



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Arts Humanit Soc Sci

ISSN 2583-7672 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjahss>

Volume – I Issue-VI (November – December) 2023

Frequency: Bimonthly



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

OBONO ESSOMBA ANNE*

UNIVERSITY OF BUEA/ ASTI

| Received: 04.10.2023 | Accepted: 07.10.2023 | Published: 25.11.2023

*Corresponding author: OBONO ESSOMBA ANNE
UNIVERSITY OF BUEA/ ASTI

Abstract

Folktales are sometimes seen as irrelevant in the context of contemporary development. Despite the general consensus on the artistic merits of traditional stories and the role played in the linguistic and cultural continuity of indigenous people, they are hardly used to improve man's socio-cultural environment. This paper attempts to show that development of the rural areas is impossible if it is not premised on their own historic-cultural conditions. In other words, the improvement of our traditional societies can never progress socially on the basis of unrestrictedly borrowed cultures. This work lays its foundations on the hypothesis that, traditional and popular culture can play a significant role in resolving local problems related to poverty, moral standards and education. To achieve the set objectives, we carried out field work which required a collection of oral tales narrated in some ethnic groups in Ewondo tribe. We also made use of observation methods and interview. Through direct questioning, we posed open-ended questions to our informants. The work is structured in two parts: the first examines the failure of traditional societies to incorporate the knowledge found in the folklore to improve their daily life, while the second part demonstrates the knowledge found in the oral tales and how it can help in the development of the rural communities.

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

Introduction

In developed and developing countries all over the world, farmers, indigenous and local communities have traditional knowledge, expertise, skills and practices related to their culture. Since its creation in 1945, FAO has recognized the significant contribution and the relevance of local knowledge in rural development. Traditional practices' reliance on ethical standards has been abandoned, with disastrous results for the environment. According to a 2003 survey that appeared in the journal Nature, only 10% of large ocean fish species are still alive. It is still unclear how much more will have been lost during the next 20 years (Shusneha Sarkar, 2002:837). The remaining keepers of ancestor and

traditional knowledge, including the ethics and ethos that helped nature preserve its goodness for life on earth, are tribal and indigenous peoples. However, the central focus of this work is to show that over the past century, there has been an extraordinary loss of indigenous and traditional knowledge since the coming and the interference of the modern culture in the African tradition. The objectives of the work would not only be to bring out the nature of African indigenous societies but also raise some limitations and encounters for conserving and transferring indigenous knowledge when it comes to put in place some development activities. One should note that this work is not the first in its genre, traditional

knowledge has been the subject of extensive inquiry, particularly in the disciplines of anthropology, ethno botany, and ecology. Some of the primary findings of this study are: Traditional knowledge's importance for conservation: - It has been determined that traditional knowledge is crucial for the preservation of biodiversity and natural resources, we can also talk about traditional knowledge's significance in medicine. However, there is a gap between this study and the ones above. The paper explores the knowledge found in the Ewondo folktales and how these knowledge can help in improvement and the progress of the rural people.

Conceptual review

Knowledge is a product of education; it is sets of information, facts, ideas, skills, expertise, and awareness or familiarity acquired by a person through education or experience for the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject (Oxford English Dictionary: 2017). Knowledge will also refer to socially accepted understanding of a subject, which offers an individual or a group the ability to use it to attain a specific goal. It is the "result of empirical inquiry that solves the problem at hand" (cited by Rohmann: 1999, 102). Lemke (1994, 15) notes that the term, "knowledge is often used to refer to a body of facts and principles accumulated by mankind in the course of time." As mankind is dispersed across the earth, what is knowledge to a particular group might be insignificant to another in a different setting. Environmental factors, language, and biological and cultural dispositions influence what every group classifies and values as knowledge. However, knowledge is a complex body of several socially constructed ideas, validated by the dominant intellectual persuasion at each point in time (Lemke: 1994, 1). The implication is that knowledge is "always biased because it is produced from a social perspective of the analyst, thus reflecting his or her inclination towards certain interests, values, groups, parties, classes, nations," among others (Jackson and Sorensen 2003, 248). In view of the above, one can say that, "knowledge is not and cannot be neutral either morally or politically or ideologically, since all "knowledge reflects the interests of the observer" (Foucault: 1969).

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

Conversely, for years, Indigenous peoples' culture and their respective knowledge systems found in their folktales have been largely misunderstood or even dismissed by development planning experts in the past. This point was made recently in a final statement by Brundtland: "Some traditional lifestyles are threatened with virtual extinction by insensitive development over which the indigenous people have no participation. Their

traditional right should be recognized and they should be given a more decisive voice in formulating policies about resources development in their areas" (Our Common Future, 1987.)

