

**Mupun Storytelling Performance in Transition:
A Study of Njingkook**

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Abstract

This paper examines Njingkook storytelling theatre of the Mupun people of Plateau state, North central Nigeria in the light of emerging socio-political and economic realities and challenges signposted by globalization and its indices. The aim of this paper is to identify functions of storytelling performance (Njingkook) in traditional Mupun community and how the stories were used as means of entertainment and education in the past. What was the moral of the story? What key elements of nature were involved in the story? Does the story have anything to do with geography and history of the people? These are some of the questions the paper will attempt to interrogate. Also, the paper looks at the mutations that characterize the present realities of Njingkook performance as well as the reasons behind the mutations. The objective is to discuss ways to revive, preserve some aspects of the performance, repackage and promote the tradition not just for the consumption of the Mupun community but to adapt and contribute to global cultures as can be seen in the playtexts of people from other cultures such as Efua Sutherland's "The Marriage of Anansewa" which major materials were gotten from storytelling traditions of the Ghanaians. This paper concludes that it is still necessary to encourage the practice and study of Njingkook performance amongst the Mupun people in the midst of global changes and mutation. This is because transition or change in itself is a social reality and man is the creator of that reality.

Introduction

Since the beginning of time, people in all parts of the globe have woven words into a simple narration, bringing to live an event or series of event to share with others. In ancient societies long before the existence of books, television and movies, storytelling was an important part of basic human communication, entertainment and education. Storytelling is as old as the existence of humanity. Humans live by stories to understand their economic, political,

socio-cultural and religious environment. Stories were performed and handed over from generations to generations by tellers and performers to understand history, philosophy and geography of the people. Stories often seek to explain nature, and they always have some important moral lessons. Though it is impossible to trace the origins of storytelling performance to a time and place, however, humans may have begun performing stories as soon as they developed the capacity of speech. Awoonor posits that "Storytelling theatre originated due to a collective action of the multitude and cannot be traced to an individual influence of great men" (73). This approach naturally plays down the authorship of storytelling performance emphasizing only its collective nature. Passing down from generations to generations, storytelling reflects the wisdom and knowledge of the early people.

Storytelling performance is not restricted to indigenous Africa, the tradition of storytelling cuts across cultures from the ancient Greek to the Baka people of the rainforest of Africa, to the Baganda people of the great lakes, Zulu of South Africa to the Swahili and Fulani people of West Africa among others. Enna argues that:

The role of the Greek chorus and indeed the choragus is a development out of their narrative art. The Greek chorus facilitates the flow of story as well as represents the conscience of the society. Similarly, African story tellers play a didactic role and the interventions of the audience are supported to illustrate, redirect and illuminate the meaning of story along the lines of aspiration, norms and values of the society (43).

Storytelling is the narration of events in words, and images, often by improvisation or embellishment. Stories or narratives have been shared in every culture as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation and moral value impartation. Akporobaro posits that "Life is a story, and stories imitate life and life imitates stories, life reflects stories and stories reflect life. When life is over it is celebrated by stories" (58).

The Mupun people of Plateau State have this aged-long tradition with its unique style used for entertainment and education in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial epochs. In traditional Mupun society for instance, it was common practice to sit together around a fire after dinner to re-enact folklore or story. This meeting point fostered a communal bond that encouraged inter and intra personal relationships amongst families. However, it appears that the tradition is gradually transiting and going into extinction as a result of many factors such as globalization, Christianization, secularization, urbanization among others. It is evident that this age-long tradition of impacting and preserving traditional culture, norms and values through *Njingkok* (storytelling theatre) nowadays is gradually disappearing into thin air with the advent of

transcultural development, exposure to foreign media of communication, influx of alternative entertainment and social media platforms. These newer platforms of communication and entertainment have received massive transformation and adherents in recent times.

