

Adapting the Cameroonian Oral Tale in the Funnel of Process Drama, Education and Wildlife Conservation

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Abstract

Oral narratives have been at the centre of the moralizing and educational process in traditional African societies. Apart from uniting families by the fireside, the storytelling event has facilitated the transmission of oral tales from one generation to the next. As society evolves within the dictates of modernization, the storytelling event has lost its essence in society. Even in remote areas, the presence of a generator and a television screen is enough to pull families from the fireside and keep them glued to the television set. In urban areas, the cell phone has taken over family reunion and distanced parents from their children. This paper will evaluate the role of the classroom teacher in formal learning settings in filling the gaps created by the absence of the storytelling event. It will examine the role of Process Drama in transforming oral narratives to meet the current needs of the society. Our focus will be on wildlife conservation which has been a major source of conflict in traditional societies where the people have hitherto dependent on bush meat for their survival and social prowess. With the aid of adaptation and the dynamics of process drama, we will examine how the folktale is transformed into a play with the aid of the classroom teacher and the contributions of the learners. The performance context will reveal how the tale is ripped from its original state to a new version that addresses an urgent and universal concern such as poaching.

Keywords: *Adaptation, Oral narratives, Process drama, Wildlife Conservation, and Storytelling Event*

Introduction

Drama and theatre arts have undergone rapid changes over the years due to developments in the audio-visual media. The question is: do we still remain at the rudimentary stage dominated by mime, gestures, local costumes and song? Does transforming the tale into comic strips enhance the learning process or does it affect the impact of the tale. Does transforming the tale to comic strips impact negatively the story telling event? Are comic strips and cartoons livelier than the storytelling event? What therefore makes cartoons attractive than a tale recounted during the story telling event in the evening? The process of adapting the oral tale to comic strips for educational and moral reasons cannot be explicated without an understanding of what history has in stock. In this study, focus will

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be on transforming the performance text to comic strips with the active participation of the audience and the storyteller. In this wise, we will examine how the classroom teacher, playing the role of the storyteller, employs the techniques of Process Drama in his classroom to transform a tale from the forests of Cameroon titled “The Death of Mr. Leopard” into comic strips with the mission of educating the learners on the virtues of wildlife protection. We are confronted with an original tale which ends with the death of the Leopard to a new version of the tale which ends with the protection and survival of the leopard. With the aid of the classroom teacher, playing the role of adapting comic strip artist, the learners were engaged in a critical thought process which questioned why a leopard should be killed and its skin used to decorate the throne of the chief’s palace. They are also pricked to question why a hunter should kill a leopard in reward of a red feather which is a traditional title for strength and bravery.

Theoretical and Methodological Standpoints

In order to proceed with the practice of adaptation, it is important to understand the different theoretical bases which inspire the process of adaptation and the methodology employed by the teacher who is assuming the role of the storyteller in a context where the image and the pictorial contribute positively to the teaching and learning process. Ecocriticism provides different foundations on which to examine different aspects of environmental protection, ecology, forest exploitation and poaching. In this study, focus will be on wildlife protection, especially the fight against poaching. The teacher is therefore seen as an activist who is portrayed by Simon Estok (2009) who states that “*It is the activist ambitions that have differentiated us and what we seek to do from the legions of staid thematicists who muse uselessly as the world smolders to an end*”(205). The teacher’s role in the adaptation process of the tale under study provided him with the dual role of teacher and activist who is able to contribute towards the fight against the indiscriminate killing of endangered and protected wildlife species.

The choice of the oral tale in order to achieve the mission of the teacher cum activist is due to the importance of the folktale in communities where wildlife and fauna are rife. The choice, therefore, of the tale and the audience being youths points to the primordial role expected of this age group in the fight against poaching and environmental

degradation. The flexible nature of qualitative research enables the learners and the teacher to focus on retaining rich meaning while interpreting the tale. With the aid of action research and narrative research, different perspectives and ideas were derived from the original tale such as poaching and wildlife protection, in general, absent from the original tale. These issues were generated due to the ability of the learners and the teacher to embrace new dimensions that accompany the evolution of society and the desire to prevent her degeneration. The folktale was narrated to the students by the teacher in the classroom with the aid of process drama which falls within the performance-context approach which embodies ethnographic and sociological dimensions.