According to Lansana Keita (2011), the term development is generally understood etymologically to mean "expansion by a process of growth" or growth and differentiation of some entity along lines natural to its kind. In other words, expansion here can be seen as a process of transformation which can be viewed in moving from states of being less developed to ones of being more developed.

Moreover, the idea of development is generally seen as central to any discussion of the economic, cultural, and political aspects. Nations of the West are seen as "developed" and members of the "First World", while those of Africa, Latin America, and some of Asia are seen as "developing" "belonging to the "Third World". In fact, Africa failed to understand that the neglect of the traditional knowledge in development strategies is directly linked to their downfall.

Zounmenou () puts emphasis on this when he says that "development strategies which ignore the importance of the human behavior are to a certain extent alienating and self-destructive. In regard to Zounmenou's approach to development, it can be said that any African community that operates on a rigorous application or a code of conduct that emphasizes African moral values is likely to develop tremendously in various ways. Nevertheless, to have a good development planning techniques and succeed in the development strategies, one should first of all know the nature of African indigenous societies. This work is based on folklore, particularly on folktales of the Ewondo community that is the reason why Alan (2007) emphasizes that for every ethnic group, folklore is the identity; for a country it is the root of the nation's cultural tradition or national civilization. As one can see, it is clear that folklore covers vast areas of learning, but we want to limit ourselves to oral tales.

Traditional knowledge and the nature of African Indigenous societies Traditionally, Africans believe in the existence of the supernatural. At the physical demise of an individual, the soul starts to exist in the ancestral world, watching over the activities of the living. For that reason, African Indigenous societies is traditionally applied in harmony with the natural and spiritual world. Research has shown that around the world, indigenous has a connection to the local land and wildlife which is both symbolic (that is knowledge systems based on spiritual ritual, religious practice) and experimental. Indigenous healers, for instance, have intimate botanical knowledge of the environment including of plants and their healing properties. Indigenous farmers are thoroughly acquainted with the vegetation, soil, and climatic conditions of a place. Indigenous hunters have extensive knowledge of the habitat including the "location and timing of a host of biological events unknown to scientists. They know the life cycle of certain animals including the kinds of foods they eat, methods of searching for food, their pregnancy and gestation period, natural habitat and average life-span" (Knudston and Suzuki, 1992).

In addition, the wisdom and skills maintained by the "keepers of the indigenous knowledge "as applied in the traditional practices of farmers, hunters, gatherers, master fishermen, artisans are based on a dynamic and sophisticated understanding of their local surrounding. For that, change in the use of this knowledge is not

random, but rather predicated upon conscious efforts by people to define their problems and seek solutions through local experiments and innovation, including evaluating and learning from appropriate technologies elsewhere.

By the way, one should have in mind that African traditional knowledge systems may not necessarily be better suited to making long-term predictions of change, but indigenous knowledge may have some advantages in recognizing the onset of change and finding ingenious ways to accommodate and mitigate them at early stages, within the community decision-making structure. Despite the fact that these traditional or cultural practices are ingeniously designed to address local ecological limitations by maintaining a sustainable utilization and protection of commonly shared natural resources, it also has some weaknesses that we are going to raise up and some limitations we come across in transferring indigenous knowledge.

Limitations encounters in conserving and transferring Indigenous knowledge

The user of traditional knowledge faces potential difficulties when they have to put in place the two paradigms (that is indigenous and state) in the development activities. Irrespective of “scientific objectivity”, there are significant differences of perception, values and languages between those who are interested in documentation and applying it and those who possess traditional knowledge.

Another aspect that makes it difficult is that, as the practitioners, guardians and educators of such knowledge, the death of key elders, particularly women, and the resulting “extinction” of their collective wisdom, presents a serious constraint to the long-term survival of indigenous knowledge.

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

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

Case studies:

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

Folktales and educational development” the Tortoise and the Rabbit”

Once upon a time, there was a great famine in the village of Nkoala'a where the tortoise and his friend the Rabbit lived. As a result of the famine the animals became thinner and thinner every day since they did not have enough to eat. So one day, Rabbit initiated a plan to get a lot of food. He dug a hole which linked his house to the market place and through this hole he was able to get the foodstuffs of the market women which they always kept at the market store at night. The Tortoise was surprised that his friend

the Rabbit was growing robust while the other animals were still getting thinner as the day progressed. So he decided to embark on a fact-finding mission in Rabbit's house. On getting there, he was astonished to see the large quantity of food in his friend's house.