The revolution in information and communication technology has disconnected, distorted and infiltrated the Mupun folklore and folk life. The cultural values that were sacrosanct and preserved in *Njingkok* are either lost or do not exist any longer. The traditional culture of infusing societal and family values into the younger generations through this theatre in Mupun society is rapidly declining and transiting owing to the impacts of alien culture and values. Unfortunately today, values like honesty, justice, discipline, mode of greetings, national pride, group cohesion, cultural continuity and respect for elders and traditions are seen as profane provided they emanate from the traditions of the people. Embu in his theses titled "The Changing form of Eggon Masquerades" notes with nostalgia that:

The Christian religion led to the alienation of the Christian converts from their traditions and this portends grave implications for the traditional set up as a whole... As a matter of fact, the belief in the powers of the ancestors as an important factor of social control is now flouted just like Hanah Okonkwo, Obi's mother in Chinua Achebe's "No Longer at Ease" that stops telling her children folktales because of total loyalty to her new religion (Christianity) (125).

This position by Embu captures exactly what is happening in other African cultures including the Mupun. Christianity has blackmailed and blacklisted most traditional theatres of the Mupun people. For instance, some converts of the new religions now see the performance of *Njingkok* as a profane and mundane practice of the primitive and uncivilized.

Urbanization has also shifted critical audiences away from the agrarian hearths to new communities enveloped by modern technologies. In these new communities, moonlight tale has lost its aesthetic significance. Any researcher who goes to these communities now to record and enjoy storytelling performance is likely to be disappointed to find out that there are neither performers nor audiences to be enchanted. Mupun youths who are expected to take over and sustain the performance traditions of this art form from older generation seem to rather embrace alien cultures thus leaving a vacuum. This vacuum is today pre-occupied with alien culture and values epitomised in language, dance, costume, religion, songs, among others.

In both rural and urban settings, the children now have other forms of folk arts to entertain and edify them. In many homes of the elites, parents and guardians wage losing battles with their children and wards over the patronage of foreign films. Our children know as much as *Mickey Mouse* and *Disneyland*

as their American and European counterparts and nothing about local archetypes such as tricksters, proverbs, oral poetry, chant and folklores generally. In the past, parents, uncles, aunts and grandparents were the first agents of socialization that children encountered. They spoke and performed stories in their native languages and thus have helped to preserve indigenous languages, ways and customs, beliefs, myths, legends, traditions, culture, in short, our folklore. Unfortunately, present generation cannot step into their shoes. Social etiquettes such as respect for elders, mode of greetings among others have been neglected leading to the production of a generation of youths that know very little about traditional ways of life. No wonder! Nwaozuzu argues that "What we are witnessing in Africa is not the evolution of traditional performances models but rather a wholesale supplanting of these indigenous forms with metropolitan performance poetics of the west" (92). This paper explores ways of reviving *Njingkong* to serve as materials for dramatic texts like in the case of J.P Clark's trilogy *The Ozidi Saga* and Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* which were sourced from oral traditions and transmuted or adapted into literary form for the wider audience.

Theoretical Framework: Intercultural Theory

Theatre theorists and critics such as Patrice Pavis and Rustom Bharucha have since the 1990s initiated discourse on a trend of theatre practice recognised as intercultural theatre which signals from the outset the opening to very different cultures. The trend has been tremendously evolving around the globe. It is a notion which stems from the 1960s, from the utopia of social mixture, of hybridization, of social progress, of sharing rather than plundering (Pavis 13). Intercultural theory developed in the environment of globalisation, from the influence of western theatre practitioners such as Eugenio Barba, Thomas Richards, Peter Brooks, Robert Wilson and Philip Zarilli. This is because of the impact of globalization on cultures and of doing and understanding theatre. Cultural syncretism and hybridization spread through globalization as new ideas, fashions, commerce, knowledge and media circulate worldwide with remarkable speed. This theory calls for the mixing and matching of cultures or subcultures. Majority of the work in the intercultural theatre is basically about thinking and doing around the themes, stories, pre-performative or performative concepts of theatre or traditional performing arts forms and practices, mixing and matching with the concepts or the ideas of foreign.

