The signifying culture: An intercultural and qualitative analysis of Tiv and Yoruba folktales for moral instruction and character determination in children [version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 1 not approved]

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Abstract

Background: In the study of African communities, folktales have remained a constant element. With their origin in the culture of oral storytelling, folktales have often been used by older age groups to guide and mould behavioural patterns in children. In ancient and traditional African societies, children were gathered at the end of the day by older members of the community for tales by moonlight sessions aimed at guiding their moral decisions. With globalisation and its consequent effects such as migration, dislocation and disindigenisation, the culture of communal folktale sessions is experiencing a quick death. This paper engages with the relevance of folktales as moral guides for children in African societies and as a renewed path to increased societal stability facilitated by morally set individuals.

Methods: The folktales were randomly selected from a pool of Tiv and Yoruba folktales in Nigeria. Two animal-based folktales which are part of shared folk culture were picked from the Tiv society and one from the Yoruba society. The study follows a narrative and content analysis approach where the selected folktales are corroborated by four key informants, two males and two females within the ages of 50-65.

Results: With particular focus on the benefits of promoting and re-introducing the folktale culture to encourage positive behavioural traits amongst individuals in the society, the study primarily highlights folktales as reflective of human life. In identifying this similarity, the character of children is largely influenced by the moral values inherent in these folktales.

Conclusions: There needs to be an increased use of media and audio-visual tools to expand the knowledge and accessibility of indigenous African folktales in order to preserve ethnic, national and social
identity as well as to provide a moral compass for children.

**Keywords**
Folktale, culture, morality, Tiv, Yoruba.
Introduction

African culture has been portrayed in the media as a never-ending festival categorised by chant songs, dramatic dances and costumes, made from intricately designed African prints. Visitors to African countries are often caught searching for an authentic African experience, and such visits are sometimes seen as unfulfilling when these visitors find ordinary people leading ordinary lives. Although African culture has been commercialised and limited aspects highlighted, leaving other important parts fallow, post-colonial scholarship has used oral literature and folktales as a way of correcting colonial anthropology and reconstructing scholarship from an African point of view. For many centuries, folktales were important cultural means of expression, entertainment, education and bonding in African societies. A world of high modernity riding the waves of globalisation has eroded the place of most oral literary forms, and folktales in particular, with dire consequences for societies which hitherto relied on these forms for their intrinsic societal and ornamental values.

Hence, this paper’s ‘renewed’ interest in folktale as an embodiment of culture, identity and conveyor of moral instruction finds validation in Dundes and Bronner’s (2007, 55) affirmation of folktale as being inherently “autobiographical ethnography – that is, it is a people’s own description of themselves”. ‘Folk’ implies all humans as folk peoples, who tell the stories that reflect their societies, customs, traditions, cultural mores and worldview. Though some societies in Africa have held on much longer to the expression and values of folktale than others, the local and universal worth of this literary form in identity mapping and construction of culture remains constant.

However, with the advent of globalisation, most cultural elements of language in erstwhile colonies have been adapted to suit the modern experiences of most postcolonial citizens and societies, thereby vitiating the place of folktales as a significant oral literary form. To this effect, folktales and oral storytelling are no longer popular in the day-to-day activities of most Africans. These practices have been largely replaced by television programmes and other forms of new media. This is not to argue that these programmes/media are completely unnecessary; but when their content re-enforces global culture to the detriment of indigenous content, the future of African moral values which were transmitted over many generations through folktales hangs in the threat of extinction.

Nigeria as a multicultural state offers a myriad of cultural practices representative of each culture and folktales serve as a recurring element in the midst of variation. The place of folktales as one of the expressive cultures connecting humanity has been established by Dundes and Bronner’s (2007, viii), who aver that: “folktale is prime evidence of culture, indeed of humanity … folklore is a people’s “symbolic autobiography,” folklore gives an “inside out” view of society. Folklore a mirror of culture, a lens for society, a key to behavior, a projection of mind.”

Enongene Sone (2018, 147) also captures the essence of folktales and their role in African societies when he says, “Thus, the folktale was used, and is still being used in several parts of rural Africa, to comment on how the individual adheres to or deviates from the community’s behavioural norms. Seen in this light, the folktale, although a creation of the imagination, ultimately derives its material from the realities of society while simultaneously shaping people’s views and constituting and constructing society. As a result, the folktale can be said to be a good mirror of society”.

In appropriating the value of folktale as ‘prime evidence of culture’, this paper focuses on the folktales of two distinct Nigerian cultures to demonstrate the underlying similarities of cultural tools for morality. We do not claim that these two cultures give an overview of the entire Nigerian/African cultural scene. However, we attempt to converge the thoughts of the Tiv culture of Nigeria’s Middle Belt region and the Yoruba culture of Western Nigeria, thereby crossing geographical and socio-cultural boundaries to arrive at cultural symbiosis.

