Unveiling Cultural Significance: A Semiotic Analysis of the Moral Essence of Myths and Folk Tales

Abdou Bassin Boye
English Language and Literature
University of Lahore
aboye@utg.edu.gm

Shafaq Fayyaz
English Language and Literature
University of Lahore

Abstract

This article analyses Gambian myths and folk tales through a semiotic lens using Rolande Barthes' (1972) semiotic theory as a framework. It examines how certain tales in Gambian folk lore and fables could be read as mythical narratives laden with morally and culturally significant meanings. The narratives are selected thematically and subjected to a semiotic analysis that highlights their metaphorical, ideological, cultural and moral significance. We thus explore the role of Gambian myths in conveying moral and cultural values, with a view to providing insights into the society's structures and emphasising the universal tendency to create and interpret mythic narratives. The analysis shows that several figures such as the hare, the hyena, the evil stepmother, the marabout, the witch and the cultural hero serve as mythical symbols through which moral values such as honesty, truthfulness, justice and equality are metaphorically expressed as cultural principles that guide social existence.

Keywords: myths, morals, narratives, metaphorical, ideological, semiotic

Introduction

From ancient times, societies have used myths and folk tales to provide basic explanations, however simple, of nature and natural forces, and to strengthen social norms and values that benefit the common good and contribute to the creation of a well-ordered, secure, and decent community (Madden 2006). The second function pertains to the impact of myth and folk tales on the social system as means of expressing and conveying core beliefs, values and morals that shape the cultural self-image of a particular society. According to Lugli (2014), a myth is a traditional story that is held by a particular community to be of collective social importance. Lugli refers to allegoresis as an interpretative method by which myths are seen as the heart of moral truths and values that were revealed by philosophical inquiries. On the other hand, Madden (2006) describes folk tales as parables that illuminate, reinforce or illustrate previously established morals and community values. In examining the cultural realities of a social group, therefore, myths and folk tale are considered constitutive elements that engender beliefs and customs that express themselves explicitly in the form of morals, values, purposes, goals, and philosophies that motivate and shape cultural reality (Shynkaruk, Salata, and Danylova 2018).

Danesi (2004) asserts that the study of myth can lead to a useful understanding of how a particular group developed their social system, customs and ways of life as well as the values that bind them as one community. He identifies several types of myth that contribute to shaping the customs, values and cultural identity of a particular social group. Cosmogonic myths, for instance, explain in various ways that differ from culture to culture, how the world came into existence. Eschatological myths, on the other hand, explain how the world will end through a variety of culturally dependent predictions. Myths of birth and rebirth explain the renewal of life or the emergence of a perfect society or saviour. The myth of the cultural hero is a particularly common depiction of a figure who makes a discovery or achievement of cultural significance and change. Explanatory myths describe natural processes and events. As a form of grouping, these varieties of myth can be useful categorisations in determining the significance of myth in any particular social group. In fact, Juenghani (2020) argues that, closely related to other symbolic forms such as language, myth is the foundation of the philosophy of culture that defines a particular community.

The relationship between myth and language is explored more explicitly by Barthes (1972) who argues that myth is a form of speech, a mode of communication, a message, a form, and a system of signification. In his theory of mythology, Barthes argues that the study of myth in fact belongs together with linguistics to the same broad field of semiology. Considered as a form of speech, mythology is a branch of the science of signs. In line with Saussure's theory of the sign, Barthes identifies the semiological concept of signifier as a sensory element which acts as a mediator between itself and something else it is used to refer to, which is known as the signified. For Barthes, the relation between the signifier and the signified constitutes the sign as it does for Saussure. However, while Saussure's theory recognises the sign as a binary structure, Barthes considers it a triadic concept. Additionally, for Barthes, the relations between these elements constitute only the first order signification system such as that which is found in the linguistic sign. Therefore, beyond Saussure's theory, Barthes recognises the existence of a second level of signification in which the sign composed of the signifier and signified of the first order functions as a signifier.

