

Transcending Cultural Boundary: Renegotiating the Significance of the Spider Folktale

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Abstract

The enchanted discourse of intercultural communication and globalization cannot be sufficiently enacted without the recognition of the revered place of folktales as cultural products. This paper, while developing its argument on the preponderance of the spider folktale across world cultures, argues that folklore has provided and continues to provide the framework for the breakthrough in inter-cultural communication and global networking. Such terms as the "web spider" and the "world wide web" which are associated with Information technology are hints on the myth of the spider as a global inter-connector. Throughout history, there have been many cultural depictions of the spider in folklore, popular culture, mythology and symbolism. From European, Asian, American, Australian down to African folklores, the spider has been depicted in varied forms ranging from: the cursed to the revered; from the tormentor to the protector, and from the greedy to the inspirer. Although, it has been used to symbolize these tolerable and the despicable ideas, the representation of the spider in many national folklores shows that it is the weaver and the ancestor of intercultural communication. Thus adopting a combination of Comparative Folklore and National Folklore theoretical approaches in interrogating the multifarious characterization of the spider in global cultural production and system of knowing, this paper privileges folklore as a purveyor of globalization.

Keywords: Folklore, mythology, intercultural communication, globalization, spider

Introduction

Much scholarship on Folklore research pay more attention to the distinctive features of various national folklores. Very few of these researches have, while examining these folklore materials, looked at the unique role of the spider folktales in illuminating intercultural unity and spinning the bridge of intercultural communication among most cultures of the world. Ngugi wa Thiongo, while meditating on the universal relevance of literary art notes:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by the social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and other forces cannot be ignored especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Our culture over the last hundred years has developed against the same stunting, dwarfing background (16).

Literature, to which folklore belongs "presents the realized and hidden values of society, and as a magic mirror, it holds up to man and society, the neglected and several unrealized aspects of the dreams of his age which it hopes to help and guide society in realizing" (Asika 91). For that purpose, literature gives insights, ideas and information, pointing at the right track and direction through which man and society can find the measure of peace they so desire. Folklore then is a medium through which these ideas are transmitted. It comprises "proverbs, idioms, folk tales, riddles, jokes, myths, customs, legends, beliefs, magic, folk songs, charms, spells, incantations, among other things found among a homogenous group of people" (Asika 90). Rems Umeasiegbu conceptualizes folklore even as a vehicle of social protest:

One can get a cursory idea of what goes on in a community by listening to the jokes current in the land. People afraid to criticize their government or bosses openly may be perfectly willing to make their feelings known through folklore, especially through jokes and songs. A newspaper article, for example, has a known author, but not so with folklore. It is only in rare cases that we are able to identify an individual with a specific folklore or joke. (76).

That folklore has no known author makes it a universal cultural product serving all people in all cultures. One of such cultural products which engender intercultural communication is the spider tale.

In oral traditions throughout the world, the spider, with its web, features in folklores and mythology. Its presence in fables, cosmology, and artistic depictions is incontrovertible. Although the spider gained an evil reputation from the 1842 Biedermeier novella by Jeremias Gotthelf, *The Black Spider*— in which it symbolizes evil and represents the moral consequences of making a pact with the devil— the spider is believed to have inspired creations from an ancient geoglyph to a modern steam-punk spectacle. Numerous cultures associate the spider's web spinning creativity with the origin of spinning, textile weaving, basketry, knot-work and net-making. Web-spinning equally links the spider with creation myths because it can secrete its own artistic world.

Linking the innovative power of the spider to the great breakthroughs in intercultural communication in a study entitled *The Spider's Strategy*, Amit Mukherjee notes that the spider “demonstrates the incredible power of collaboration in action” (2). For Michael Watkins, the spider shows “what it really takes to leverage the power of networks” (Mukherjee 2). Comparing the spider’s network ingenuity to the urgent innovative power needed for today’s world of cultural production, it seems pertinent that folklore possesses the ideation that can lead to the creation of a culturally interconnected world. To thrive in a world where nations share networks of cultural materials is a step in recognizing man’s common brotherhood. Thus the folkloric life of the spider excites a compelling need to promote collaboration across cultures by establishing practical mechanisms to discourage racial “win-win” mentality as a basis for action.

