A Gloss on Perspectives for the Study of African Literature versus Greek and Oriental Traditions

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As in African literature in general, most African children's literature exhibits what Richard van Leeuwen calls “a broad network of texts” and “an amalgam of types of stories.”¹ This is of course expected given the usual interaction between written and oral traditions in African literature, the former pointing to European cultures accompanying imperial projects. Modern African literature is essentially hybrid to the extent that it incorporates both European and African literary traditions. It is therefore born from a confluence of cultures.

Children's literature draws in many instances from traditional folklore. In any case, and until fairly recently, the first stories that children in Africa came in contact with were orally transmitted fables and fairy tales. Indeed, even to date, we still have oral and written forms of children's literature existing side by side. It is the written forms, though, that exhibit the kind of intertextual borrowing I have referred to due to their affinity with European literary traditions. In fact, it was the desire of the writers of children's stories in Africa to offer alternatives to the European narratives that had dominated classrooms in colonial Africa that led them to experiment with new forms of writing that took cognizance of the holistic environment of the African child reader.²

In a sense, we can distinguish three kinds of borrowing/adaptations connected to the early construction of children's literature in Africa. First, there is the reproduction of oral tales, where writers merely record and publish versions of popular folklore for children's consumption. In this category may also be placed the translation into local languages of well-known universal myths, fairy tales, and fables. Next, there is the more creative attempt to borrow from

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African folkloric materials and myths from other cultures in order to create narratives that address new African realities. Third, there is the usual category of imaginative fiction.

Let me now use a few examples to further illustrate the second category, which I find especially relevant to this project because it consciously blends African myths with mythic traditions of other cultures. I will begin with Chinua Achebe (1930–2013), a writer originated from Nigeria who is widely recognised as “the patriarch of the modern African novel” and whose borrowing from the traditional resource base has made his writings, both for adult and child readers, some of the most fascinating texts from Africa. Most of us know Achebe more for his adult fiction than his children's works. Among the books he has written for children are such masterpieces as Chike and the River (1966), How the Leopard Got His Claws (1972), The Flute (1977), and The Drum (1977).

The Drum is adapted from traditional African folklore. The writer reworks this on two levels, providing on the lower level basic entertainment for the child reader and on the higher level a discourse on power focusing on the collapse of a fledgling oligarchy. The main character in this fable is Tortoise, who is well known in African folktales for wit, trickery, and treachery. Other stock characters that play these roles in animal stories include Hare, Rabbit, and Spider, but also include deities in those narratives that exploit mythology deeply. Adaptations of these characters vary depending on the intentions of the authors: that is, whether they want to use the fables for overt ideological purposes or to merely pass on some useful moral lessons. In most cases the stories that leave lasting impressions are those that leave the ideological messages implicit while giving priority to the structures of the plot.

In any case, children's books with implicit rather than explicit ideological messages are in fact the most powerful because implicit “ideological positions are invested with legitimacy through the implications that things are simply so.” This is, in a sense, where Achebe's adaptations of African folklore derive their particular power. Ideology is encoded implicitly. In the case of the story under discussion, The Drum, the essence of the plot lies in the tragic possibilities of the elements of trickery, wit, and treachery that constitute the character traits of Tortoise.

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5 In the subsequent paragraphs on Achebe's Drum I repeat my analysis published in my earlier paper: “Ideological Inscription in Children's Fiction: Strategies of Encodement in Ngugi and...