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**The Expression of Parenthood  
through the Oral Tradition of Storytelling.  
Educational Relationships in a Corpus of Bwa Folktales from Mali**

**Abstract**

Are parents the best people to educate their children? In this context of great upheaval for young people – due to the significant increase in formal schooling and the development of youth labour migration since the 1990s – are the educational relationships depicted in folktales subversive, or indicative of a new situation where parents are struggling to fulfil their roles? We propose to approach the educational parenting relationship by basing our critique on the contrasting child figures that can be identified within this corpus. A first contrast is between the ill-treated orphan and the spoiled child. Likewise, the presence of an obedient child seems to counterbalance the many naughty or difficult children more often encountered in folk tales. Last, different types of extreme child characters capture our attention, obliging us to think more deeply about their parents' role in their education.

**1. Introduction**

During a collective research project<sup>1</sup> bringing together French and Malian researchers from various disciplines<sup>2</sup> whose overall objective was to reach a better understanding of rural parent/child relationships, our interest was drawn to the family relationships portrayed in

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<sup>2</sup> Demography, sociology, history, anthropology, and information and communication sciences.

folktales from the oral tradition of a rapidly changing society. This type of literary expression has seen a renaissance, following the development of rural radio stations in Mali since the 1990s (Leguy 2007). Our corpus was selected from a collection of tales recorded by local radio station hosts<sup>3</sup> in everyday settings in various villages, with the storytellers speaking directly to their usual audiences.<sup>4</sup> From these tales, we chose<sup>5</sup> those which deal with parent/child relationships – a total of thirty nine tales, sometimes including two or even three versions of the same “type” but told by different storytellers.<sup>6</sup> Unlike legends and epics (both literary genres based partly on historical realities), folktales are purely fictional stories that privilege the realm of the imagination. Although sometimes viewed as mirrors of society, folktales in the oral tradition are, first and foremost, channels of expression offering a certain freedom; they may even be instruments of subversion, as Zipes has clearly shown in the case of folktales published in European literature (2006). Folktales can depict unbelievable events or impossible relationships. The famous story of Oedipus, a myth recounting the macabre destiny of a parricidal, incestuous hero, is the archetypal example of literary creation’s potential for portraying extraordinary or unrealisable situations, particularly in families.

However, literature is also a means of considering what is possible, of envisaging ways of living other than those to which everyday life accustoms us, and of exploring their potential (Lévi-Strauss, 1973; Görög *et al.*, 1980; Görög-Karady and Seydou, 2001). Therefore it seemed valuable to analyse, alongside the socio-demographic research led by Véronique Hertrich into the Bwa people of Mali, the depiction of educational relationships in folktales, which are the principal form of literary expression in this context. What do tales

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<sup>3</sup> Radio Parana is a community radio station created in 1995 by Alexis Dembele, which broadcasts principally in the Bwa language from the small village of Parana, 4 kilometres from San, covering a radius of around 100 kilometres. The tales are broadcast during a popular weekly half-hour programme. (Dembele 2010)

<sup>4</sup> These tales are available in audio form (on cassettes), with a current total of just over two hundred tales across thirty-six volumes.

<sup>5</sup> The tales were translated by Alexis Dembele and Joseph Tanden Diarra, with the collaboration of Cécile Leguy and Pierre Diarra.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix for list of tales.

from the oral tradition teach us about parent/child relationships, particularly the educational relationship? How can these relationships be understood in today's rapidly changing situation?

The region that interests us, the Bwa region of Mali, is a fairly isolated rural area which has little infrastructure<sup>7</sup> but is nevertheless experiencing changes that affect family, childhood and the ways in which children are brought up (Hertrich *et al.*, 2012). The decline in infant mortality over the last fifty years represents a major development. In the 1960s, parents saw half their offspring, on average, die before the age of five; today 85% of children pass this stage and, as uncertainty reduces, families can envisage a future for their descendants. Fertility (in the order of eight children per woman) has not yet begun to fall and children represent a particularly high proportion of the population (more than half the population is aged under 15). Over the last 35 years, children's family environment has varied little, consisting of large family units with complex structures (about half are polynuclear).

