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Beyond Entertainment: Formal Features and the Social Function of Folktale

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Abstract

Folktale is an indispensable component of folklore, serving as a vital medium for moral instruction and value transmission within traditional societies. This study investigates the didactic and cross-cultural functions of folktales, using *The Ant and the Grasshopper* as a case study to illustrate how narrative art reinforces communal ethics such as hard work, foresight, and social responsibility. Folklore, as an umbrella term, encompasses three broad categories—verbal lore, material lore, and customary lore. Within this framework, folktale belongs to verbal lore, which embodies the spoken art forms through which a society expresses its worldview, moral philosophy, and collective identity. The study adopts a comparative and interpretive approach, examining parallels between the moral lessons of *The Ant and the Grasshopper* and similar tales from Igbo and Yoruba oral traditions. It argues that while folktales are locally grounded in the experiences and beliefs of a people, they often reveal universal human concerns and ethical ideals that transcend cultural boundaries. By analysing the symbolic use of animal characters and the narrative strategies employed by traditional storytellers, the study underscores the enduring relevance of folktales as tools for moral education and cultural continuity in African societies.

Keywords: Folktale, Verbal Lore, Morality, Diligence, Cultural Parallels

Introduction

What Is a Folktale?

A folktale is a traditional narrative peculiar to a particular folk or community. Unlike myths or legends, it is not meant to be believed as historical truth since it has no basis in verifiable history. Myths usually seek to explain the origin of the world, the gods, or natural phenomena, while legends may attach themselves to historical figures or events. Folktales, however, are different. They do not claim to be true but rather exist for the shared pleasure and wisdom of the people. Each folktale is communal in nature—popular among the people, owned collectively, and transmitted orally from generation to generation without a known author. Nobody can point to the first person who told a particular tale, yet everyone in the community can lay claim to it as part of their common heritage.

By its very definition, a folktale is nonrealistic. It thrives on imagination rather than reality. The world of the folktale is one where animals speak like human beings, trees can walk, rivers can get angry, and a poor child can suddenly become a king through unusual adventures. No reasonable adult is expected to believe in it literally, yet it retains deep social significance. It is through these imaginary settings and characters that the community passes on its values, morals, and collective wisdom (Bascom 3; Lindfors 57).

People listen to folktales not for factual truth but for entertainment, enlightenment, and moral instruction. According to Nnyagu, folktale is often narrated in the evening after the day's work, with children, youths, and even elders gathered around the raconteur. The audience laughs, claps, and sometimes sings along with the tale. Through these stories, children learn about honesty, obedience, courage, and the consequences of greed or selfishness. Thus, the folktale is a classroom without walls, a theatre without a stage, and a moral court where society judges good and evil in symbolic ways.

In essence, a folktale is a communal prose narrative—highly fictitious, orally transmitted, and widely accessible among the folk. It survives not because it is historically true but because it is socially useful. It entertains the people, sharpens their imagination, and at the same time reinforces the moral codes that hold the community together (Finnegan 45; Isichei 112).

Of all forms of oral literature, the folktale remains the most popular and enduring. Scholars such as Ruth Finnegan affirm that no other form of oral art is as widely enjoyed, recited, and transmitted among African communities as the folktale. Before European colonization and the introduction of Western education, Africans relied heavily on folktales as a primary means of educating their children and transmitting communal wisdom. As Isidore Okpewho explains, the folktale served as "a people's social charter," shaping the morals, customs, and expectations of the community (Okpewho 47).

The Didactic Nature of Folktales

While folktales may not mirror society directly or provide empirical knowledge, their value lies in their didactic function. They are moral instruments, designed to teach lessons about diligence, honesty, greed, and the consequences of one's actions. The impossible becomes possible in folktales: animals speak like humans, birds marry mortals, and spirits live side by side with men and women. As Chinua Achebe observes in his reflections on storytelling, the folktale allows "a playful entry into the serious business of life," making abstract truths accessible to both the young and the old.