In Barthes' theory (1972), the relations between signifier and signified that produce the sign on the first level of signification form only one part of the second level of signification. The second-order semiotic system provides another level of expression where we encounter myth and connotation. Therefore, myth is a system of signification that is unique from that of language. Barthes explains that this peculiarity stems from the fact that myth is constructed from an already existing semiological chain. In other words, myth is a second order semiological system in which the sign, i.e., the combination of the signifier and signified of the first semiotic order, becomes merely a signifier or a form that is given a new meaning. Barthes explains further that at this second-level signification, the form or the signifier is distanced from its previous meaning in replacement of the concept for which the myth is uttered. It is on this level that the interpretative process of allegoresis may seek to establish a relationship between a mythical signifier and a form of moral or cultural belief or value.

Bearing in mind the duplicity of the mythical signifier both as meaning and form, Barthes suggests three ways of deciphering myth which correspond with three different points of focus: on the form, or the meaning, or on both at the same time. He argues that focusing on the

empty form of the signifier merely lets the concept of the myth fill the form of the signifier without ambiguity and the signification becomes literal again as in the first order. On the other hand, focusing on the meaning of the signifier alone, distinguishing clearly between it and the form, reveals a distortion that unveils the myth as a fake. The third reading which concentrates on the mythical signifier as an inseparable combination of meaning and form reveals the composing mechanism of myth as an ambiguous signification open to a variety of potential meanings. Barthes maintains that in order to explicate the semiological process that transforms myth to the moral interests of a particular society, the third type of reading explains myths according to the purpose for which they were built. Additionally, he asserts that myth is not defined by the content of its message, but rather by the manner in which this message is conveyed.

According to Walter Burket, quoted in Bremmer (1987), myth is a tale of antiquity that possesses a secondary nature that makes allusions to the collective consciousness of humankind. For Lugli (2014), folk tales are the aggregate of traditional oral narratives that mirror the beliefs, customs, and values unique to a particular culture. Therefore, both myth and folk tale are traditional narratives that are sustained by their cultural significance. Like religion, they constitute a cultural force with the power to arrange social life in a moral order, performing utilitarian functions of education, socialisation and entertainment (Lugli 2014).

As Madden (2006) explains, myth frequently establishes norms that are subsequently reinforced by folk tale, thereby ascribing to myth and folk tale the same functional value. However, Madden explains some important distinctions between myth and folk lore in three different ways. Firstly, unlike folk lore, myth predates society; secondly, whereas myth often involves powerful supernatural characters that claim divinity, folk tale often involves ordinary protagonists with ordinary qualities such as intelligence, courage, and luck; and thirdly, while myth establishes a moral precept or expectation with general application, folk tale, typically understood to be a mixture of imagination, history, culture, custom, and advice, does not prescribe any specific conduct, but encourages people to consider the pros and cons of different actions. Nonetheless, the present discussion avoids any structural or procedural differentiation of myth from folk tale in preference to a functional approach that highlights their utilitarian purposes.

Plakhova (2016) brings out the correlation between myth and folk tale clearly. The sameness of purpose between the two is accentuated by his definition of folk tale as a socio-cultural form of communication with the dual purposes of interpreting the nature of the relationship between man and the world, and of inspiring strategies of value and belief in a variety of texts. These texts serve as a repository for the mythological beliefs shared by a community. Plakhova argues that folk tale is founded on the use of myth that has been desacralised, functioning as means to organise social memory. The symbolism in folk tales is predominantly shaped by signs that refer to mythological situations. When original mythological elements are transformed according to the dominant values of folk consciousness, it results in the creation of distinct signs within folk tales, which take the form of folk tale images serving as names, events, and expressions in the context of the narratives. A significant feature of folk tales is the semiotic space they occupy as a particular sign system functioning as a form of cultural communication. Therefore, the principles of semiotic analysis can be applied to the interpretation folk tale discourse.

