

MYTH AND PROVERB AS A VEHICLE OF MORAL EDUCATION AMONG TRADITIONAL YORUBA

J. O. FASORO, Ph.D

Ekiti State University,

Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria.

Department of Philosophy

E-mail: rotimifasoro@gmail.com

Tel: 08033896814

Abstract

Moral regeneration of the (Nigerian) youths is not to be hinged solely and wholly on formal pedagogy. Traditional African (Yoruba) people taught their young ones to be morally upright by devising effective and pragmatic ways of imparting certain ideals and virtues in them. Two of these media of moral education were myth and proverb.

The act of story telling fostered communal spirit and unity among the people. It also encouraged closeness among people of some clans and tribes, parents and children, as well as respect and awe for what was believed to be sacred. Myth and proverb were designed to teach the young minds why they should emulate certain characters (deed and alive) and how to go about achieving this objective, as well as why they should shun certain actions and characters. The soul-searching questions often asked at the end of each story were meant to prick the conscience of the listeners (youths) to enable them discern what was believed to be good from what was evil. This traditional (Yoruba) mode of teaching morals, with little modification, may go a long way in stemming the tide of moral decadence in any contemporary society of the world.

Key words: Moral regeneration, Proverb, Myth, Dependency, Relativism.

Introduction

There have been, in contemporary times, several calls on Nigeria to inculcate moral discipline in youth. As a matter of fact, the launchings of War Against Indiscipline (WAI) by the Buhari-Idiagbon and War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAI-C) by the Abacha-Diya regimes respectively were meant to achieve this objective. Only few people in Nigeria will today deny the fact that the country is in dire need of moral regeneration. While some have argued that one of the ways to combat moral decadence among the Nigerian youths is to return the mission schools to their original owners, others have argued that there is a marked difference between religious instructions and moral education. This latter school of thought believes that to be religious is not the same thing as being moral.¹ Again, it is an undeniable fact that one of the factors responsible for moral decadence in contemporary Nigerian society is the way people tend to construe the phrase, 'being moral'. Today, 'being moral' means nothing more than 'being on the fast lane', in which case everyone, or almost everyone, wants to 'make it fast' by becoming a millionaire overnight! On the other hand, whenever 'being moral' is construed differently, it may come to mean 'being stupid' in that wise the 'moral man' is seen as someone who is still 'preaching' the 'old morality' thereby allowing various 'opportunities' to pass him by.

This essay does not intend to discuss the factors that are responsible for moral decadence in Nigeria. Neither does it aim at taking side on whether or not the mission schools will be able to teach religious or moral values capable of reducing, if not eliminating, moral decadence in Nigeria.² Rather, it attempts to explicate some forms (media) of moral education among traditional Yoruba. One of these media of moral education was myth in which various stories were told by some elders of a clan while the young ones listened attentively. It is argued that at the end of each story, certain conclusions were usually drawn and some lessons learnt. The moral consequences or implications of the stories were usually emphasized or highlighted.

The paper concludes that an inference (though not explicitly stated nor argued for) that may be drawn from our discussion here is that a re-visit to some of these teachings and attempts to impart moral education on the youth among traditional Yoruba may, where necessary, be a way out of the present moral degeneration. Contrary to arguments in certain quarters that morality has no objective or indisputable purpose, the traditional system of morality among the Yoruba of South-West Nigeria had some purposes among which were making the youths morally upright, obedience to tradition and constituted authorities and institutions, respect for elders, establishing a cordial relationship with the ancestors, ancestresses, gods and goddesses.

Some Preliminary Clarifications

As already stated, since this paper does not aim at covering all aspects of traditional (Yoruba) moral education, then a number of clarifications become apposite. Also, since the paper attempts a critical discussion of one or two media through which the traditional Yoruba tried to make the young one better citizen, then the scope of the paper needs be defined. Consequently, the following points must be noted:

- (a) That what the paper discusses is the recognition of the fact that moral education among traditional Yoruba was usually rooted through songs, proverbs, myths, taboos, totems, worships, sacrifices, and not necessarily an attempt to portray them as angels. For example, why, despite their efforts at educating the youths to be moral, the elders still sold their fellow men and women into slavery;
- (b) It is not concerned with whether or not these people believed strongly the stories (myths) they told the youths, or whether or not such stories were true. Rather, it attempts to draw the moral values contained in the mythical beliefs;
- (c) The paper does not discuss (at least, not very seriously) or try to determine, whether or not the Yoruba system of morality was based on religion or some religions even though it is sometimes argued that both religion and morality set standards of human conduct and behaviour;
- (d) In spite of the various means of moralisation adopted by the traditional Yoruba, the paper does not hold that these same people did not sometimes act immorally;
- (e) It does not discuss the various ethical theories, neither does it try to determine the school of (ethical) thought that their own type of morality belonged;
- (f) It does not hold that moral sense (a form of intuitionism) was innate to the traditional Yoruba. That is to say, the paper does not hold that moral faculty (the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong) was inborn with the traditional moral educators. Morality, the paper holds, is a product of socialisation, the more reason why we have the teachers and the students, the learned and the learners;
- (g) It does not try to determine the rationality of the people's beliefs as well as the validity of their arguments;
- (h) And finally, no attempt is made here to engage in a comparative analysis between traditional (Yoruba) system of morality and the contemporary analytic ethics.

