"Tales by Moonlight" and the Televisual Education of the Nigerian Child*

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Comme dans d'autres pays africains, l'école dans le Nigéria postcolonial souffre de l'anxiété qui résulte de l'ambivalence et du goût d'inachevé que génèrent les nombreuses quêtes postcoloniales de reconstruction et de définition de soi. De nombreux aspects de l'éducation et de la culture locales ne sont pas pris en compte par la pédagogie formelle héritée de l'école occidentaled'une manière qui permette de valoriser les savoirs indigènes. Cet article analyse la manière dont la direction de la télévision nigériane, par le biais de son programme intitulé « Légendes de clair de lune » s'est inspiré des modes indigènes de narration aux fins d'éducation morale et culturelle. Les auteurs étudient le rapport entre les stratégies visuelles, orales et musicales adoptées dans la présentation du programme et le contexte social, l'audience visée par le programme et les conditions psychologiques dans lesquelles la télévision est regardée au Nigéria. Les auteurs étudient également la mentalité d'un segment de l'audience constitué de jeunes qui regardent le programme à domicile. Selon les auteurs, outre qu'elle constitue un moyen de reconstruire l'authenticité culturelle dans le contexte postcolonial, la manière de présenter le programme prouve que la télévision est devenue un moyen utile de mobilisation des modèles culturels indigènes et de décentrage de la production intellectuelle dans le milieu postcolonial.

Postcolonial media in Nigeria are faced with the challenge of justifying their sociocultural relevance while satisfying the formal requirements of communication created by Western technology. In a sense, the Nigerian media, in making its local audience become part of the global village, faces a primary obligation of discovering and using indigenous systems which

their audience has been more familiar with and in which they construct and transmit (cultural) knowledge. As essential agents of education, and inheritors of cultures, the media in Nigeria could become important complements of the formal school system, especially in a situation where it has become difficult for the Western school system inherited from the colonialists to maintain effective link with indigenous cultures, to harness local knowledge, and to really produce an "educated" individual who is morally and intellectually sound. Because it is neither appropriately Western nor adaptive of local context, Nigerian educational system is ambivalent (as is typical of the postcolonial condition) and seems to dispense knowledge that lacks ideological direction.

How is the media in Nigeria, therefore, responding to this task of providing complementary cultural education to Nigerian children, especially as that form of education has not been (adequately) catered for or accommodated in the modern Western educational system in the country? In the present paper, we discuss the experimental enactment of local folktales on Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) network for the entertainment and education of Nigerian children. The programme, called "Tales by Moonlight", was created in 1984 by Victoria Ezeokoli, a former Director of Programmes at NTA Headquarters, as an attempt at introducing a local and relevant children's programme that could challenge the highly popular foreign option, the Sesame Street. The programme was initially presented by a lady, but a successful research aimed at improving its quality brought in a male presenter, Jimmy Solanke, who gave the programme a new engaging turn. The longest running children's national programme, "Tales by Moonlight" is presented weekly (every Tuesday) on NTA, but due to the problem of funding, new editions of it have not been coming up for over a quarter now. NTA has been having reruns of previous editions. There are also similar attempts at performing local stories for and with children on regional and private television and radio stations in Nigeria. Relayed on all NTA stations so as to reach many rural and urban communities, "Tales by Moonlight" is an attempt also at staging and electronically visualizing the local folktales in ways that children would feel their impact more

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meaningfully and absorb their moral messages easily at a time that the pursuit of basic needs of life has almost denied parents the opportunity of providing their children cultural education through folklore. It also seems to be part of the treatment of what Homi Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* refers to as the "will to forget" or the "syntax of forgetting", which arises in the relationship between the Self and the (postcolonial) nation. To forget the stories of the culture or nation is to remember to forget the irrecoverable Self. Indeed, the programme is an attempt at recuperating a vanishing African theatrical and educational tradition and to locate this "past" in the present, to create space for African "media" and pedagogy within the context of modern communication education.