A significant contribution to the study of myths has been made through extensive analysis of their cultural, religious, as well as symbolic significance. According to Danesi (2004), myths have been considered by different scholars from different perspectives. According to Claude Levi-Strauss (1978) for instance, myth holds a significant role as the primordial wellspring from which binary conceptualizations such as the dichotomies of life versus death, good versus evil, maternal versus paternal, originate. In his seminal work, Freud (1913) delved into the intricate depths of human motivation and the complex interplay of individual psyches. He perceived myths as a profound manifestation of the conflicts that individuals grapple with as they navigate the complex terrain of their unconscious psyche. On the other hand, Carl Jung (1965) saw myths as consisting of primordial archetypal images that constitute evidence of the collective human endeavour to express cultural values in symbolic forms. Thus, while Freud highlights the importance of myth to individual consciousness and values, Jung emphasizes its role in molding the collective consciousness. Jung's emphasis is similar to French sociologist Durkheim's (1912) view that myths emerged from the realm of social existence and, together with their attendant rituals, nurture and revive moral systems that bind people socially. What these great thinkers seem

to highlight is the profound impact of myth on the cultural and social identity of a community.

Exploring the concept of myth as a cultural phenomenon, Shynkaruk, Salata and Danylova (2018) investigate how myth functions as a cultural language. Using an anthropological integrative method, the researchers examine its interpretive role in understanding the world and highlight the significance of the basic mythological concepts of "world" and "human" in shaping life attitudes in the early stages of human development. A relevant observation in the contemporary stage of human development is their opinion that although myth has yielded to philosophy and science, it remains influential throughout history utilised by both religion and literature. Talking about the application of myth in religion, Humaeni (2015) explores the significance and functions of religious myths. Adopting a similar anthropological approach as Shynkaruk et al., Humaeni focuses on the cultural and moral values of religious myths in the Bantenese community. He also reaches a similar conclusion that the development of science and technology and the rising genres of popular culture in all kinds of media have not diminished the significance of myth. Both Shynkaruk et al. and Humaeni emphasise that myth is still revered both commonly and by the educated owing to its profound impact in upholding moral values, fostering virtuous behaviour, and promoting proper conduct in society.

However, Onu (2018) reaches a different conclusion that challenges this understanding. In examining the roles of myth and folk tales in the inculcation of moral values into children within the context of a rapidly advancing global era, his study reveals an emerging moral decline. This decline is attributed to the erosion of the cultural significance of myth and folk lore that is witnessed by parental indifference towards children's moral development in the midst of a fast-paced and technologically driven society. Emphasising the crucial role myth and folk lore play in instilling morals in children, the study calls for concerted efforts to integrate them into the educational and cultural fabric in order to restore and strengthen the moral foundations of the younger generation.

Also related to the impact of myth and folk lore on behaviour, an interesting study by Del Moral et al. (2020) examines the impact of myth on intimate partner violence. The researchers sought to understand how myth contributes in shaping general beliefs and attitudes towards the

expression of violent behaviour during adolescence and adulthood. Their findings reveal that high levels of myth acceptance contributed to the expression of intimate partner violence particularly among males. Consequently, they recommend that efforts should be made to challenge or deactivate mythical narratives and beliefs that escalate intimate partner violence. On a different aspect, Ansar and Unti (2021) analyse the use of myth in the reports of state auditors to highlight how financial statements also utilise language at the second level of signification for ideological purposes. Their study is significant as it demonstrates several of Barthes's assertions that every text can contain myth as long as the text is conveyed by a discourse. It also underlines the semiological transformative link that turns myth into ideology.

Tanduk, Maruf, and Suluh (2021) also demonstrate the link between myth and ideology. Using data obtained from the oral literature of the Toraja people, their study investigates the use of symbolism, parallelism and metaphor as devices to convey deeper meanings in mythical constructs in the ritual text of the cultural ceremony of the buffalo meeting. The study reveals that the ritual text is a mythical construct that serves as means of transmitting Torajan ideology concerning the value of character. It also makes an important observation concerning the relationship between myth and connotation as second level systems of signification. Whereas the denotational meaning of the ritual text highlights Torajan reverence for the buffalo, it is through connotation that the concept of myth created through the use of symbolism, parallelism and metaphor is conveyed in the text. Another study that underlines the intimate relationship between myth and connotation is Ishar and Irawan (2022) which highlights the use of myth and connotation in a number of lyrics by The Beatles. The study demonstrates, as Barthes theorises, how myth is a means to analyse the connection between denotative and connotative meaning.

