

Virtues in the Vicissitude World: Humility and Modesty in Fulbe Culture

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Abstract

Virtues are generally cherished everywhere around the globe. Some of the virtues are universal while others are relative to cultural variation. Fulbe culture, like many other cultures, sees humility and modesty as a virtue which the culture enjoins everyone to imbibe. This paper focuses on the way this virtue is represented in Fulbe folklore which is a replica of the various practical ways of promoting it in the Fulbe cultural practices. Two Fulbe folktales are analyzed in the paper and the reflections of the virtue of humility and modesty were extracted. The results of the analyses reveal that humility and modesty is not only a virtue that is cherished among the Fulbe but is the major characteristic of the Fulbe code of conduct (Pulaaku) covered under semteende. The result from the analysis also reveals that, although some cultures may not value humility and modesty as much as the Fulbe do, it is a general virtue across many cultures and upholding this virtue is encouraged in Islam which is the religion of most Fulbe.

Key words: *Folktale, Fulbe Culture, Virtue, Humility and Modesty.*

Introduction

Fulbe is the plural of *Pullo* which refers to as an ethnic group of people called *Fulani* in Hausaland, *Fula* in Sierra Leone and the Gambia and *Fellatta* in Sudan. They speak a language which is known variously as *Pulaar* in Senegal, *Pular* in Guinea and *Fulfulde* in many countries such as Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Cameroun and Sudan. Some of the countries where they are found in large numbers include Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea, Gambia, Niger, Cameroun, Mali, Benin and Chad (Arnott, 1985). Their ancestral home is said to be around Senegal and the Gambia (Daudu, 1995). They are very much identifiable from their culture both material and non-material. The non-material culture of the Fulbe is generally called *pulaaku* which is a set of rules and regulations that guide their actions and inactions. It has various components among which *semteende* 'humility and modesty' is central. Both humility and modesty involve unwillingness to draw attention to one's goodness, achievements or abilities. It is the opposite of

arrogance and pride. There is a substantial amount of research conducted by various researchers on Fulbe culture particularly on *pulaaku* and they include but not limited to Stenning (1959), Sa'id (1991), VerEecke (1991) and Shede (2014). In spite of the place of humility and modesty in the Fulbe code of conduct, there is no research conducted so far that focuses on the way this virtue is encapsulated in the Fulbe folktales, both as a component of *pulaaku* and its uniqueness in the Fulbe culture.

Fulbe folklore is a vast area, and folktales are an integral part of it. It can be used to study different cultural aspects of a people. In line with this, Hammond (1978) says understanding of a people's orally transmitted literary traditions is important because the content of verbal art frequently reflects important aspects of their culture. The folktales are part of such orally transmitted literary traditions which are usually artistic narrations of communal authorship that serve as means through which a society can preserve its culture and pass it to the younger generation. This is so because the folktales, and indeed all other oral forms of literature, are formulated from the experiences of the people, and the totality of the experiences acquired by people is what constitutes their culture.

This paper therefore, sets out to analyze some Fulbe folktales with particular attention on the way in which humility and modesty is portrayed in them. The folktales used as corpus are limited to only two so as to avoid cumbersomeness and give room for thorough explanation.

The Folklore and Fulbe Folktales

Folklore as a term was coined by William John Thoms in 1840's in replacement of various other terms used at that time such as popular antiquities and popular literature (Yahaya, 1979 and Hamza, 1984). It is a modern term for the body of traditional customs, superstitions, stories, dances and songs that have been adopted and maintained within a given community by process of repetition not reliant on the written word. Along with folk songs and folktales, this broad category of cultural forms embrace all kinds of legends, riddles, jokes, proverbs, games, charms, omens, spells and rituals especially those of preliterate societies or social classes. Folklore has also been "the collective name applied to sayings, verbal compositions and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by word of mouth and example rather than in written form (Abrams and Harpham, 2009:124). According to Rosenberg (Bericelli and Gibaldi (ed.) 1982:90) folklore refers to those aspects of culture such as customs,

beliefs, rituals, crafts, costumes, foods and many forms of verbal expression that are transmitted orally or by custom. Yahaya (1979) opines that the field of folklore as demarcated by folklorists consists of the following:

- (r) Orature (spoken, sung or voiced form of traditional utterances).
- (s) Material culture (traditional handicrafts products).
- (t) Social folk custom (festivals and traditional ceremonies). And
- (u) Performing folk art (music, dance and drama).

