

FOLKTALE AS VERBAL LORE: A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF DIDACTICISM AND MORAL INSTRUCTION IN SELECTED AFRICAN NARRATIVES

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Abstract

Folktales are among the most significant components of folklore, and have traditionally served as a vehicle for moral instruction in many African societies. Folklore, which encompasses verbal lore, material lore, and customary lore, embodies the collective ways of life of a people. Among these categories, folktale belongs to verbal lore because it is transmitted primarily through spoken narration. Through the actions and speeches of fictional characters: often animals, birds, human beings, and other similar beings. Folktales communicate moral lessons and social values to members of society, especially children. Although the events portrayed in folktales are largely imaginative and often impossible in real life, they are presented in a believable manner that enables audiences to identify with the characters and learn from their experiences. This study examines the didactic function of the popular folktales of Ant and Grasshopper and Tortoise and Goat, demonstrating how the narratives promote the virtues of diligence, foresight, and responsibility while condemning laziness and idleness. The study further argues that remarkable thematic affinities exist among folktales from different African societies, with particular reference to Igbo and Yoruba traditions. The findings reveal that despite cultural differences, many African folktales share common moral concerns and continue to function as effective instruments of informal education.

Keywords: folktale, folklore, verbal lore, didacticism, ant and grasshopper

Introduction

Folktale is a traditional narrative of a people, transmitted orally from one generation to another and usually without a known author. According to Nnyagu (2026), “A folktale is a traditional story particular to a folk, not meant to be believed in any literal or historical sense.” As a communal form of storytelling, it belongs to the collective heritage of a society and represents one of the most significant expressions of oral literature.

Folktales are not typically intended to be taken as historical accounts; rather, they are imaginative narratives whose value lies in their ability to entertain, instruct, and preserve the moral and cultural values of a community.

As a form of verbal lore, folktale occupies a central position in the cultural and intellectual life of many societies. Through imaginative plots, symbolic events, and fictional characters, folktales communicate lessons that regulate individual conduct and reinforce communal norms. The characters may include human beings, animals, birds, spirits, and other entities endowed with human attributes. Within the narrative space of folktales, these beings interact freely in ways that transcend the limitations of ordinary reality. Consequently, actions that would be impossible in real life become acceptable and meaningful within the imaginative world of the tale. Animals speak, reason, negotiate, deceive, suffer, and even assume social roles comparable to human beings. In the well-known tale of Elephant and Tortoise, for instance, Tortoise, despite his physical limitations and social insignificance, succeeds in marrying a beautiful princess, thereby illustrating the imaginative elasticity of folktale tradition.

Laurence Perrine believes that literature does more than mere entertainment; it educates too. As an aspect of literature, folktale educates. The imaginative nature of folktales does not diminish their social or educational relevance. On the contrary, the fictive elements embedded in these narratives often serve as symbolic representations of real social experiences. Folktales frequently encode the values, beliefs, anxieties, aspirations, and ethical principles of the societies from which they emerge. For centuries, particularly before the advent of Western education and formal literacy systems in many African communities, folktales functioned as vital instruments of informal education. Through them, children were introduced to moral virtues such as honesty, diligence, courage, obedience, humility, patience, and communal responsibility. In this sense, folktales perform a dual function: they entertain while simultaneously educating.

The effectiveness of folktales as pedagogical tools explains their enduring popularity, especially among younger audiences. Skilled raconteurs employ a variety of performance techniques, including suspense, humour, repetition, songs, proverbs, and dramatic gestures to sustain audience engagement. Children, in turn, become emotionally invested in the narratives and often identify closely with the characters. Through such identification, they gradually learn to distinguish between desirable and undesirable forms of behaviour. The moral impact of folktales is therefore achieved not through direct instruction but through experiential engagement with narrative situations.