As Kolesnyk (2019) asserts in a study that addresses the cognitive premises of myth-oriented semiosis, myth can be considered a cognitive and cultural phenomenon pertaining to verbal depictions of noematic senses that accumulate in the national conceptual space. He adds that the interpretational process is also determined by sets of conceptualisation models applicable to the anticipated states of affairs or alternative realities. It is on the strength of such arguments that this study proposes to address the moral significance of Gambian myths and folk tales as

culturally significant phenomena that reflect the moral beliefs, customs and values of Gambian society.

The existing literature on the analysis of myths and folk tales has mostly focused on investigating its cultural, theological and symbolic import across diverse settings. However, a significant gap remains in conducting a thorough semiotic examination of the moral significance inherent in myths and folk tales, especially within the distinct context of Gambian myths. Although previous research has explored the influence of myths and folk tales on moral values and behaviour, there is a dearth of scholarly investigations particularly examining the semiotic resources and linguistic devices used in Gambian myths and folk tales to communicate moral principles. The objective of this study is to address this gap by undertaking a semiotic analysis of Gambian myths and folk tales. The aim is to offer a culturally unique viewpoint that reveals the complex mechanisms by which myths and folk stories convey and strengthen moral values.

Additionally, despite the existing body of scholarly works that emphasize the dynamic nature of the connection between myths and modernisation, there is a limited body of research that has specifically examined the dynamic relationship between conventional myths and the current socio-cultural environment in The Gambia. The present study aims to fill this void by examining the enduring moral impact of Gambian myths and folk stories in the context of contemporary Gambian society.

The literature reviewed above indicates that a substantial body of research on the significance of myth as a source of moral values already exists. Additionally, the close relationship between myth, folk tale, and connotation as second level semiological processes has also been recognised in the literature. However, while Gambian myths and folk tales have been recognised for their cultural and entertainment values, not much has been done to explore how they instill moral concepts, ethics, and life lessons into the local consciousness. Since both myth and folk tale are two intertwined phenomena that weave themselves into the tapestry of cultural existence and the fabric of social life, exploring these narratives can unearth the explicit and implicit moral values and beliefs embedded in them and cast more light on the traditional norms, ethical values, and social dynamics that shape Gambian society. Additionally, as Gambian society embraces modernity, it is necessary to reexamine these ancient narratives to evaluate their adaptability to solving the moral

dilemmas of our time. By doing so, this research can illuminate their capacity to cultivate virtuous conduct, inspire compassion, and nurture social cohesion. Exploring this research gap will reveal how the cultural legacy of myths and folk tales may continue to influence the moral foundation of Gambian society in a constantly evolving environment.

In order to fill this gap, this research more specifically seeks to identify the mythical elements in the selected folk tales that are deemed relevant in the inculcation of moral values, determine the means by which these mythical elements are conveyed, and explore the extent to which the mythical elements instill or maintain moral values within the context of Gambian society. To achieve these objectives, the research is guided by the following set of questions: what are the mythical elements conveyed in the folk tales? by what means are the mythical elements conveyed in the folk tales? and to what extent do the mythical elements contribute to establishing or maintaining moral values in the society?

Methodology

The study thus explores the significance of myths and folk tales as cultural phenomena that contribute to the moral fabric of society. The data consist of narratives selected from *Folk Tales from The Gambia* by Bojang and Bojang (2009). This text is chosen because it serves as a repository of traditional Gambian folk tales that have been transmitted for several generations. Five folk tales are selected purposively on the basis of their moral significance. The methodology involves a textual analysis and ethnographic research that seek to examine the intricate layers of cultural importance and moral lessons embedded within these narratives. Employing Barthes theory (1972) of myth, the analysis of the data is based on a close reading that pays attention to what signs are used from the first-order signification to serve as mythical signifiers on the second-level signification. This is to facilitate the exploration of the connotative, ideological as well as metaphorical meanings of the mythical elements in the narratives. These are highlighted as a means to access the socio-cultural associations that the folk tale and mythical elements generate. Finally, these associations are assessed in order to gauge the extent to which they shape or influence moral values in contemporary Gambian society.