Researches in Folklore have been done using several theories. In “Current Folklore Theories”, Richard Dorson examines the history and existence of folklore over many years, specifically the twentieth century and identifies four major theories of folklore research. These include the comparative, national, anthropological and psycho-analytical theories. While Comparative Folklore theory, which is based upon the Finnish historical-geographical method, explores the stories of many lands and compares them to one another, National Folklore theoretical approach concentrates on the distinctive qualities of folklore within one country, not many countries. Based in the principles of diffusionism, National Folklore method traces back all of the versions of a story to its foundation, possibly covering much of the world, as a story migrates to other cultures. While relying heavily on repetitive formulas, it “advances the usage of the variant, and systemizes the gathering of data from many sources” (Dorson 77). However, unlike National Folklore theory, the comparative method does not consider style, political theory, or culture differences. Thus National folklore theory attempts to isolate a national culture from others and is used by governments as a form of propaganda. In this research, I apply a combination of these two theories in interrogating the inter-cultural functionality of the spider folktales in Europe, America, Asia and Africa.

The Spider Folktale and Intercultural Communication

The Spider tale shows its presence in many folklores and mythologies of various cultures for centuries. To be sure, the most notable ancient legend about the spider’s origin is the Greek story of the weaving competition between Athena the goddess, and Arachne the princess. This story may have originated in Lydian mythology; but the myth, briefly mentioned by Virgil in 29 BC, (*Georgics* 246) is known from the later Greek mythos after Ovid wrote the epic poem *Metamorphosis* between the years AD 2 and 8 (129-145). The epic poem, written two millennia ago, includes the metamorphosis of Arachne. This was retold in Dante Alighieri's (*Canto XII*) depiction as the half-spider Arachne in the 2nd book of his *Divine Comedy, Purgatorio* (6). The Greek Arachne (αράχνη) means "spider", and is the origin of Arachnida, the spiders' Class in taxonomy. In *Divine Purgatorio*, Arachne is depicted as a half-spider half-human. This myth tells of Arachne, the daughter of a famous Tryian purple wool dyer in Hypaepa of Lydian. Due to her father's cloth dyeing skill, Arachne became highly proficient in the art of weaving. She soon was to mislead herself to think that she was a greater weaver than the goddess Athena herself, and challenged the goddess to a weaving contest to prove her superior skill. Athena was so infuriated by the mortal's pride and taunts that she visited Arachne, disguised as an old woman, and warned her against incurring the wrath of the gods. Arachne dismissed the warning and claimed that if ever she met Athena she would challenge her to a contest. Athena threw off her cloak and accepted the challenge. Athena chose for her tapestry her own contest with Neptune while Arachne chose the abduction of Europa. As their labours finished, each turned to see the other's work- while Arachne's tapestry was wonderful, one glance at Athena's work sufficed to show that Arachne was beaten. In despair, Arachne tried to hang herself in her own tapestry. However, Athena was unwilling for her rival to escape so easily and changed her suspended body into a misshapen and repulsive form and condemned her to continue weaving throughout the ages.

Greek myth admonished humans to know that they are mortal and that there is disproportionate power relations between man and the gods. For this reason, he must revere the gods and do nothing to show that he seeks to compare his tiny powers with those of the gods. If he disobeys this law, he may be plunged into a tortuous experience. Thus to the Greeks, “the gods were beautiful in a way that appealed to more than the eye, in their inexhaustible power, their self reliance, their perfect adjustment of mind and body” (Bowra, 1975:59; Eze 77). This shows that man is not equal to the gods, as “the gods can do on an enormous scale what man can do only, faintly and fitfully, and much that he cannot do at all; they are assured of unflinching success and satisfaction” (Bowra, 1975: 58; Eze 77). But the Greeks “were high-spirited people with great physical and intellectual disposition” (76). However, as Edith Hamilton contends, “a high spirited people full of physical vigour do not obey easily” (25). In spite of their boisterous life demonstrated through wars, games, banquets, dances, drama, music, and many more, they “were keenly aware, terribly aware of life’s uncertainty and imminence of death ... the swift passing of all that is beautiful and joyous” (24). The idea of the folktale about the spider, Arachne and Athena is to teach the dangers of human hubris and transgression. The tale of the spider, a cursed figure, remains a luminal signpost of this cultural ideation.