The first constituent of folklore as stated above is orature which includes folktales, songs, proverbs, legends and so on. This study is, however, limited to folktales only. Other forms of orature and or the rest of the constituents of folklore may, however, be used for further clarification in the analysis where necessary.

Folktale is “a story passed on by word of mouth rather than by writing and thus partly modified by successive re-telling before being written down or recorded” (Baldick, 2004:99). Folktale is also “a short narrative in prose of unknown authorship which has been transmitted orally... (Abrams and Harpham, 2009:124). It is also “an imaginative narrative (story) in prose form. The story that constitutes a folktale may have a basis in real life but generally, the story is an imaginative recreation of a memorable experience that is intended to entertain rather than to record history or social experience.” (Akporobaro, 2005:46). From the foregoing, it can be concluded that a folktale is an imaginative story which consists of the societal culture that is transmitted orally from one generation to the next one. Structurally, folktale consists of five important parts: opening word (phrase), initial move(s), sequential actions, results and closing word (phrase). The opening word (phrase) serves as a means of drawing the attention of the audience to listen to the tale. The audience also shows their readiness in listening to the folktale by answering using some words. There are different words and phrases used in opening folktales in different languages. For instance, the Fulbe say, *taale-taale* to declare a folktale opened, and the audience say, *taalaate* or *taalette* or *jannatabooyel* depending on the dialect. The initial move provides an introduction of the condition of life of the characters which might be affluence or poverty and their behaviour which might be kindness, humility, bravery, loyalty, dishonesty etc. This condition and behaviour of the characters determine the sequential action. The sequential actions then determine the result which is usually a reinforcement of the characters based on their respective actions. This reinforcement, of course, can be in form of either reward for good behaviour or

punishment of bad behaviour. The closing word or phrase marks the end of folktale. The Fulbe use *takkala mulet* or *kuraakundus* to mark the end of a folktale depending on dialect (Daudu, 2007 and Daudu and Liman, 2010).

Fulbe Code of Conduct (*Pulaaku*) and the Concept of Virtue

The word *pulaaku* is a noun having ‘pul-‘as its root. Other words derivable from this root include *pullo*, plural, realised as “*Fulbe*”, *puldebbo* denoting “old Fulani woman” and *Pulpule* meaning “dialects of Fulfulde. *Pulaaku* involves the rules that guide the Fulbe in their relationship among themselves and with other people (Sa’id, 1991). It consists of a lot of components which include honesty, modesty/humility, patience, courage, generosity, vigilance, caution and compassion among others (Mukoshi, 1984 and VerEecke, 1991). *Pulaaku* consists of the principles of conduct that every *pullo* is expected to embrace. These principles, as seen in the Fulbe ideology, are the qualities that enable them to conform with the ethics of virtue as described in the saying, *ulaaku dum daanngol haa maangol kujje boodde fuu pedii* meaning; ‘*pulaaku* is a calf rope on which all good things are tied’.

Pulaaku is not taught to the *pullo* at a time. Instead, it is cultivated and nursed in the mind and conscience of a child through a long period of upbringing and his observation of what other people do and do not do. Moreover, the constituents of *pulaaku* are embedded in the customs, traditions and beliefs of the Fulbe, they assimilate them as they grow up and become participant members of the society (Shede, 2014).

Modesty and humility, according to Standford Encyclopedia (2018), touch on a variety of issues in philosophy as it relates to moral issues about self and other. But there are debates about what makes it morally virtuous which is a battle in the ongoing war about the nature of virtue itself. There are many features of modesty and humility which include doxastic and non-doxastic accounts. Under doxastic accounts, there are accuracy accounts which view modesty and humility as essentially about having accurate beliefs. This is in concordance with the view of *Pulaaku* on *semteende* (humility/modesty) that it is the mother of all other components as the Fulbe say *Pullo to semteende maayata* (*Pullo* prefers to die than to act shamefully without humility and modesty). It is also in line with Islamic teaching as enshrined in the Glorious Qur’an where the Almighty Allah commands thus: Invoke your Lord with humility and in secret. He likes not the aggressors (Qur’an, 7:55). Again, Bn Abubakar (nd:74) relates the Prophet

(PBUH) saying, “he who humbles himself will be raised in status by Allah while he who is arrogant will have himself humiliated.”