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

-Folktales and the development of moral values

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

Let us examine this tale: **“The quarrel between the parts of the body”**.

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

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

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

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

The head laughed saying, “Look here. You better stop being foolish. You legs arms and eyes, mouth, and nose, shut up. Do you know that I am the one who directs all your activities? I am the one who ask you legs to run from danger. In the same way, I ask the arms to work for us, I also ask the eyes to see and the mouth to eat.

This tale expresses communal living in Africa as fundamental. It teaches us that a community that is constructed on constant arguments, disagreements and rancor lacks the strength of unity and a sense of focus that should characterize a communal people. In fact, we can see that communalism as a product of African philosophical thoughts is projected in the tale in which separated parts of the human body are personalized and presented as indispensable to the entire human anatomy. That is

While attributing the decline of moral African values to exotic cultures, Adeline Masquelier (1999) says: “Mawri legends and tales are replete with explicit allusions as to how human greed and selfishness have progressively destroyed the fruitful symbiosis that existed between people and the spirits. The past is always constructed as an idyllic world where no one was wanting because the spirits took care of everyone’s need so long as people trusted them and care for them.” The folktale provides therefore a guide for our children to choose between positive and negative, rational and irrational in order to arrive at an appropriate synthesis that can foster the moral.

If we examine the tale title: “The stubborn girl”, the lady is been swallowed by the black river due to her disobedience. In fact she refuses to follow the rules and regulations given to her by her father not to give herself to any boy before marriage. The tale dramatizes the possible repercussions of misconduct and moral depravity manifested in the disrespect of the parents.

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

Folktales and economic development: Division of labor

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

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

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

In beti rural area, agriculture is the main occupation of nearly every body, and the source of live hood. Here, there is a strong division of farming labor by sex and the type of crops. The men farm what

is known as cash crops that is cocoa, coffee, while the women farm what the family consumes, hence the appellation , subsistence farming. Children are closely integrated into the household production systems. As reflected in oral tales, men, women and children has separates roles to play at various stage of the cultivation throughout the year. Let us take the example of this tale: “The Overzealous Farmer Boy”:

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

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

Many tales are narrated to transmit such values. The expectation is that any community that is sufficiently rooted in such norms possesses greater potentials for economic development. Alan Pence and Jessica Schaffer in “Knowledge and Early Childhood Development in Africa” (2009) arguing in favor of the economic potential found in oral tales said:” Several arguments have favored the use of indigenous knowledge in development practices, ranging from the philosophical and ethnical to the utilitarian and pragmatic. Indigenous knowledge with its roots in reciprocal and redistributive cultures, is perceived as providing the basis for an alternative to the dominant economic and moral system of the West.” In other words, well cultured and rigorously disciplined people possess a greater capacity for economic growth than a community of rancor and anarchy. This story shows us that a genuine economic progress requires absolute hard work. And beside hard work a moral commitment and cultural norms also boost economic development.

Conclusion:

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

REFERENCES

1. Dewey j (1997), Democracy and education. Free press, New York
2. Ellen rf, Harris h (2000), Introduction. In: Ellen rf, Parkes p, Bicker a (eds) indigenous environmental knowledge and its transformations. Harwood, Amsterdam
3. Foucault M (1969), The archeology of knowledge and the discourse on language. Random house inc, New York

4. Jackson r, Sorensen g (2003), Introduction to international relations: theories and approaches. Oxford university press, New York
5. Kiggundu j (2007), Intellectual property law and the protection of indigenous knowledge. In: Mazonde i, Thomas p (eds) indigenous knowledge systems and intellectual property in the twenty-first century; perspectives from Southern Africa. Dakar Codesria, pp 26 – 47
6. Kuhn T (1962), The Structure of scientific revolutions. University of Chicago press, Chicago
7. Knudston P, Suzuki d (1992), The wisdom of the elders. Stoddart Lepena, Toronto
8. Lemke J (1994), What is postmodernism and why is it saying all these terrible things. Accel. Learn teach. [Http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/edu/education/jlemke/papers/jsalt.htm](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/edu/education/jlemke/papers/jsalt.htm) 11/27/07 accessed 16 nov 2007
9. Oguamanam C (2006), international law and indigenous knowledge; intellectual property, plant biodiversity, and traditional medicine. University of Toronto press, Toronto
10. Oxford English Dictionary (2017), Oecd (2000) Mobilizing human resources for innovation. Oecd, Paris
11. Okpewho, Isidore, 1982, African oral literature: backgrounds character and continuity, Boomington, Indiana university press.