Methods

The folktales were randomly selected from a pool of available written folktales in existing literature and oral folktales shared in home storytelling sessions in the Tiv and Yoruba societies of Nigeria. Two animal-based folktales which are part of shared folk culture were picked from the Tiv society and one from the Yoruba society. The selection of the folktales was based on popular animal characters found across African folklore including the hare and tortoise in order to establish a convergent point of analysis.

The study follows a narrative and content analysis approach where the selected folktales are corroborated by four key informants, two males and two females within the ages of 50-65. They were selected within this age range due to the role of elderly people in both societies as storytellers and an equal gender ratio was applied for a balanced input. The corroborative data consisting of the selected folktales was collected via audio recordings and then manually transcribed and translated literally. The folktales were then analysed against their didactic signification, moral relevance and engendering of social order.
Consent
The participants were aware that the data collected would be used for research and were clearly aware of their right to withdraw from the study or decline being reported in the study before, during and after the data collection.

Theorising culture in folktales
Culture debates have morphed and percolated over time, with earlier theorists such as Barthes (1972) and Foucault (1988), to later theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Hall (1997), foregrounding from multiple perspectives, the place and influence of culture on peoples and their literary expressions. If Culture is said to be “the beliefs, rituals, and practices of a given social or ethnic group or nation” (Habib 2008, 172), then the general idea that culture deals with the basic life of a group of people, leads to further debates on what constitutes the pillars of culture; and what yardstick should be used in defining various groups culturally.

In highlighting the role of the physical environment, the ecological approach relates the ecosystem and its natural transformation over time as the defining factor for adaptation which produces culture. As such, the Yoruba culture reflects the way of life of the people; a way of life rooted in communal living by farming, hunting, fishing, and other socio-cultural and economic activities. The Tiv society on the other hand is also noted for farming due to adaptation needs in their migration history.

J. Steward’s extensive research into cultural change is documented in his book, Theory of Culture Changes (1955), wherein he gives insight into the relationship between environment and culture, emphasises the technological adaptations that people make as time progresses. Steward (1955) also touches on issues of resource exploitation and the concept of multilinear exploitation, which R.M. Netting, the author of Cultural Ecology (1986) critiques as being too broad for analysis.

Although there are unique processes in various cultures, common linear and non-linear patterns can be identified. Overall, the analysis of texts or literary artefacts along the lines of culture “tends to stress what is specific or unique – in terms of time, place, and ideology – to a given cultural and literary movement” (Habib 2008, 173). Therefore, in this paper, the ideological positions and prevailing beliefs passed on through generations in folktales across two distinct Nigerian societies – Tiv and Yoruba – are used to signpost broader issues of class stratification, social cohesion, and the dynamics of power relations.

Hall’s (1997) work on cultural theory, specifically multiculturalism, encourages a multifaceted approach to examining culture. For him, imagination and representation lie at the core of understanding ourselves as part of a culture. According to Hall (1997, 576):

Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that’s not what the term means); it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it.

Thus, although a single approach to culture theory might be elusive, multiple approaches give room for comprehensive analysis.

Nigeria has experienced various phases of transition in the struggle to exist as an independent state, with its own belief systems and situational practice free from extreme external influences, which is often challenged and vitiated by internal conflicts arising from the existence of multiple cultures. At this point, the only way to achieve a tolerant cohesive cultural standpoint with regards to postcolonial Nigeria is to back-date the reality to pre-colonial Africa and find bearing from there. With the knowledge that this is physically impossible, the alternative would be to extract relevant traditions that foster progressive growth within a multicultural society. Using folktales to examine the moral consciousness of indigenous ethnic groups, the gap created by globalisation is exposed.

Folktale or the act of storytelling is a way, in traditional African societies, of passing on tradition, moral codes of conduct, ethics, and maintaining social order. The storyteller’s position is fortified by his/her multiple mandates as a historian, entertainer, poet, musician and educator, duty-bound to transfer knowledge from one generation to another. In many African societies, the oral tradition forms serve important ethical and social purposes; hence, the assertion that the death of an African elder is the equivalent of an arsonist setting the library of a university ablaze.

