



Similarities Between African Folktales and French Folktales

Curriculum Unit 93.02.01

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The development of mankind has been more or less rapid depending on the richness of the land, the geographical position and the historical events that developed there.

One common thread which unites mankind throughout all the continents without any boundaries of land or race is fantasy. Each continent has, however, marked differences and characteristics. Such differences can also be observed in the different arts such as drawing, music and dancing.

The individuality and the characteristics of the African continent are represented by its rich folklore, exposing a lifestyle that is completely different from the other continents.

In the pictorial art the colors used in drawings as well as in textiles are vibrant and reflect a love for and a sense of belonging to, the earth and the sun.

In the musical field, folk music and folk dancing tell stories whose sources are taken from a simple event of the day to an act of heroism and often include the participation of the community in their performance.

Since the title of my unit is "Similarities between African Folktales and French Folktales" I will explore those characteristics that made African tales so very original and different from any other continent. I hope to make the reader aware of the great tradition and variety of Folktales and Storytelling in Africa, and of the similarities to tales in other countries, especially France.

The different steps I will follow in order to achieve my objectives are:

1. Select several folktales, focusing in particular on African countries where French is still spoken today.
2. Compare these tales first to African tales and then find the common thread and/ or similarities with the French tales.
3. Discuss the particular events that might have created that tale and explore the possibility of transferring them to modern times.

The Storyteller

Fantasy is an invisible thread that joins together mankind, without any boundaries of languages, borders, religions, or social status. But the universality of fantasy can be such only if it is brought to life with such a power that the unbelievable can become believable and vice versa. Storytelling is therefore considered a very special art.

One of the characteristics of Storytelling is mobility. This is even more apparent when we notice that many variations of the same tale exist in cultures sometimes so far from each other that one can wonder how certain similarities may exist and how they took place.

This unit is intended especially for Junior or High school students who are studying French, however it may also be used (with the variations that the teacher will decide to make) for lower grades.

Who is the Storyteller, and what was his place and purpose in an archaic society?

According to the definition, the Storyteller is “a person who tells or writes stories”. While the definition is simple the task is quite complex.

As we know Storytelling was originally only an oral art. It traveled by word of mouth sometimes by free people and sometimes by slaves. This is why it is so difficult to trace the origin and age of certain tales.

Even today the Storyteller has a vital role in our society because it is by a different projection of reality and his fantasy that the story becomes believable and enticing. The success of the Storyteller is therefore proven when the people who are listening do not ask anymore the reason why or question the event, but accept the telling with no reservation and become part of it.

The Storyteller not only uses his imagination through fantastic adventures which are able to capture the audience, but he also uses them to develop a moral and promote a certain behavior suggested by his customs. He also aims to keep the cultural heritage of a certain tribe, including therefore their own moral, religious and social values.

Officially the Storyteller is a man, sometimes a grandmother or great-grandmother, in any case he must be old because the Storyteller must also hold the wisdom accumulated over the experience of long years so to pass to whoever is willing to listen and to hear. For simplicity, I shall use the pronoun “he” even though some Storytellers are women.

The Storyteller is extremely important in the African continent. He is invited everywhere and he is always welcomed, in fact he can be compared to a famous writer whose literary circles fight to have him as a guest to display him and to request the pleasure of having one of his poems read by himself.

There are different types of Storytellers:

Traditional Storyteller:

He does not introduce props. He waits for everyone to sit in a circle, and when everyone is ready to listen he begins with his story.

Actor Storyteller:

He tells the story including in his program miming and dancing. A special group in this category is called *Mbandekett*. The purpose of these actors—clowns is to entertain, and they do it with a whole range of skills: narration, tam-tam playing, acrobatism, clowning around, etc. This group is particularly liked by youngsters who like the fast pace in a story. The Mbandekett do not generally care about giving a moral message to their performance.

But becoming a Storyteller is by no means an easy trade for many reasons. The person wishing to become a Storyteller has a long and hard way to go to achieve his goal.

He begins as an apprentice. He joins a “Master” who will teach him the skills of the trade, in exchange he must make himself available for different services. Occasionally the master may put the pupil on stage.

Once the apprentice judges that he has learned enough from his master, he may decide to leave him and join another master to observe and therefore learn a variety of skills.