Lindfors observed that in many African societies, folktales are commonly associated with evening or moonlight storytelling sessions. The predominance of nighttime narration has often been misinterpreted by early European observers as evidence of superstition or ritualistic practice. However, such interpretations fail to consider the socio-economic organization of traditional African life. Ottobah Cugoana and Olaudah Equiano in their article, "The Tradition of African Protest Writing in Oguni's *Genius in Bondage*, suggest that the onus of discussing Africans traditions should be left for Africans. In their words, "What must now be done is to establish the fact that these early writers were the first Africans to address the Europeans in a language and idiom that they all understood." Oguni G. T is right when he disclosed that African tales were told at night. But the Europeans' belief that the reason for telling the tales at night was because of its root to ritual is false. Nnyagu explains that the tales were told at night because the people were hardworking. In most communities, daytime hours were dedicated to productive labour such as farming, fishing, hunting, trading, and other forms of economic activity. Storytelling therefore emerged naturally as an evening leisure practice, providing both relaxation and moral instruction after the day's work had been completed.

Isichei, in *A History of African Societies*, similarly draws attention to the cultural biases that shaped some early European accounts of African societies. He believes that the misrepresentation of African cultural practices by some early European writers contributed significantly to distorted understandings of African oral traditions. Such accounts frequently overlooked the complex moral and social systems embedded within African societies. G. T. Basden, for instance, in his *Among the Igbos of Nigerian*, interpreted some Igbo practices through a biblical/European framework. In reality, many African cultures place strong emphasis on hard work, discipline, and communal responsibility, while discouraging laziness, idleness, and antisocial behaviour. These values are not only articulated in folktales but are also reinforced through proverbs, songs, rituals, and various forms of artistic expression.

A notable literary illustration of this value system can be found in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Through the contrasting figures of Unoka and Okonkwo, Achebe dramatizes the tension between idleness and industry within Igbo society. Unoka is portrayed as a man who avoids hard work and fails to achieve social distinction within Umuofia. His inability to provide adequately for his family and his reputation as a debtor mark him as an example of social failure. Okonkwo, by contrast, consciously rejects his father's way of life. Through determination, discipline, and relentless effort, he rises to prominence as a successful farmer, titleholder, and respected member of society. Achebe thereby reinforces a value deeply embedded in African oral tradition: diligence leads to reward, while laziness results in failure and social disapproval.

This moral framework is strongly reflected in the folktale of Ant and Grasshopper, a narrative widely known in various forms across African and global oral traditions. The tale presents a sharp contrast between the industrious ant, who prepares for the future by gathering and storing food, and the carefree grasshopper, who neglects preparation and indulges in leisure. When famine eventually occurs, the ant survives through foresight and hard work, while the grasshopper suffers the consequences of negligence and lack of planning. The moral significance of the tale lies in its affirmation of diligence, prudence, and responsibility as essential virtues for both individual survival and communal stability.

The parallels between Achebe's characterization of Okonkwo and Unoka and the symbolic representation of Ant and Grasshopper reveal the enduring influence of folktale motifs within African literary imagination. Just as the ant embodies industry, foresight, and responsibility, Okonkwo reflects similar ideals of achievement and self-discipline. Conversely, the grasshopper's carelessness and dependency resonate with the weaknesses associated with Unoka. Through these correspondences, folktales continue to shape literary representation and reinforce cultural values across generations, demonstrating their continued relevance in both oral and written African traditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Functionalist theory of literature, supported by the Didactic theory of oral tradition. These two theoretical perspectives are particularly appropriate because the selected folktales are examined not merely as artistic narratives but as cultural instruments that perform specific social, moral, and educational functions within African societies.

Functionalism, as associated with Bronislaw Malinowski and later developed within cultural anthropology, views cultural practices and artistic expressions as serving identifiable functions within a given society. According to this perspective, every cultural product exists to meet certain social needs, whether emotional, moral, educational, or structural. Literature, including oral literature, is therefore not an autonomous aesthetic object but a functional component of social life. It contributes to the maintenance of social order, the reinforcement of norms, and the regulation of human behaviour within the community.