Another major change is that formal schooling has expanded since the 1990s, partly through the building of community schools. Schooling was marginal before 1990, but now involves up to 50% of children in the region; in the first years of primary education, half the pupils are girls (Lesclingand *et al.*, forthcoming). Continuing at school to secondary level means migrating elsewhere, adding to the temporary labour migration that is now widespread among both girls and boys (80-90% of younger cohorts have migrated once for work by the age of 20: Hertrich and Lesclingand, 2013). This mobility, which begins at 12 or 13, means that some young people move a great distance away, separating early from their parents.

The corpus used here is composed of the thirty-nine tales most concerned with parenthood from among those recorded for radio, preserved in the form of audio cassettes and broadcast regularly. Choosing this corpus has the advantage – besides the richness and

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<sup>7</sup> Electricity came to San, the principal town, only in 2000.

diversity of the tales collected – of giving access to folktales which are currently circulating in the region. They are well known and much liked: even in the villages where there is no active storyteller, people listen to these broadcast tales (Leguy 2009).

Some of the child figures presented in these tales – especially orphans – and the pathway that orphans generally follow in them lead the audience to question whether parents are really the best people to educate their children. Indeed, faced with certain attitudes, we have reason to query the importance of obeying one's parents. If children sometimes demonstrate faults or behave immoderately, aren't their parents often the root cause? Any critical examination of the educational parenting relationship expressed in this corpus of folktales must highlight the questions about upbringing that surface from this literary speech, exchanged in idle moments or listened to for pleasure on the radio.

Among the tales we selected, various child figures stand out, and can be contrasted with each other: for each main type of central figure we identify, we observe that its opposite also exists in the corpus, in a more secondary role. We propose to approach the educational parenting relationship by basing our critique on the contrasting child figures that can be identified within this corpus. A first contrast is between the ill-treated orphan and the spoiled child. Likewise, the presence of an obedient child seems to counterbalance the many naughty or difficult children more often encountered in folk tales. Last, different types of extreme child characters capture our attention, obliging us to think more deeply about their parents' role in their education.

## **2. Do orphans receive a better education than other children?**

One child figure draws our attention first because it stands in opposition to the familiar image of the mistreated child,<sup>8</sup> often an orphan, frequently evoked in the tales.<sup>9</sup> This is the “spoiled” child, hero of Tale 30.

This spoiled child is an only child, born after the deaths of several siblings, referred to in Bomu<sup>10</sup> as *hinbwe* (died and reborn). At birth, such children generally receive protective

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<sup>8</sup> Tales 2 and 5 are about mistreated children, and Tales 15, 16, 17 and 22 focus more specifically on orphans, whether boys or girls.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in Görög-Karady and Baumgardt 1988, three out of six chapters are devoted to “The mistreated child”, “The abandoned child”, and “The black sheep”; the three others are “The brave child”, “The loyal child”, and “The dishonest child”.

“foil names” – using Maurice Houis’s terminology (1963) – and often receive more attention than other children. These children are therefore the exact opposite of orphans, who no longer have anyone to take care of them and may be mistreated by their mothers’ co-wives. This is a frequent scenario in folktales – particularly for girls, but also for boys, as in the story of Nyani in Tale 2. Here, a mother spoils her children with shea nuts, refusing to give the same to the orphaned Nyani; one day a hyena, disguised as the mother, traps all the children except Nyani, who did not come out when she called the children to come and get their nuts. Two tales in the corpus describe extremes of mistreatment. Tale 5 relates the suffering of Masira, orphaned daughter of the “hated wife”,<sup>11</sup> whose jealous half-sister complains and whose stepmother beats her, kills her and then burns her amidst the millet stalks. The story ends with the “talking ashes” in the grate denouncing the evil stepmother. Tale 22 is set at the funeral of a mother, where the orphaned baby is crying, demanding her milk. A kindly woman undergoes a whole series of tests (of the “successive exchanges” type) to be able to bring him a gourd of milk; however, the mourners drink it all under the pretext of tasting it for the child, and then leave, abandoning him to his sad fate.

The cases of mistreated children are not always so dramatic – Nyani ends up as the sole surviving child; and orphaned girls mistreated by their stepmothers are sometimes helped by animals or other allies (Tales 15, 16 and 17), ultimately finding a good husband more easily than their sisters. However, we often see these children obliged to seek the help they need outside their immediate circle. The success of orphans is thus a lesson in courage and perseverance; yet the result is that they often mature more quickly and learn more than other children.