The concept of virtue in Fulbe perspective is therefore, enshrined in *pulaaku* which is the code of conduct that guides their actions and inactions and is also strengthened by Islam which is the religion practiced by most of them.

***Semteende* (humility/modesty) as a Component of *Pulaaku* and a Virtue among the Fulbe**

Semteende (humility/modesty) is a noun which belongs to the Fulfulde nominal class of ‘*nde*’. It is one of the components of the Fulbe code of conduct as outlined in the preceding discussion. There are several ways through which the Fulbe exhibit *semteende* in their culture. Whereas it forces them to do some activities, it deprives them the opportunity of doing other things. For instance, it is because of this virtue that the Fulbe see it as anti-*pulaaku* to eat in public. They prefer to remain hungry until they find privacy before they eat. It is also responsible for their quiet nature because they believe that too much talk is anti-*pulaaku* as it may lead to telling lies and arrogance. They also avoid calling the names of their parents, uncles, aunts, first child (sometimes even the second and the third ones) and above all, their in-laws. A husband does not always call his wife by her name like-wise the wife does not call the husband by his name. They use nick-names. The uncles and the aunts are usually nick-named and the nick-names are usually arranged serially by culture from the eldest to the youngest. The nick names for the uncles include *Baadikko*, *Baasammba*, *Baayero*, *Bappaate*, *Baademmo*, *Baanjobbo* and *Baaseebo* in hierarchical order from the eldest to the youngest. Those of the aunts include *Yaadikko*, *Yaakummba*, *Yaatakko*, *Yaadaado Yaapenndo*, *Yaademmo* and *Yaaseebo*. These names are seven each, so what happen if they are up to eight or even more? “The eighth uncle is named *Baadikko kubitto* while the eighth aunt is named *Yaadikko kubitto* and it goes like that respectively” (de St. Croix, 1998:415). The logic here is that, the eighth uncle or aunt bears the same nick-name as the first one with *kubitto* as the only addition. The ninth one the automatically bears the same nick-name as the second with the same *kubitto* added. This continues in that sequence until all of them get their nick-names.

As for the first child, the Fulbe often use ‘*o*’ which is the human nominal class and can be used as personal pronoun ‘he’ or ‘she’. They may also nick-name the first child, especially a male by relating him with one of the prominent cows of the family. Some of such names may include *mosayge*, (the owner of *sayge*),

modaake (the owner of *daake*) and *monyaaye* (the owner of *nyaaye*). In the above examples, *sayge* is the name of red hair cattle with white belly and sides, *daake* is the name of white hair cattle with red spots all-round the body and *nyaaye* is the name of a cow with white hair but having black spots round the face (Shede, 2019). All these are practical instances where *pulaaku* through *semteende* restricts the Fulbe from acting in certain ways. On the other hand, it forces them to do some other things. For instance, it is considered anti-*pulaaku* to greet one's parents or in-laws while standing. One must squat down while greeting them. Not only parent's in-laws have that right in *pulaaku*, but even one's elders. By elders here, we are referring to anyone who is senior to him or her by age.

Humility and Modesty as Reflected in Fulbe Folktales

There are Fulbe folktales which portray how humility and modesty is valued and the way the Fulbe culture portrays the virtue as a catalyst to success. For the purpose of illustration, let us consider the following tale *Taalol Gorko e Debbo Muudum* (The tale of a man and his wife) collected in Gombe in 2013. The summary of the tale's plot is translated below:

A man got married but his bride refuses to nick-name him after the wedding. He saw the act as a violation of the Fulbe cultural provisions. After employing some persuasive measures but to no avail, the husband, who was not happy with the development, arranged with a monster to intimidate his wife and force her to nick-name him. The monster came to the house and threatened the lady of her life if she refuses to nick-name her husband in line with cultural practice. She succumbed to the requirement of the culture, humbled herself and nick-named him. They continued living a peaceful marital life afterwards.

The above folktale embodies one of the ways of demonstrating humility and modesty in Fulbe culture, that is, avoiding calling one's elders by their names but by their nick-names. Here, nick-naming the husband by his wife is focused on. Although one might argue that the husband is like a peer to the wife, and that even the husband is enjoined by the culture not to call the wife by her name. Yes, this is true but this is done as a precaution so that the children will grow up nick-naming them. It is a fact that children, especially at their earlier stage of life, imitate whatever they hear people saying. This includes the names with which people are called. So should the couple call each other with their names, there is

the likelihood that their offspring will imitate same. It is also important to note from the folktale above that the nick-naming is considered very important in the culture so much so that all avenues could be employed in order to maintain it in the culture as demonstrated by the husband in the above example. It is also worth noting that, the folktale above also shows that Fulbe are among the African cultures where imaginary creatures called monsters exist. Although these creatures are usually not visible, the belief that they exist and are powerful helps many African cultures in inculcating good and cherished values in the society.