The imperativeness of folktale or storytelling as an art form serving as an important instrument for entertainment, documentation and education in African societies has been documented by some scholars and writers (Achebe 1987;
Generally, most African folktales portray characters which share similar perspectives, albeit sometimes, in different distractions are eliminated. With the timeless expression the education of the Tiv child:

Insaidoo 2011; Obiechina 1993; Owomoyela 1997, 2004; Lawuyi 2012; Olugbemi-Gabriel 2015); while Dundes and Bronner (2007) have focused attention on folklore across world cultures. Adumbratively, Achebe in his epochal novel, Things Fall Apart, reveals the pivotal role which folktale plays in the entertainment and education of an African child. In chapter eleven of Achebe’s seminal novel, the didactic and entertainment values of folktale are privileged. According to the narrator, “Low voices, broken now and again by singing, reached Okonkwo from his wives’ huts as each woman and her children told folk stories” (67). It is night-time, Ekweft, one of Okonkwo’s wives chooses to tell her only child, Ezinma a story based on the character of the notoriously popular animal trickster, Tortoise, whose shell is cracked due to acts of greed, treachery and subterfuge. “Once upon a time” the story begins, “all the birds were invited to a feast in the sky. They were very happy and began to prepare themselves … Tortoise saw all these preparations and soon discovered what it all meant.” The tales reveals how, out of uncommon greed, Tortoise betrays his benefactors (the birds as a group) and he is made to pay dearly for his action. Embedded in the act of storytelling for entertainment is the fact that, Ezinma is taught the virtues of contentment, honesty and the need to always place group interest above individualism.

Instructively, folktales are usually told at nighttime, when the day’s work is over in order to emphasise the importance of the maxim: ‘work before play.’ Night-time storytelling also makes the storyteller the centre of attention because distractions are eliminated. With the timeless expression “Once upon a time”, which is a storyteller’s clever strategy of trapping time in timelessness or eternity, the attention of the listener is gained from the start of the story. In African folktales, time is quite fluid with no concrete time or place setting. Vagueness in time and place is intended to create opportunities for the listeners (mostly children) to associate the setting with their experiential world of fantasy and reality, wherein ghosts exist and humans are capable of good and bad acts. Ekfei’s folktale in Things Fall Apart is not only intended to entertain an innocent child after a hard day’s work; but it is equally an attempt by a mother, as the teacher, to pass on to her child a set of moral ethical codes necessary for good behaviour and social order. Thus, the African storyteller is not just an entertainer; s/he is also the archetypal educator, who exists to teach morals, and pass on societal values and ethos, which are crucial to the survival of the society. Furthermore, it is instructive to state that Achebe uses the novel to acknowledge the role of folktale in moral grounding within African societies. Foregrounding the relevance of folktale in today’s pedagogical teaching model, Dundes and Bronner (2007, 53) strongly advocate its use by teachers “as an instructional tool to develop tolerance” and build stellar character.

Indeed, some scholars have affirmed the importance of folktales within the milieu of Yoruba and Tiv cultures. Lawuyi (2012, 1) holds that alo (folktale) does not only offer sociological imaginations and imaginings of the world of the Yoruba people/culture, the “clustering of imageries within any alo … can reveal insight into the social and political systematisation of not only the Yoruba but also the ‘Nigerian’ culture.” Udu and Udu (2013, 7) situate the centrality of folktale in the education of the Tiv child:

“Folktales expose children to the richness of Tiv language, Tiv myths, songs, values and culture. They help children in both character and cognitive development by enabling them to learn good virtues such as tolerance, honesty, hard work, obedience to parents and the repercussions of being deviant.”

Generally, most African folktales portray characters which share similar perspectives, albeit sometimes, in different stories. Amongst the Tiv people of Nigeria, folktales are traditionally told in the communal hut called ‘Ate’ after dinner. The primary use of the folktale is to instil values that are beneficial to the growth of the children as they transition into new stages of life and also to entertain them. Whenever the children are gathered in the ‘Ate’, the dual significance of the folktale is not lost on them as partakers of a cultural milieu, which places high premium on instilling the right values and education in children to engender peaceful coexistence and social cohesion.

The use of animals in folktale is also a consistent feature of African oral storytelling. This is due to the relationship Africans have with animals as part of their ecosystem. Almost every part of life is interconnected with daily rituals involving animals, whether this is through the presentation of goats and cows during marriages or the use of dogs as hunting companions. This is why there are different animal characters across the regions of the continent.

By far, Ijapa, Tortoise is the most popular character in Yoruba folktale. Anansi the spider is the character closely associated with folktale from Ghana, Sierra Leone and Liberia, while the Hare is the most prominent animal trickster character in East, Central and Southern African folktales. These animal characters are usually tailored for particular regions to achieve an understanding of the inherent lessons embedded in the folktales. For the Tiv people, whose primary occupation is farming, animals are also prominent characters. But, unlike the Yoruba society which focuses on Tortoise as a character, the Tivs are particularly fond of using the Hare, who is a trickster in kwagh-alom tales (Hare tales) to present important lessons central to the wellbeing of the society.
Alom and other Folktales in Tiv society