It is therefore worthwhile to focus on such media educational practice as a way of drawing attention to the role that modern media can play in making Nigerian (and indeed African) education not forget its "past" and to be more meaningful and socially relevant.

The plan of the paper is as follows: the section that follows immediately after this introduction briefly makes an excursion into the realm of related theory, especially related with the idea of the postcolonial media (the visual media in particular) as important tools of producing and using knowledge. After the excursion into theory, we discuss the performance of "Tales by Moonlight" on NTA, focusing on its form or theatrical design, its types of messages or moral education and their social relevance, the reception of the programme by children who constitute its primary audience, and also some of its problems as a televisual folkloric means of reaching Nigerian children and making them part of the communicating society. In concluding, we will generally comment on the significance of the televisualizing of local folktales for current formal education in Nigeria.

In Theory: Mediating Moral Education

Morality, education, and children's production and consumption of art are very problematic issues. We do not intend to and cannot settle such problematic within the scope of the present paper, but would rather briefly show that both in Nigerian (African) and Western intellectual contexts, art has been seen as an important means of making children to learn to know, to do, and to be. But it has also been a zone of censorship, on the basis of the fact that it can serve as a means of producing individuals who destroy society and civilization. In this regard, it would not be out of place to pay due homage to Plato. In his *Republic*, Plato attempts, dialogically, to outline and justify the principles on which the building of an ideal polis is to be based, recommending that stories told to children "should be models of virtuous thoughts", not suggesting "wrong ideas" but being morally sound and edifying. Part of this morality in mediating knowledge for children is centered on truth: Plato insists that the stories should not be lies, as for instance in the references to the wars among the gods in heaven, which are found in some Greek narratives, like those of Homer. He rather advises that children should be told that "quarrelling is unholy, and that never to this time has there been any quarrelling between citizens; this is what old men and old women should begin by telling their children…." Poets whose works arouse base emotions and who tell lies about the gods are therefore censored by Plato.

Although Plato's discourse is germane to the idea of "learning to be " at peace with other people in community (Susan Fountain, 1999), its contradictions as a moral theory of education are quite glaring. He condemns lying about the gods as being immoral and misleading, yet he recommends that children should be told lies - that there has never been any quarrelling in the society. He tries, though unsuccessfully, to get out of the dilemma (of telling and at the same time not-telling the truth) by making a distinction between "true lie" and "lie in words" (see Diaches, 1982: 1 - 22). The former is explained as involving "ignorance in the soul of him that is deceived", while the latter is

"only a kind of imitation and shadowy picture of a previous affection of the soul, not pure unadulterated falsehood". "True lie", he argues, is hated by gods and "men" (sic), whereas "lie in words" " … is in certain cases useful and not hateful; in dealing with enemies - that would be an instance; or again, when those whom we call friends in a fit of madness or illusion are going to do some harm, then it is useful and is a sort of medicine or preventive; also in the tales of mythology, … - because we do not know the truth as we can, and so turn it to account" (cited in Diaches, 1982: 12).

The moral theory of children's literature and art generally has always meant a censorship of certain kinds of cultural production. Certain video films, advertisements, etc whose narratives are considered injurious to children's moral well-being are censored in many cultural contexts including those of Nigeria. Video film producers are required in Nigeria, for instance, to warn viewers that their films, when they involve horror, love-making, and crimes, are not meant for the consumption of children. The basis for this censorship is that children literalize what they see in films and on televisions (just as Plato feared about their being unable to distinguish between true and false situations) and may take them as the right copies or forms of behaviour. Taking them as models of behaviour implies trying them out in real life. There have been many occurrences of children's experimentations on what they see on television, most of the time with disastrous consequences.

