

## “Signifying Monkey” –The Guardian of African Tradition

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### Abstract

African oral tradition is much more than just a story. It is the history of one nation. It is a code of laws under which people live and die. However, the oral tradition is also a rich area of wordplays and high philosophy, which represent the foundation of today's African and African-American literature. Proverbs, ritual songs, epics, all of this is the foundation of an advanced society. In reality, the keepers of the culture are griots - storytellers. In fiction, these are trickster gods in the shape of sacred animals. Only one of them is a cunning monkey, thanks to which a whole genre of double-thinking has emerged. The monkey is a shadow in the proverbs and inspiration for storytellers. The double-thinker and the representative of reason and justice through stunning wordplays. Two-voiced messages which are a feature of the highly advanced philosophical nation that possessed cultural richness even in the era of oral tradition. The tradition that still exists.

**Keywords:** African and African American literature, oral tradition, griots, African proverbs, signifying monkey

### Introduction

The roots of African and African-American literature are found in the oral tradition of Africa and its many nations. History, customs, religious instructions, moral principles - everything is embedded into stories that have been passed on to the generations. Learning through stories and preserving national identity through myths is an indispensable part of the African man, both in the past and today. Oral tradition, even today in the era of modernization and technological advancement, is cultivated in the rural areas of Africa. Literacy is not a problem here. The younger generations are quite educated. The fact is that the language, alive, symbolic and melodic, is much more attractive in oral than in written form. For, as Mihail Bakhtin (1981: 294) says: “The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own.”

The attraction of playing with words is the most important characteristic of the African oral tradition. The narratives reflect life, even through the theme and speech of the narrator. Often the stories include music, songs and imitations of animal sounds. “The tradition of imitating animal speech is, in fact, so strong that collections from the earliest to the most recent have virtuoso pieces in which the story is almost totally told in sound effects.” (Roger, 1985: 25) In the dialogues spoken by animals, speech is adapted to animal voices. With this skill, the narrator gets more dramatic effects that capture the attention of listeners. He transmits a piece of reality in the story, helping the listener visualize the world he is talking about.

Depending on the subject, African narratives can be divided into several types: fairy tales, legends, myths, fables, parables, stories of origin, historical narratives and epics. In African society, historical narratives are of particular importance because they represent a treasury of cultural identity. Within the African oral tradition, all historical facts are remembered and transmitted through narratives. They usually talk about migrations of people, the establishment of villages, cities or kingdoms, and about some of the heroic acts of their ancestors. People can also tell about their own ups and downs that become part of the heritage of the family or local community.

According to the context in which they are performed, the narratives can also be classified into: ritual, sacred, and folk tales. (Robert, 2004: 629) If these stories are spoken in honor of certain historical figures and gods or during certain special events, as a part of the ritual, they are of great importance for religion, divination or magical treatment. Depending on the

main character in the story, it can contain sacred or secular elements. The same story can be interpreted in two different ways. If the main character is an animal, all its acts, attitudes and achievements are viewed with humor and is not taken very seriously. However, if the main character is a man, the message from the story is taken seriously and linked to social problems.

### Griots and epics

Storytelling in Africa, over time, reached its more complex form as epic, which combined stories, poetry and singing. Epics are often sung or recited with musical accompaniment. The content of the epics is of historical significance because it shows the crucial periods of a nation. Certainly the most famous African epic is "Sundiata" of Mandingo people from Mali, which describes the arrival of the king Sundiata to power. What particularly characterizes the epic, among others, and what truly gives life to an epic storytelling are griots. The term griot is derived from the French word *griot* and means, in a broader sense, the narrator. Griot can be represented by various types of narrators, including "spokespersons, ambassadors, celebration leaders, tutors, praise-lovers, historians, scribes, musicians, composers, barkers." (Bowles and A. Hale, 1996: 77) The characteristic feature of the griots, even in narrative epics that are old for several centuries, is that they always try to adapt and modify the epic to the modern audience. For example, if a griot knows that the listener's ancestor was a famous military leader, this one will seek to praise him as much as possible. However, if he knows that the ancestor had a bad past and that there were some incidents, the griot will try to alleviate these events, if not eliminating them. Stephanie Newell sees it in the West African literature (2006: 61) "A canny griot adjust each performance to accommodate audience members and, in the process, earns a greater sum of money for his or her narrative, and also gains a reputation for sensitivity and eloquence." A good griot also knows how to put current events and moral debate into the context of historical narrative so that the audience does not notice distortion of historical facts.