In Scottish folklore, the spider is celebrated as an inspirational symbol, according to an early 14th century legend. The legend tells of Robert the Bruce's encounter with a spider during the time of a series of military failures against the English. While taking refuge in a cave on Rathlin Island (214), he witnesses a spider continuously failing to climb its silken thread to its web. However, due to perseverance the spider eventually succeeds, demonstrating that, "if at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again" (201). Taking this as being symbolic of hope and perseverance, Bruce came out of hiding and eventually won Scotland's independence (855). This idea is not only relevant to Scottish culture but to all cultures of the world. However, other cultures may use other patient and persevering animals to communicate this same idea.

In America, folklore was not considered important until the post-war greatness. As Dorson notes, "American anthropologists "show little interest in oral traditions, considering them to be too untrustworthy" (65). Franz Boas was one of the few who saw value in oral traditions, as they were considered the tales of non-literate societies. However, Boas recorded the tales passively, making no questions or comments. His student, Ruth Benedict, equally examined these oral tales and found that a culture's identity lies within its folklore. According to her, to understand a culture, the examiner must "possess an intimate knowledge of a given culture and a full record of its narrative traditions" (102). For this breakthrough, cultural anthropologists do use oral traditions more often now. Thus the Spider tale is a very important part of the oral tales of many Native American tribes. In Southwestern tribes, for instance, "spiders are associated with the culturally important art of weaving, and wise spider goddesses give their assistance to the people as culture heroes" (*Native Languages of the Americas website* © 1998-2015). On the other hand, many of these tribes feature the spider as a rough trickster god, ranging from an entertaining rogue to a violent and slightly deranged criminal. But like the Scottish, the Osage tribe respected the spider as a special symbol of patience and endurance. To the Blackfoot, the spider represented intelligence and skillfulness. The Ojibwe tribe associated spider webs with their dream catchers, a type of traditional hand-woven Ojibwe craft meant to filter out bad dreams. And to many Native Americans, it is still considered bad luck to kill a spider.

In Native American mythology, the spider is also seen in the legend about the birth of the group known as Ursula Major. The group was seen as seven men transformed into stars, climbing to paradise by unrolling a spider's web (1). It is said that Spider Grandmother thought the world into existence through the conscious weaving of her webs. Spider Grandmother also plays an important role in the creation mythology of the Navajo, and there are stories relating to Spider Woman in the heritage of many Southwestern native cultures as a powerful helper and teacher (335-6).

Asian folklore, specifically Soviet Russian, was manipulated so that they reveal the obvious tenets of Marxist and philosophical theories. In the Vedic philosophy of India, the spider is depicted as hiding the ultimate reality with the veils of illusion. The Vedic god Indra is referred to as Sakra in Buddhism, or with the title Devānām Indra. Indra's net is used as a metaphor for the Buddhist concept of interpenetration, which holds that all phenomena are intimately connected. Indra's net has a multifaceted jewel at each vertex, and each jewel is reflected in all of the other jewels. According to Timothy Brook in *Vermeer's Hat*:

When Indra fashioned the world, he made it as a web, and at every knot in the web is tied a pearl. Everything that exists, or has ever existed, every idea that can be thought about, every datum that is true—every dharma, in the language of Indian philosophy—is a pearl in Indra's net. Not only is every pearl tied to every other pearl by virtue of the web on which they hang, but on the surface of every pearl is reflected every other jewel on the net. Everything that exists in Indra's web implies all else that exists (22).

In Japan, national folklore is used to reconnect to the past. The spider figure is the *Jorogumo* ("prostitute spider") which is depicted as being able to transform into a seductive woman. In some instances, she is venerated as a goddess dwelling in the Joren Falls who, through her innovativeness saves people from drowning. Her name also refers to a golden orb-spider species *Nephila clavata* (*Jorō-gumo*, or Jorō spider). In the 16th-century Chinese folk novel, Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West*, the Buddhist monk Xuanzang's odyssey includes being trapped in a spider's cave and bound by beautiful women and many children, who are transformations of spiders (50).

The spider is depicted in indigenous Australian art, in rock and bark painting and for clan totems. In its web, the Spider is associated with a sacred rock in central Arnhem Land on the Burnungku clan estate of the Rembarrnga/Kyne people. Their totem design is connected with a major regional ceremony, providing a connection with neighboring clans and having spider totems in their rituals. In this tale, *Nareau*, the Lord Spider, created the universe, according to the traditional Cosmology of Oceania's Kiribati islanders. Similarly, Old Spider plays an important part in the creation myth of the traditional Nauru islanders of Micronesia (Reid 116). In the Philippines, there is a Visayan folk tale version of *The Spider and the Fly* which explains why the spider hates the fly (Knappert 2).