For example, in the well-known story of *Elephant and Tortoise*, the unattractive Tortoise marries a beautiful princess—an impossible event in real life, yet perfectly plausible within the folktale universe. Through this exaggeration and imaginative

reversal, the tale teaches that wisdom and cunning can achieve what physical beauty or sheer strength cannot.

Because of their moral weight, folktales were often told by professional raconteurs who sometimes received payment in cash or kind. Ruth Finnegan notes that the storyteller was not merely an entertainer but also "a teacher, a social critic, and a custodian of collective memory" (*Oral Literature in Africa* 412). At the end of every folktale, the audience—especially children—was expected to draw lessons that would guide them in life. Interestingly, children often believed the stories to be literally true until adulthood revealed them to be carefully crafted fantasies meant for instruction. The imaginative power of the folktale, therefore, is not diminished by its fictional quality. Rather, as Isidore Okpewho argues, "the folktale thrives on fiction in order to express the truth about human society" (*African Oral Literature* 82).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a functionalist and interpretive approach to the understanding of folktales. Folktales are not historical accounts but social instruments that help the community educate, entertain, and regulate behaviour. In the words of Bronisław Malinowski, every element of culture performs a function in society, and folktales, like other forms of oral literature, are primarily used to satisfy social and moral needs (*Myth in Primitive Psychology* 45).

Ruth Finnegan, in her classic study *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970), emphasizes that oral narratives, though fictitious, are deeply tied to the values of the people who tell them. For her, the importance of a folktale lies not in its literal truth but in the meanings and lessons it conveys. Okpewho similarly stresses that African folktales remain relevant because they embody communal wisdom and transmit cultural values from one generation to another (*African Oral Literature* 56).

The interpretive dimension is equally important here. As Claude Lévi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp demonstrate in their structural analyses, folktales are built on patterns, oppositions, and recurring motifs. Yet beyond structure, their real force lies in how the community interprets them. Within African societies, the telling of a folktale is not merely an individual act but a communal performance. The audience participates, the children learn, and the story itself becomes a living instrument for shaping conduct. This study therefore views folktales as communal prose narratives whose significance lies in their social function, moral weight, and capacity to mirror cultural values, rather than in their factual truth.

Folktales and the Night Tradition in Africa

In most African societies, folktales are synonymous with moonlight tales. They are usually told at night, after the day's hard labor is done. Among the Igbo, they are known as *akụkọ ifo n'abalị* (night stories), while the Yoruba speak of *àlọ́ àpàlẹ̀*—the fireside tales. These were not idle diversions but communal gatherings where children and adults sat in the courtyard or under the moonlight, listening to the storyteller's voice, often punctuated by songs, choruses, and riddles. The night setting provided an atmosphere of leisure, reflection, and communal bonding that was essential to the storytelling experience.

Early Western anthropologists, ignorant of African cultural logic, often misinterpreted this nocturnal storytelling tradition. Some hastily linked it to primitive superstition or "barbaric ritual," thereby reinforcing colonial stereotypes. Classical writers like Herodotus had long portrayed Africa as a land of monstrous races, and later figures such as Joseph Conrad deepened this misconception by depicting it as the "heart of darkness."

Such views overlooked the pragmatic and moral foundations of African storytelling traditions. In reality, the restriction of folktales to nighttime reflects African societies' deep abhorrence of laziness

and idleness. Daytime was for work—on the farm, in the market, the smithy, or the palm grove. A healthy adult who loitered during the day was viewed with suspicion or disdain. To sit and tell stories while others labored was considered shameful, the habit of loafers. Thus, storytelling naturally belonged to the evenings, when the community gathered to rest after a productive day. As Bronisław Malinowski reminds us, every cultural practice performs a social function; the night-tale tradition allowed societies to combine recreation with moral instruction, ensuring that lessons were taught without disrupting economic life (*Myth in Primitive Psychology* 52).

Chinua Achebe vividly illustrates this cultural principle in *Things Fall Apart* through the character of Unoka. Unoka, lazy and pleasure-loving, spends his days playing the flute instead of farming or taking titles like other men of Umuofia. His idleness reduces him to a perpetual debtor, and his poverty confines him to a single wife. He becomes a byword for failure—a living example of what a man ought not to be. His son Okonkwo, in contrast, embodies the African ideal of hard work, discipline, and achievement. Determined to distance himself from his father's shame, Okonkwo becomes a successful yam farmer, a warrior of renown, a titleholder, and a man of wealth before middle age.