With the aid of ethnographic research, this researcher, playing the role of classroom teacher, was able to immerse himself amongst a group of students who belong to a community which is silent to the indiscriminate killing of wildlife species for economic and social reasons, including pride and social aggrandisement. With the aid of action research, the learners and the teacher were able to collaboratively apply new ideas and theories of wildlife protection in a bid to effect social change in the affected communities of the forests and grassfield regions of Cameroon where the killing of protected wildlife species is rife in spite of government's efforts to sanction and prosecute perpetrators.

In order to achieve our objective, a group of students from the University of Buea interacted with a group of students from Bloomsburg University who were on an academic exchange programme coordinated by the Faculty of Education of the University of Buea that served as host University. On the Cultural Studies module, a facilitator was invited to enable them take part in a series of discussions on the tale under study. The students had as task to analyse environment issues affecting not only Cameroonians and Africans in general, but the United States of America, Europe and Asia.

In the tale under adaptation, we examined the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches. The anthropocentric approach presents man and his desire to conquer, dominate, domesticate, and violate and exploit the environment and man's inhumanity to the forest, wildlife and environment. The hunter in the tale under study is an epitome of man whose selfish desires, ambitions and prospects leave him with little or no consideration of animals in the wild. In the play we find the hunter, driven by his desire to earn the red feather from the fon, digging a pit to trap and kill the leopard. His

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anthropocentric desire to dominate animals and use them for self-aggrandisement is glaring. It is thanks to the timely intervention of the forest guard, whose role is to check and control poaching and indiscriminate felling of protected tree species, that the life of Leopard is preserved. The biocentric model, which is opposed to anthropocentric tendencies and which explores the connectedness of all living and non-living things, places the game guard as an important personality in the process of conserving the forest and wildlife.

The Choice of Tale

The teacher chose “The Death of Mr. Leopard” because of the lessons drawn from the tale which are relevant to educating members of forest communities and others on the importance of wildlife conservation and the negative effects of poaching to the environment and the ecosystem. The choice of the tale under study was motivated by the fact that folktales are relevant in the growth and development of young people who live in communities where storytelling thrives. The oral tale also appeals naturally to children, who can often identify with the characters in the tales and share in the feelings and emotions of the characters. Teachers also exploit the resources provided by the tale to integrate social aspects of the curriculum and relate these issues to societal realities. Kashim Ibrahim Tala (2013) on the importance of folktales affirm that “*folktales serve the villagers as means of entertainment, emotional release, and avenues of acculturation of young people*” (43).

The choice of “The Death of Leopard”, narrated by Daniel Asongwe, was motivated by the tales’s socio-cultural and moral relevance and the image of the leopard. In most chiefdoms and fonderms of Cameroon, for example, the leopard is not only considered as one of the strongest animals of the forest, its skin is considered as a status symbol and a sign of wealth, pride and authority. It is used to decorate the thrones of traditional leaders. It is also used as seat or chair cover when the fon or chief is out of the palace visiting his kin and kith. Our attention to the tale was also due to the fact that the leopard is considered as endangered species in most forests of the world. Therefore, creating dialogue and images that has to do with its protection becomes worthwhile. Since the plot revolves around courage and reward on the part of the hunter in a traditional African, setting, the leopard’s skin will attract a valuable reward because of its importance

amongst the royalty in most traditional settings of the world. So a leopard's skin will therefore be valued by many because of the beautiful spots characteristic of its skin. Norman Myers (1976) states that the trade of the skins of spotted cats has resulted in the exploitation of wild spotted cat species at a rate that will bring many of their present populations to eventual extinction unless remedial action is taken to halt such a trade. The intention to collect and adapt the tale into comic strips is geared towards addressing issues of wildlife protection and to evoke moral and universal concerns related to the killing of endangered animal species in an era when the ozone layer is being threatened by the effects of climate change.