Not everybody has the gift of Storytelling. He must hold precise qualities that he will improve with time and practice: intelligence, memory, imagination, gift of the word, the ability to present serious and/or grave situations in a laughable way, and be able to attract the attention of the audience firmly. In addition he must be knowledgeable of the background of the different tribes, the genealogy of the most influential families in the community as well as their historical past in relation to the community itself. He should also learn to improvise dance and play some musical instruments. Finally the preparation, as well as the ending for a successful session of Storytelling is extremely important, therefore once everyone is seated in a circle and ready to listen and to participate, the Storyteller will begin in this traditional way:

(figure available in print form)

“I am going to tell a story.”

“Right,” the audience answers.

“It is a lie”

“Right,” the audience agrees.

“But not everything in it is false.”

“Right,” the audience recognizes.

When the story is over he will end with the following formula:

“I put the tale back where I found it.”

The art of Storytelling includes different genres of stories. Among them we can include mythical, fantastic and animal stories. many are the similarities in these groups between the African and the French tales. The first example is taken from fantastic stories and it can be read in the book entitled “Retold African Myths” by Eleanor E. Tate.

In this particular book we find a tale that bears a striking similarity to the “Beauty and the Beast” (La Belle et La Bete).

This is one of the most widely known tales of this kind, but many dealing with the same kind of enchantment exist in other cultures.

In “The Snake and The Princess”, whose name is Ntombinde, she is just an ordinary princess with all the same qualities as Beauty: she is beautiful, caring, unselfish but she is also very curious and courageous. There are, however, some differences between the African story and the French one:

1. Natiombinde is an only child *Beauty* (Belle) has two sisters
2. She has a father and a mother *Beauty* has only a father
3. She is the one traveling *Her father* travels and gets in trouble
4. She asks for lodging *Beauty’s father* enters, without knowing, an enchanted castle
5. Natiombinde is told the story of the spell and she is asked if she wants to stay in the enchanted room and break the spell. *Beauty’s father* must bring back Beauty or he will die
6. The Prince has two jealous brothers who repent after they realize what evil they have done *Beast* does not have any brothers or sisters
7. The Prince is a snake with the face of a man *Beast* has the body of a man but the face of a beast

According to this tale the Prince has been changed into a snake, and the princess is the only one who can return him to his original human form, because of her courage and audacity to confront him with stubbornness and tenderness at the same time. This tale comes from the Congo and what makes it even more interesting is that this part of Central Africa was isolated from the rest of the world for thousands of years. The first contacts with European culture took place in the 19th century.

Another story belonging to the same category of stories of everyday life is taken from the book “Les Naissances Extraordinaires” (The Extraordinary Births). This book was developed by the Minister of Culture of Dakar, Senegal, and it includes the story of *Banji Koto* (Tale Wolow), the original text being issued in French.

The tale will be compared to Little Thumb (Petit Poucet), but in order to fully understand it and before comparing it to the French one, we must go back to the title of the book which deals with special children (with extraordinary powers) and their relationship with their mothers and the other members of their family.

1. All children decide by themselves when they want to be out of their mothers’ womb. Their mothers do not want to have any part in bringing them into the world so they are not going to

help them in the delivery itself.

2. The children, after being born, still ask their mothers to give them a name but again their mothers refuse, the explanation being that if they had been able to be born by themselves they could also be able to give themselves a name.

3. The newborn child becomes immediately the protector of his family (brothers) even if his protection is not, at first, welcomed.

Banji Koto

Very briefly Banji Koto is born out of his own will. He gives himself a name and since he has two brothers who are going to the village to court two girls, he decides that he is going to accompany them. Of course Banji knows also that the two girls are going to kill his brothers, hence his duty to go with them and protect them.

The brothers feel that he is too young and small to go with them, therefore they give him a good beating to convince him to stay behind.

Through his magic powers the little brother still tries to convince them to renounce the idea of going to the village, to no avail. Finally the two brothers arrive at the village and they are well received by the two girls whose mother is an Ogre and intends to kill the two boys and eat them the day after.

Disguising himself, the little brother shows up at the ogre's house and asks to spend the night there.

While he is pretending to sleep he sees the ogre sharpening the knife with the clear purpose of killing his two brothers. He transforms himself into a red ant and penetrates his brothers' room, wakes them up and tells them to wake up the daughters and convince them to exchange beds with them.

The ogre goes into the room and instead of killing the two boys she kills her own two daughters.