Through Achebe's portrayal, we encounter a motif common to many African folktales: hard work is rewarded while laziness is punished. This same moral thread runs through the well-known folktale of *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. In the story, the Grasshopper idles away the harvest season singing and dancing, while the industrious Ant diligently stores food for the dry season. When famine comes, the Grasshopper, like Unoka, goes begging for sustenance and ultimately perishes—a grim reminder of the fate awaiting the idle and unprepared. The Ant, meanwhile, thrives and is celebrated as a model of foresight and diligence.

Achebe's use of this motif in *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates the deep affinity between African written literature and oral tradition. Modern African writers frequently draw on the structure, themes, and moral patterns of folktales, reshaping them into enduring literary forms. Amos Tutuola in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Wole Soyinka in his plays similarly evoke the moonlight tale tradition, affirming that the African night is not a realm of darkness but of wisdom, creativity, and communal renewal.

Folktale – Tale about Ant and Grasshopper

Once upon a time in a place called *Iduu-na-Oba*, during the harvest season, Ant visited its friend Grasshopper and advised it to follow him to gather food in preparation for the rainy season when there would be little or no food at all. But Grasshopper only laughed and shook its head. It told Ant to forget about tomorrow and rather join in the merriment of today—singing, dancing, and playing music. Ant looked at Grasshopper as a foolish one, shook its head, and went on alone to gather food.

When the rains came, the skies darkened and the earth grew wet and cold. Ant and its young ones remained secure in their hole, feeding happily on the grains they had stored up during the harvest. They never felt the hunger of the season because their barn was filled. Grasshopper, on the other hand, became thin, weak, and hopeless, for it had nothing to eat.

At last, Grasshopper dragged itself to Ant's house, humbled and begging for food so that it would not die of hunger. "What!" cried Ant in surprise. Ant did not know that Grasshopper had not stored even a single grain. Ant stared at Grasshopper in shock and asked, "Haven't you kept anything away for this season of hunger?" "I did not have time to store up food," Grasshopper answered weakly. Ant was bewildered. "You had no time? What then were you doing all through the season of plenty?" Grasshopper bent its head in shame. "I was busy making music

and enjoying myself. Before I knew it, the harvest was gone." Ant shook its head in disgust and looked at Grasshopper with pity and anger. "You say you were making music while others were gathering food? When I invited you to follow me, you refused. Now you are here to beg. If I give you today, will I give you tomorrow too? You had the opportunity, but you wasted it, thinking I would share what I laboured for with my young ones. Since you chose music, very well—now dance to your music!"

Ant sighed and turned away. "I am sorry, Grasshopper. The food I gathered is for my family. I cannot share it with you and let my children suffer. Go. You deserve no mercy." And so Grasshopper staggered out into the rain and cold, and before long, it died of hunger.

Folktales such as this one are deeply woven into the moral fabric of African societies. The tale of *Ant and Grasshopper* transcends its simplicity as an animal story; it becomes a didactic parable about foresight, discipline, and responsibility—virtues highly valued in traditional African thought. The Ant represents prudence, self-reliance, and industriousness, while the Grasshopper symbolizes idleness, waste, and lack of vision. The conflict between them dramatizes a moral truth that cuts across cultures: life rewards diligence and punishes sloth.

Among the Igbo, Yoruba, and many other African peoples, such tales are not told merely to amuse but to train character and preserve moral order. In Igbo thought, the saying *onye na-arụghị ọrụ agaghị eri nri* ("he who does not work shall not eat") captures the same lesson that this story dramatizes. The Yoruba express a similar moral sentiment in *Ìṣe lóògùn ìṣè* ("work is the cure for poverty"). In both traditions, labour is conceived not only as a necessity but as a sacred duty, a mark of responsible personhood. The folktale therefore functions as a moral mirror through which children internalize the ethics of communal life.