However, here and there, now and then, reference may be made to where we think one of the systems is preferable to, or is more tenable than, the other.

Moral Education among Traditional Yoruba

Moral discourse especially among contemporary ethicists and philosophers has witnessed a radical departure from its conception in ancient times. For instance, 1095a5 and 1103b25, of the Nichomachean Ethics, we read that ethics is not what we read in order to know what good men are like, but in order to act as good men (Thomson 1981:17, 65, Passim). In the same way Kai Nielsen once argued that the characteristic functions of morality are to guide conduct and to alter attitudes of disposition to actions (Nielsen 1957: 236). On the other hand, Perry has argued that objective moral purpose is a farce. According to him, thinking that there is one is sheer fantasy, that is, such a thought takes us in to the wonderland (Perry 1976:62). And for most contemporary emotivists in particular, and positivists in general, from the analysis of the language of moral discourse, nothing follows as to how we ought to act, a view, as it may be seen, that appears to negate Aristotle's as stated above.

However, among traditional Yoruba, the stories that were told to the young ones under the moonlight were meant to teach morals, and the most effective way of achieving this objective was to resort to myths.

Myths are not only theoretical explanations of the origin of things, they also serve as a guideline for the daily behaviour of men as well as they command religious principles (Hountondji 1974).

Myth was seen in the traditional societies as a true, sacred and exemplary story (Hountondji: 14). The Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines myth as a story handed down from olden times, containing the early beliefs of a race (especially explanations of natural events such, as the seasons). A myth has also been defined as a narrative or tradition, without historical or scientific basis, embodying a popular idea regarding natural phenomena, or historical events or deeds of gods, heroes, and so on (Draver 1982:180). Whatever may be our analysis, definition, or explanation of myth, in this paper, however, a myth is understood as a story that is deliberately and consciously told to the young ones in order to impart moral values on them (Fasoro 2005: 6-7). This is another way of saying that the paper intends to determine the pragmatic (moral) values of the act of story-telling among the traditional Yoruba.

Part of our thesis in this paper therefore, is a rejection of Hountondji's submission that in the so-called traditional (African) societies, the various myths were held unconsciously. Even though it may be argued that myths have no written literature, but this is different from saying that myths are tales meant to suggest, but not to prove things. Or, that myths were meant to appease man's uneasiness, at little cost, by providing ready-made answers to questions which might, anytime come to tease the human mind. We recognise the fact that in a pre-literate culture such as the traditional Yoruba's, instructions of whatever form, colour or degree, would have to be communicated through the words of mouth and symbols. When a Yoruba elderly person called his children and grandchildren together every evening (these children were sometimes joined by others from the neighbourhood) to tell them some stories about certain events which were believed to have taken place in the remote past, he was not trying to merely amuse the children. Usually, the story tellers always drew some moral lessons from their stories saying: 'Eyin omode, ki ni itan yi ko wa?' [Children, what (moral) lesson does this story teach us?], or 'ogbon wo ni a ri ko ninu itan ti e sese gbo tan yii?' (What type of wisdom do we derive from the story we have just heard?). 'E ma se gbo itan yi lasan, e gbodo, (tabi e ko gbodo) se bi... (ijapa, ode, agbe, etc.) inu itan naa'. [Do not just hear/listen to the story, you must (or must not) act like the... (tortoise, hunter, farmer, etc.) in the story].