Analysis and Discussion

Honesty has always been the corner stone of moral principles. As a result, there are numerous examples in myth and folklore where it is rewarded, and dishonesty is punished. In the folk tale of "The Hyena and the Hare", the two animals are used to illustrate the difference between uprightness and fraudulence. The tale recounts how hare tricks hyena on their way to visit their father-in-law, and strategically exchanges hyena's high-quality rice, meant as a present for their in-law, with his own low-quality rice, with the aim of securing the position of favoured son-in-law. In the narrative, hare and hyena are used as mythical symbols to illustrate the divide between honesty and dishonesty. The tale can thus be seen a localized depiction of what Levi-Strauss (1978) describes as the form of conceptual thinking that resonates with the binary oppositions that underlie all myths, good vs. evil, rich vs. poor, trickster vs. dupe, life vs. death, chaos vs. order, and so on. In this case, hare is presented as a trickster and hyena as a dupe.

From a Saussurean perspective, it is clear that the mythical elements *hare* and *hyena* are each a linguistic sign comprised by the word as a signifier and the animal to which it refers as a signified. The two elements therefore constitute the final terms of the first semiological chain. From a Barthesian perspective, however, the linguistic signs *hare* and *hyena*, which already exist as the associative totals of signifier and signified, are reduced to signifying functions in the narrative chain. Thus, they become the first term of the second signifying system on which the myth is built, and of which they are only the first part.

In his studies of *Folk Tales from The Gambia,* Magel (1977) says that the attributes of honour and shame are assigned to hare and hyena as metaphorical concepts. In addition, Beidelman (1961) states that the hyena is metaphorically associated with the concept of a duped trickster and is frequently connected to witchcraft. A common figure in Wolof folk tales, the hare has been analysed as a character from both psychological as well as sociological interpretations. As Magel (1981) explains, it is depicted from both perspectives as a cultural symbol of trickery and deception. Its antics and cleverness are explained as the result of its selfishness and individuality. Its endeavours to trick other animals for its own satisfaction pose as the polar opposite of the African ideal of communality. This is evident in this particular tale in the cunning and deceitful manner it tricks hyena despite the assurance of an elusive

cooperative relationship.

As Roberts (1989) explains, the moral function of the trickster figure in many mythical African tales is to remind people not only of the behaviours related to the trickster, but also of the effects of behaving like the dupe. The relationship with one's father-in-law is a sacred one in Gambian society. The cost of hare's trick on hyena is therefore not just an opportunity to strengthen the bond with his father-in-law, but it is also a usurpation of the sacred alliance between son and father-in-law. Roberts (1989) observes that this violation of social ties is a common practice of the animal trickster figure in African folk tales. The prevalence of this theme reflects the socio-cultural importance that is attached to the preservation of social ties within African society. Hyena is a friend who is duped by another friend. Although the lesson is clear, the practice of double standards is a critical zone of uncertainty in many societies. How can one get to know their friends, and how can one be sure that friends won't evolve into something else? The trickster tale serves as a mythical illustration and a warning to society that while one may admire the trickster for his cunning wits, one should be wary of other's actions, including those regarded as friends.

Thus, it is possible to associate the metaphorical roles of the hare and the hyena to the fundamental processes of socialisation in Gambian society. They are reminiscent of the dilemmas that confront the urge to satisfy individual needs juxtaposed against the communal obligations and demands established by social relations (Biedelman 1975). With the use of animal characters as mythical symbols, the tale is fundamentally allegorical as the animals are assumed to behave like people. In addition, the use of animals to convey moral issues creates a sense of detachment and liberty. With a certain degree of exaggeration and embellishment, people's intentions and acts may be conveyed to highlight certain social and moral tensions without the flagrance of involving human characters in atrocious deeds. Nonetheless, there are still mythical tales in Gambian folklore depicting human characters who, by their intentions and actions, raise serious moral tensions that burden the cultural consciousness. The myth of the evil stepmother is one such enduring tale.