To children, the moral behind the story is important. It teaches against ingratitude and the importance of appreciating kindness and other kind gestures shown towards someone in distress. These moral values are not only important in the moral upbringing of children and youths but are guarantors of peace, unity and stability in any community, nation or amongst different peoples of the world. One of the hunter's motives for killing the Leopard is greed and self-aggrandizement. It is not uncommon to find the likes of the hunter in African communities who nurture the same dreams like the hunter. There are others who do not appreciate the love and kindness extended to them by others in times of need. It is important to note that the spirit of gratefulness and appreciation to man and nature are qualities which should be inculcated in young children as they grow into youths and adults. Failure to do so will deprive them of love of fellow man, love of natural environment and the wildlife.

Plot Adjustments

With regards to plot adjustments, based on subject matter, the original story underwent some modifications. With the introduction of the forest guard, the story was modified to incorporate the protection of wildlife and the forest. In an era where rare animal species are faced with extinction on a daily basis as a result of illegal and indiscriminate poaching, animals such as the chimpanzee, gorillas, lions, leopards, elephants, giraffes, rhinoceros, and birds such as the eagle, the kingfisher, the ostrich, the hawk, and kites are getting scarce in the wild. The consequences of their disappearance are enormous. Tree and crop species that used to be planted in different parts of the forest due to the migrating nature

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of these animals and birds are on the decline. Therefore the absence of trees and the resultant consequences on environmental protection cannot be under-estimated. The presence of the forest Guard in the tale enhances the plot by introducing a new element which completely changed the course of the events. The game guard's role at dissuading the hunter from killing Leopard is relevant in the ongoing fight against poaching in Cameroon and other communities.

In our proposed script sample for the comic artist, we find the game guard discouraging the hunter from killing the leopard. The acceptance of the proposal made by the game guard that Leopard be taken to the palace alive is indication of the role of traditional authority on wildlife and nature protection. It is important at this juncture to note that the protection of animal and plant species in any given locality cannot be effectively implemented without the participation of the traditional ruler and the support of the village elders and the people whose survival is partly guaranteed by the forest. It is in this wise that the adapting artist, on page 4 decides to introduce the fon in the company of the village elders who make up the traditional council palace and the villagers who make up the crowd. It is also realized that the game guard does not impose his idea on the fon and the villagers. He instead provides an alternative to the leopard skin which serves as a symbol of wealth, power and supremacy and which is also attractive to the eyes of onlookers. After the game guard's speech, the villagers are convinced of the social amenities that will be provided if they approve of the protection of the leopard for research and conservation purposes. Such conservation for joint action is the basis of peace and development of forest settlements. We therefore find the fon, his notables, villagers, and the game guard united towards the protection of endangered wildlife species and the forest. The chanting of a song by the villagers, the dancing, and blowing of horns symbolize their agreement and support of government's plans geared towards protecting the forest and improving on the lot of its citizens.

Adjusting Characters

The characters involved in the original tales, may either be changed, maintained, subtracted or added depending on the motive of the writer and the adapting artist. In the tale under adaptation, the lion is being replaced by the leopard because of the value placed

by traditional rulers and other nobilities on the latter's skin. This therefore pushes hunters and poachers to hunt for the leopard's skin thereby leaving it at risk of extinction. The Deer in the original tale is also replaced by the tortoise. Although they play similar roles in both versions, the tortoise remains the anti-heroic figure noted for his cunning and wit in the forest zones of West and Central Africa, where Cameroon is situated. Apart from this region, the tortoise remains the animal trickster whose fame in deception has travelled with the stories in which he plays similar roles.

Another character introduced in the process of adaptation is the Rat Mole usually found in holes around grassy and leafy areas. His presence in the vicinity must have been provoked by the destruction of his hiding place by the hunter during the digging process. We are therefore not surprised to see him in the vicinity, anxious to spread the news of Leopard's ordeal in the pit since he has the capacity to run in-between the forest and human settlements. It is characteristic in most societies to see the weak rejoice when the strong and powerful lose their grip on power. The rat mole therefore represents the weaker masses of any society, who live under the mercy of the strong and influential.