Intercultural productions display aesthetic components from different cultures in imitational, adaptive or universal modes. In the imitational mode, material from the source culture dominates the production as model or ideal. The goal of the universal mode is to appeal ecumenically to audience members from a range of cultural backgrounds. However, in the adaptive mode, which

this paper privileges, material from the source culture is adapted to fit the expectations of the target culture, or the source material dominates, and elements from the target cultures are integrated to broaden the semiotic range of the production. For instance, most storytelling theatres are originally expressed in the language of the people, and subsequently transformed or adapted into other languages possibly for the consumption of the global audience. Today, most storytelling theatres and other performatives in Eggon land are performed using the nuances of English language owing to its universality. English language has become a universal entity because of the impact of globalization.

Nowadays, contemporary Nigerian writers and scholars draw from the oral traditions of their people which usually serve as a source of inspiration to them as well as for the benefit of the global audience who may have assessed to their works. What these writers usually do is to adapt contents, forms and materials from the source culture, harness them to fit the expectation of the target audience. This position exemplifies exactly what the researchers have done in this paper. The story performed and analyzed in this work was originally performed in Mupun language during the fieldwork experience and translated into English language simply to fit into the expectation of the target readers. The researchers have profitably adapted and exploited the resources of *Njinkook* theatre of the Mupun people and interlaced them with a European medium of expression. In this paper, the researchers weave indigenous and foreign cultures together to evolve a hybrid dramatic offering for a wider audience. However, this interplay and hybridization of different cultures to serve specific purpose is exactly what scholars of intercultural theory advocate.

Storytelling Performance

Miruka sees performance to mean “the delivery or rendition of an item usually to an audience” (57). To Turner, Performance is a mode of behaviour, an approach to experience; it is a play, sport, aesthetic, popular entertainment, experimental theatre and more (4). Carlson on the other hand defines performance as “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (37). In this definition, Carlson stresses the fact that certain behaviour has an audience and an effect on the audience. His definition addresses what seems to be an essential quality of performance, which is based upon a relationship between a performer and an audience.

For instance, in storytelling performance, it is obvious that people relate, engage and involve in telling stories. They tell stories about their experiences, situations, events and life. Most times the narration or

performativity of these stories is accompanied with actions of demonstration, impersonation and imitation such as dancing, singing, clapping, drumming, costuming, masquerading fluting among others. Since this act constitutes representation of events, they can be said to be involved in a performance. Storytelling is orally performed, flexible and dependent on its social context. It is a stylized deployment of language resources to create theatrical performance effects measured by rendition, proverbs, improvisation, memorization and audience governed by the element of space.

Nzewi avers that, "Storytelling performance is a communally derived performance integrated into the programme of a community corporate being" (18). Again, Tsaku avers that:

This traditional medium (storytelling) is not merely a form of art expression but a way of expressing knowledge in a manner which is acceptable and functional. The poorest man in the land has access to his culture expressed either in the story, poems, song, proverbs, custom, ritual, rites, or a variety of other ways characteristics of folk culture (29).

It means that, as a cultural expression, storytelling performance emanates from the people's socio-cultural context which serves as a channel and vehicle for the dispensation of knowledge and development in the society. The essence of all these stories is to produce an individual who is productive, resourceful, discipline and honest. One who will one day become a proud and productive member of the community. Corroborating, Obadiogwu affirms this position that storytelling performance is:

A reservoir of culture and social values, that revolves around improving the moral health of the society. It reinforces people's beliefs, values, aspirations and worldview. Storytelling performance exists to entertain, educate, inform and criticize human behaviour with the intention to point out morally accepted values upon which the community is built; story is didactic in nature and serves as pedagogy to growing mind with the sole aim of molding the participants into acceptable members of their communities (151).

What this means is that, the propagation of these values through storytelling performance is to create a seemingly harmonious environment for the community. As an art form traditionally invented to teach moral lessons to the

growing child, the aim is to make the child conform to the value system of the society and forces him/her into a good relationship with other members of the community through socialization. In a variety of situations, storytelling performance fosters confidence through discovery, practicing appropriate ways to survive in a harsh environment. Research in this field has shown that over the years, stories were performed for both the young and the old, though emphasis was on the young because they will transport the wheel of the community. Whenever there were people there were stories, and it was those stories that connected people from different villages and communities.