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<sup>10</sup> Bomu (ISO 639-3: bmq) is a dialectical variant of Bwamu (spoken in Burkina Faso and Mali), a Gur language.

<sup>11</sup> In a polygamous setting, the husband frequently loves one wife more than the other: generally, the better worker is preferred. In Bomu, the favourite wife is called *hán-bára*, from the Bambara *baramuso* (beloved wife) – *bára* also refers to work – while the other is named *hán-ní’a* (hated wife).

Tales 15, 16 and 17 all clearly deal with the subject of initiation. The three tales differ, but all focus on a young woman who, held back by her stepmother for extra chores, cannot go to get her hair braided at the same time as her friends.

**Summary** of Tale 15: A man with a son and a daughter from a first marriage weds a very beautiful woman, who bears him a very pretty little daughter and then dies. This girl's stepmother mistreats her, giving her all sorts of tasks, even the most difficult. However, the chief's son wants to marry her. He makes gifts to the girl, which her parents accept even though they are not willing to give him her hand in marriage. A great feast is being prepared; but as there is no griotte<sup>12</sup> in the village, the young women must go to another village to get their hair braided. As her stepmother demands that she finish her work, the girl cannot leave with her friends. She asks them to mark the way for her with a leaf, but the leaf is blown away and lands on another road. Meanwhile, the girl is held back by her stepmother who asks her to sort seeds. With the help of some ants, she succeeds in this task and is free to leave, but her unkind stepmother refuses to give her any of the beautiful garments presented by her fiancé to adorn herself. As the leaf has blown away, the girl gets lost and meets an old "genie" woman, who has removed her scalp to delouse it. The girl greets her, and tells her story. The old woman asks the girl to wash her back. A python appears and invites the girl to get into his mouth when it is red, which she does. He chews her up: when she emerges, her hair is beautifully braided and her teeth all white. The old woman asks her to wash her back again; when she does, it opens to reveal beautiful clothes. The serpent tells her that from now on she must no longer guffaw like a young girl. When she returns to the village, her hair is so beautiful that the stepmother rebukes her own daughter for not having waited for the girl.

We see the young woman tested several times: she is separated from her group of friends, subject to chores including grain-sorting, in which she is helped by ants, and then she is sent down the wrong road. There she meets an old genie woman, who – as Calame-Griaule shows in her analysis of the Dogon version of *The Kind and the Unkind Girls* (AT 480) (1987: 177-206) – is often a sort of initiator figure. The old woman asks the girl to wash her back, which she does willingly. Upon her return, adorned and braided, she is ready to marry the chief's son. She is advised only to stop guffawing like a young girl: she is a woman now.

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<sup>12</sup> Bwa society includes an endogamous griot caste. In addition to their roles as spokespeople and musicians, they also engage in certain crafts: weaving, shoemaking, and, in the case of women, hairdressing.

Tale 16 focuses more on a stepmother's jealousy, which has harmful consequences for her own daughter's development. Here, it is lions who come to the orphaned girl's aid; and when the stepmother sees her return with gold threads braided into her hair, she dies on the spot. Her daughter, wishing to be equally beautiful, sets off herself, but does not know how to respond to the lion's song and just gets eaten.

The orphaned girl is therefore very often a "good girl" character who knows how to respond to people, the best attitudes to adopt to get others to help her, and what behaviour is expected of a well-brought-up young woman. She seems to be ready to leave childhood behind more quickly than a girl whose mother is still alive.

Now let us turn to our "counter-example", the spoiled child presented in Tale 30:

**Summary:** This is the tale of an only child, born after several older siblings had died. His parents indulge his every whim. The child demands a stool made of gold and diamonds. His parents scour every market, to no avail. Finally, an old man tells them to buy the gold and diamonds and have the stool made by craftsmen. All this is extremely expensive, but they do it for their only son. This temperamental boy does not want to eat or drink unless he is sitting on the stool. During the overwintering, the whole family goes to harvest peas, but the child falls asleep and leaves his stool in the field. His parents promise to collect it the next day, but he will not hear of it: he sets off to look for it alone.

