

ALLEGORY OF THE TORTOISE IN AFRICAN FOLKLORES: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF EXPERIENCE

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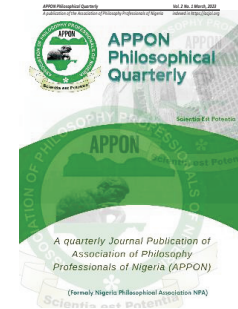
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Abstract

African literature is replete with stories about the tortoise as a major character. The tortoise as an allegory symbolizes several moral and epistemic universals such as 'truth', 'wisdom', 'knowledge', 'ego' and so on. Stories about the tortoise are always captivating and enchanting to children in their naïve years. The continual representation of the tortoise in a particular cast leaves an indelible impression in the formative minds of children especially with regards to such virtues as 'knowledge', 'wisdom', and 'truth'. Such vices as "self-centeredness" and "being cunning" is another worrisome narrative associated with the character of the tortoise. One implication in all of these is that, children begin to come to terms with certain virtues or vices that the tortoise depicts in its behavior. This goes a long way to affecting either positively or negatively, children's experiences of the self and others in the environment. This study attempted a phenomenological exposition of how stories found in folklores about animal characters, like the tortoise can implicitly or explicitly help to create a sense of virtue or vice in the formative minds of children towards the other as well as the environment. The major finding of the study is that, the phenomenology of human experience of the self and others is being shaped by cultural affinity to a society. Hence, this can be better harnessed in the right direction for the educational pedagogy of young children in their understanding, appreciation and application of core universal concepts as well as the preservation of the ecosystem

Keywords: Tortoise, Phenomenology, Experience, Virtue, Vice, Allegory, Folklore, Education.

Introduction

Stories, myths, legends, folktales, and folklores as told in African cultural setting uses animal representation to communicate fundamental truths about reality. Animals are used as representations based on their unique and distinct ontological characteristics. For example, the hare is seen and understood as:

always in motion, the tortoise (wise and crafty), lion (strong and kingly), snail (slow and lazy), snake (subtle), leopard (inconsistent in character), fox (fast and tricky), tiger (smart and fast), hawk (killer), and so on. Interestingly, when stories are told to African children using animal representations, it leaves a lasting impression

on their young formative minds affecting their phenomenal perception about life, reality and the environment.

The use of allegory in African cultural or traditional worldview is occasioned by the fact that, truth and morality can be interrogated using any medium. Another reason is because animals are seen as possessing “vital force” (life force) and can easily fit into the narrative of “being and reality”. The use of allegory is not new in scholarship. Even some Western Greek texts are replete with allegories famous of which is, Plato's allegory of the cave. Shawn Eyer, the translator of the allegory of the cave noted that 'Plato's famous allegory of the cave, written around 380 BCE is one of the most important and influential passages of *The Republic*. It vividly illustrates the concept of idealism as it was taught in the Platonic Academy, and provides a metaphor which philosophers have used for millennia to help us overcome superficiality and materialism. In this dialogue, Socrates (the main speaker) explains to Plato's brother, Glaukon that we all resemble captives who are charred deep within a cavern, who do not yet realize that there is more to reality than the shadows they see against the wall'¹

Phenomenology as popularized by Edmund Husserl is understood as 'the careful description of experience in the manner in which they are experienced by the subject, purposely to study, in Husserl's words, the whole of our “life of consciousness”. That is to say, it includes not just explicit cognitive states and acts, such as judgments, but all the myriad acts and states of consciousness such

as sensory awareness, perception, memory, imagination, feeling, emotion, mood, freewill, time-consciousness, judgment, reasoning, symbolic thought and desires'² from the first person point of view of experience. This paper attempts to understand how the allegory of the tortoise in its many negative metaphors and representation in African folklores affects the subjective experience of individual African children especially in the way they view and relate with 'the other' and the world at large.