Alom stories have been documented by scholars such as Tsaaior (2015) who narrates a similar story of a he-goat who eats stolen yams and is unable to escape because of his distended stomach and is left behind by his friend, the hare. Another popular alom (Hare) story which is commonly found among a gathering of Tiv people focuses on the mystery of the missing pot of beans. At a time of famine in the kingdom, there is an increased need for work on the farm. Hare is married to a hardworking woman, who wakes up early and prepares food to take to the farm together with the equipment to be used. Hare on the other hand is lazy and does the bare minimum of work on the family farm, quite contrary to his position as the head of the family. As the folktale goes, on this particular day, Hare’s wife makes a special meal of beans before the family’s departure for the farm with a declaration that the meal would be eaten when they return from the farm. Hare, in his usual nature as a trickster, leaves the farm midway through the work, claiming that he has something urgent to attend to in the village. Of course, this is not true; his claim is a decoy for a more sinister intention. Hare makes his way home and eats half the pot of beans, which is supposed to be the family dinner. To cover his misdeed, Hare adds sand to what is left of the meal so that the pot would appear to still contain the quantity of beans prepared. Hare’s wife returns home after the day’s work and, unsuspectingly, brings out the pot of beans to serve the family dinner. To her consternation, she realises that someone has eaten half the food, replacing what is eaten with sand. She asks her husband if he is responsible for the acts of theft and subterfuge. Not known for honesty in the first place, Hare vehemently denies. Her children also denied culpability of the chicanery.

It is noteworthy that Hare’s wife’s enquiries are made through a song. However, the song is not an ordinary one as it serves the dual purpose of exposing and punishing the culprit:

Alom a lu we

(Hare if it is you)

U yam alev u mor gbor gbin

(That ate my beans, let your stomach grow well)

Wan ityondo a lu we

(Hare’s child if it is you)

U ya’m aleve mor daa laa

(That ate my beans let your stomach swell)1

As she sings one after the other for the suspects, the innocent ones remain unchanged but when it is Hare’s turn, his stomach swells since he is the culprit.

Theft is a serious moral ill and perhaps one of the first acts a child is warned against in almost all traditional African societies. The folktale uses the character of the Hare to bring to the fore the consequences of stealing. Through this method of associating terror with theft, children are frightened into being morally upright. This is an effective instructive and corrective measure. Through the course of connecting multiple moral lessons, the folktale also speaks against subterfuge, falsehood, indolence and selfishness. The conduct of the Hare signposts the elevation of self above others; which is an idea contrary to communalism, the guiding philosophy of many African societies. To these societies, when a person steals from his family as Hare has done, “the self is alienated from the common good, from the “other” which is framed in kinship. In return, the community makes move to ostracize or punish the thief” (Lawuyi 2012, 11). The punishment of a swollen stomach meted to Hare is therefore in order as it serves as a deterrent to anyone who may want to follow in his footsteps. Though metaphysically contrived, the manner of punishment reflects the belief that there are forces (benevolent and malevolent) ruling in the affairs of humans; a lesson elders want children to take to heart as part of their belonging in the society.

The tale also implies that if the Hare was a hardworking person, he would not need to scheme to take charge and/or steal from his own family. Hare’s signification of self (above others) and his indifference to his unenviable status (playing the

1This particular tale was sourced from a storytelling session at the Tyungu family home in Gboko on 27th December 2018. However other versions of the alom story have been recorded in Harper (1997) analyzing the relationship between hare stories and sacred masquerades.
second fiddle) negate the societal structure of expectations, which places the man as the head and defender of his family. Greed is also a concern in the folktale. If he had waited until everyone was home, he would have had a portion of the same meal. But because of his greed and self-centeredness, he contrives a subterfuge to steal from the common pot, without any consideration for the impact on others.

From this, it is not difficult to see why folktales hold children of preliterate and traditional societies spellbound. If folktales in the past held such a strong influence on the behaviour of children the shift from folktales to TV shows as tools of moral education in modern societies brings forth an important question. Is there a problem lurking over our heads (as Africans) with the fading culture of storytelling and deployment of folktales for didactic purposes? Arguably, the erosion of traditional African means of moral instruction and teaching of values by westernisation and modernity have accentuated many vices such as greed, wanton materialism and theft in today’s societies. The abandonment by many Africans of Africa-oriented values such as communalism and moderation for the assimilation of western values such as individualism, materialism and capitalism, has created a generation of people who are a testament to the deculturalisation and disindigenisation of an entire race.