When he arrives, some genies are busy making a sacrifice: their leader is sitting on the stool, holding the sacrificial cockerel. The child grabs the stool, tipping the genie onto the ground. The cockerel runs away. Two genie children are sent to chase the child while the others look for the cockerel. Twice they catch up with the child, but he manages to slow them down by singing: they cannot help themselves and start dancing, which allows him to flee each time. Finally he reaches home, so afraid that he says to his parents: "I'm never going to be naughty again!"

Here, too, the tale's initiatory subject-matter is clear, but the final lesson is addressed more to parents than to children themselves: they must know when to put an end to children's whims, otherwise parenting an only child is impossible. The spoiled child's demands are

excessive and lead him to take risks. Pursued by genies, he finds a way of tricking them by refusing to show where he is going, and sings them a lullaby whose lyrics confess that he deserves what is happening to him: “*Father, I really asked for this. Mother, I really asked for this*”. And when he finally reaches his destination safe and sound, he himself announces an end to his whims. He seems more ready to grow up than his parents who, blinded by their love for this only child, do not realize how excessive his demands are and do not seem very concerned with his education.

This counter-example, considered alongside the tales about mistreated orphans, ultimately also shows that the parents alone are not always the best people to bring up their children. Without a parent, children seem to mature better and more quickly, whilst the spoiled child suffers from never being truly educated at all. Does this mean that it takes several people to bring up a child well?

### **3. Must children really obey their parents?**

A certain number of tales portray children who are asocial, disobedient, or even “terrible”<sup>13</sup> to use the term specific to a tale-type<sup>14</sup> of which we have two versions. But the antithetical character, the obedient child, is also the hero of one tale (Tale 38), which it is interesting to consider alongside the others.

Tale 6 is about a lazy girl, who does everything too late: she starts dancing in the village square when everyone else is already asleep. God sends her an evil genie, a sort of baby covered in eyes, who clings onto her back and whom she cannot throw off. This problem is interpreted as punishing her for being badly behaved and asocial. Her parents send her into the bush, where she gets rid of her “baby” by tempting it with honey then going away,

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<sup>13</sup> Children who are asocial (6; 20; 26; 27), “terrible” (28; 29) or disobedient (19; 31; 39) and difficult girls (34; 35; 36; 37) are well represented in our corpus.

<sup>14</sup> See Görög, Platiel, Rey-Hulman and Seydou, 1980.



claiming that she needs to relieve herself. When she returns to the village, having learned her lesson, she sets to work earlier than all the other girls.

Through the test imposed upon her, therefore, this asocial girl finds the means of becoming a well-brought-up woman. This is also true of certain “difficult girls”, like the one in Tale 35, who is saved by her little sister, or Masira (Tale 36) who is rescued by the domestic animals who accompanied her – or the young woman in Tale 37 for whom prayers and sacrifices are effective *in extremis* (when, swallowed by the python, only her head remains outside...) But it is not true of all asocial or disobedient children. Because she refuses to listen to her mother’s suspicions, Mama, another “difficult girl”, is led to the bottom of the river by the python disguised as a handsome young man (Tale 34). Dabi (Tale 20) refuses to go out with boys, saying that she will only marry the one who succeeds in making her speak; a mischievous leper forces her to answer him, and in the end she commits suicide by jumping from a tree. She is turned into fonio. (The leper, falling after her, becomes the sorrel from which the fonio seeds are now inseparable – as the tale says, like men and women...) The race between Porinabwè and Zè’è, the terrible twins (Tales 28 and 29), ends with the first becoming the great rumble of thunder and the second, its echo. Manburu, the child who calls his mother by her name although she has forbidden him to do so, brings about her tragic end through his obstinacy.

These tales show that disobedience does not always lead to a redeeming life lesson. However, in another tale, a disobedient character plays an educational role – but for his father rather than for himself.