African Folktales

Folktales are a traditional genre of literature which plays a very important role in the transmission of worthwhile knowledge to pupils. This knowledge has a lot to do with the educational, cultural, religious, and social ideologies of that culture or community. Folktales are borne out of oral tradition where creatively inspired stories are told to growing children in order to be able to transmit truth about reality to their young minds. So one of the functions of folktales is educational or pedagogical where children are taught varied lessons of truth in order to instill discipline, moral uprightness, hard work, and courage in them. Halima I. Amali notes that:

Folktales are an integral part of the African oral society. They usually relate to and elucidate the various cultural and traditional aspects of the society from which they evolve. Folktales perform salient functions of the people, educating the young of the various aspects of society. Since folktales portray the values and traditions of a society, where the

¹. Plato. *The Allegory of the Cave*. (Trans), Shawn Tiger. Plumston Books, 2016. p. 1.

². Dermont Moran.. *Edmund Husserl and Phenomenology in Philosophy of Mind: The Key Thinkers* (ed) Andrew Barley, London: Bloomsbury, 2013. pp: 37-38.

young and adults alike learn through the events conveyed, the function of this traditional oral genre of folktales can therefore not be overemphasized.³

Folktales in Africa are unique in that, they maximize the oral tradition it is known for in the educational process of its young ones. In the pre/post-colonial Africa, there is the tradition of getting children to sit under a large Baobab tree where they are taught a lot of ideals through folklores, which invariably shapes their young minds and the perception of their world from a subjective or egoistic position. Ethelia Sibanda avers that:

The aim of education is to produce a good citizen with acceptable characteristics in society like good neighborliness involving responsibility or helpfulness. Formal education is achieved through institutions while informal education of what is valued and preserved in a cultural society is transmitted through generations in folklore form.⁴

Folklores are very significantly important to the African communal life. It is where reality is condensed in stories in varied manners of metaphors and representations in a bid to educating the young by transmitting worthwhile educational instructions to them.

This goes to suggest that what is being transmitted in African folklores can make or mar the pure minds of African children. This is how a people develop culture and holds same in high esteem. Emmanuel Archibong and Ebalu Ogbenika notes that “culture informs a people's belief system and general perspective about life showing clearly what their preferences are”⁵

Phenomenology of Experience

The idea of transcendental phenomenology as popularized by Husserl can be found in his works: *Logical Investigations* (1900/1) and *Ideas I* (1913). Husserl's method is called the phenomenological reduction or alternatively 'epistemological reduction'. Husserl defines phenomenology as the 'science of pure phenomena'. He characterizes phenomenology more specifically as the:

Theory of the essence of pure phenomenon of knowing. Such a phenomenology would advance the “critique of knowledge’, in which the problem of knowledge is clearly formulated and the possibility of knowledge rigorously secured.⁶

Edmund Husserl sees phenomenology as the science of pure phenomena or essences. As a method, he describes phenomenology as a process where presuppositions are put aside or 'bracketed' so that we can attain knowledge that is absolutely necessary or apodictically

³. Halima Amali, I. “The Function of Folktales as a Process of Educating Children in the 21st Century: A Case Study of Idoma Folktales”. *International Conference on 21st Century Education at Dubai Knowledge Village*, Vol 2, No. 1, 2014. p: 89.

⁴. Ethelia Sibanda,. The Role of Folklore in African Society. *International Journal of Sociological Science*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2014. p 1.

⁵. Emmanuel Iniobong Archibong and Ebalu Gregory Ogbenika. “Science, Technology and African Cultural Renaissance”. *Amamihe: Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 18. No.6., 2020. p: 53.

⁶. Edmund Husserl. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Trans). Doron Cairns, London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1960. p.4.

certain. Napoleon M. Mabaquiao Jr. asserts that:

This process of bracketing presuppositions is carried out within the framework of relationship between consciousness and objects towards which it is directed. The essential feature of consciousness that directs or relates it to its objects is what is called 'intentionality'. Husserl describes this feature as the phenomenon whereby consciousness is always a consciousness of something'.⁷

Phenomena at the subjective level of reality are what phenomenology as a philosophy and method is concerned about. This enables the individual subject to interrogate reality from the first person point of view. Here, consciousness plays a vital role in the engagement of reality from an epistemic point of view. Since consciousness is at the core of phenomenology, it becomes descriptive in the nature of our lived experiences as sentient beings. This is why I agree with Sadruddin Qutoshi that 'phenomenology is an approach to educate our own vision, to define our position, to broaden how we see the world around, and to study the level of experience at a deeper level. The Husserlian perspective of phenomenology is central to the concept of description of the invariant aspects of phenomena as they appear to consciousness'.⁸