The idea of "telling stories" through the media, especially on the television, is, inevitably, not limited to ordinary oral presentation of a story. Media storytelling is defined by the nature of a given medium, and it is our contention that each medium not only has a special impact on the form of the "story" but also on its reception. Indeed, television storytelling may be understood as covering a wide range of narrative practices on television. Generally, as Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires observe in their book, *Telling Stories*, "Our culture depends upon numerous types of narrative: novels, short stories, films, television shows, myths, anecdotes, songs, music videos, comics,

paintings, advertisements, essays, biographies, and news accounts. All tell a story." (1991:1). Thus "storytelling on television" is not exactly the same thing as "television storytelling". Both involve a combination of oral and visual devices, but "television storytelling" encompasses all forms of visual and oral performance on television. These would include comics, advertisements, etc. Television pictures are "stories" because the camera may be understood as recounting, as Cohan and Shires (1991:2) further observe. Storytelling on television is, on the other hand, the restaging of folk stories in which case we have a human raconteur with or without an immediate audience.

In an interesting way, storytelling on television becomes an important form of television storytelling, an important form through which the television tells its own story or the story of its technological ability to recuperate an oral culture and to reuse it. This metacommunicative function is particularly significant in a postcolonial milieu, especially in relation to the important complementary role the television takes on in the context of social and cultural education. Making storytelling on television become significant in a postcolonial society would also be subject to cultural ideology, for instance, the moral view of what is *tellable* and what is not. This calls to mind Salman Rushdie's metafictional comment in *Shame* that "… every story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship, it prevents the telling of other tales…." (1983:71). Thus telling children only those stories we consider to be in accord with their moral well-being is also a form of "lying". Maintaining silence over the "harmful" story is in line with Plato's advice that children should be told that there has never been any fighting and quarrelling among human beings. Education in the ways of the culture may after all not be able to do away completely with moral contradictions especially because education, at least understood as "any process - whether in schools, or in informal or non-formal educational contexts - that develops in children or adults the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values leading to behaviour change" (Susan Fountain, 1999: 3), is ideological.

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Generally, children's lores are important aspects of the transmission and acquisition of culture. Part of the regret, and indeed the anxiety, in the postcolonial milieu like Nigeria is that local cultural values and forms of education or production of knowledge have either been neglected or are being forgotten. The loss of *memory* for cultural knowledge intensifies the postcolonial condition of ambivalence and *strandedness* of mind, especially given the fact that the received foreign cultures and ideas are far from being mastered by the postcolonial subject. The staging of children's storytelling on television therefore straddles the postmodern and the postcolonial in terms of the presencing of the past. Postcolonial presencing of the past attends to the loss of memory and could be explained as a form of cultural nationalism. It is also an attempt to reconcile the local and the foreign, and in respect of postmodernity, to reconcile the seeming opposing strategies of the cultural production of knowledge.

In another respect, storytelling on television is one of the attempts by the postcolonial media to construct their cultural and social relevance. Nigerian media, especially the televisions, have often been accused of promoting imperialism by presenting programmes that contain the colonial logic of cultural supremacy, programmes that have no direct relevance to immediate social needs. In other words, that they seem to fail to recognize the contexts in which they operate.

Thus a programme like "Tales by Moonlight" may be seen as an attempt by NTA to construct its relevance and also increase its liking locally. Segun Olusola (1981) has explained that the NTA started facing a problem of the conflict of objectives when it was established by the Western Nigerian Government in 1959:

> The first contradictions became apparent in the choice of programming. The local patrons planned to "teach and entertain" through the use of Nigerian teachers and entertainers. But the foreign partners were quick to

point out that they could "teach and entertain" by importing films of foreign teachers and entertainers at a much reduced cost (actually one tenth) to the joint venture. .... Since both partners had agreed to operate television as a joint business venture, winning such an argument was easy. And so, the Nigerians lost the initiative which was never really regained until recently, in spite of the fact that the business partnership broke up in 1962 (p. 373).

NTA could be said to have inherited the mentality that, as Olusola further says playfully, " Television does not admit the worship of any other god but Television" (p. 376), but later realised its mistake, coming up with a policy in the early eighties that 80% of all of its programming should be local or locally produced (Olusola 1981:380). "Tales by Moonlight" is obviously one of its serious efforts at corrreting its previous programming mistakes.