The introduction of the game guard is born out of the practice of process drama carried out in cultural studies lesson delivered by this researcher to students from Bloomsburg University while interacting with students from the Performing and Visual Arts Unit of the University of Buea. The discussion, arguments, debate and contribution of both groups of students on issues concerning the protection of wildlife and the environment in the face of climate change led to the birth of the forest guard an adjustment of "wildlife officers", "fish and game wardens" originally proposed by the students from Bloomsburg. According to them these officers assist state and federal conservation units through law enforcement. It is in this wise that David Landis Barnhill (2010) considers nature writing as ecological philosophy of mind which he describes thus: "*Nature writers sometimes present views of the essential nature of our consciousness and its relation to the world of nature often holding that our consciousness is not separate from the world but implicated in it*"(281).

The introduction, therefore, of the game guard is part of this consciousness aimed at limiting the damage being caused on the environment and climate by the indiscriminate and uncontrollable killing of animal species and felling of trees. It is part of moves being taken to reduce the effects of devastating climatic change being experienced today as a

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result of man's irresponsible attitude towards nature and wildlife. The game guard is therefore symbolic of all the measures and efforts at conservation. He stands as an eye to government bodies and non-governmental organizations interested in protecting wildlife and nature. In some communities, he is considered a harbinger of poverty and hunger because he prevents illegal killing of animal species and felling of protected tree species. His suggestion that they take the leopard to the palace, is part of his moves aimed not only at educating the fon but the villagers involved in poaching and forest degradation. He succeeds in convincing the fon, his notable and villagers to protect the leopard. This earns him praise and recognition alongside the hunter, whose original intention was to kill the leopard, and hand its skin to the palace in return for a reward of a red feather on his cap. Although he does not kill the leopard, he is rewarded for trapping it and although the palace is deprived of the leopard skin, the Fon is still happy for the alternative social projects proposed by the game guard aimed at ameliorating the living conditions of the villagers.

Practical Application in the Classroom

In order to introduce folk tales to the students, Mike Peterson and Jennifer Hind (2005) recommend folk tale elements, critical analysis, skill-based instruction, creative writing project, cultural studies, the individual stories in terms of writing, reading, listening and speaking. Folk tale elements, according to Peterson and Hind, are the information and lesson plans about the characteristics elements of folk tales, including specific activities and instructional strategies to teach about each of the elements. These include character development, setting, plot and themes. Critical analysis according to them involves teaching students to analyse and interpret folk tales through a critical lens, and also developing an understanding of social development, cultural implications and trends in literature. As far as skill-based instruction, is concerned, they point to the use of folk tales to teach a variety of skills such as decoding, fluency, oral presentation and grammar. The creative writing project, involves the use of folk tales to teach styles of writing such as persuasive, descriptive and narrative in a fun and educational format, such as a newspaper. Cultural studies permit learners to learn more about the various tribes, villages, nations and cultures from which the stories come. The writing, reading, listening

and speaking activities of individual stories involve lessons, activities and strategies based on individual folk tales.

With the aid of a comic strip illustrator, a natural setting emerged out of the skeletal tale characterised by dialogue and actions of the characters. Robert Kern (2009) observes that such a practice does not simply causes a disconnection of literature from the world that animates it but it estranges the readers from the world in which they live. The continuous disassociation of the reader from his world affects his relationship with these elements of nature, and dampens his zeal in living in harmony with such elements. Ecocriticism, therefore, attempts to close this ever widening gap that exists between the reader and his natural world.

Kern warns us from relegating the environment to the status of setting, thus making it a place chiefly interesting because of the human events that unfold in it, or to see its significance as primarily symbolic. Let us observe the following scenario presented by Niall Binns (2003) on Latin America:

Clearly, the struggle for “sustainable development” is doubly difficult when the most basic needs are yet to be covered, and there is widespread resentment towards First World ecological advice and pressure: you get fat destroying your environment, so what right do you have to tell us to curb our development, clean up our act, and preserve what you seem to consider this supposedly last remaining paradise in the world? (124)