Consciousness therefore, is central to phenomenological discourse which is the nucleus of our meeting with the external world. We engage and interact with phenomena through consciousness even though we may or may not be able to make any meaningful deduction from same. Rene Descartes did a lot in charting a new course of phenomenology with his 'cogito'. Thus, "Rene Descartes gave transcendental phenomenology new impulses through his *Meditations*. Accordingly, one might almost call transcendental phenomenology a neo-Cartesianism even though it is obliged and precisely by its radical development of Cartesian motifs to reject nearly all the well-known doctrinal concepts of the Cartesian philosophy."⁹

Phenomenology as a philosophy and method is essential to the determination of truth especially when we bracket other idiosyncrasies and presuppositions. It is expected that since phenomenology gives more credence to the 'conscious subject' or 'individual experience', objectivity of truth may be eroded. This is why phenomenology has been criticized from several quarters as '...taking experience as a sole foundation for knowledge, forming experience problematically as a historical, assuming that experience is immediately accessible for analysis and learning to take into account the interpretative dimension of experiential constitution'.¹⁰

⁷ Napoleon M. Mabaquiao, Jr.. "Husserl's Theory of Intentionality". *Philosophia: An International Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 34(1), 2005. p: 24.

⁸ Sadruddin Bahadur Qutoshi. "Phenomenology: A Philosophy and Method" *Journal of Education and Educational Development*. Vol. 5, No. 1. 2018, p: 215.

⁹ Husserl, Edmund. *The Idea of Phenomenology* (Trans) Lee Hardy, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997. p. 1.

¹⁰ Jessica Stanier. "An Introduction to Engaged Phenomenology". *The Journal of British Society for Phenomenology*. Vol. 53, No. 3. 2022. p:226.

Just as every other school of thought, phenomenology is not without its shortcomings. It has been criticized using the basest of words with a lot of critics seeing the idea as too mentally absurd. However, phenomenology has a simple goal which bothers on how conscious beings make contact with the phenomena of the world. In other words, it seeks to transcend mere illusion into what can be apprehended as real via the instrumentality of consciousness of experience. By this, conceptual presuppositions will be bracketed or suspended ('epoche'). In all, the one important takeaway of phenomenology is that it is irked out of human conscious experience in a lived existential turf.

Allegory of the Tortoise

The tortoise is a renowned figure or protagonists in African folklores because of its character representation. The tortoise represents so many things some of which are: the lack of integrity, trust, truth-telling, and forthrightness. Yet, the tortoise is revered as a being with ideas, wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Below is one of the popular folktales about how the tortoise got the cracks on his shell and it is a very old community folktale spanning through several generations in Africa:

Once upon a time in the animal kingdom, there was a famine. The animals in the kingdom all starved and looked very lean except the birds. When the tortoise noticed this, he decided to find out from the birds where they got their food. The birds refused, citing the tortoise's cunning as a reason why they wouldn't disclose it. The tortoise continued to plead and promised not to play any tricks. They told him of a feast held high up in the

heavens for anyone who could make it up there. The tortoise thought about it and realized that it would be impossible for him to get to the heavens because he had no wings. However, an idea struck him; he said "if only each of you would lend me a feather to attach to my body which would serve as a wing". The birds agreed and gave him a feather to attach to his body to form wings. Before they left, the birds asked him to take a ceremonial name, one which he would be addressed by when he got to the heavens. After thinking about it, the tortoise said he would be called "every one of you" and so they left for the feast. When they arrived, they were welcomed by the host of heaven and led to a table where a banquet was prepared. "This food is for every one of you" said the host before leaving. At that point the tortoise stepped forward and reminded them that his name was "Every one of you" and as such, the food belonged to him alone. He then went ahead to eat the entire food. When he was done, his smooth shell shone brightly. The birds were very angry with him and they all agreed to take back their feathers leaving him with no wings. The tortoise however pleaded with one of the birds to take a message home for him. "Tell my wife to bring out the softest materials. The beds and pillows in my house and put them under the heavens so that I can land safely when I jump down. The bird agreed to take the

message but when he got to the house of the tortoise he changed the message. “Your husband has instructed that you bring out the hard and strong materials in the house out in the open” he said. When he had finished, the tortoise leapt down from the heavens, and crashed into the hard materials. His smooth shell shattered into several pieces. It took the best healer in the land to put his shell together. Thus, until this day, the tortoise has a broken shell as a reminder of what his greed cost him.¹¹