Within the context of African oral traditions, folktales function as tools for socialisation and cultural continuity. They are used to inculcate values, guide behaviour, and transmit collective wisdom from one generation to another. The Functionalist perspective is

particularly relevant to this study because the selected folktales: the Ant and Grasshopper narrative and the Tortoise and Goat narrative clearly demonstrate how oral narratives operate as mechanisms for promoting discipline, responsibility, and moral consciousness within society. The actions of the characters and the consequences they experience reflect the community's value system and reinforce socially acceptable patterns of behaviour.

Complementing Functionalism is the Didactic theory of literature, which emphasizes the instructional and moral purpose of literary works. The Didactic tradition holds that literature is not only meant to entertain but also to teach and guide audiences toward ethical and socially responsible behaviour. In this sense, storytelling becomes a pedagogical tool through which moral lessons are communicated in an accessible and memorable form. Within oral cultures, especially in African societies, this didactic function is central to the purpose of folktales.

The Didactic theory is particularly useful in explaining the moral structure of the selected narratives. In the “Ant and Grasshopper” a tale from Uche Nnyagu's *Nigerian Folklore and Oral Tradition: A Cultural Heritage*, the consequences of laziness and the reward for diligence reflect a clear moral ordering of the narrative world. Similarly, in the “Tortoise and Goat” tale, the punishment of theft and the warning against careless association underscore the ethical expectations embedded in the story. These narratives do not merely entertain; they instruct audiences on how to live responsibly within their social environment.

When combined, Functionalism and Didactic theory provide a comprehensive framework for understanding African folktales as both socially functional and morally instructional forms of oral literature. While Functionalism explains the role of folktales in maintaining social cohesion and transmitting cultural values, Didactic theory clarifies their explicit moral and pedagogical intentions. Together, they illuminate the dual function of folktales as instruments of entertainment and education, reinforcing their significance in African oral tradition.

The Ant and Grasshopper Folktale

The folktale of Ant and Grasshopper is one of the most widely known didactic tales in many societies. Although versions differ across cultures, the central message remains essentially the same: diligence attracts reward while laziness invites hardship. The version below illustrates this moral principle.

Once upon a time, in a place called Iduu-na-Oba, Ant visited its friend, Grasshopper, during the harvest season. Ant advised Grasshopper to join it in gathering and storing food for the coming rainy season, a period when food would become scarce.

Grasshopper laughed at the suggestion and replied that Ant should abandon its worries about tomorrow and join in making music and enjoying life. Ant regarded Grasshopper's attitude as foolish and immediately set out to gather food for the future.

As the harvest season progressed, Ant worked tirelessly, collecting grains and storing them away. Before long, the rainy season arrived. Ant and its young ones fed comfortably on the food they had preserved during the season of abundance. Consequently, they never experienced the hunger that accompanied the harsh season.

Grasshopper, however, had stored nothing. As food became scarce, it grew weak from hunger. Realising the seriousness of its situation, Grasshopper decided to visit Ant and beg for food.

Approaching Ant's home, Grasshopper humbly pleaded for something to eat.

"What!" exclaimed Ant in astonishment. "Did you not store any food for the rainy season?"

"I did not have time to gather food," Grasshopper replied weakly.

Ant was surprised. "You had no time? What then were you doing throughout the harvest season?"

"I spent my time making music and entertaining myself. Before I realised it, the season of plenty had passed."

Ant shook its head in disappointment.

"During the harvest season, I invited you to gather food with me, but you refused. Instead, you chose pleasure over responsibility. Now you have come to beg for what you neglected to prepare for yourself. If I feed you today, what shall I give you tomorrow? The food I gathered is meant for me and my young ones."

After a moment of silence, Ant added:

"You preferred to make music while others worked. Very well, continue with your music now."

Ant turned away and returned to its family. Grasshopper departed in sorrow and, having no food and nowhere to turn, eventually died of hunger.

The moral of the tale is that diligence, foresight, and hard work are rewarded, while laziness and irresponsibility often lead to suffering and regret.