Such a scenario is common not only in the Latin world but in Africa, especially south of the Sahara, where the Equatorial forest resides as the main source of survival of the rural populations. Like Binns, environmentalists and other concerned individuals in Africa also observe that money that comes from ecological abuses fills not only pockets abroad but also the pockets of the local elite without reaching the bulk of the population especially the poor who feel the brunt of injustice, pollution, barren lands and who are victims of exploitation and corruption. Such injustices are exposed by Mathew Takwi in *Gaining the Game*, a play on environmental protection. In the play he proposes legislation as the last option to salvage an already duplicable situation. Environmentalist, backed by legislation, found a leeway to penetrate the rural spaces to check the damage being inflicted on the forest and wildlife. The resurgence of writings on the protection of the environment is in response to a loud call by environmentalist to stop an imminent ecological disaster that now looms over both the urban and rural spaces. Ayang Frederick Enoh in *Green Hills* also raises the burning issue of the indiscriminate destruction of the

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forest for farming and building purposes and proposes government support in collaboration with traditional authority, the civil society and the masses in protecting the environment from degradation.

During the practical exercise, the students were encouraged to contribute to the discussion geared towards building the script. They played the role of comic writers constructing and reconstructing scenes, pages, panels and symbols. The facilitator took active part in guiding and redirecting the discussions and arguments. The students and the facilitator had a common say in the reconstruction of the tale. Their ultimate intention was to come up with a comic strip version that will be appreciated by a wider audience.

To achieve their goals, the participants went through the following stages: preparation and enrolment, reflection and establishing a pre-text.

Preparation and Enrolment

To fully engage the participants, the class was divided into two groups. The first group comprised mainly of students from Bloomsburg University while the second group comprised of students from the Performing and Visual Arts Unit of the University of Buea and Bloomsburg students. This group had as task to think and behave like Cameroonians. This researcher playing the role of facilitator advised the students to get emotionally involved in the situation and the characters, while reading the proposed adaptation of the play for comic strips and even for stage. The original tale presented ended with the hunter killing the leopard and obtaining a red feather from the hands of the Fon.

Based on an eco-critical standpoint the questions raised had to do with the *raison-d'être* of protecting endangered animal species. These questions include:

Q1: What is the value of the forest today?

Q2: Are rare animals and plants species relevant to the growth and preservation of the forest?

Q3: Is forest degradation a major cause of climate change and the rapid depletion of the ozone layer?

Q4: Who plays an important role? The hunter or game guard?

Q5: Does the attribution of titles such as the red feather to someone in recognition of killing a great animal the only means of compensation?

Q6: Does chieftaincy lose its value if the throne is void of adornments made from animal skins?

The students from Bloomsburg University reading the tale from a Western critical viewpoint proposed the following answers to the questions summarised as follows:

- 1: The forest is very precious to the growth and preservation of animal and plant species.
- 2: Animals and birds help in the planting of tree species in different parts of the forest while plants help in the multiplication of seeds.
- 3: Forest degradation is the root cause of climate change characterized by global warming and a rapid depletion of the ozone layer.
- 4: The Game Guard plays a primordial role not only in preventing poaching and the illegal felling of rare tree species, but educate the hunter and farmers on the importance of protecting rare and endangered animal species.
- 5: A red feather cannot be compared to the life of an animal or bird that enable scientists, researchers come up with useful experiments that have helped humans fight certain endemic diseases. Protecting these rare animals and plants also encourage tourism which is a great source of revenue and development in many countries.
- 6: We do not need an animal skin today to adorn a place or any building. Tiger, leopard and lion skins are being produced on an industrial scale today by designers.

The teacher was interested to know if these responses were as a result of ecological knowledge acquired by students in the University of Bloomsburg. This was not the case. The socio-cultural, economic and political environment of this group of students had made them eco-critically conscious and aware.

The following answers were provided by the group comprising Bloomburg and UB students from the perspective of an average Cameroonian and African not exposed to the vagaries of western lifestyle.