By now it should be very evident that the story collected in the book "Les naissances Extraordinaires" is nothing but a variation of "Petit Poucet" (Little Thumb) included by the author Perrault in the collection of fables entitled "Histoires ou contes du temps passe" (Stories or tales of by-gone time)

In brief, Little Thumb is abandoned in the forest with his seven brothers by their poverty-stricken father. While looking for their way back they reach a house and knock at the door. Little Thumb tells the woman that they are poor children and asks if they could lodge there for the night. The woman tells them that the house belongs to an Ogre but the children still insist in their request. The woman, who is the Ogre's wife, hide them under a bed hoping that her husband will not find them. Unfortunately, as soon as the Ogre enters his house and sits at the dinner table he sniffs the fresh flesh of the boys and discovers right away their hiding place. His intention is to immediately kill the boys but his wife convinces him to postpone the execution to the morning.

The seven brothers are put to bed in the same room where the Ogre's seven daughters sleep. Petit Poucet notices that each one of the little sisters wears a crown. During the night, when everyone is asleep he switches the crowns from the girls' heads to his brothers'.

In the middle of the night, also the Ogre gets up, he intends to kill the boys. Because of the obscurity of the

room he feels for the crowns therefore he kills his own daughters instead.

Here are some of the similarities and differences between the two stories:

1. Little Poucet has six brothers *Banji Koto* has two brothers
2. His parents are very poor *Banji's mother* does not care for him
3. They are abandoned because there is no food *His brothers* leave the village spontaneously looking for wives
4. Little Poucet although small is respected by his brothers, they trust him *His two brothers* do not respect nor trust him
5. The Ogre has a wife, she is not happy about her husband's habit of killing little children, but she still thinks that he is a good husband *The Ogre in Banji Koto* is a single parent
6. The Ogre in *Petit Poucet* has seven little girls *The Ogre in Banji Koto* has two girls
7. Little Poucet switches the little girls' crowns with his brothers, cap *Banji Koto* has his brothers switch beds with the girls
8. During the night the Ogre kills his daughters believing that they are the boys In *Banji Koto* during the night the Ogre kills the girls believing that they are the two brothers
9. Little Poucet protects his brothers *Banji Koto* protects his brothers, he has a very high sense of responsibility
10. Little Poucet handicap of being small becomes very valuable, it is not considered a handicap *Banji Koto handicap* of being small allows him to disguise himself and to find out the real intentions of the Ogre.

It is important to notice that in this kind of stories the relationship with the mother is not generally a positive one. The good mothers very often die, leaving the children at the mercy of a mean stepmother.

While the male child has in the African ' society a very important role because he will be one of the pillars of his society when he will enter adulthood, the woman will always be considered a property whose importance in society will be hardly recognized. It is made very clear to the child that it is his duty to listen and to learn in order to become wise and carry on the work of his ancestors so to take his rightful place in the society when the time comes. It is also made very clear to the girls that they will always be under someone's custody, protection or authority first by the father, then by the husband. The father can decide what to do with her daughter and he can give her into marriage to whomever he deems right. The girl's opinion does not really matter, she must follow instructions, fulfill tasks. There are exceptions as seen for instance in the tale of

Ntombinde who can follow her own instincts, and is her own person, completely supported by her parents.

The woman is also considered accountable for many ills of society in both African and French societies. The latter holds especially true in pregnancy and birth. If something goes wrong, it is because she has not followed some specific rules during pregnancy; therefore she did not use caution in protecting her unborn child.

Some interesting similarities on this particular subject can be found between Africa and Europe in general under Old Wives Suggestions. Here are some of the suggestions on the matter of pregnancy as it is presented in the book "Les Naissances extraordinaires":

1. Expecting mothers must not go out after certain hours considered dangerous, such as sunrise, midday, dawn, because that is when the souls of the dead enter the body and chase the fetus out.
2. Never go out alone to avoid contact with sorcerers who want the new souls.
3. Never walk barefoot or follow someone's else footsteps to avoid sickness dangerous to the baby.
4. Never live with another expecting mother to avoid rivalry or premature birth.
5. Never walk on grassy spots to avoid snakes.

The rigorous observation of these rules should bring a pregnancy to a happy ending, however if all the rules are followed and the baby dies there are still two more possibilities for future pregnancies:

1. The next born child will be given a name that will convince him to stay, such as MOOFI (DO NOT LEAVE)
2. Cut the ear lobe or a finger off the dead child so the next new born will be born with the same mutilation and he will know that his parents have control over him.

It is very evident from this partial and already long set of rules that this is but another expedient to keep the female gender under complete control and it is still very similar to many of today societies.