Another good example is the tale of “Tortoise and Goat”, taken from Nnyagu's *Nigerian Folklore and the Oral Tradition: A Cultural Heritage*.

The Tortoise and Goat Folktale

Like many African folktales, the tale of Tortoise and Goat employs animal characters to communicate important moral lessons about friendship, wisdom, personal responsibility, and the consequences of wrongdoing.

Once upon a time, in Iduu-na-Oba, Tortoise persuaded its friend, Goat, to accompany it on a stealing expedition. One day, a man left his compound for the market after spreading grains and other food items under the sun to dry.

Seeing an opportunity, Tortoise and Goat entered the compound through a small opening in the wall and began to eat the food. After eating for some time, Tortoise quietly returned to the opening to ensure that it could still squeeze through should the owner return unexpectedly. Satisfied that it could still escape, Tortoise continued eating but remained careful not to overfeed itself.

Goat, however, paid little attention to the danger. Excited by the abundance of food, it continued eating greedily without considering the consequences.

Before long, the owner of the house returned. Immediately, Tortoise ran towards the opening and escaped without difficulty. Goat attempted to follow but discovered that its stomach had become too large to pass through the narrow space. Despite several attempts, it could not free itself.

The man entered the compound and found Goat trapped. Realising that the animal had been feeding on his food, he seized it and tied it to a pole as punishment for stealing.

From a nearby hill, Tortoise watched the scene and laughed.

“Foolish Goat,” it mocked, “you stole another person's food and now you must pay the price.”

Goat looked up sorrowfully and pleaded with Tortoise for help. However, Tortoise merely laughed and reminded Goat that every action carries consequences. Abandoning its companion, Tortoise left Goat to face the punishment alone.

The moral of the tale is that wrongdoing often leads to unpleasant consequences. It also

warns against greed, carelessness, and the danger of associating with dishonest companions who may abandon their friends in times of difficulty.

Didacticism and Moral Instruction in the Selected Folktales

The two folktales presented above clearly demonstrate the didactic orientation of African oral narratives and the central role they play in the moral education of society. Although the narratives differ in plot structure, character configuration, and immediate thematic focus, both are fundamentally constructed to transmit essential social values, ethical principles, and behavioural norms to members of the community, particularly younger audiences. Through the strategic use of animal characters, symbolic actions, and clearly defined moral consequences, the tales transform what appears to be simple entertainment into a sophisticated medium of informal education.

In the “Ant and Grasshopper” tale, the dominant moral concern revolves around diligence, foresight, and responsible preparation for the future. The Ant is carefully constructed as a symbol of industry, discipline, and prudence. Its actions reflect a deep awareness of seasonal cycles and the necessity of planning ahead in order to ensure survival during periods of scarcity. Grasshopper, in contrast, represents laziness, irresponsibility, and an excessive attachment to immediate pleasure. The sharp contrast between these two figures is not accidental but deliberately designed to foreground moral oppositions that are easily recognizable and applicable to human society. The eventual suffering of Grasshopper, therefore, is not merely a narrative outcome but a moral consequence that reinforces the lesson that negligence and indiscipline inevitably lead to hardship.

The Tortoise and Goat tale, on the other hand, communicates a different but equally significant moral lesson. Here, the narrative condemns theft, greed, and poor judgment while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of wisdom, vigilance, and discernment in social relationships. Goat becomes a victim not only because it participates in an act of wrongdoing but also because it demonstrates a lack of critical awareness in its association with Tortoise, a character widely recognized in African oral tradition as cunning and self-serving. The tale thus operates on two moral levels: it warns against immoral actions such as stealing, and it also cautions against uncritical trust in companions whose intentions may be exploitative. In this way, the narrative extends its moral reach beyond individual conduct to include the dynamics of interpersonal relationships within the community.