Again, the analysis looked at another folktale titled *Taalol Wobbe Sukaabe Dido* (the tale of two young men). This folktale is obtainable in a pamphlet co-authored by Daudu and Liman (2010) which contained about five Fulbe folktales. It is a story of two young men who are sons of co-wives. One of them is called Gidaado and the other one, Ardo. Gidaado happened to be the favourite of their father. Of course, even the name suggests that. It literally mean the beloved one. For the fact that he enjoys the love of his father, the father got a wife for him through *hoowugo* 'engagement' which is a general practice in a traditional Fulbe setting. But Ardo was asked to go and look for a wife himself as a demonstration of less affection on the side of his father. He sets out for this purpose and came across rice which asked him to eat and take home as much as he liked but he declined and said he only wanted a prayer for him to succeed in getting a good wife. He proceeded on his journey meeting cows, sheep, goats, maize, corn and all sorts of domestic animals and foods which asked him to take them along but he declined as usual and requested only prayers. The last thing he came across were bundles of money which also asked him to take as many bundles as he could, but he refused as usual. The money then described to him where he could get a wife and spelt out for him the guidelines, he should follow to get a good wife which he followed strictly. Part of the guidelines was that he would come across ladies, one of them ululating, another one making some attractive sound and then yet another keeping calm and quiet. He was instructed to the one who displayed humility and modesty by keeping quiet. He finally got a beautiful and obedient wife and, on his way back home, the money, cows, sheep, goats, rice, maize, and so on which he passed on his way going decided to follow him back home. He therefore, returned home with not only a good and beautiful wife, but also with bundles of money, herds of cattle, flocks of sheep, bags of rice and maize and all that a rich man is expected to possess. Gidaado was enviously sent by his father to look for another wife so that he can become rich like his brother, Ardo. He equally came across rice, cows, money and all other kinds of food and riches but took as much as he

could because of greediness. He also violated the guidelines laid down to him on how to get a good wife and ended up choosing the one ululating as against the one that kept quiet. He finally realized that he chose an old woman as his wife and on his way back home, all the animals, foods and riches he took while going either disappeared or became sand or stones. So he returned home poor and with an old wife accompanied with flies, lice and donkeys. All other members of the family forsook him. But Ardô welcomed and accommodated him.

In the above folktale which is longer than the preceding one, two other practices that show humility and modesty are revealed: not eating in public and quietness. These two acts were responsible for Ardô's success and the failure of Gidâdô in their respective ventures. Whereas the former was able to overcome his greed and avoided eating in public and also chose the lady that kept quiet, the latter acted contrary, and this led to the success of the former and the failure of the latter. These two virtuous acts are the major focus of this paper. But this does not mean that there are no other virtues which the folktale under study is trying to inculcate. Of course, there are some others such as abiding by rules and regulations, avoiding greed and determination in whatever one is doing.

Conclusion

This paper looks at humility and modesty as virtues in Fulbe culture. Attempt is made to discuss the way it is valued and encouraged among the Fulbe. Illustrations showing various practices in the Fulbe culture that demonstrate the importance of the virtue of humility and modesty are presented through the analyzed folktales. Two folktales from various sources were used in the analysis. Whereas one of the folktales was gotten in its oral form, the other one has been documented as a way of preservation. It is clear from the analysis that humility and modesty is so much valued and practiced as a virtue among the Fulbe perhaps not only because it is a component of their code of conduct but also because it is enjoined by Islam which is a religion that most of them practice. It is therefore, recommended that more research need to be done in three ways regarding the Fulbe folktales. The first is the documentation of the folktales in order to save them from forces of globalization which are gradually sending them towards extinction. The second one is the analysis of the folktales in order to uncover the lessons embedded in them. The final way is to make an attempt of digitizing the folktales. Thank God for the digital technology which can be used in order to create animations that can be used in transforming the folktales into cartoons so

that the younger generation and the generations yet unborn can benefit from the lessons contained in them and our societal culture can continue to thrive.

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