- 1: The forest serves as a bastion for food, agricultural activities and the provision of meat and proteins on the table of an average African family.
- 2: Rare animal and plant species are lucrative sources of income to poachers, hunters and timber exploiters respectively.
- 3: Forest degradation is not a major cause to climate change as compared to ozone depleting substances such as gasses from cars, refrigerators and industrial waste.
- 4: The hunter guarantees the constant provision of meat, and fish to their families and the entire village while the game guard is a harbinger of hunger, malnutrition and poverty to both the hunter and the village folks.
- 5: The red feather is a major achievement not only to the hunter but even to other influential personalities from traditional African communities.
- 6: A chief, Fon or village elder is recognized by the amount and texture of different animal skins that adorn his throne, seat or palace.

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Reflecting on Comic Action

This stage gave the participants an opportunity to reflect on the different comic aspects of the story. Assigning different roles at random, the class became a mixed group. The cultural barriers were therefore broken. The discussion settled where the hunter appeared with a spear in his hand to kill the leopard and is stopped by the game guard. At this point the facilitator instructed the students to reflect on a possible end to the story and its effects on the audience. There was therefore need for a task that should be completed geared toward a resolution.

The process of reflection gave the participants an opportunity to examine the action and to find meaning and significance. The facilitator raised the following issues of reflection and a series of arguments were raised and accompanying resolutions.

Reflection 1: Do we support the brutal killing of the leopard. Let's see if the life of the Leopard can be saved and by who.

Resolution: The leopard should not be killed and a game guard or wildlife officer be introduced to serve as a voice of conscience to the hunter.

Reflection 2: Should the story end here?

Resolution: The hunter should be given an opportunity to carry on with his dream.

Reflection 3: Do you think the efforts of the hunter will still be appreciated by the fon and the villagers without the Leopard's skin?

Resolution: If the fon is convinced, he may still proceed with the award of the red feather as recognition of the great act of trapping the Leopard.

Reflection 4: Do you think the efforts of the game guard will still be appreciated by the fon for preventing the hunter from killing the leopard?

Resolution: The game guard should be awarded a red feather for convincing the hunter from killing the leopard.

After this period of reflection, there was need to establish a pre-text based on the agreement of the group. The pretext was based on the following questions and corresponding responses:

Q1-What happened when the game guard met the hunter aiming his spear at the leopard?

Response: The hunter halted, listened to what the game guard had to say and dropped his spear.

Q2-Who are the different actors involved in this scene?

Response: The hunter, the game guard and the leopard.

Q3-Why does the hunter agree to lay down his spear?

Response: The hunter agreed to lay down his spear because he was convinced that he will be provided an alternative source of livelihood by the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife, environmentalists, researchers and non-governmental organizations both at the local and international levels engaged in research and conservation of the wildlife and the forest.

Q4: What happened to the leopard?

Response: The leopard is shot and rendered unconscious with the aid of a sedative applied on the blade of the arrow and tied hands and legs.

Q4: Where is the leopard taken to?

Response: The leopard is taken to the palace

Q5-What is the fate of the leopard?

Response: The Fon, his notables and the villagers all agree to spare the leopard's life and to allow it to move freely in section of the forest that will be carved out for him by the Fon in collaboration with conservationists.

Q6-What is the fate of the hunter and the game guard?

Response: The hunter and the game guard are rewarded each with a red feather and one of the greatest titles of the land reserved for those who contribute to the development of the village.

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned a final text was agreed upon which Kern describes as potentially environmental and therefore susceptible to ecocriticism or ecologically informed reading. Unconsciously, the participants were able to arrive at a new that tale saw the addition of new characters such as the game guard, the palace elders, the villagers and the 'Kwifon'. The action therefore moves to the palace, with a new set of characters, with the aid of dramatic dialogue the game guard succeeds in convincing the fon, his elders and the villagers on the dire need to protect endangered animal species. At the end

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of the story, the need to protect the wildlife and forest becomes primordial in every society. The birth of an ecological conscious people is seen and hopes of a healthy and improved living environment raised. The biocentric view that links the coexistence between man, animals, plants and nonliving things becomes relevant to the protection of the forest, the environment and wildlife and the ultimate survival of the earth. At the end of the adaptation process a new tale, *The Fate of Mr. Leopard* reveals the leopard in a new habitat-a zoo which attracts tourists, scientists and revenue for the growth and development of the people and their community.

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