It was important that the above folktale be reeled out despite its size and the long read because it is fundamental to giving us more insight about the personality of the tortoise as captured in the story as well as providing the necessary materials needed for an evaluation of the phenomenology of children's experience. There are other folktales too about the tortoise that portrays it in a very negative light as cunning, selfish, full of tricks and inconsiderate. But this particular one shall suffice for our evaluation shortly.

The Character of the Tortoise and the Phenomenology of Children's Experience

John Locke was an English empiricist whose epistemological theory has it that the mind of man at birth is a 'tabula rasa' i.e. a clean slate upon which experience writes. That suggests that innate knowledge is not possible as far as the mind of humans is concerned. It is the

experience of phenomena that builds up the mind and fills it up with knowledge. Immanuel Kant also argued for the categories of the mind that ordered the reasonability of phenomena in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Maria Kondratuik avers that:

Self-consciousness is a complex mental process that manifests itself, first of all in a person's perception of numerous images of himself in various situations of activity and communication. These images initially arise on the basis of a given person's awareness of his assessment by other people, then on the basis of correlation of assessments of others and his own. In other words, they are always the result of a social interaction of the individual and his environment. During infancy, development of self-consciousness is attributed to the continuously increasing activities, formation of spatial relations, development of motor and senses.¹²

Since children are a product of the society and their immediate environment, what goes around in their environment affects their cognitive experience of reality positively or negatively; and this is true of what they hold as beliefs too. Emmanuel I. Archibong and Usoro I. Usoro holds the view that “belief usually comes across as just a mere subjective opinion. In contrast to knowledge, belief refers to the subjective mental acceptance that

¹¹ Anike Foundation. *How the Tortoise Got Cracks on its Shell: A Nigerian Folktale*. www.anikefoundation.org/african-folktales, 2021.

¹² Maria Kondratuik. “Phenomenon of Self-Consciousness and its Development during Infancy and Childhood”. *E35 Web of Conferences* 164, 12017, 2020. p: 3.

a claim is true".¹³ The case that children enjoy playing, and engaging in any activity that captures their minds speaks volume about how they relate with the world. The principle of pleasure finds great expression in the phenomenal world of children which also play a vital role to their overall mental or cognitive development. L. S. Vygotsky states that 'to refuse to approach the problem of play from the standpoint of the fulfillment of the child's needs, his incentives to act and his affective aspirations would result in a terrible intellectualization of play. The trouble with a number of theories of play lies in the intellectualization of the problem'.¹⁴

In African traditional and contemporary setting, folktales are still very fascinating to children in their infancy. Whether told under a tree in the cool of the evening or through audio/visual modes, it still captivates the pure minds of African children and helps in their imagination and moral compass. Since phenomenology is concerned basically about the first person experience of the world, the experience of children especially with regards to the kind of stories they are told as representing the world has a lot of lasting impact on their young minds and shape their moral and aesthetic perceptions about right, wrong, good, and bad.

Granted that children in their infancy cannot fully make meaning of their subjective experience, but they are still conscious beings nonetheless. They can still recollect certain experiences that have had huge impact on their world as they become more conscious.