Whether or not the present day presenters of kiddies' programmes both on radio and television would appreciate their indebtedness to long-time story-tellers, the fact remains that such programmes as "The young

shall grow”, “Eyin ni di akuko”. “Children’s Time”, “Eyin omo mi da?” “Kiddies half-hour”, and others like them are based on some of the myths told to their young children by our ancestors and ancestresses. I have myself heard many of such stories from my grandfather and grandmother, stories which, today, may appear ridiculous, but which then instilled fear into my mind and those of my peers. For example, we were told of how, once upon a time, the tortoise tried to collect the wisdom of the whole world in a calabash and hide it on a palm tree. Since he held the calabash on his chest, he could not climb the palm tree. He made several futile attempts until someone came around and saw him struggling to climb the palm tree. This person then told the tortoise to put the calabash on his (tortoise’s) back. The tortoise did as he was told and he discovered that he could now climb the palm tree but not before it dawned on him that he had been behaving foolishly. First, he realized that after all, he had not succeeded in collecting the wisdom of all the people of the world into the calabash because here, before him, was a man wiser than him. Secondly, and more importantly, it might never be possible for him to gather the wisdom of the entire world, and indeed, after gathering the wisdom, what did he want to do with it, after all, ‘Eniti o gbon, t’o ni enikan o gbon, oun ni baba were’ (He who thinks he is wise and others are foolish is the maddest) (Odunjo, et al). This story about the tortoise and his lunatic ambition is something that is told just for telling sake. Apart from the fact that it teaches us to shun covetousness, it also tells us that we are not the only one that is wise. If contemporary Nigerian politicians could imbibe the moral lesson in this story, then we may as well say goodbye to the ‘rule of ruin’ syndrome that has bedeviled the Nigerian political landscape before and since independence.

As already hinted in the opening pages of this paper, traditional Yoruba also imparted moral values to the young ones through proverbs. The type of proverb to be uttered would depend on the context or situation at hand (Abraham: *The Mind of Africa*). For instance, despite the fact that the Yoruba did not condone a situation in which youth would be disrespectful to elders, they also expected the elders to put themselves in a position of honour. The following proverbs explain the point I am making:

- (a) Bi omode ko ba ki agba, yoo simi ara re ni.

[If the youth does not greet the elder, he (the youth) will keep his peace. This shows that the youths are expected to greet the elders first]

However, there is also a proverb which says that the elders too ought to be alive to their social responsibilities because,

- (b) Ti okete ba dagba, omu omo re lo n mu.

(When the big rat grows old, it feeds on the milk of its young ones)

It is not the case that Yoruba proverbs were always coined to polarize the interests of the elders and those of the youths. There were also proverbs which encouraged mutual respect and cooperation. Such proverbs include:

- (c) Owo agba ko wo akengbe, owo omode ko to pepe.

(A child’s arms cannot reach the high shelf, an adult’s hand cannot enter the mouth of a gourd).

- (d) Otun we osi, osi we otun, oun ni owo fin mo.

(The right arm washes the left, the left arm washes the right, that is how both arms may become clean).

It was through the combination of myths, proverbs, songs, adages, and the rest, that traditional Yoruba strove to inculcate, moral values to their children. This process of moral education may further be explicated graphically as follows:

THE DON'T'S (myths and mythical beliefs)	WHY? (Its believed or assumed implication)	The moral lesson derivable from the mythical belief
1) The youth must not say the clothes of an elder are smelling.	The youth would not grow to a ripe age to be regarded as an elder.	To prevent waywardness on the part of the youth. To encourage respect for old age.
2) Refraining from merciless beating of domestic animals.	To prevent giving birth to deformed children.	Prevention of cruelty to animals. Encouragement of sympathy to all creatures. (In those days, cases of hired killings and armed robbery were not heard of).
3) Not walking and whistling at night.	Such an act as this could disturb the witches who usually held their meetings at nights. The witches could be angered, hence they could harm that person.	Social: Not constituting a nuisance to the neighbourhood, because "Ijakumo kii rin 'de osan, eni a bii re kii fin 'ru".
4) Do not stand at the doorstep when it is raining.	Sango, the god of thunder might be angered.	Preventive: Avoid being hit by a thunderbolt.
5) Totemism: Avoid killing and eating of a particular animal.	The first man of the tribe or clan was the one who changed to that animal; or he was, at the point death, assisted by that animal by showing him food and water.	Respect for what was sacred and for old age and one's ancestral roots.
6) Do not stand while eating	The person would never be satisfied. This is because the food that should go directly to his stomach would now be scattered all over his body especially his feet which might grow abnormally fat.	To encourage good table manner. To eat in a relaxed atmosphere rather than fidgeting about while eating because "oba ni ounje" (Eating/food is supreme).