**Summary** of Tale 39: A man is so rich that he has a house built for himself out of *tô*.<sup>15</sup> Proudful, he demands that his children say after each meal that their father is above God. The youngest child refuses and runs away after each meal, pursued by his brothers. One day, as he is running away with his old horse, he falls into an anthill and finds himself in a village, landing on the canton chief’s roof. He is welcomed like a prodigal son and, upon the chief’s death, is entrusted with the chieftaincy. Two years later, his father is

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<sup>15</sup> The millet paste which is the staple rural food of the region.

ruined: his children and wives die, and he has nothing left to eat but the walls of his house. When it has all been eaten, he leaves, living off rubbish along the way. He falls into the same anthill and finds himself on the roof of his son's house. The children see him eating rubbish and call their father, who recognizes the man as his own father and sends for something for him to drink. After several days, the man regains his strength. The young man gathers all the villagers together, declaring that this man is his father, that he was very rich but very prideful, and that he had chased his son from his house for refusing to say that his father was above God. He asks his father what has happened and listens to his explanation. He asserts that it is not good for a son to be set above his father and passes the chieftaincy to his father.

Here, the child is disobedient, but this is because his father's command is unreasonable. By refusing to play his father's game, he thus shows a certain maturity: he sees beyond simple obedience to paternal power. His journey of initiation leads him into another world (he falls underground and arrives in a village where he becomes the chief), whilst his father loses everything and sinks deeper into his own immaturity by eating the walls of his *tô* house. When he meets his fallen, destitute father, the son shows him that he is wise, just, and respectful of social rules and the generational order, giving him a belated but salutary life lesson. Here, it is actually the son who educates the father.

In contrast to all these terrible, difficult or disobedient children – all headstrong and therefore, with the exception of the last example, very difficult to educate – an astonishingly obedient child features in one tale from our corpus.

**Summary** of Tale 38: A man has two wives, each with one son. Every market day, he gives five cowries to his favourite wife's son, and only one to the son of the hated wife. The latter saves his cowry, while the other spends everything. With his savings, the boy buys himself a chicken which lays twelve eggs, each giving two chicks. Soon he has lots of chickens, and asks his father what he should do with them. His father, jealous and wanting his son to lose out, advises him to cook the chickens before taking them to market. His mother does not agree, but the son decides to obey his father. Nobody wants to buy the chicken, which starts to smell bad. But one day the daughter of a very rich man falls ill and the soothsayer says that she must eat some dead chicken. Their slaves go to market and see flies circling around the young man. The girl eats a piece of his chicken and is restored to life. To thank the boy, the rich man offers him numerous gifts, and five slaves to escort him, playing music. He returns home with great pomp, to his mother's great surprise. Despite her reluctance, the boy wishes to ask his father's advice once more. The father, desiring his son's ruin, tells him to sell the horse and

bulls he has received as gifts, and to buy blades of grass, which the boy does. Then his mother goes blind and poverty threatens them; but one day, she takes a blade of grass and accidentally sets it alight. The glow restores her sight, which is worth more than anything! The storyteller finishes by commenting: “This shows that if you obey your father, God will not abandon you”.

In this tale, the child is mistreated by his father as the son of the hated wife, but despite everything is totally trusting and respects his father’s word. Here, too, the father’s jealousy shows his immaturity, in contrast to the determination of the child who blindly obeys his advice even though it is ridiculous. This child could be thought particularly silly, but his success shows the opposite. In the end, he gains more than any riches since, thanks to his obedience, his mother regains her sight. However, although the child is obedient, once again his father does not play an educational role. On the contrary, the father is jealous and immature, and his child’s trust serves only to reinforce this: it is not thanks to his father that he succeeds, but rather despite him, miraculously escaping the traps he lays and remaining a docile, well-brought-up child despite the adult’s perversity.

#### **4. Are children to blame for their excesses?**

The tales in this corpus also depict children who behave unacceptably, but their faults are often accentuated by the attitudes of their own parents. We may therefore wonder, once again, whether parents are really fulfilling their educational role.

“The child who fears nothing” is a well-represented figure in the corpus.<sup>16</sup> These are extraordinary children, with inordinate destructive powers, who kill many more animals than is reasonable (for example, Tales 32 and 33). This is dangerous not only for the children, who finds themselves in thorny situations (in Tale 32, for example, one is taken prisoner by sable antelopes who want to kill him), but also for their parents. In Tale 26, the intrepid child who kills too many animals meets a man-killing monster in the bush. He befriends the monster,

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<sup>16</sup> The child who fears nothing (26; 27; 31; 32; 33); the terrible children (28; 29).

who helps him fish, enabling him to bring great quantities of fish to the village. Despite his reluctance, his greedy mother wants to go fishing with him – and it is only through her son's cunning that she narrowly avoids getting eaten by the monster. Here, we see that excess is a family affair; ultimately, the son shows himself more reasonable than his mother.