The next category in Storytelling deals with animals. Again we have to remember that in trying to trace back some of the stories we must go back to a time when this was an oral art therefore it is very difficult to have the names of the authors of many stories since they are for the most part unknown.

One of the most important Storyteller in the history of mankind was Aesop. He was originally a slave whose specialty in Storytelling included the use of animals, and the impact that he had in this field is still felt today, not only in the African tradition but also in France and the rest of the world.

Many are the animals that hold a special place in African culture, and while some of them are typically African, such as the elephant, hyena, hippo and lion, many other animals are common to both African and French cultures. It has always been very important for the African people to understand the origin and the reason for the existence of such animals therefore we find many African stories that explain why animals look and act as they do and why some animals prey on others.

The Trickster

The Trickster is used as a mean connecting the domain of the animals and men. The use of the Trickster was also a necessity for some level of society at a time when freedom of expression was a very dangerous and unpopular idea to follow.

The Trickster is a highly humanized animal hero. *Anansi* the spider is very common in many African countries such as the Gold Coast, Ivory Coast, Congo etc. *Hare* is best known in East Africa as well as Tortoise.

Trickster is an animal of inferior size and strength and superior cleverness. He is hardly moral. The trickster acts with premeditation, he is always in control of the situation, he manipulates the people around him to his advantage. His values deal with convenience; he will marry Antelope for the value of her horn and then eat her.

The Trickster is not interested in sex as it is usually intended, but replaces it in favor of food or to tease or dupe another animal.

The favorite preys of a Trickster are generally the lion, elephant and hyena, a larger and therefore strong animal than he is, but who is considered dull and slow. In the French culture the same animals do not represent stupidity because they are not typically part of the French fauna. The lion is the only one represented in some stories as symbolic of power with some negative characteristics.

The power that the Trickster holds over lion, hippos hyena etc is continuous, in fact even if they have been tricked before by him, he can do it again over and over.

These tales have a dual purpose:

1. Stress the right of ordinary people to complain against the unreasonable requests made by the authority.
2. Explain the use of trickery to achieve a goal instead than calling for help from the Gods.

As a comparison to the African Tricksters the “Roman de Renart” by Pierre Saint Claud shows striking similarities in the use and the purpose of animals in stories.

One of the differences in the “Roman de Renart” is that the composition is built around a society such as it was in France during the 12th and the 13th centuries. The society is by no means free and everyone recognizes the ruling of Noble, the lion, and of Fiere the lioness. Noble’s main concern is to keep the peace in his kingdom.

The “Roman de Renart” is a community formed by animals. They speak, dress, have families and all of them

revolve around the king. This construction represents the society of the time. Each animal has a particular purpose. The bear represents a priest(to deride religion). The lion in addition to representing authority represents the criticism against the abusive power of the highest authority or the unjust treatment given by the king.

The most frequently used animals in the “Roman de Renart” are:

Renart The Fox
Ysengrin The wolf
Bruno The Bear
Bernard The Donkey

The noble animals are

Noble The Lion
Fiere The Lioness (also called Orgueilleuse)
Bruiant The Bull

The society is divided into the following four families:

1. The Lion
2. The wolf
3. the Fox
4. The Rooster

The Fox of the French stories can be compared directly to the African Trickster Anansi.

Renart is guilty of crimes such as:

1. Bringing trouble to public peace,
2. Attempting continuously to disrupt the established power.
3. Attacking continuously his worst enemy Ysengrin, the wolf.

It is true that Renart will go to any length to strike Ysengrin. To achieve his goal he involves even his enemy’s wife, catching her favors. For this reason he must appear in court and Hersant, the wolf’s wife, must testify.

The character of Isengrin, the wolf, is more devious and ugly than the lion, the hippo, the tiger and the elephant of the African tales. While on the surface the wolf may appear stupid, he releases his hate in a more

subtle ways. Sometimes he complains publicly about the fox and his actions, other times he insinuates that his punishment would be very good for society, hiding therefore his own reasons.

One of the differences between Anansi and Renart is that the fox has indeed a friend. In fact he is Grimbert, his cousin. Grimbert is just as cruel, ironical and astute. He can help Renart in his misfortune but he is also very cautious towards him.

The character of Renart is a complicated one. He is astute and conceited. Like the African Tricksters he can win over his enemies without their realizing it until it is too late. He is an essential and irreplaceable part of society, but he will attack even the highest hierarchy including the king and his entourage. The clergy does not escape either. The fox loves to play tricks, it is part of his nature; but his main aim is to make a parody of the French society of the time.