In the introductory part of this paper, it is stated that some assumptions and presupposition about the traditional Yorubas world-view fall outside the scope of the paper. One of these presuppositions is that morality and religion formed two legs of the same cultural issue and that they were hardly distinguished or indeed distinguishable. It may however be argued here that even if we grant that morality was based on religion among the traditional Yoruba, this fact (assuming it is a fact) does not negate the main thesis of this paper, namely, that the people's belief in myths helped in promoting adherence to moral principles and rules. In a world believed to be inhabited and permeated through by spiritual powerful forces, forces that had absolute control on human

conduct and destiny, it is not surprising if the world-view of such people were said to be heavily coloured by some metaphysical (or mythical) beliefs, moral convictions inclusive. The important thing to note here is that the world of the traditional Yoruba man was constituted in such a way that there were those divinities who were charged (by Olodumare – the supreme being) to watch over human conduct – to reward good deeds as well as to punish the bad ones. In his discussion of the Yoruba concept of human personality, Abimbola (1975) notes that the *Orisa* (divinities) are generally believed to be helper of human beings against the forces of evil known collectively as *ajogun*. The *Orisa* however will project only those who lead moral and just lives. That is not all. The ancestors (and ancestresses) who are said to be next to the *Orisa* also play a prominent role in seeing to the day-to-day conduct of the living. The ancestors, Abimbola believes, could also be angry with a man who fails in his filial or moral responsibilities. Similarly, though the witches were believed to be very powerful, yet ‘*Olododo kii ku si oko ika*’ (the morally upright person is not usually destroyed, (does not usually die) by the evil machination of the wicked).

Again, the importance which was attached to strict observance of the rules and regulations guiding rituals, totems, sacrifices, cleansing, purifications, confessions of guilt and the subsequent atonements, and so on, was meant to inculcate moral values in the adherents of certain religions and festivities, as well as for the youths to respect what was believed to be sacred. Political, social and economic life was also imbued with some prohibitions the observance of which was meant to make the people (morally) better citizens. One more avenue through which moral values were taught the youths among traditional Yoruba was their strong belief in the reality of after-life. The concept *Orun* (heaven) was meant to emphasise the need to work towards attaining eternal bliss but, by first of all being morally upright while one was still living on earth (*aye*). Since the people also believed in reincarnation, one must guard against any act capable of causing eternal wandering thereby preventing that person from being re-born to his/her earthly family. The honour and respect that were usually given to good ancestors could not be despised by a normal person.

It should be noted however, that there was an element of *dependency* in the process of moral education among the Yoruba. The youths were expected to question or disagree with the views of elders concerning the rationality or authenticity of the stories usually narrated to them by these story tellers. The important thing here was for the children to listen attentively to the respected story tellers and get the *messages* of the stories which were meant to teach morals.

If and when questions were asked, they were meant to clarify some points or issues and not necessarily to doubt the messages or lessons being conveyed in the stories. One other observation worthy of note here is an element of *relativism* inherent in the moral system of the traditional Yoruba. The moral values that were taught through myths, songs, wise-sayings, and so on, were usually culture-bound, that is to say, many of these moral injunctions were restricted to particular cultures and religious practices. For instance, those food items and practices that were tabooed by adherents of a particular religion were not expected to be observed by people who did not practice that religion. However, there were also some beliefs and actions that cut across religious and cultural barriers. Among the traditional Yoruba, showing hospitality to strangers was not a practice that was expected to be restricted to a section of the society or a particular set of people.

Conclusion

It is not the contention of this paper that the best way today to inculcate moral discipline in our youth is to resort to story-telling. Rather, it is argued that we cannot possibly make any meaningful headway in our (national) endeavour to eradicate moral decadence from our society if we consistently close our eyes to

whatever is tagged 'traditional'. The paper contends that myth, at least among the traditional Yoruba of South-West Nigeria, was not something spontaneous to the extent that it should be regarded as an *ad hoc* solution to human problems. Moreover, the period that was spent together in telling and listening to stories about great peoples, ideas, as well as ideas usually brought a sort of closeness to the people in which case they knew more about whom they were and where they came from. Though such knowledge, they were able to deliberate on whom they wanted to be and where they wanted to go. They were able to learn about the moral (cultural) dos and don'ts of their respective societies and communities. For the traditionally Yoruba, being wealthy was not the only thing it required for someone to be regarded as being great or good. This was because they believed that 'iwalewa' (manner or character is beauty). Unlike the present day Yoruba (Nigerian) context where 'a gbe maalu to ndajo a igbe adie' (those who steal cows are the ones who determine the fate (legally) of those who steal chicken), anyone caught stealing brought contempt upon himself/herself as well as his/her family. Since it is often said that the youths are the leaders of tomorrow, those leaders of tomorrow should be given proper moral education today in order not to produce a set of morality bankrupt leaders. One way of doing this is to educate the youths to respect other people's property by abstaining from tampering with them. Contemporary Yoruba parents would be doing their children a great good by being close to them so that these same children would enjoy the much needed parental love and care. The present commercial tendencies whereby parents and children hardly see face-to-face must be discouraged. Parents should be alive to their moral responsibilities to their children, rather than pursuing material wealth, a situation which encourages parents delegating their moral duties to house maids. We are not saying that the quest for material wealth is intrinsically morally bad. Similarly, no one would say that paying little or no attention to the moral upbringing of our children should be encouraged. There is an element of truth in the Yoruba adage that 'Omo ti a ko, oun ni yoo gbe ile ti a ko ta' (the child whom we do not educate or train (morally) will no doubt sell the house we built). What this adage implies is that it is our duty as parents to first of all build the child before we start building houses. And this was exactly what the act of story-telling aimed at achieving among the traditional Yoruba. Whatever method is thought to be appropriate, the contention of this paper is that there is the urgent need to devote more time and energy to the moral upbringing of our children. Whatever nomenclature is adopted, and whatever the degree of publicity given to it, no social programme designed to eradicate moral decadence in our society will ever succeed until and unless the leaders themselves are seen to be transparently morally upright. The day of 'do as I say and not as I do' is over. The youths of today are mentally alert and when they imitate what the elders do, sometimes surpass them in penetrating immoral acts. That is the more reason why 'Omo a gbe keke fi ngbe baluu, (the child of someone who stole bicycles now steals aeroplanes). Consequently:

*As we surpass our fathers' skills,
Our children will shame our own,
A thousand things are hidden still,
And not a hundred known.**

In sum, therefore, this paper rejects, in its entirety any thesis which holds that the ways of our fathers are not relevant in contemporary times simply because science and technology have taken control of human mind. Science and technology, as well as computer literacy we must have, but there was no other time when the issue of morality demanded greater attention than the contemporary jet age. In the alternative, we must be content with the mass production of criminal scientists and technologists!

Notes and References

1. A critical look at our churches and mosques as well as the adherents of these religions reveals this fact. These places of worship have, more or less, become commercial centres for the highest bidders!
2. Later in the essay, I will touch, very briefly, the relation between religion and morality among the traditional Yoruba.
3. Vide: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated J.A.K. Thomson, *et al* (Penguin Classics, London, 1981, (Reprint); 17 65, *passim*).
4. Kai Nelson; "The Functions of Moral Discourse", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, (January, 1957), 236.
5. Thomas D. Perry, *Moral Reasoning and Truth. An Essay in Philosophy and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 62.
6. Paulin J. Hountondji, "The Myth of Spontaneous Philosophy"; *Consequence: Journal of the Inter-African Council of Philosophy*, (Jan-June, 1974) 11-37. The quote is on page 15 of the journal. Subsequent references to Hountondji's view on myth are to this same journal.
7. James Draver; *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, Revised by Harvey Wallerstein (Penguin Books), 1982, 180.
8. While ethics may be defined as the principles and rules guiding human conduct, morality deals with the rightness or wrongness of actions, decisions, etc. as well (This is not however meant to be an Indisputable definitions of ethics and morality).
9. Authors and writers on Yoruba folklore such as late Chiefs J.F. Odunjo and D.O. Fagunwa could be said to have drawn most of their stories from what were passed down to them from many generations of (Yoruba) story-tellers. In particular, Odunjo's stories were full of moral values. In his *Alawiye, Iwe keta*, (Atunse Keji), there are such chapters as "Igberaga nii siwaju Iparun ("Pride precedes destruction" ch. 1), "Ere Iwa" ("The gain of (good) character", ch. 9), and other chapters which narrate stories that might be seen as fictitious, but which nonetheless, teach morals. For instance, one would ordinarily wonder how a toad could run faster than, say, an elephant, but that was exactly what happened in the story in chapter one of Odunjo's book referred to above. After all, "...Nitori agbara nla ti Efon ni yii, gbogbo eranko yooku ko jo o loju mo..." (p. 1). And at the end of the race, this powerful creature was disgraced by a mere toad. No wonder then that the story teaches us that "Pride comes before destruction".
10. This appears to be what informed Prof. W.E. Abraham (*The Mind of Africa*) in holding that African proverbs are situational. Critics have however pointed to this development as non-awareness of the inconsistencies inherent in the Yoruba system of morals. We will not join in the controversy as to whether or not the traditional Yoruba could be credited with consistent moral philosophy. This does not form part of the thesis of this paper.
11. A careful reading of "Wande Abimbola's *La Notion de personne en Afrique Noire* clearly reveals the importance attached to living a moral and just life among the traditional Yoruba.
12. Anon. We were taught this poem as teacher trainees. Unfortunately our then tutor did not tell us where he was quoting from as well as the author of the poem, but I had since committed it to memory.