In the past, stories were performed by different tellers around campfire. Story tellers traveled with traders as they moved with caravans across ancient lands, stories were performed by traveling Bards and Minstrels including African Griots who traveled from village to village. Storytelling performance uses the narrative voice, and it is this voice that carries the momentum of the tale. Performers and audience often use percussion instruments, masks, costumes, props and other artistic paraphernalia to entertain while performing. They dance, sing, clap, laugh and cry. It is all involving, a total theatre.

Popular characters such as the spider, hare, tortoise, lizard among others characterized most storytelling performance in Africa. For example, *Anansi* the Ashanti tricks star also known as the spider is the intermediary of the sky god *nyeme*. He is a typical trickster, he is crafty, villainous, but also taught mankind how to sow grain and how to use the shovel in the fields. The hare is often regarded as the "everyman" of the folk tradition, agile, resourceful, cunny and crafty. Other inanimate characters include the moon and the sun who often have human qualities and play important role in stories.

The Mupun People of Plateau State in Brief.

Mupun as a term is composed of two phrase: *MU*, meaning "we" and "*PUN*" 'chase out of hiding. It is a term used by hunters when a game is chased out of its hiding place. A tradition of the Jiblik people has it that during one of their wars with the Mwangavul people, the later discovered the hiding place of the former (laying ambush), *Mu Pun Mu*. This indicated that they had discovered their hiding place and intended to flush them out (Danfulani and Fwatshak 6). **The term MU-PUN could also denote "the thing of the father" or that which belongs to the father. The Mupun are found in the eastern edge of the Jos Plateau state in north central Nigeria.** The Mupun like many other ethnic groups on the eastern part of Jos Plateau state fall within the Chadic speaking ethnic group. Chadic speaking neighbours of the Mupun include the Ngas, Mwangavul, Chakfem Tambes and Gung.

The Mupun area became known first as *Lankan* village until the creation of Pankshin province in 1926, and later *Lankan* district in 1934 (Danfulani and Fwatshak 7). Today, the people are predominantly found in Pankshin south and some parts of Mangu Local Government Areas. Mupun as an emergent post-colonial, peripheral capitalist society in a globalizing world, still believe and keep the following values as world view, which made them distinct even in the midst of relativism in ideology. The values include but not limited to: truth and sincerity, social justice, quest to acquire western education to complement the limited farm lands which cannot contain the growing population, friendship and loyalty, commitment to a cause or duty among others. Furthermore, they have tremendous regards for cultural values. *Lankan* is their nucleus settlement and where the seat of their traditional stool is situated.

***Njingkook* (Storytelling performance) among the Mupun People of Plateau State.**

Njingkook is a moonlight activity shared among the natives based on their experiences and worldviews. It means folktale or story. It is a moonlight performance usually carried out after the day's activity is over. *Njingkook* performance is central to the life of every Mupun person. It is largely secular as a category and is eclectic and dynamic in form and content. It is part of Mupun philosophy that stories must be told to inculcate some moral lessons and values into the children so that they can become productive members of the society. The aim and objective of this performance is to produce an individual who is transparent, honest, respectful, skilful, and cooperative and one who could conform to the social order of the society. Until recently, performance of *Njingkook* formed the main entertainment in villages and small towns at nights after work.

Njingkook is traditionally performed in the evenings; there is one performer at a time, there is rotational order which is followed to accord each performer a chance to perform. Most times, it is performed in the open and members of the audience are free to arrive and leave as they please. Features like heightened language, metaphorical expression, musical form or accompaniment, structural repetitiveness, context and setting of the performance, mode of delivery, skill and personality of the performer, the audience's action, dances, costumes among others, are all embodied in *Njingkook* performance. In the early evening hours for instance, a family may gather in the central room in the house to perform traditional stories. There are also evenings when the audience assembles in one of the houses, often the house of a gifted performer or in open places like the village square, depending on the magnitude of the performance. Hence, every parent is essentially

expected to be a good storyteller, which is an important role of informal education in the Mupun society. While offering entertainment, it serves as a mode of communication as well as a means of recording and transmitting historical events.