The Tiv people also have an aetiological folktale about *Ikyarem*, the green snake that saved them during their earlier wars. Tsaaior (2015, 11) documents this tale while highlighting generosity and good-naturedness as ideologies important to the Tiv people instructively with the name *Ikyarem*, which means friend. It is believed that during the early days of Tiv migration, the Tiv people came across the Ugenyi people of Cameroon. In the course of a clash between the two communities, the Tiv side was losing and they had to flee for respite. They found themselves at the Aya River and reminiscent of the biblical setting of the Israelites and the red sea, the Tiv are caught in the middle. With no means to cross the river and at the peak of exasperation, the green snake, Ikyarem, suddenly appears and stretches its full length from one end of the river to the other. The Tiv people are then able to use this makeshift bridge to cross over safely, thus providing them with a lifeline to continue their journey until they reached their present home, on the banks of River Benue. This folktale explains the reverence Tiv people have for the snake, which is believed to be harmless. It is considered taboo for any Tiv person to kill this snake.

There is a lot of doubt regarding the believability and credibility of the above story but it houses and promotes a special (sacred) part of Tiv history. This particular folktale creates awareness of the legendary Tiv resiliance, which was ingrained in these people through their journey to finding a permanent home. According to Tsaaior (2015, 10) tales such as these “also constitute a memory archive and documentary reservoir in Tiv society and foster an abiding sense of historical awareness”. He likens this to the biblical story of the parting of the red sea for the Israelites who were fleeing from Egyptians.

On the other hand, the folktale also shows a respect for animals and belief in reciprocity – one good turn deserves another; while it also promotes the idea that help can come from the most unexpected places. The noble theme that nobody should be discriminated against because of size, class, or because they appear weak, is given deserving prominence.

It should be noted that Tiv folktales have gone beyond the trite and common functions of entertainment and knowledge sharing to instil confidence and self-awareness in children. Beyond the existence of these tales, there is a lesson to be learnt in the way the stories are told. For larger groups, the tales are often told through dramatic performances like the kwagh-hir dance and, children in Tiv society are found in smaller circles retelling these stories through performances, which help in building confident personalities. The foundational years are important in moulding children’s personalities; and if the right systems are set in place from a young age, they have better psychological tools to deal with the various stages of growth into adulthood. Deng (1988, 15-16) argues that such tales aid in passing knowledge from one generation to another and mould the character of children who listen to these stories.

If culture can influence one’s way of life, then it is given that the foundational provisions of one’s culture could be understood as a loose framework for understanding other cultures and could create a bridge between other tribes and cultures. Buttressing the intercultural realities of human existence, Evwierhoma (2002, ix) posits that “culture is often taken for granted because many see it as a common experience to all humans. But its dynamic nature gives it the flexibility to cross climes and races” (emphasis added). Interestingly, similarities have been observed between Tiv culture, particularly the language, and the cultures of other Bantu language speaking peoples. Clearly, there is similarities between ‘nyam’ the Tiv word for meat, and ‘nyama’ the word for meat in Swahili; *alo*, is Yoruba for folklore which, in Tiv, is *alom*. A Swahili or Yoruba speaker listening to a Tiv folktale that references meat can find a common ground in their understanding. Upon further interaction, they might even realise that more similarities are located within disparate cultural milieus. This paper therefore pays critical attention to the didactic use of folktales within Tiv and Yoruba cultural milieus to promote the idea of intercultural (as opposed to intracultural) evaluation of African folktales.
Ijapa and Igbin in Yoruba folktales: Signposting Yoruba philosophy on crime and punishment

The use of animals to convey morals is not exclusive to Tiv people. Among the Yoruba, Ijapa (Tortoise) is a popular trickster in *alo apagbe*. For the purpose of clarity and elucidation, it is essential to distinguish the Yoruba dual words, *alo apagbe* from the generic and more popular mono word, *alo* in order to signpost the didactic significance of folktales among the people. When translated or transliterated, *alo apagbe* means ‘call and response story.’ In this sense, and within the milieu of Yoruba folktale, the storytellers and their listeners are active participants in the whole exercise, which usually involves singing and dancing in a way that underscores the recreational and educational values of folktales. Therefore, when a Yoruba adult tells folktale(s) to wide-eyed children, beyond entertaining them, the original intention is to instill valuable moral lessons on them through a ‘call and response’ strategy of engagement as the narrator prepares the children for life as responsible citizens in society. In signification, *alo apagbe* is intended to educate children, which is akin to the Western education model. The storyteller allows the children to be part of the storytelling, albeit in a controlled atmosphere where s/he retains authority over the entire activity. The purpose of folktale for education in Yoruba society is then realised through the critical feedback, which the storyteller gains from deploying the ‘question and answer’ model at the end of each story.