The spider is equally held in high esteem in Islamic oral tradition. In this case, it features in a folktale which holds that during the Hijra, the journey from Mecca to Medina, Muhammad and his companion Abu Bakr were being pursued by Quraysh soldiers, they decided to take refuge in the Cave of Thawr. The tale has it that

Allah commanded a spider to weave a web across the opening of the cave. After seeing the spider's web, the Quraysh pass the cave by, since Muhammad's entry to the cave would have broken the web. Since then, it has been held in many Muslim traditions that a spider is, if not holy, then it is at least to be respected. A similar story occurs in the Jewish tradition, where it is David who is being chased by King Saul. David hides in a cave, and Saul and his men do not bother to search the cave because while David was hiding inside, a spider had spun a web over the mouth of the cave (Brewis 23).

The Spider in African Folklore and the Rest

In African folklore and mythology, particularly in Ancient Egypt, the spider was associated with the goddess Neith in her aspect as spinner and weaver of destiny. To this extent, a people's destiny depended on benevolence or malevolence of the spider. This connection continued through the Babylonian Ishtar and the Greek Athena (Cooper 214) who was later equated as the Roman goddess Minerva. In Ghana folklore, the spider is personified as a creation deity Anansi, and as a trickster character. There are many variations of the name including Kwaku Ananse in Ghana West Africa and anglicized as Aunt Nancy (or Sister Nancy) in the West Indies and some other parts of the Americas (More 6:87-145) *Anansi toree* are "spider tales"; stories that have been brought over from Africa and told to children of Maroon people. These tales are allegorical stories that teach a moral lesson (level 4). Gail Harley's *A story, a story* recounts how Anansi the spider got stories from the sky-god and spill them all over the world. The story is from the Ashanti people of Ghana. West Africa is the home of Anansi, a folk hero, who is both spider and man to the Ashanti people. He is a trickster, a provider of wisdom and a keeper of stories. His role is both light hearted and profound, often providing the link between people and the supreme being. One of the stories is about Anansi's involvement in the creation of the world. Anansi was ordered by the sky god to spin the fabric from which people would be made. Anansi then acted as the messenger between people and gods. Through Anansi's skill as a messenger the sky god gave people day and night, rain and wind. Yet, in another story, Anansi put all wisdom in a pot to keep it safe but the pot was so big he couldn't carry it. When his son wisely suggested that he put the pot on his back, Anansi realised that all wisdom wasn't in the pot. In a fit of temper he tipped the wisdom out of the pot. Now wisdom is available to all people.

In Nigerian folklore, the spider is taken as a trickster figure, lazy and greedy and usually gets stuck in the pool of his greed. In *Spider and the Honey Tree*, Philip Martin recorded the calamity that descends on him as he attempts to exploit an innocent girl. The spider tale in African folklore can communicate many ideas for people to identify with as they are forming judgments about the world. But that is a minute aspect of its significance. It definitely has the potential for generational impact, to indicate that down the road every culture is just as nuanced and exciting as any other in the world, thereby encouraging people to learn more and engage fairly with one another. The tale is a universal cultural product that links one culture to the rest of the world.

Conclusion

That folklore as a cultural product has contributed, and has continued to contribute to intercultural communication has been established for centuries. As a material of this product, the spider folktale exists in many cultures in different manifestation, ranging from the depiction of the spider as the cursed or the revered, the death dealing or the liberator. This has also been established. What has been overlooked in folklore research is that despite this complementary duality in the characterization of the spider, its innovativeness, ingenuity and creativity as evidenced in its web is a knowledge production known and shared by most tribes of the world. As an oral culture that transcends even continental barriers and enacts its presence in every part of the world, the spider folktale fosters intercultural communication. Thus this paper, while suggesting that as a medium of intercultural communication, the spider folktale admonishes against human pride, greed, exploitation, discrimination and transgression of norms, enjoins all cultures to emulate the spider by encouraging help to the needy and protection to the endangered. This way, we are sure to reap from the spider's web as a bridge woven to interconnect the world.

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