Taken together, the two narratives reveal a recurring structural principle in African folktales: the consistent deployment of reward and punishment as mechanisms of moral

instruction. Characters who embody socially approved behavior, such as hard work, foresight, honesty, and responsibility, are rewarded either directly or indirectly, while those who violate communal norms are made to suffer the consequences of their actions. This pattern is not merely punitive but pedagogical, as it reinforces the idea that ethical behaviour is essential for both individual well-being and communal stability. The moral universe of folktales is therefore structured around accountability, where actions inevitably generate corresponding outcomes.

Another important feature evident in both tales is the symbolic deployment of animal characters as vehicles for representing human traits and social behaviours. In this symbolic system, Ant functions as a representation of diligence, foresight, and collective responsibility; Grasshopper embodies laziness, carelessness, and lack of planning; Goat represents greed, impulsiveness, and gullibility; while Tortoise typifies cunning, opportunism, and self-preservation. By translating complex human behaviours into easily recognizable animal figures, the folktales enhance comprehension and ensure that moral lessons are more readily retained by audiences. This symbolic economy is one of the key reasons for the enduring effectiveness of folktales as pedagogical tools.

Furthermore, both narratives demonstrate the accessibility and psychological immediacy of folktales as instruments of informal education. Unlike formal didactic instruction, which often relies on abstract principles, folktales embed moral lessons within concrete narrative situations that appeal to imagination and emotion. Listeners are not merely told what is right or wrong; they are shown the consequences of behaviour through engaging and memorable stories. This experiential mode of learning contributes significantly to the internalization of values, particularly among children who constitute the primary audience of such performances.

The enduring popularity of these narratives across generations further confirms their effectiveness as cultural and educational instruments. Long before the advent of formal schooling systems, African societies relied on folktales as a major means of transmitting ethical knowledge, social expectations, and practical wisdom. Even in contemporary contexts, where literacy and formal education are widespread, folktales continue to retain their relevance because the moral issues they address, such as hard work, greed, honesty, responsibility, and social awareness, remain universal and timeless. Consequently, folktales persist as one of the most resilient mechanisms for preserving and transmitting cultural values from one generation to another.

In this sense, the selected folktales are not merely artistic expressions but also functional components of a broader cultural pedagogy. They reflect a worldview in which

storytelling is inseparable from moral formation, and where narrative imagination serves as a vehicle for shaping responsible social behaviour.

Folktales and the Transmission of African Cultural Values

Beyond their entertainment value, folktales serve as important vehicles for the transmission of cultural values and communal wisdom. Through stories, societies educate younger generations about acceptable behaviour, social responsibilities, and the consequences of violating communal norms. The lessons embedded in folktales often reflect the ideals that a society seeks to preserve and promote.

The two folktales examined in this study illustrate this educational function. The Ant and Grasshopper tale promotes diligence, foresight, and self-reliance, values that are highly esteemed in many African societies. Similarly, the Tortoise and Goat tale emphasizes honesty, wisdom, caution in friendship, and personal responsibility. Through the actions and experiences of the characters, listeners are encouraged to cultivate virtues that contribute to individual success and communal harmony.

Folktales therefore function as repositories of indigenous knowledge. They preserve cultural values, reinforce social expectations, and provide practical lessons for navigating everyday life. Their continued relevance demonstrates the enduring importance of oral traditions in the moral and cultural education of society.

Affinities between African Folktale Traditions

Despite differences in language, geography, and cultural practices, African folktale traditions exhibit remarkable similarities in form, content, and function. Uche Nnyagu (2025), averred that in many African folktales, vice is discouraged and virtue is promoted.” This is a central aim folktale across many cultures in Africa. A cursory review of folktales from many societies in Africa proves this claim to be a fact.

Across many African societies, folktales serve as instruments of entertainment, moral instruction, and cultural preservation. They employ imaginative narratives and symbolic characters to communicate ethical values and communal wisdom to younger generations.

One notable similarity is the frequent use of animal characters. In Igbo folktales, Tortoise often appears as a cunning and crafty trickster who relies on intelligence rather than physical strength to achieve his objectives. Similarly, among the Ashanti of Ghana, Anansi the spider occupies a comparable position. Like Tortoise, Anansi may function either as a hero or a villain, depending on the demands of the narrative. Through such characters, folktales explore human virtues and vices in ways that are both entertaining and memorable.