In Mupun tradition however, there are many stories in the repertoire which are rendered for instructional and learning purposes. Stories that have animal characters are mostly performed. The more recurrent of these characters are the Hare, Frog, Tortoise, Hyena, the Lion and Elephant among others. However, the Hare is the stock hero; he is the master trickster, cunning, agile and resourceful. He is usually presented as a very clever animal and most of the stories are based on his antics. Sometimes, an elder in the village who has developed special oral craftsmanship attracts a group of adolescents on each night during moonlight. He would in turn keep the children busy by shelling groundnuts or melon in the process. Most times, the performers are able to satirise situations or events or ridicule them and this in turn acts as a sanction on erring individuals. The audience usually consists of both adults and children. Usually, adults are less active while children are active participants. This is because, the performance is usually meant for them and the objective is to make them productive members of the society. The performer may use proverbs and other philosophical expressions to propel and enhance his performance which is orally performed. Below are examples of some *Njingkook* performance of the Mupun people:

Dakur Mo Khi Dafwan (The Tortoise and the Hare)

Performer: Njingkook, Njingkook, fen yaa Dakur mo khi Dafwan (my story, my story has caught the tortoise and the hare). Long time ago, the Tortoise and Mr. Hare traveled to the sky (deng naan) for a special dance performance to the supreme deity (Naan). On arrival, they were welcomed and served with bambara nuts (ngargak). The Tortoise ate his own but decided to shift the covers on Mr Hare's side so as to assume that he ate a lot. The supreme deity decided to reward them with beautiful maidens (Shurep gwang) but the maidens were left to decide. Five of them (maidens) decided to stay with Mr Hare because they believed he who eats a lot is hard working but only three followed Mr. Tortoise. As they journeyed back to the earth (yil grum) there was a heavy rainfall and the river was full but Mr. Tortoise and Mr. Hare ran fast and crossed with their maidens.

Mr. Tortoise: please my brother, help me out I can't cross.

Mr. Hare: hmmm... only if you agree to give me one of your maidens

Mr. Tortoise: Ok, agree.

Performer: Afterwards Mr. Tortoise denied the arrangement so they continued their journey and came across a very big sea; of course Mr. Hare crossed with his maidens while the Tortoise kept wondering what next to do, he called Mr. Hare.

Tortoise: Please my dear friend and brother, I will do anything you want or ask, just help me this time.

Hare: No I will not help you.

Tortoise: Ok, hmm, I will try and cross.

Performer: Mr. Tortoise decided to cross with his maidens but all were drowned and carried away by the high current of water in the sea to different locations. Tortoise found himself under a tree (Ting Kuul). Suddenly, a child was sent to plough the seed of the tree; on reaching there, the tortoise scared the boy by groaning:

Tortoise: ehemm ehemm daji bhi yaa haa, hmmm...

Performer: On reaching home, the boy reported to his father that he saw, an *Nji* masquerade under the tree (*ting kuul*), and the father took a very big stone, threw the stone and hit Mr. Tortoise on his back. That is why till today Tortoise has a cracked back. *Tu puup mbe kop* (my story ends here).



Plate 1: Shows an organized *Njingkook* performance session

Meaning and Analysis

There is no art for just art sake within the concept and content of *Njingkook*. It is about humanity and essence. The aim of the above story is to make the children productive members of the society; to make them honest, resourceful, respectful, discipline as they grow and develop so as to make the Mupun nation the envy of others. The story performed is replete with lot of themes and moral lessons. *Njingkook* is always built around several themes that drive and preoccupy the performance from the beginning, middle to the end which explains the whole meaning of the performance. It reveals the philosophy of the community decoding the principles of human and healthy relationship within the community. The performance concludes with the drawing of themes & lessons, it is usually both the audience and the performer that draw the themes of the performance. Themes like: love, greed, deception, disobedience, revenge, hard work, truth & lies could be deduced from the performance. For instance, the theme of truth and its implications predominate the story. As the saying goes, "one who lies must lie many times to cover the first lie". Mr. Tortoise from the initial stage began with a faulty personality built on the principles of lies and deceit, pretending to be hard working so as to get favour from the maidens:

Performer: The Tortoise ate his own but decided to push the covers to Mr Hare's side so as to assume that he ate a lot.