From the story of the tortoise reeled out above, certain moral themes become easily spotted such as: greed, deceit, not keeping a promise, not being considerate of others, lies and so on. All of these are phenomenological experiences that come to mind from the story. Beyond the Tortoise as an allegoric representation, the child begins to observe certain other humans who exhibit these traits and then complete the full circle of the fact that there are humans who behave like the Tortoise. Since there are other several folklores where the tortoise is captured as a proud character, a trickster, a thief and a wicked fellow, Patrick Ebewo asserts that:

From the earliest times to the present, every society, every culture, and every people have told stories and these have passed from one generation to another. Irrespective of the recent phenomenon of family television and home videos, telling stories orally have been one of the chief means of entertainment in the history of mankind. The most popular belief among Africans is that these stories goes beyond their entertainment value and are also didactic instruments in society.¹⁵

Society therefore, has a responsibility towards the moral and knowledge development of the child. Instructions latent in folktales should be construed in such a manner that it helps in the phenomenal development of the child in a positive light and direction. The child in his

¹³ Emmanuel Iniobong Archibong and Usoro I. Usoro. "A Critical Appraisal of Reality and Belief System in Africa". *NAJOP: Nasara Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2020. p: 223.

¹⁴ L.S. Vygotsky, "Play and Its Role in the Mental Development of the Child". *International Research in Early Childhood Education*. Vol. 7, No. 2, 2016. p: 6.

¹⁵ Patrick Ebewo, "Heroes in African Folktales: Agents of Contemporary Corruption". *Luwat: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, Vol. 1., 2004. p: 50.

infancy may not be able to engage in a phenomenological reduction, through abstraction and consciousness. But that cannot be jettisoned completely as the child is in the process of 'becoming' where he/she attains a much more conscious or awareness state. The characteristic of "essence and intentionality" in phenomenology has a bearing on the conscious or mental formation of the child as he comes in contact with reality through folklores even if it is at an elementary stage of cognitive assimilation as directed by the protagonist which in this case, represents various human characters and behaviours as its objects. Even the issue of climate change can be mitigated if a consciousness is foisted on children through folktales tailored towards that direction. Children can grow up appreciating their environments and contributing to its sustainability if their subjective consciousness is directed towards that path.

Evaluation and Conclusion

When Edmund Husserl attempted to make phenomenology a basic method of philosophy, it is to be thought that he had in mind, to achieve a method and a process of interrogating and making sense of reality. It was a way of seeing in pure light, the transcendence in experience. The positive sciences cannot apprehend the science of being hence, the need for a transcendental phenomenological method to assist in this venture. This is why phenomenology covers such areas as the nature of intentionality, consciousness, perception, awareness, and the consciousness of the other. Beyond that, there is also the theme of human lived experience, subjectivity and interpretation of conscious states. This position is similar to how Africans

make sense of the phenomena of time in consciousness. Inameti Udo and Emmanuel Archibong (2019:47) aver that "...for the Africans, time is deduced from phenomena in nature and is integrated into their metaphysical worldview. Interestingly for the Africans, time is eternal and doesn't only terminate in the natural universe".¹⁶ The point made here is that phenomenological reality has an ontological basis that subsists in the mind for a very long time.

However, phenomenology as agreed by the major phenomenologist such as Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty is on the manifold features of conscious experience from the first person point of view. As beings in the world, we encounter ourselves as well as the world of entities in its temporality, spatiality and the core structure. As the being becomes more conscious, he can then bracket, intuit, analyze and describe reality. The existential lived experience of the conscious subject is fundamental to the understanding of reality. This is where this paper becomes relevant in its application to the lived-experience of children who are exposed to folktales that presents a protagonist in a certain light that can shape their perceptual reality negatively.

In concluding this paper, it must be stressed that the principle as adumbrated here though localized, can be applied on a more universal scale cutting across various cultures. The gap in the world has been bridged by information and communication technology (ICT). Hence, the problem of consciousness and perceptions are universal and affects all of humanity. As audio or visual contents are prepared for children's pleasure, care must be taken to

¹⁶ Udo, Inameti L. and Archibong, Emmanuel I.. "The Oddity of Time and Time in African Worldview" *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*. Vol. 2, No. 8, 2019. p: 47.

ensure that it contains useful information and moral narratives that will help better the conscious imagination of children in order to make them more humane and eco-friendly. Clearly then, children can be assisted to appreciate consciousness and have an experience that gives value to their existence. This is the essence of the idea of phenomenology and one that holds great promises both for theory and practice leading to a positive influence for children's cognitive development and love for humanity and the world.

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