enormous gifts the bird had given her. She went home rich with her baby and the gifts. She narrated her ordeal to the senior wife and even shared the gift with her. The senior wife at this point was not satisfied. She wanted to have similar experience so that she could also have immense wealth. She went to the farm also and left her baby carelessly so that the *Àgbìgbò* bird would pick it. *Àgbìgbò* did not, until she had stubbornly abandoned the baby. Later, the baby was picked and she started to sing just like the

junior wife did. Instead of the bird to drop jewelries and gifts after each song as she expected, *Àgbìgbò* was dropping part of the baby's body until it finally threw the totally dismembered body of the baby at her. On arrival, she was expelled by her husband from her home.

Tale 2: Jémpe and The Baby's Stool

This is an example of the cyclic chain type of folktale called *Àrò*. The baby of a certain woman passed stool in front of her home. Instead of disposing it immediately, she beckoned on the dog to consume it but the dog refused. She beckoned on the snake to bite the dog, but the snake also refused. She beckoned on the staff to kill the snake, the staff refused. She beckoned on fire to burn the staff, fire refused. She beckoned on water to quench fire, water refused. She beckoned on the sun to dry water up, sun refused. And so it went that no solution was found to clear the stool. Then she started to sing thus:

<i>A pòòrùn</i>	We beckoned on the sun
<i>Òòrùn òòrùn kò</i>	The sun refused
<i>Òòrùn kò lámi</i>	The sun did not dry water up
<i>Omi omí kò</i>	Water refused
<i>Omi kò paná</i>	Water did not quench fire
<i>Iná iná kò</i>	Fire refused
<i>Iná kò jópàá</i>	Fire did not burn staff
<i>Òpá òpá kò</i>	Staff refused
<i>Òpá kò pejò</i>	Staff did not kill snake
<i>Ejò ejò kò</i>	Snake refused
<i>Ejò kò pajá</i>	Snake did not bite dog
<i>Ajá ajá kò</i>	Dog refused



<i>Ajá kò jẹmí ọmọ o</i>	Dog did not consume stool
<i>Jẹ́mpe</i>	<i>Jẹ́mpe</i>
<i>Jẹ́mpe Jẹ́mpe o</i>	<i>Jẹ́mpe Jẹ́mpe o</i>
<i>Jẹ́mpe</i>	<i>Jẹ́mpe</i>

Tale 3: *Kín-ín-kín* bird and the king's farm

Once upon a time, the king of a town inhabited by birds and animals ordered his subjects to clear the weed on a certain farm. All of them congregated on the farm at dawn and by the end of the following day, they had accomplished the task. But the king did not invite *Kín-ín-kín* bird because it was very tiny. When the others were busy on the farm, *Kín-ín-kín* observed them with sadness because the king belittled him. *Kín-ín-kín* was patient while the work lasted. When they had gone to report to the king, *Kín-ín-kín* entered the farm and began to sing thus:

<i>Ọba Aláàran bèwẹ</i>	King <i>Aláàran</i> ordered cooperative work
<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>	<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>
<i>Ó bẹ kèrè ẹyẹ</i>	He invited all sorts of bird
<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>	<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>
<i>Ó démi kìn-ìn-kín sí</i>	He exempted me, <i>Kìn-ìn-kín</i>
<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>	<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>
<i>Koríko dide</i>	Grass, arise
<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>	<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>
<i>Èrùwà</i>	Chaff, arise
<i>Kìn-nì-kin</i>	<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>
<i>Kálo jó bàtá</i>	Let us dance to <i>bàtá</i> drum
<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>	<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>
<i>Bí bàtá ò dún</i>	If <i>bàtá</i> does not sound

Kìn-ìn-kin	<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>
<i>Kálo jó dùndún</i>	<i>Then, we dance to dundun drum</i>
Kìn-ìn-kin	<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>
<i>Sebéle sebèlèke</i>	<i>Sebéle sebèlèke</i>
Kìn-ìn-kin	<i>Kìn-ìn-kin</i>

On reporting that the work had been done, the king went for inspection. The bush and the weed had grown up. The king was annoyed. The subjects were astonished. They explained to the king that they cleared the farm properly. The king ordered a repeat performance but requested a seven legged gnostic spirit known as Òsanyìn to secure the farm. When kin-in-kin noticed that the farm had been cleared again, he went there to repeat the song. Òsanyìn started to dance to the song until he lost all his seven legs. It continued this way with a three legged and one legged Òsanyìn consecutively.

Kin-in-kin was only caught when the king put a deaf spirit who could not hear the song on guard. He took Kìn-ìn-kin to the king. Kìn-ìn-kin narrated to the king that he felt slighted and spited when he was left out of the invitees. The king apologised to Kìn-ìn-kin and promised that such a thing would not happen again.

Tale 4: How Rain Became the Husband of Maize

In the days of yore, Rain and Fire were suitors to Maize. Maize requested them to compete with each other. She would marry whoever was triumphant. In several ways they competed, Rain triumphed and eventually took Maize for a wife. The two men: Fire and Rain were invited to a duel before a congregation of



animals. Even before they arrived the venue, both of them had been testing their powers. Fire gutted all bush around, but Rain released a downpour that quenched it to the admiration of Maize, who sang thus:

<i>Ení tere nà tere</i>	One by one
<i>Tééré nà</i>	It is one
<i>Iná pupa béléjé</i>	Fire is bright and shining
<i>Tééré nà</i>	It is one
<i>Òjò dudú bọ̀lọ̀jò</i>	Rain is clear and soothing
<i>Tééré nà</i>	It is one
<i>Kàkà kí n fẹ́nà ma fọ̀jò</i>	I will rather marry rain instead of fire
<i>Tééré nà</i>	It is one
<i>Òjò lọ̀kọ̀ àgbàdo</i>	Rain is the husband of Maize
<i>Tééré nà</i>	It is one

Rain was happy on hearing this song but Fire was sad. Fire tried again by gutting all the surrounding but Rain quenched it again. Maize repeated the song. On getting to the venue of the contest, Fire displayed, and Rain, after exercising some patience, quenched Fire, again to the admiration of Maize. It continued like that until Rain showed the spectators clearly that he is indeed superior to Fire. Fire surrendered to Rain and Rain became the husband of Maize.