From her numerous depictions in myths, fairy tales, folklore, and film adaptations across the world, the evil stepmother is indeed an infamous mythical figure thought of in more negative connotations than any other family figure. Looking at the history of the linguistic sign

stepmother itself, one may argue that the bias against the figure of the stepmother is ingrained into the history of the language system. The etymological path to *step* traces it back to Old English *steop*, which expressed a feeling of loss and deprivation. This feeling is heightened if one considers that even the metaphorical reference to something as *stepchild* suggests its inferiority. As Barthes (1972) explains, the linguistic sign is emptied of its history as it passes from being a complete final term of the first semiological system to being only the first term of the second semiological system of signification. Thus, the linguistic sign enters into myth as an empty signifier or form waiting to be filled by a signified.

However, the history of the meaning of the linguistic sign is absorbed as part of the concept of the myth which becomes its new signified. In that light, the loss and deprivation suffered by the stepchild left only to the mercies of a stepmother may be considered the major concept behind the tale of 'The Two Half Sisters'. Thus, the tale serves as a cultural outlet to confront the delicate subject of stepmother/stepchild relationship within Gambian culture. As Pateh's first wife Bintu passed away leaving him with their daughter Mai, Pateh is compelled by society to bring home his second wife Khadijatou and their daughter, also named Mai, to ensure that Mai Bintu, already in her puberty, is given a proper upbringing. However, as soon as Khadijatou is brought to her husband's home, she assumes the role of the evil stepmother and hatches a plan to get rid of her stepdaughter. Khadijatou disregards the fortune teller's dire prophecy of her impending doom and the fact that her stepdaughter and her real daughter are practically identical. The concept of the myth, therefore, inherits the history of wickedness and cruelty that has been ascribed to the evil stepmother for centuries.

Additionally, the portrayal of Mai Bintu and Mai Khadijatou as identical twins with identical names emphasizes a common cultural and filial identity that seeks to obliterate all differentiating notions of prejudice between child and stepchild. It is a metaphorical representation of the moral principle of equality among offspring that must guide the maternal spirit of nourish and nurture. Thus, while the name Khadijatou denotes a second wife who replaces the first one on the first plane of semiosis, on the mythical plane of signification, it symbolises the antithesis of the benevolent matriarch who is revered for her maternal instincts that keep the body and soul of the family together. As Tatar

(2019) explains, folk tales of the evil stepmother provide therapeutic means of addressing taboo emotions such as maternal bile and hatred. Khadijatou's resolve to get rid of Mai Bintu despite the fortune teller's warning accentuates the sort of resentment that emerges from the competition for resources and attention between stepmother and stepchild. However, as Barthes (1972) elucidates, there is no obduracy in mythical concepts. That is, a mythical signifier can refer to a wide expanse of changing concepts. The idea behind the evil stepmother folk tale may as well as be cautionary household counsel for stepmothers to treat stepchildren fairly and for fathers to be a little more sensitive to their (stepchildren's) protective needs in order to prevent undesirable things from happening.

Furthermore, given the increasing rate of divorce and re-marriage in Gambian society, there is no want of concern and good advice for the evil stepmother. Khadijatou's visit to Efra, the fortune teller, is a symbolic gesture that does not only reinforce the use of ritual in African life as a potent means of bringing about knowledge and resolution (d'Almeida 1994). As mentioned earlier, Carl Jung (1965) considers myth and folk tales as proof for the existence of a collective unconscious made up of archetypal figures that are expressed through symbolism and other means. One of these archetypes is the figure of the wise old man. According to Jung (1965), this is a kindly figure of wisdom, knowledge and power with a mystical aura around him. The role of the mythical wise old man in Gambian folklore, as in many other parts of Africa, is frequently portrayed by the fortune teller, popularly known in and around The Gambia as marabout. He is considered a religious man of great wisdom, knowledge, and supernatural powers. Like the Jungian archetype, the marabout is considered a source of guidance and resolution. Seeking to set her daughter apart from her stepdaughter, Khadijatou turns to the venerable Efra for guidance.