"Tales by Moonlight" could also be seen as an NTA experiment on how to accommodate children more appropriately in television presentations and audience network. Children are also people! And it is perfectly in line with one of the dimensions of the targets that countries are expected to take in the Jomtien *World Declaration on Education for All*, in the *Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs*, namely: "Increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living and sound sustainable development, made available through all education channels including the mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication, and social action, with effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural change" (1990). The targeted behaviour change appears to hinge on the acquisition of Life Skills which entail Interpersonal Skills, Skills for Building Self-Awareness, Values Clarification Skills, Decision-Making Skills, as well as Coping and Stress Management Skills (UNICEF Curriculum Report Card, 2000: 21). Children's Life Skills could be built through televisual education, especially that which practically involves children themselves in its execution.

In relation to the target of behaviour change, it appears that most of the programmes on Nigerian televisions are adult-oriented and not even suitable for children's consumption. Numerous studies in psychology and psycholinguistics have shown that children mostly prefer their own forms of language and lore to those of adults. In a sense, therefore, the adult-orientedness of the programmes is a social and psychological alienation of children as a social group. At best, the consumption of programmes meant for adults dislocates them psychologically.

It is against this theoretical background that we discuss the performance of "Tales by Moonlight" on NTA. In the discussion, we give attention to the storytelling as a form of teaching through entertainment.

Critiquing the "Tales by Moonlight"

The name, "Tales by Moonlight", recalls the traditional performance of stories when the moon is shining in the traditional Nigerian context. It recalls a traditional African orientation to Nature and the natural, a linkage of cultural life with natural situations. In a poem entitled, "Moonlight Play", such a situation has been captured as follows:

> Way back in my little village
> Naked in innocence
> The people knew when and how
> To go to the moon
>
> On the wings of stories
> In the swing of songs
> In the call and the response
> In the hide-and-seek
> ..... (Oha, 2001, www.poetry.com)

In a curious sense, "Tales by Moonlight", is also, figuratively speaking, an exploration of knowledge framed in a "moonlight" - the moon itself being a

symbol of insight. As in the actual traditional Nigerian (African) cultures, the setting of NTA's "Tales by Moonlight" is always outdoors under a tree or somewhere with natural and traditional outlook. The setting seems significant because situations are themselves part of the messages in visual performances. It seems to relocate the child viewer to the local, in contrast with the settings in non-indigenous visual presentations (e.g. soap operas and films from Latin America shown on Nigerian televisions) that tend to alienate or remove the Nigerian child from the reality of the local context. Constant viewing of foreign contexts may make the Nigerian child to take such foreign contexts as the models or norms from which the local contexts merely deviate, or which cancel out the world of the local. On the other hand, the setting could be seen as an attempt at being faithful to the realism of the performance of Nigerian folktales.

In the performance of the story, there is always a raconteur (who may be a man or a woman) who sits with a child, with an audience (made up of children) sitting in front of them. Sometimes the children sit around the raconteur, at his/her feet, and at other times the raconteur sits on a traditional stool or chair, with the children on the floor in front of him or her. Every effort is made, in the arrangement/composition of the participants on television, to foreground the presence of the children as the focus and center of the performance, i.e. to show that the programme is meant for children.

Also, in the performance, children's roles are made significant. Indeed, the raconteur merely provides the lead; the children double as both the immediate audience and the co-performers, joining the raconteur with singing of choruses to move dramatic action. Indeed, as many authorities on African oral literatures like Isidore Okpewho and Ruth Finnegan have pointed out in their several studies, African oral performances are made more dynamic and creative through audience participation, and are not formulaic and uncreative as the early Western anthropologists thought. This is what we find in the participation of children in the presentation of "Tales by Moonlight". Children's skills and abilities are developed immensely as they participate

actively in the performance. Children also learn more when they are made active participants in the process of their education.