In Yoruba folktales, *Ijapa* (Tortoise) is well established as a cunning and indolent character. Being proverbially lazy, he lacks the capacity for work. In ‘Ijapa ati Igbin’ (Tortoise and Snail) folktale, the lazy *Ijapa* is newly married to Yannibo, the daughter of Igbin (Snail) and he is invariably saddled with the obligation of feeding another mouth. Daily and without any clear source of income or cultivated farmland, *Ijapa* returns home like every other farmer with robust tubers of yam, with which *Yannibo* prepares dinner for the young family. However, *Igbin* (*Ijapa’s* father-in-law) is experiencing a nagging and perplexing theft of yam, pepper, tomatoes and other vegetables from his farm. Naturally, unable to bear the implications of his farm being gradually decimated by a determined thief, *Igbin* sets a trap to nab the fellow. A day after the trap is set, *Igbin* arrives at his farm at dawn to find *Ijapa*, his beloved son-in-law, caught in the trap and in agony. Freshly dug tubers of yam together with vegetables are found close to where *Ijapa* writhes in shame and pain. Thus, the theft and perfidy of *Ijapa* are exposed in the most ignominious manner.

Determined to punish the thief by exposing him to opprobrium, *Igbin* drags *Ijapa* to a big baobab tree at the major intersection leading to different farmlands and ties him to the big tree, leaving no chance for escape. At daybreak, *Ijapa* is the butt of crude jokes, receives odious insults and excoriation from everyone who passed, and becomes a spectacle of disapproval and opprobrium.

However, at the close of the working day and much to the surprise and chagrin of the people on their return from the farm, they find *Ijapa* still tied at the same spot in great distress and exhausted from the weight of his shame and punishment. Instantaneously, the table turns against *Igbin*, who is communally dismissed as an *Alaseju* (an unpleasant Yoruba noun for anyone who has overdone something). ‘*Ju*’ in the Yoruba word, ‘*Alaseju*’ connotes ‘too much’, and it usually carries negative implications in referential importance; in particular, whenever it is used, it stands as an excoriation of the receiver. Finding traction for this concept in Yoruba philosophy, Lawuyi (2012, 15-16) adds that ‘*Ju*’ calls attention to the limit of action, the end of individual freedom.” Therefore, ‘*Alaseju*’, in this context, refers to how *Igbin* undoubtedly crosses the societal boundaries of *omoluabi* (which is Yoruba for ‘a respectable and responsible personality’), *iwontunwonsi* (Yoruba for ‘moderation’) and *molebi* (Yoruba for ‘kinship’ or ‘family’); the three are central to the evaluation of one’s personhood in the society. Therefore, Igbin’s personal failings on the ethical landscape presuppose that *Ijapa*’s punishment is a matter which the people (and, by extension, the society) cannot leave to his sole discretionary power.

Within the context of *Ijapa and Igbin* folktale, two main issues are accentuated with regards to the centrality of *omoluabi*, *iwontunwonsi* and *molebi* on the moral landscape of Yoruba society. The issues of misdemeanour (theft in this case) and an appropriate but moderate punishment are given prominence among the Yoruba. *Ijapa’s* action (theft) is not tolerated by the community; hence it supports the disgrace and punishment mete out to him by *Igbin*, his father-in-law. In the society, any act of theft is evil and unacceptable because it encourages indolence and can easily create a recipe for social disharmony. On the vaunted danger of theft, societal codes dictate that when a thief is caught, appropriate punishment in relation to the act should be imposed, regardless of the kinship relationship between the parties. *Igbin* is therefore right to ignore the kinship relationship when punishing *Ijapa* for his crime.

On the other hand, the same society expects *Igbin*, as an *omoluabi* (responsible person) to be guided, and his actions tempered by the ethos of *iwontunwonsi* (moderation) in his search for justice against *Ijapa*, who doubles as his in-law. It should be noted and understood that it is *Igbin’s* violation of societal ethos and expectations on what constitutes appropriate punishment that ultimately turns the tables against him. The Yoruba sayings, “*iwontunwonsi lo ye omoluabi*”
(a responsible person is guided by moderation) and “alo ni ti'japa, abo ni ti'ana re” (Ijapa gets the first blame, but the second blame is reserved for his in-law) exist as priceless reminders of societal expectations on how members must conduct themselves with dignity and moderation.

The moral lessons to be learnt here are not far-fetched. Clearly, the crime and punishment paradigm is well recognised and established in Yoruba society. But the culture, philosophy and ethics of the people also focus on the need for all persons to always endeavour to strike a balance between action and reaction. To achieve that balance, Iwa (character) is needed. Iwa is the linchpin of morality among the Yoruba and it is so central to behavioural expectations that it is further subsumed in the individual’s personality.

According to notable scholar of Yoruba philosophy, Gbadegesin (1991, 79), Iwa is “perhaps the most important moral concept. A person is morally evaluated according to his/her Iwa - whether good or bad.” In regards to stealing, it can be said that “Ijapa ti s’owa nu” (Tortoise has lost character); therefore, he deserves the shame, insults, and punishment given to him by Igbin, and other members of the society.