Even within the epic, the voice of the greater and much older author of that story and the witness of a certain time can be heard. "Sundiata" with its first written edition by D.T. Niane from 1960 became the most famous version of this epic in Africa. Niane wrote the epic listening to the narration of the griot Djeli Mamadou Koujate from the village of Djeliba Koro in Guinea. In his honor, and in order to show readers the importance of the griots in African culture, Niane writes in the introduction to his book (2006: XXIII): "Formerly "griots" were the counsellors of kings, they conserved the constitutions of kingdoms by memory work alone; each princely family had its griot appointed to preserve traditions; it was from among the griots that kings used to choose the tutors for young princes. In the very hierarchical society of Africa before colonization, where everyone found his place, the griot appears as one of the most important of this society, because it is he who, for want of archives, records the customs, traditions and governmental principles of kings."

Even Djeli Mamoudou Koujate himself, as a griot, at the beginning of the epic addresses the audience with the words: "I know the list of all the sovereigns who succeeded to the throne of Mali. I know how the black people divided into tribes, for my father bequeathed to me all his learning; I know why such is called Kamara, another Keita, and yet another Sibibé or Traoré; every name has a meaning, a secret import. I teach kings the history of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old, but the future springs from the past. My word is pure and free of all untruth; it is the word of my father; it is the word of my father's father. I will give you my father's words just as I received them; royal griots do not know what lying is. When a quarrel breaks out between tribes it is we who settle the difference, for we are the depositaries of oaths which the ancestors swore." (2006: 1)

Djeli Mamoudou Koujate, after the introduction, begins with an epic where, at the very beginning, a listener encounters a new griot, Ball Fasséké, as a Sundiata's teacher, and later a royal adviser. As a witness to the events of Sundiata's reign, Fasséké becomes a historian and transfers his knowledge to the new generations of the griots. As a sign of gratitude for the unselfish help and support Sundiata appoints Fasséké as a great master of ceremonies and decides that his tribe Kerta will continue to hire only the griots from the tribe of Koujate, to which belongs the Mamoudou Koujate. Moreover, the Sundiata gives Koujate the right to make jokes at the expense of all tribes, including the royal tribe Keita. By this decision, historically accurate or just invented by Djeli Mamoudou, the actual griot gets a monopoly over the history of the Keite tribe, which can also be included in many other, more comical, narrative genres than epic.

Familiar with political events and relations among people, a good griot must always be skilled with words. He must be the leader in the word play, while others listen enthusiastically. The master of two-voiceness in all African stories is a trickster god, sometimes even in the shape of the monkey. But, here, in reality, it is a griot. Therefore, it is no wonder that some sort of divine qualities are often attributed to the griot. He could do many things and was considered the right hand of the king. As Catherine A. Salmons (The Boston Phoenix, 2004) said: "In ancient times, the griot was not only the court musician,

bard, storyteller and oral historian, but also an official conciliator and spokesman for the king. Denoted a "master of eloquence," the griot could intervene at will in public debate; his words were expected to fall like honey into the midst of bitter argument, soothing conflicts between political factions - out of struggle and disquiet, the griot brought peace. He was considered the right hand, the mind, the mouthpiece of the king: A word from the griot was a word of implicit authority. As a musician, his skill with the kora was meant to extend the impact of his words. The griot played not just to entertain but to teach, and to uplift."

### **African proverbs**

Proverbs play an important role in the education of people in Africa. Today there are over a thousand published collections of proverbs, and it is estimated that there are a total of about one million in total. (Nkulu – N'Sengha, 2009: 541) Proverbs are the most valuable philosophical and religious ideas of Africa. They are "memorable sentences of traditional wisdom reflecting a keen observation of human existence and conduct and a long experience of life throughout the ages." (Nkulu – N'Sengha, 2009) They represent the moral and practical wisdom of a nation. Through them, the people dealt with issues of education, religion, social order, family, morality, life and death. "Proverbs are a particular form of a skillful literary genre. They tend to be a compact statement of wisdom expressed in a poetic and enigmatic fashion. [...] Some take the form of a short maxim, dictum, adage, aphorism, or apophthegm. Others take the form of a riddle or even an allegory, legend, or song." (Nkulu – N'Sengha, 2009) Proverbs are extremely poetic. They often rhyme, are lyrical, use alteration, assonance, and other poetic techniques.