The storytelling process itself reinforces these values. In the moonlight gatherings—*akụkọ ifo n'abalị* among the Igbo or *àlọ́ àpàlẹ̀* among the Yoruba—the tale is often punctuated by songs, chants, or riddles, inviting the participation of listeners. Through repetition, rhythm, and dialogue, the storyteller creates a communal atmosphere in which moral knowledge is shared and remembered. As Ruth Finnegan (1970) observes, the folktale in Africa is not merely a narrative but "a living performance," an art of moral persuasion wrapped in delight.

The Ant and Grasshopper narrative also illustrates the African understanding of *ọgwụ ọrụ*—the dignity of labour. To work is to live in harmony with the moral and social order; to avoid work is to drift into shame, hunger, and isolation. The tale thus resonates with Achebe's portrayal of Unoka in *Things Fall Apart*, whose laziness and pleasure-seeking bring him disgrace, in contrast to his son Okonkwo, whose hard work earns him titles and fame. Both the folktale and the novel dramatize the same moral equation between labour and honour.

Folktales are also fluid and adaptable; they do not belong to a fixed time or author. They pass from mouth to mouth, generation to generation, acquiring new shapes and nuances as they travel. Even in contemporary forms—through print, radio, or music—their essence remains unchanged. This adaptability ensures that they continue to instruct and delight, no matter how society evolves.

It is in this light that one must appreciate the contribution of **Mike Ejeagha**, the celebrated Igbo folk musician and storyteller, whose songs stand at the meeting point of oral tradition and modern art. Often called the father of traditional narrative music, Ejeagha transforms ancient folktales into melodic narratives, infusing them with humour, wisdom, and moral reflection. His songs, such as *Akụkọ n'Egwu* ("story in music"), carry the rhythm of the fireside and the moral gravity of ancestral counsel. He has often said that

he never ends a story without drawing its moral lesson, because every tale, no matter how brief or humorous, must teach the listener how to live well.

Ejeagha's repertoire, inherited from his father and grandfather, demonstrates how folktales serve as vessels of cultural memory. Through his songs, he keeps alive the oral link between the past and the present, showing that storytelling is not an archaic practice but a living tradition that continues to shape moral consciousness and social wisdom in modern Africa.

Characteristics and Social Functions of the Folktale

The story of Tortoise and Elephant (as will be discussed in a later part of this work), and other similar tales, are rightly classified as folktales because, like the popular story of the Ant and the Grasshopper mentioned earlier, they embody certain distinctive features that serve important social purposes. The formal characteristics of folktales are not arbitrary; each of them performs a cultural and moral function within the community. The following features illustrate how the form and content of folktales work together to sustain their social value:

Moral Instruction as Social Regulation

Folktales are not mere stories told for idle pleasure; they are moral instruments designed to guide conduct and preserve social harmony. Each tale is a vessel of wisdom, communicating lessons about honesty, diligence, courage, humility, and restraint. For instance, the story of *Tortoise and Elephant* warns that not every professed friend is genuine—some smile in the open yet plot in secret. Through such symbolic conflicts, the folktale becomes both entertainment and ethical compass, shaping the conscience of its audience and reinforcing communal norms.

Respect for Parents and Elders as Cultural Continuity

One of the strongest values embedded in folktales is reverence for

parents, elders, and authority figures. In most African societies, age is synonymous with wisdom, and the tales reflect this belief. Disobedience is often punished while respect and humility are rewarded. This emphasis is functional: it ensures generational continuity by reinforcing obedience and discipline among the young. A true elder, in the African worldview, guides with love and foresight; the folktale thus operates as a cultural classroom where children learn proper behaviour and moral restraint through narrative performance.

Brevity and Simplicity for Accessibility and Memory
Folktales are deliberately brief and straightforward, crafted to be told in one sitting and easily remembered by both the young and the old. Their economy of form and rhythmic repetition serve a pedagogical function—ensuring that moral lessons are not lost but internalized. During moonlight gatherings, such simplicity made it possible for children to retell the stories to their peers, guaranteeing the survival of collective wisdom. In this way, brevity becomes a social strategy for transmitting knowledge and sustaining oral heritage.