In the same vein, Iwa and Omoluabi go together in Yoruba cosmology. A person is humanised through Omoluabi, but Iwa is central to the making of a person; that is, how they are viewed by other members of the society. Menkiti (1984, 176) opines that the becoming of a person in traditional African societies is a function of how well communal living and the discharge of obligations are emphasised by that person. One’s Iwa is ever present; it is an eefin (smoke), which cannot stay hidden. The centrality of Iwa to a person’s standing is codified in the Yoruba maxim, Iwa rere l’eso enia (character beautifies a person); that sense, oozes and epitomises ugliness without Iwa. For exhibiting a lack of moderation in punishing Ijapa (his in-law), Igbin is stripped of the privileged status of Omoluabi, which Iwa grants a person in the society.

Igbin’s indiscretion also underscores his failure to factor iwontunwonsin and molebi into the handling of Ijapa’s case. Iwontunwonsin is underlined by iforigi (forgiveness), which should have been activated ordinarily by the open fact that both parties are molebi (relatives) joined by marriage. In the eyes of the community, an omoluabi (Igbin earns that title because he is a hardworking farmer and responsible member of the community) should have been mindful of the fact that Ijapa does not steal to sell but in order to feed his family, which includes Yanibo, Igbin’s daughter. Seeing that Igbin’s inability to forgive and apply the necessary iwontunwonsin (moderation) could have easily led to the death of Ijapa, turning his wife (Igbin’s daughter) into a widow, the community swings into action by invoking its right to intervene and save the day. Thus, Igbin is compelled by communal disapproval to bring an end to Ijapa’s punishment on grounds that it violates the codes of iwontunwonsin, molebi and omoluabi, at the same time.

The story’s trajectory poignantly indicates that every member of the society in the Yoruba world is held to certain standards of responsibility in relation to action and reaction for the purpose of guaranteeing the dignity of person, peaceful coexistence and social order. Equally, the folktale illustrates that regardless of a person’s status in the society (whether as a violator of rule(s) or as one who enforces it), it is sacrosanct that the “principle specifying the limit of action, the correctness of procedure” (Lawuyi 2012, 12) is recognised and respected.

**Conclusion**

The examination of African folktales reveals that they play a great part in the culture of human development across ages and epochs; and it is now possible that the fadings of these tales poses a formidable threat to human societies and Africa in particular. In any given society, activities are influenced by the collective ideology of its peoples and citizens. A flawed ideology and disposition to morality would affect the society accordingly. In understanding folktales as an essential part of a peoples’ cultural landscape, we are privileged to understand different communities and how they exist regardless of global influence. Thus, this study in investigating folktales as important cultural tools of informal education in Africa aligns with Dundes and Bronner’s (2007, 66) position that: “Folklore as a subject of study can be a most rewarding one. It does serve as a mirror of culture and it is a mirror well worth looking into.” Therefore, to sustain internal development in Africa in the age of globalisation, there is an urgent need to appropriate and promote relevant elements of her cultures, of which folktale is one, and putting up a determined fight to sustain these tangible and intangible cultures for character development and social harmony.

Dankarol and Agoom (2015) have given some suggestions on how to put a pause to the slow death of folktales and their didactic relevance within African societies. Both scholars believe that debates on core Tiv language issues, for instance, should be organised at the foundational stages; primary and secondary schools. Screenplays from Tiv folktales and competitions surrounding them should also be focused as a plausible way of encouraging development through folktales. Others include how the people/society can employ research on Tiv language with the purpose of sparking interest in it,
in addition to the reintroduction of nighttime tales into our routines. These suggestions are valid in the sustenance of all endangered cultures in Africa and other places.

In extrapolating the suggestions, it is acknowledged that there is need to share folktales through the medium that appeals to the audience. Since audio-visual media is high on the list of acceptance and assimilation, it should be a default means of sustaining the culture of folktales. The reality of a technology-driven world brings to the fore the need to combine these advocated solutions with relevant means to gain and sustain the attention of the next generation with regards to folktales and the lessons they carry for all indigenous people. A basic step in this direction is the inclusion of more African language options on digital platforms enabling African folktales to retain stories in their original forms. User interaction interface in language and simulation games is also a progressive option for memory retention. With these measures, age-old positive aspects of culture espoused through folktales are protected and sustained, thereby having positive impacts on moral conducts and development in the concerned societies. The availability of folktales on digital platforms and in new media forms would serve to validate its ever changing yet constant nature. Moreover, it would also vitiate the position of those who hold the belief that folktales are relics of a bygone age and have dismissed its continued relevance in a world of high modernity. In its new forms, folktales would exist as a cultural totem of high identitarian value, especially in Africa where the essence of preserving intangible culture cannot be overemphasised.

Data availability
Due to lack of consent from the participants, the transcripts from the storytelling sessions are not available.
Overview

Thank you for the opportunity to read this fascinating paper. The topic is timely and the manuscript is well written. In general, the paper presents an innovative exploration of an ancient African fictive genre – that I am eager to see published.