Another important affinity lies in the didactic orientation of the tales. Whether among the Igbo, Yoruba, Ashanti, Hausa, or other African peoples, folktales are generally intended to teach moral lessons. Virtues such as hard work, honesty, wisdom, courage, obedience, and communal responsibility are encouraged, while laziness, greed, dishonesty, and selfishness are condemned. The educational function of folktales therefore transcends ethnic and linguistic boundaries.

African folktales also share similar performance traditions. Storytelling often involves active participation between the raconteur and the audience. Among the Igbo, a storyteller may announce the intention to tell a story and receive a response from listeners before proceeding. Comparable practices exist among the Yoruba, Hausa, and many other African societies. Such interactive performance techniques create a sense of communal involvement and help sustain audience interest throughout the narration.

These similarities suggest that although African societies possess distinct cultural identities, they share common approaches to oral education and moral instruction. Folktales remain important repositories of indigenous knowledge and continue to contribute to the preservation of cultural values across the continent.

Conclusion

Folktales constitute one of the most enduring and influential forms of African oral literature. For generations, they have served not merely as sources of entertainment but also as effective instruments for the transmission of knowledge, cultural values, and ethical principles. Through imaginative narratives, symbolic characterization, and memorable plots, folktales communicate lessons that shape individual conduct and reinforce communal expectations. Their continued relevance in contemporary society underscores the enduring importance of oral traditions as repositories of indigenous wisdom and cultural memory.

The examination of the Ant and Grasshopper tale and the Tortoise and Goat tale reveals the fundamentally didactic nature of folktales. Although both narratives employ animal characters and fictional situations, they address real human concerns and social realities. The Ant and Grasshopper tale promotes the virtues of diligence, foresight, self-reliance, and responsible planning while warning against laziness, carelessness, and dependence on others. Similarly, the Tortoise and Goat tale condemns theft, greed, and poor judgment while emphasizing the importance of wisdom, vigilance, and personal responsibility. Through reward and punishment, both tales establish clear moral distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, thereby guiding audiences toward socially desirable conduct.

The study also demonstrates that folktales often function as reflections of the values cherished by the societies that produce them. The emphasis on hard work, honesty, wisdom, and accountability found in the selected tales corresponds with values that are widely respected across many African communities. In this regard, folktales serve as informal educational institutions through which societies socialize younger generations and prepare them for meaningful participation in communal life. The lessons embedded in these narratives are therefore not accidental; they are deliberate cultural mechanisms designed to preserve social order and promote harmonious coexistence.

Furthermore, the comparative discussion reveals notable affinities among African folktale traditions. Whether among the Igbo, Yoruba, Ashanti, Hausa, or other African peoples, folktales share common structural and thematic features. Animal characters are frequently employed to represent human virtues and vices, storytelling performances often encourage audience participation, and narratives commonly culminate in moral lessons intended to educate listeners. The similarities observable across these traditions suggest a shared understanding of storytelling as an important medium for cultural preservation and moral instruction.

Another important finding of this study is the remarkable adaptability of folktales. Despite the growth of formal education, urbanization, globalization, and digital technologies, folktales continue to retain their relevance. Their themes remain applicable to contemporary social realities because the human behaviours they address, such as laziness, greed, honesty, wisdom, diligence, and responsibility are universal and timeless. Consequently, folktales continue to offer valuable lessons that can contribute to character formation and ethical development in modern society.

Ultimately, folktales should not be dismissed as mere fantasies or simple stories for children. Beneath their imaginative surfaces lie profound insights into human behaviour, social relationships, and cultural values. They preserve the experiences, aspirations, fears, and wisdom of the communities that create and sustain them. As important expressions of Africa's rich oral heritage, folktales deserve continued scholarly attention, documentation, and preservation. Their study not only enriches our understanding of African cultures but also highlights the enduring role of oral literature in the education and moral development of society.

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