The above dialogue is not without its implication at first because what Mr Tortoise thinks will aid him counts against him:

Performer: The supreme deity decided to reward them with beautiful maidens (*Shurep gwang*) but the maidens were left to decide. Five of them decided to stay with Mr Hare because they believed he who eats a lot is hard working but only three followed Mr. Tortoise. As they journeyed back to the earth (*yil grum*).

It is clear that the faulty foundation built on lies by Mr Tortoise was not rewarded as the maidens decided to follow the other way. That marks the first lesson of being true to one's personality. Again, the story preaches that at all times the Mupun people must be true to themselves because it is only the truth that defines character anytime even in the world beyond.

Another key theme in the story is "greed". Greed by definition is selfish and excessive desire for something more than is needed. In the light of the story, Mr Tortoise the greedy character ate a lot but pushed the covers of the nuts to Mr. Hare's side in order to portray him as the glutton and to find favour in the eyes and hearts of the beautiful maidens (*Shurep gwang*) which unfortunately turned against him. Greed destroys a society, society cannot guarantee equality when greed abound. Hence, the story seeks to warn the

Mupun community on the consequences associated with greediness. It teaches the community to be careful not to exalt greedy people before the future is mortgaged for nothing.

Another lesson learnt has to do with sanctity of marriage. Marriage is sacrosanct and honoured among the Mupun people. It is always the hope of the community that every young person in the community marries. Marriage is not an option but a mandatory act that community gate keepers can sanctioned any who tries to violate. Another lesson that is apt in the story is the need to be united as a people. The saying in Mupun *mun vul, mishik amut* (We two are wealthy but loneliness is a diseases) sums the essence of unity in the story. Mr Tortoise and Mr Hare are friends but are not working in unison.

Another lesson that is apt in the story is friendship and loyalty. The value of friendship and loyalty is chronicled in the story. It teaches friends to be brothers' keepers, to avoid trying to take undue advantage in whatever guise. The character of Mr. Tortoise x-rays a friend who lost such a value in order to portray and picture scenario where friendship has lost loyalty. Also, the value of sincerity is also cardinal in the story. From the inception of the story, Mr. Tortoise was punished to teach the living that sincerity should be upheld at all times.

Conclusion

Oral performance undoubtedly has been a vital tool of socialization, cultural preservation and continuity. Though it may not have the written preservation mode, yet, it is stored in the memories of a community, transported to generations by way of mouth, without losing its cardinal message. In this work, an in-depth study of storytelling with its aesthetics' composition, elements, theatricality and function is carried out with special interest to *Njingkook* performance of the Mupun people. Today the society is rapidly in a process of selection and de-selection; its change and identity is continually defined and re-defined along the dynamics of realities. In the process of these mutations a lot is missing and at the same time some gains, values and world views are shaped and re-shaped.

The change is a social reality which must be accepted, modified and questioned. By common sense, it therefore means that, Mupun cannot live in isolation of the global community; yet, the Mupun must begin to think not to be consumers alone but major contributors to the global cultures. Africa, Nigeria and the Mupun in particular in this twenty first century of transition are likely to be one of the final battlegrounds of the forces of globalization. This phenomenon called globalization has its winners and losers. There are gains and benefits as well as losses. However, local materials must be appreciated with a global appetite. The Mupun people must begin to think globally and act

locally. This is owing to the fact that today the forces of globalization have come to remain with us. We eat modern food, speak modern language, dress in the modern way, use modern tools, hence our thought patterns have seemingly become modern. Cultural performance like *Njingkook* and others must be loved, embraced and appreciated by the contemporary Mupun or else they stand the risk of total supplant or displacement. For the Mupun culture and community to continually remain relevant and to earn the respect of the global community, there is a need for a conscious adaptation and documentation of *Njingkook* performances through the vehicles of globalization such as written texts or printed form as well as film and video formats and be globalized or internationalized via youtube, facebook, instagram among others across the globe.

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