Analysis

To perform an illocutionary act in the Speech Act theory, according to Yoshitake (2004), a speaker must rely on the socially accepted convention without which the speaker cannot inspire a social force. In order to send the true message home to



the listeners, Yorùbá folktales employ a system that appeals to the mind of the listeners' attachment to the social force, which in this case, is naturally the protection of the environment and all its relics. This then leads us to the perlocutionary functions of these tales, that is, the process whereby the tales do not only relay some events but also perform some specific kinds of actions in the minds of the hearers. Below are the analyses of each tale in line with the Speech Act Theory.

In tale 1, we have the presentation of the inherent environment as psycho-spiritual. It sees a good environment as one where peace and harmony reign. The value system of the Yorùbá is displayed. Humility is virtuous as shown by the junior wife. Envy, arrogance and dissatisfaction are vices as displayed by the senior wife. These vices sprang into full glare, in this tale, as a result of what Austin calls the *performative utterance*. This is an 'utterance-as-action' aspect of the Speech Act Theory where some forms of discussion will lead to the hearers' reaction which may be positive or negative. Such vices as these shown by the senior wife are the type that can upturn the peace of the environment. In the Yorùbá society, the family is seen as the nucleus of the community. Harmony in the family binds the entire society. The environment is conceived as consisting of human beings, animals, plants and even spiritual beings as seen in the mysterious birds that came to enforce the Yorùbá belief in the supremacy of the child over wealth. Offsprings are precious because they make for continuity of the race.

Tale 2 highlights the physical nature of the environment. It teaches the saying that anybody's duty is nobody's. In Speech



Act theoretical terms, we relate this to the doctrine of *infelicities* which deals with the things that can go wrong on the occasion of some utterances (Austin 1962:14). This doctrine has a feature called *misfire*. Misfires are infelicitous cases in which an act is purported but it is of no effect (Yoshitake 2004:28). There are two types of misfire namely, *misexecution* and *misinvocation*. The latter is the type of misfire that is relevant in this tale (the former will be discussed in details in the analysis of the next tale). Misinvocation is the purported act that is not allowed. In Yorùbá society, environmental pollution is largely frowned at. Therefore, to a very large extent, Jémpẹ's act of calling a dog to eat the stool is a type of misinvocation. The mother of the baby that stooled should have cleared the environment instead of beckoning on the dog and pressurising it to eat up the stool. It shows us that whoever is responsible for defiling/polluting the environment should take responsibility for its cleansing instead of waiting for other agencies to do so.

Tale 3 talks about the social nature of the environment. It says that everybody is part of the environment. Nobody should be overlooked in the effort to sanitise the environment. In the Speech Act's expression of this tale, we refer to a type of misfire called 'misexecution'. This type of infelicitous misfire deals with the societal conventions/norms. However, whenever the execution of these societal conventions/norms is bedeviled by some mistakes, it leads to a type of failure called *flaw* (cf. Yoshitake 2004). Flaw is an inappropriate type of execution which can be likened to the act of the king in this tale. The king, according to that tale, means well by clearing the farmland but



commits a flaw by overlooking a tiny bird (Kín-ín-kín). For this singular reason, it can be factored, in Yorùbá society, as an *a priori* idea that the act of the king is purported but void. Consequently, if everybody is allowed to play his role, no matter how small, the collective effort will be very effective.

Tale 4: Even though the four fundamental elements in the society are Fire, Air, Water and Earth; only two, namely, Fire and Water (Rain) are focused in this tale. In Yorùbá belief, these elements are personified and their interaction is held as fundamental to the sustenance and maintenance of the environment. The illocutionary act of Speech Act Theory presents the truth and the falsehood of utterances. There is a class of utterances force under this illocutionary act called *expositive*. This force clarifies the way utterances fit the proceedings of conversation, arguments and description. Therefore if we say *omi ní ñ poró iná* (it is water that kills the poison of fire), which is a usual incantation, it brings into fore the socio-cultural nature of the environment in the supremacy of water over fire as portrayed in the tale. Rain then is presented as vital to the production of food for man's survival. The precious value of rain and water generally is highlighted so that sources of water can be protected in the society. Maize represents one of the staple foods among the Yorùbá which is consumed in various forms. It blossoms in the raining season. This also strengthens the expositive strength of this fourth tale in Yorùbá society as much as the subliminal message it teaches.



Conclusion

This paper has made use of folktales to show that the concept of environment among the Yorùbá people of Southwest Nigeria is interwoven and complex. The environment encompasses not only the physical but also its contents such as human beings, plants, animals and even the spiritual beings. In the Yorùbá worldview, peaceful environment can only be achieved with the interaction of all these visible and invisible elements in the environment. To the Yorùbá, immaterial value supersedes material. The study shows that Africans, even as non-literates from the olden days, have methods of managing man and nature for the protection of their cultural heritage.

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