Flat and Predictable Characters for Moral Clarity
Unlike modern fiction that explores psychological depth, folktales employ simple, consistent characters whose behaviour remains stable from beginning to end. The cunning Tortoise is always cunning; the foolish Goat remains foolish; the wise Elder stays wise. This predictability serves a moral function: it allows listeners—especially children—to identify virtue and vice without ambiguity. Animals and natural forces often substitute for human characters, enabling the community to discuss moral failings symbolically and without offence.

Encouragement of Virtue and Deterrence of Vice
Folktales act as moral mirrors through which society praises desirable behaviour and condemns wrongdoing. They reward

wisdom, patience, honesty, and communal living, while punishing greed, pride, laziness, and deceit. For example, the tale of *Tortoise and Goat* teaches the importance of caution and restraint, warning against greed and haste. In this way, folktales perform the social role of moral correction, functioning as informal courts of public opinion where the values of the community are dramatized and reaffirmed.

Through these features, the folktale reveals itself not merely as an artistic creation but as a **functional social institution**. Its simplicity ensures participation; its moral clarity promotes ethical understanding; and its entertainment value guarantees survival across generations. Thus, the form of the folktale is inseparable from its function—it exists to educate, to correct, and to preserve the moral fabric of the community.

The Tale – Tortoise and the Goat

A very long time ago, in the ancient village of Iduu-na-Oba, Tortoise and Goat were close companions. To the people, they appeared as true friends, always seen walking side by side. Yet everyone knew that Tortoise was a cunning trickster—forever plotting how to use others for his own gain.

One bright market day, the two friends went wandering. As they walked, they noticed that Man had gone to the market. Before leaving, he had spread his grains and other foodstuffs in the compound under the sun to dry.

At once, Tortoise's eyes gleamed with mischief. He licked his lips and whispered to Goat: "Friend, let us go in and eat to our fill. After all, Man has abandoned his food in the open. The mouth that does not eat when it sees food is a foolish mouth."

Through a narrow crack in the wall, they crept quietly into the compound. Soon, they were eating hungrily, filling their bellies with the sweet grains. For a long while, they ate without restraint, forgetting the world outside.

But Tortoise, though greedy, was also cautious. He paused and thought to himself, *Let me first test whether I can still pass through the crack. A wise man measures his rope before crossing a river.*

Quietly, he wriggled through the hole, and to his relief, he passed with ease. He chuckled softly, turned back, and slipped inside again. He did not warn Goat. Instead, he ate just a little more and waited.

Goat, however, was carefree. He ate and ate, without a thought for tomorrow. His stomach swelled until it looked like a calabash filled with water. He was so lost in enjoyment that he forgot he was stealing—and that danger might be near.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps shook the air—Man was returning from the market!
Like lightning, Tortoise dashed to the crack and slipped outside. In a blink, he was free. But Goat was not so lucky. He panicked and ran to the crack. Alas! His stomach had grown too big. He struggled and pushed, but the opening was too narrow. His horns struck the wall, his belly jammed, and he could not escape.

Man stormed into the compound. Seeing the greedy thief, he caught Goat with ease and, in his anger, tied him to a pole.

From a nearby hill, Tortoise stood laughing, shaking his head. “Foolish Goat,” he mocked, “you stole Man’s food, and now you must pay for it. Did I not test the hole before you? Did I not escape

before danger came? A wise animal knows when to stop, but a foolish one eats until trouble finds him."

Goat cried bitterly. "My friend, please help me. Do not leave me here. Speak for me, untie me, or at least show me another way of escape."

But Tortoise only laughed louder and walked away. "He who eats without caution must also chew the rope of punishment. Remain with Man and pay the price of your greed."

And so Goat remained tied, a victim of his gluttony, while Tortoise went away free—though his freedom carried the stain of betrayal. That is why elders say: *A wise man eats with measure, but a fool eats until he is trapped.*

Moral Lessons

This tale teaches that wisdom is superior to foolishness, and that greed leads to destruction. It also reminds us to beware of friends who pretend to care but think only of themselves.