In "Tales by Moonlight", there are sometimes up to two segments in a programme: the presentation of a story by an elderly raconteur (obviously acting the role of mother or father, or grandparent, who represent some natural obligation and whose relationship with the children is marked as intimacy) and the presentation of another story by a child raconteur. This complementation is clearly an attempt at stimulating involvement by children and an encouragement of the children (both those participating on television and those watching the programme at home) to develop interactive and speaking skills, which are part of the necessary Life Skills emphasized in the Basic Education programme being executed by UNESCO and UNICEF and relevant institutions in many countries. At the end of the story, which is partly acted out, the morals are discussed with the children making their contributions. This particularly underlines the importance of making children's voices to be heard (in their education), apart from helping the children to develop critical thinking skills.

The morals often include: children should obey their parents; children should not tell lies; children should learn to live in community and help other human beings; children should not steal; children should not cheat others (as the tortoise or the monkey does), etc. Indeed, these moral lessons agree with the goals of peace education which aims at addressing "the prevention and resolution of all forms of conflict and violence, whether overt or structural, from the interpersonal level to the societal and global level" (Susan Fountain, 1999: 3).

The purpose of the performance of "Tales by Moonlight" is therefore not merely the entertainment of children. It is rather that of teaching through entertainment, and teaching in lines with the pursuits of Global Education in all its dimensions. The songs and proverbs that occur in the performance are among the devices through which knowledge is constructed and transmitted in a culturally relevant way.

In another respect, the survey we conducted using a segment of Nigerian children from both urban and rural communities reveal very interesting perspectives. We could summarize these as follows: (1) many Nigerian children, especially those who live in the rural areas, do not watch or have knowledge of the television programme; (2) those who watch the programme live with their parents and guardians in the urban areas, and are mainly from the working class; (3) many of the children who watch the programme were introduced to it by their friends/peer group, especially at school, where during playtime they discuss TV programmes and films they have watched; (4) all the children interviewed, who watch the programme, indicate that they like it and learn from it, and that they always look forward to the next week's edition; (5) majority of those interviewed who have watched the programme were able to recall what they learnt and to make specific judgments about its moral messages, and to make distinctions between good and bad personality roles in each performance; (6) some of the children complained of poor picture quality in the reception of the programme on their TVs, while some, as would be expected, complained about electricity failures, which sometimes interrupted the programmes; and (7) all the children who claimed to have watched it would want the programme to be continued.

It is quite clear that Nigerian children who watch "Tales by Moonlight" already see it as an important and alternative source of their non-formal education. Hilary Perraton and Charlotte Creed have observed that

> Mainstream children's programming has been gaining increasing attention in the shift towards sophisticated, intergenerational and multi-channel communication strategies and growing recognition as an undervalued educational resource. An emphasis on the need for links between formal and non-formal education, the recognition that learning is an intergenerational phenomenon and that children play a crucial role in teaching each other have all led to an increased concern with informal and nonformal opportunities for learning both in and out of school. (2000: 26)

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Such an observation has strong validity, with the "Tales by Moonlight" experience. Non-formal education of children in countries of the South can benefit immensely from the New Technology generally, not only the television, especially if such technologies are reconciled with local realities.

Conclusion

The quest for more result-oriented and contextually-relevant education in Nigeria and in other African countries need to be consolidated with the rediscovery of indigenous media of education. Locating such media within the modern media is necessary for more realistic and effective encounter with contemporary conditions in the postcolonial milieu where education has to be geared towards not only learning to know, but also learning to do, and learning to build (peace in) community. The real story of "Tales by Moonlight", for us, is that Nigerian education should recognize its context, as well as the future of such a context, namely: children.

* *This article was first present ed at the international conference on "The Youth and the Media of the South", which was held at IRD, Bondy, France, from 25 to 26 May, 2000. The presentation was accompanied with video strips which, unfortunately, cannot be reproduced here. We thank NTA Ibadan for allowing us to its their video tapes for the purpose of this academic work.*

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