Through a distilling of famous folktales from two ethnic milieus (Yoruba & Tiv), the paper expounds on the centrality of storytelling to cultural pedagogy in traditional African spaces. Part of its goal is interventionist – to theorize “folk-telling” as a defining African practice and as a conduit of knowledge, and a mirror of collective realities. The paper further establishes how through folktales, the old speaks to the new – the contemporary African social ecologies and their concomitant issues of class, power, and cohesion.

Comment to the authors

1. Four informants were interviewed (2 males & 2 females). Barring word limit, relevant parts of the naturalistic data from these participants can be quoted to animate the analysis. Though the authors note that transcripts from the storytelling data could not published due to lack of consent. I suggest they state clearly if this was before or after the data was collected. Did the participants give a limited consent? Put differently, the statement under “Consent” and “Data availability” appear to contradict each other.

2. “This study follows a narrative and content analysis approach...” I am wondering if the generous review of cultural debates in the paper can be de-emphasized, and instead highlight the core of narrative and content analysis. In other words, the discussion in the section on theory would need to circle back to the approach mentioned in the abstract.

3. On page 4 - in the paragraphs that begins with “Nigeria has experienced....”, an interesting point is made about the deployment of folktales towards restoring indigenous morality or precolonial African mores. Perhaps it would be possible to theorize this more strongly. My
question to the authors is whether this can be advanced as a notion or conceptualized with a phrase that ties in with the broader interventionist discourse of folk-telling in Africa.

4. The last paragraph on page 5 signals a contrast between two animal characters in Yoruba and Tiv folktales – namely, the Tortoise and the Hare. It would be useful to learn more about these characters, and apart from farming, why the animals are distinctively prominent in stories from the two regions.

5. This is negligible: there are a few instances of semantic doubling in the paper (e.g., surprise and chagrin on pg.8).

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Sociocultural and variationist linguistics

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 23 June 2022
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Emmanuel Adeniyi
Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria
The article attempts an intercultural study of the Tiv and Yoruba folktales with a view to emphasizing the significance of the verbal art for moral rebirth in Africa. It is a good research idea, but the writers failed to address critical issues that ought to be the building blocks of their argument and interpretations. Looking at the methodology, I was expecting to see a qualitative analysis of data collected either through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), interviews or other methods, but the writers only analyzed a few folktales and inserted their interpolations into the article without sound theoretical and empirical truths. To ask pointedly, what did writers do in their field trip? They possibly interviewed people, participated in folktales rendition, made recordings ... Where are the data collected during their trip? Why are the interviews not transcribed? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed before considering this paper for indexing. While stating that they would engage in narrative and content analyses of their data, their analysis is more narrative-based. We are not told the model of CA they did. Is it relational or conceptual? Though it appears a conceptual analysis, their explanation of some lexical items in both Tiv and Yoruba is inadequate and may be difficult to accept as an example of CA. CA is done for specific purposes; what are the purposes of the methodology in this research? They are obviously missing. CA is more than giving themes to texts, it helps in delivering theoretically and conceptually structured arguments and interpretation. Honestly, that is missing here.

Another major issue with the paper is that the reader is left in the lurch regarding its purpose. While the writers set out to interrogate cross-cultural convergences using the media of folktales and totemic symbols, they fail to deliver on this. An intercultural study of this nature should also be comparativist. The writers hinted about this approach with their insertion of “convergence” study in their methodology. However, they failed to address this in the article. The article holds a lot of prospects. The topic is interesting, and its intercultural approach even makes it an exciting research idea worth pursuing. I don't know of any study on Tiv/Yoruba cultural parallelism, yet this article has boldly delved into it. I think it is a good idea that should be pursued in African/a Studies.

The introduction doesn't lay a solid background for the study. A promising work of this nature should be moored on critical interrogations of the issues pointed out in this section. It is too scanty, jerky and is deficiently blind to critical discussions that ought to strengthen the paper and indicate the enormity of research invested in it. Reading the article raises serious questions: What is the basis for converging or possibly comparing the two cultures? Why the choice of these cultures? Are there underlying cultural parallelisms, historical contiguities and any other analogous cultural elements uniting the two cultures? You can't just claim your study investigates these cultures, paying attention to convergent patterns in them without identifying and justifying these parallel elements.

However, I don't recommend its indexing in its present form, due to some of the issues I pointed out in my review. It needs to be firmed up, taking into consideration a number of factors, including theoretical, methodological and analytical details. I recommend its complete overhaul and revision.

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?**
Partly

**Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?**
Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?  
No

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?  
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?  
No

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?  
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: African Literature, Oral Literature, Postcolonial Studies, Yoruba Studies

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.