Renart and the African Tricksters expose in their own way the troubles affecting their own societies playing unmercifully jokes and tricks towards the most powerful and avenging therefore the simple and the defenseless souls.

Lesson plan 1

Objectives:

In this lesson the students will learn the importance of the Storyteller in ancient times as well as in modern times. They will realize that this is an art essential to the development and evolution of the mind and that today more than ever we need to rely on Storytelling to fight the mental passivity resulting from the use and abuse of TV.

Materials:

Two dittos

Strategies:

This lesson will be divided into three parts consisting of two dittos and the creation of a story.

1. The first ditto will be distributed after the students have been introduced to the subject of Storytelling. This ditto is meant to be a poll to see if the students can relate at all to Storytelling from their childhood. After the dittos have been completed and collected the results will be made public on the blackboard with the help of a student:

Man Woman Relative Friend

Qualities _____

Animal Stories Fairy Tales Others

How many times did you have the same story told?

2. Creation of a Story

The title of the story will only be given at the very end when we shall know what the story is about. The answers will be written on the blackboard. Before beginning this part distribute the II ditto.

Ditto I

Please answer the following questions:

1. What does the word Storyteller mean to you?

2. Do you remember anyone you could call Storyteller?

3. Why do you remember this person (qualities)?

4. What kind of stories did this person tell you?

5. Did you like to have the same story told many times?

6. Do you remember which one was your favorite story? Please describe it briefly.

Ditto 2

1. Main character: (please choose one)
 - a. Animal
 - b. Person
2. Where is the action developing?

3. How long ago?

4. What is happening?

5. How long has it been happening?

6. Who is involved in the situation?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____
 - e. _____
7. Why?

8. Any possible changes to the story so far created?

9. How do you want the story to end?

10. Is there another possibility?

11. What title do you give to the story?

Lesson plan 2

Objectives:

The understanding of the Trickster and its place in Storytelling.

Materials:

Drawing paper, colors (crayons, paints etc.)

Strategies:

Choosing a student who can draw, we shall create on the board a class Trickster, and the artist will transfer the classmates ideas on the board.

1. What kind is it going to be? If it is an animal let's begin with the shape. If it is a person let's invent this person: shape, height, color eyes etc. Age (if they want) Where does the Trickster live?
2. Has this Trickster a particular purpose? Is he/she going to deliver a moral message? Is he/she going to be representative of a certain group of people?
3. Does this Trickster have an enemy? Who is he/she?
4. Does he/she has any special friend?
5. What about his/her friend? How is he/she shaped? Who or what is he/she? Why are they friends?

Once the class Trickster has been found and his/her creation has been completed the next step could be the creation of a journal describing the weekly adventures of the Trickster. Again if there is someone particularly talented in drawing could be used to draw the comics, journeys or adventures of the Trickster(s), otherwise the plain journal will be considered an exercise to stimulate the fantasy and improve writing skills in English or in the Foreign language.

Lesson plan 3

Objective:

The students will translate and will compare themselves the similarities between the stories of "Le Petit Poucet" and "Banji Koto"-and the differences between the two.

Strategies:

The teacher will introduce first the vocabulary unfamiliar to the students from both stories. The teacher will then proceed with the translation of the stories. The translation can be done both orally and/or in writing. After both translations have been accomplished the teacher can start with the finding of the similarities as well as

the differences because the text presents many irregular verbs and special tenses, only the teacher can truly decide what kind of questions and how complicated and involving the answers can be.

Materials:

I include the beginning of the two stories. The integral part can be found with the Institute.

(figure available in print form)

As a final task I intend to involve the students in the creation of a very special folktale of their own which should afterwards be adapted for the school stage with an original title. For this purpose I will ask the cooperation, the help and the involvement of the students particularly interested in performing in the different arts such as music, dance, painting and recitation. A particular importance will be given to the art section of the play. In fact because of the goal of creating the students will have to design the masks as well as the costumes. I give a particular emphasis to the masks because they seem to be another of the common threads of many cultures and civilizations through which by eliminating the visual reality the new situation can be introduced and developed. The mask makes easier for the spectator to accept the story with no reservation. For the fulfillment of this task I will also ask for the help from the music and the dance teachers at my school. With their help I am sure I will be able to achieve my goal.

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