Many proverbs take the form of sharp comments at the expense of someone's behavior, but their meaning is skilfully hidden. Thanks to symbolism and metaphor, the message is not revealed directly to the listener. Consequently, verbal tensions are avoided, and problems are solved without calling out of certain individuals. In this case, the proverbs serve as an excellent tool in resolving the conflict. Like other literary forms, proverbs lose their meaning over time. Some are universal and immortal, others are lost in the past because of their impracticality, many appear in a completely new context.

Some of the proverbs dealing with questions of wisdom and the proverbs themselves are: "Fulani will lie but he will not make a lying proverb." Of Fulani people. With this statement, Fulani make it clear that they believe in the truthfulness of proverbs as the bearer of wisdom and moral lessons. Akan proverb "Wisdom is not in the head of one person." explains that knowledge is accessible to everyone. Another Akan proverb carries the same message: "Wisdom is like a baobab tree; a single person's hand cannot embrace it." The proverb of the Luba people, which speaks of human responsibility, is: "God gave you beauty and good character but you must help him, by taking care of yourself and constantly cultivating your virtues." The Baluba people have a saying about the lazy people: "Let the one who sleeps eat his sleep." Human dignity and self-esteem is the message Akan proverb: "All human beings are children of God, no one is a child of the earth." Chewa people have a proverb with a similar meaning - "Human beings are like sand out of which one cannot make a mountain." Baluba people emphasize the value of attractiveness with a proverb: "No one can put his arm into another person's heart, not even when sharing the same bed." The need to respect others, especially the disabled, is emphasized by the proverb: "DO not laugh at a crippled person, God is still in the creation process."

As stated before, the meaning of proverbs is sometimes skilfully hidden, which is a characteristic of the African oral tradition. Two-voiceness and wordplay is the basis for secular and ritual creation of practical wisdom. The material world expresses itself through the voice of the griots, and the spiritual dimension has its own hero in the shape of the cunning monkey. They all have the same mission, to help humanity, and the easiest way to accomplish this is through the proverbs – the textual link between the spiritual and the secular.

### **The cunning monkey and the richness of African languages**

The richness of the African language is easiest and best seen in the stories full of symbols, secret messages, colorful characters and intertextuality. The lyrics, apart from the songs, are the bearers of the African oral tradition and best represent the complexity of African thought and words. Perhaps, now, logically the question arises as to the relationship between the monkey and the languages of Africa. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In his book *The Signifying Monkey* says that over the centuries the monkey took upon himself the role of trickster god, and therefore the role of a guardian of the oral tradition. In the mythology of many African nations, the trickster god is the guardian of knowledge and language. He is a gift-bearer and master of wisdom. He is a cunning player in the game of wits and patron of the African oral tradition.

At the time of colonialism and enslavement of the African people, which caused taking them into the New World, it is thought that the god of deceit went with his people overseas in order to help them. He, based on the new continent, in addition to

the role of the cheater, takes on himself the responsibility of preserving the African tradition, and the role of a warrior who fights against slavery. With the task of uniting members of all African peoples subjugated by whites, the trickster god, known in every nation by another name and presented in another form, takes now a universal form in the image of a monkey. Among the nations of the Yoruba and Fon, the cunning monkey existed even earlier in folk tales as "Why Monkey Did Not Become Man" and "Monkey's Ingratitude: Why One Does Not Deceive the Diviner". While the boundary between mythology and folk tales was largely delineated by the characters of a trickster god and monkey, in the New World, both characters were united in a monkey.

But the true value of the monkey's character as a guardian of African tradition lies in his skill of creating confusion between the figurative and the literal. Gates calls the equivalent of trickster god in African-American culture the Signifying Monkey. The attribute of signifying was derived from Gates's perception of the meaning of the monkey, not only in the narratives, but in the African-American language in general. He says: "Signification", in standard English, denotes the meaning that a term conveys, or is intended to convey. It is a fundamental term in the standard English semantic order. Since Saussure, at least, the three terms signification, signifier, signified have been fundamental to our thinking about general linguistics and, of late, about criticism specifically. These neologisms in the academic – critical community are homonyms of terms in the black vernacular tradition perhaps two centuries old. By supplanting the received term's associated concept, the black vernacular tradition created a homonymic pun of the profoundest sort, thereby making its sense of difference from the rest of the English community of speakers." (1988: 46-47)