However, the ambiguity that Barthes (1972) associates with the mythical form is evident in the concept of the marabout figure. Despite his wise counsel to Khadijatou on how to nurture a stepdaughter, Efra proceeds to facilitate a distinction between the two half-sisters. This turned out to be a profoundly symbolic and anti-social gesture of discrimination that culminates in the complete disintegration of the sacred filial bonds that held Pateh's family together. A clear depiction of the dark, ominous side of the marabout figure, this tendency which often compels

him to abuse his power and influence in evil, unreligious, and cynical ways, constitutes a real menace for Gambian society. Countless relationships, marriages, family ties, and innocent lives have been destroyed by the dark mysticism of the marabout. Thus, parallel to the mythical figure of the evil stepmother, Efra fulfills the role of the archetypal wise old man, a mythical form signifying the ambivalent figure of the marabout as he dithers in the nature of his actions between good and evil.

The battle between good and evil and the ultimate defeat of the devil by the divine constitute the cornerstone of all social systems and are accordingly the subject of numerous myths and folk tales. The tale here is that of the villain, Lolly, versus the hero, Bai Njougoup. As a witch, Lolly is an old lady who casts evil spells to devour men who wish to marry her daughters. Bai Njougoub, born with the power to transform himself sought to save his brothers and the rest of their society from the witch's evil. He poses as the cultural hero who delivers society from the menace of a persistent malice. As for the witch, Singh (2021) explains that it is a cross-cultural figure that is portrayed in many demonising myths and narratives as the representation of evil and immorality. Believed to be in possession of dark powers, it is a portentous figure to the community, regarded as morally repugnant.

On the other hand, Njougoup is a Wolof noun that translates into English *bat*. As a linguistic sign, it comes with a certain history attached to its meaning. Thus, the heroic figure of Bai Njougoup is associated with the mythical creature of the bat. In that sense, it is possible to link the character of Bai Njougoup with the popular mythical hero of the Batman. This can be explained by a number of convergences in the narrative arc of the two characters' stories. Firstly, Bai Njougoup's resolve to make sure that the witch claims no other victims is a plausible adaptation of the Batman's dedication to fighting crime and evil. This way, Bai Njougoup gives his life to something bigger than himself and transcends the ordinary level of achievement, manifesting a typical quality of the heroic figure. Additionally, the cultural identification that associates Bai Njougoup with the mysterious creature of the bat suggests the source of his supernatural powers. It is reminiscent of the mythical belief that the Batman was initiated into his calling by the bats. In this case then, Bai Njougoup's duel with the witch can be read as a metaphorical representation of the ongoing battle between good and evil. Then, as Bai

Njougoup pushes the witch into a pit of fire, his victory is not to be deciphered merely as a moral lesson against evil tendencies. It must also be regarded as a symbolic expression of the ultimate victory of good over the inevitable conquest of evil.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyse Gambian myths and folk tales as traditional narratives through which cultural and moral principles, values, beliefs and customs of the society are transmitted. Employing Rolande Barthes' (1972) semiotic theory, the paper has attempted an exploration of the symbolic, metaphorical, and ideological concepts of various mythical forms contained in these narratives to unveil the moral and cultural significance that sustains them. The analysis has revealed that two main groups of mythical characters have been used as metaphorical vehicles to express a number of moral and cultural values. Animal figures such as the hare and the hyena, and human characters such as the evil stepmother, the marabout, the witch and the cultural hero have been used as symbolic vessels to raise a multitude of moral and cultural principles. As cross-cultural mythical figures, these are universal characters found playing different roles in diverse narrative forms across the world. However, these figures have been adapted to Gambian folk tales. On the first level of signification, these myths and tales utilise the linguistic system as narrative forms of storytelling. On the second level, however, the mythical characters assume symbolic meaning as metaphorical figures whose interactions within the narratives are used to preach the concepts of honesty, truthfulness, kindness, justice, fairness and equality. These moral principles function as a cultural compass guiding generations of Gambians through the conundrum of social existence.

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