Excellent material — rich, balanced, and well aligned with your overall focus on **the social function of folktales**. What you have here actually restores the focus the reviewer said was missing earlier: it clearly connects the *didactic purpose* of folktales with their *social and cultural significance across African societies*.

The Social Function of Folktales in African Societies

In folktales, vice is usually discouraged and virtue is encouraged. From the tale of the *Tortoise and the Goat*, the audience learns that stealing is evil and that one should avoid bad friends who may lure one into wrongdoing and abandon one in times of trouble. Through such stories, communities transmit ethical norms, guiding both young and old toward acceptable behaviour within the society.

Across Africa, folktales maintain this didactic essence, though they vary in form, imagery, and character types. In Ghana, particularly among the Ashanti, the folktale tradition functions much like that of Nigerian societies, teaching moral lessons through familiar trickster figures. Whereas in Igbo folktales the Tortoise is the master of cunning and deceit—often outwitting larger animals such as the Elephant, Lion, or Goat—the Ashanti tales frequently centre on *Anansi* the spider. Like the Igbo Tortoise, *Anansi* is both hero and villain, admired for his cleverness yet condemned for his selfishness. In some tales, he succeeds in outsmarting others; in others, he fails and suffers humiliation. Whatever the outcome, the moral remains constant: vice ultimately brings shame, while virtue is rewarded. A fine example of the Ashanti folktale tradition is Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*, which, though dramatized, draws heavily from this oral heritage and demonstrates how traditional stories can be adapted into modern literary forms.

Among the Yoruba, folktales hold similar social and moral significance. Like the Igbo, they value storytelling as a vital instrument of education and character formation, often employing professional raconteurs who travel from village to village, entertaining and instructing children. The cunning Tortoise, *Ijapa*, is a recurring character in Yoruba tales, embodying wit, trickery, and greed. His escapades, much like those of the Igbo Tortoise or the Ashanti *Anansi*, highlight the dangers of dishonesty and the importance of prudence. Through these tales, Yoruba children learn the virtues of patience, wisdom, humility, and obedience, as well as the perils of pride, greed, and deceit.

Each culture also preserves its own unique call-and-response formula for beginning a folktale—an essential ritual that sets the mood for storytelling. Among the Igbo, the raconteur proclaims, *"Onwelu akuko m ga akolu unu!"* ("I have a story to tell you!"), and the audience responds, *"Koolu anyi, anyi ga ege nti, nuru ihe i ga ekwu"* ("Tell us the story; we shall listen to hear what you

say"). In Yoruba tradition, the storyteller calls *"Àlọ́ ọ́!"* (Story!), and the audience replies *"Àlọ́!"* In Hausa oral tradition, tales often begin with phrases like *"Tarihi ya ..."* ("The story of …") or *"Akwai ku ..."* ("Gather round and listen …"). These formulaic openings do more than announce the performance; they symbolically usher both storyteller and listeners into a shared imaginative space, reaffirming community bonds and preparing the mind for moral reflection.

In all African folktales, animals and other non-human characters are endowed with human qualities, serving as mirrors through which society contemplates itself. The endings are not always happy, but the lessons endure—virtue is celebrated, vice is ridiculed, and the young are instructed in the values that sustain communal life.

Conclusion

This study has explored the folktale as an enduring vehicle of moral instruction and social education in African societies. Through the analysis of *The Ant and the Grasshopper* and *The Tortoise and the Goat*, the paper has demonstrated that the folktale transcends mere amusement to serve as a moral compass that regulates behaviour, reinforces communal ethics, and preserves cultural identity. In the Igbo, Yoruba, and Ashanti traditions alike, the folktale sustains the same ethical vision—virtue is rewarded, vice is punished, and wisdom is upheld as the key to survival. By projecting human traits onto animals and supernatural beings, these stories dramatize moral truths in symbolic yet relatable ways, making complex ethical ideas accessible to all members of society. As African writers and performers continue to reinterpret folktales through literature, theatre, and music, these narratives remain a living bridge between ancestral wisdom and contemporary experience, ensuring that the moral imagination of the people endures across generations.

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