Gates's *Signifying monkey* is a relatively new expression in the world of semantics and literary criticism, but its meaning and role has existed since ancient times. The cunning monkey of the enslaved African nation is the guardian of even older African linguistic heritage of the black continent. In this ancient world, the master of semantics was a trickster god. Gates primarily deals with the connection between the Signifying monkey and the trickster god of the Yoruba people - Esu. Esu, as the wise and cunning, contains contradictions and double meaning, literally and hidden meaning. As an example of this duality, and the need for harmony between the contradictions, the Yoruba have the myth of "Two friends". In this myth, two friends swore to eternal friendship, but during the oath they forgot to pray to Esu. Outraged, the trickster god decides to retaliate. One day while friends were working in their fields, Esu passed the road that separated them. He was wearing a black and white cap on his head, but one friend only saw the black side and the other only white. During lunch, friends began to talk about a stranger who walked over with a hat on his head. One claimed that he was wearing a black hat and the other a white one. Not being able to agree on the color of the hat, and not wanting to rebound because they were convinced that each one was right, the friends got into a fight. Finally, Esu stopped the fight, coming with other villagers. Having heard what the problem was Esu said:

"Both of you are right," said Esu.

"How can that be?"

"I am the man who paid the visit over which you now quarrel, and here is the cap that caused the dissension." Esu put his hand in his pocket and brought out the two – colored cap saying, "As you can see, one side is white and the other is black. You each saw one side and, therefore, are right about you saw. Are you not the two friends who made vows of friendship? When you vowed to be friends always, to be faithful and true to each other, did you reckon with Esu?" (Ogundipe, 1978: 133-135)

Esu's two-color hat and the argument of friends who should live in harmony represents at the same time duality and unity, ambiguous and whole. The cap is not only an object, but also a reflection of Esu's personality as a trickster. Gates says: "Esu's two sides "disclose a hidden wholeness"; rather than closing off unity, through the opposition, they signify the passage from one to the other as sections of a subsumed whole." (1988, 30)

Esu's two-faced character, linguistic double meaning or named by Gates „double-voice“ is known by Bakhtin „hidden polemic“. In a hidden polemic there are two voices where: "The other speech act remains outside the bounds of the author's speech, but is implied or alluded to in that speech. The other speech act is not reproduced with a new intention, but shapes the author's speech while remaining outside its boundaries. Such is the nature of discourse in hidden polemic." (Bakhtin, 1971: 187)

The narrator's skill to play with words in this way, but also the listener's skill to understand meaning and messages from a rich context, shows that the African oral tradition had a long and successful development process. Even before literacy, African society was already at an enviable cultural level. Respecting the word, transforming it and interpreting it through

symbols and concepts with the transferred meaning is not only the privilege of educated people, but these skills are represented on a daily basis in all social strata. Whether it's a song, a joke, a story, a saying, or an epic, the knowledge that is transmitted through them is available to everyone. They become the main weapon in the fight against oblivion. One proverb of the Ashanti people best describes the oral tradition of Africa with the words: "Ancient things remain in the ear." (Berry and Blassingame, 1979: 241)

What is it so special that is transmitted for generations? Henry Louis Gates explains the meaning and goal of the story: "The stories that we tell ourselves and our children function to order our world, serving to create both a foundation upon which each of us constructs our sense of reality and filter through which we process each event that confront us every day. The values that we cherish and wish to preserve, the behavior that we wish to ensure, the fears and dreams that we can barely confess in ordinary language, the aspirations and goals that we most dearly prize – all of these things are encoded in the stories that each culture invents and preserves for the next generation, stories that, in effect, we live by and through." (1989: 17)

### Conclusion

What cunning monkey poses to African oral tradition, griots are for history. Reality and fiction were often intertwined, and the mystery, vigor and melody of language were most often found in practical proverbs. It was the place of the merging of the spiritual and the secular. The monkey ruled the stories inspired by religion and ritual practices. The griot mastered the knowledge of the language and the long-lost mysteries by keeping the memories of everyday life. Sometimes, in order to preserve the African tradition, the monkey and the griot would become one. In these situations, the two-voiceness would appear. Some scholars call it "signifying". We can call it the beauty of the African oral tradition.

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