In contrast to these fearless characters, two tales in the corpus (Tales 11 and 12) present a boy who is afraid of everything.

**Summary** of Tale 11: A boy is so cowardly that his father fears he will never become a man. Seeking a solution, he asks his son to come with him to make a sacrifice in the village where he was born, but abandons the boy alone in the middle of the bush with the goat. Hearing a hyena approaching, the boy can think of no better plan than to kill the goat and chop it up in order to hide under its skin, because he does not want to see what happens. The hyena is attracted by the smell of meat. The boy climbs a shea tree. The hyena eats the goat, then leaves. But soon, ghosts arrive with a dead young man, who asks to be mourned; then he asks a blacksmith to go and fetch a shea fruit. The gigantic blacksmith climbs the tree and grabs the leg of the frightened boy, who begins to scream. All the ghosts flee. Next, the boy hides in a termite nest, but the ghosts come back and the dead man asks to be buried in the nest. The blacksmith begins to dig, but the boy positions his quiver in defence. The blacksmith breaks it, and keeps digging. So the boy defends himself, first with his bow and then his hatchet; finally he has only his whip. He tells himself that it is better to die than to defend himself so like a woman. So he attacks the blacksmith, hitting him: the others are singing and do not hear his screams. He kills the blacksmith, who falls on top of the dead man, then he sets about hitting the dead man. Everyone runs away except the dead man, who hides under the grass. Each time a ghost comes back, the boy hits it. He gathers his things and returns to the village. When his father asks him about his adventure, he answers by asking for an iron-tipped whip: he feels ready to fight a lion.

The initiatory subject-matter of the tale is clear: this boy who is afraid of everything will never become a man. When his father abandons him in the bush, he can think of nothing better to do than to hide under the goat's skin, sacrificing the animal to do so and stupidly attracting the hyena with the smell of blood. All his attitudes seem ridiculous and immature; yet he will emerge from this adventure grown up and ready to fight. But the father, despite setting the boy's transformation in motion by abandoning him in the bush, has not played a major role in his education. He triggers his son's initiation process by putting him to the test;

but the boy finally accomplishes it when, somewhat indirectly, the hyena, the blacksmith and the ghosts force him to overcome his fear. He has to draw the strength to grow up and become a courageous adult from outside the family circle.

We can also contrast two other extreme child figures from the corpus: the child with too many good qualities and the child with too many flaws (in particular, the lazy girl in Tale 6, discussed above). The child with “too many” good qualities<sup>17</sup> is generally too handsome, which is a source of misfortune for both the child and the parents.

For example, in tales about the handsome Naalo (Tales 8 and 9), his excessive beauty – which makes all the girls desire him as their husband and all the women eager to be seduced by him – arouses the jealousy of the other men, who finally poison him. Blind, leprous, and destitute, Naalo continues to arouse the women’s admiration and the men’s jealousy. He throws himself into the river, where he is saved and healed by a fish; the fish asks him simply to forbid his family from fishing in future. But his mother, a woman who loves food, will not hear of it. She catches the fish who saved Naalo, kills, cooks, and even – in Tale 9 – eats it, leaving Naalo to find only the bones. However, Naalo manages to put the fish back together and return it to the water, banning his descendants from eating it in future. Here, we once more see a boy who manages to rectify the mistakes of one of his parents.

In Tale 18, the parents are blinded by their pride in having a very beautiful daughter. They wish to keep her to themselves: they shut her away, imprisoning her in her bedroom. But a crafty young man manages to smuggle his friend in, putting him inside a bag which he gives them to look after. The friend keeps company with the imprisoned girl. Finally, when she is expecting a baby, her parents are forced to accept the idea of sharing their daughter with other people.

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<sup>17</sup> Tales about such children: 8; 9; 18.

Numerous tales feature parents who are “flawed”, unreasonable, irresponsible, and ultimately more excessive in their faults than the children themselves. The desire to have children is evident in several tales – notably Tales 1 and 4, where it is the main subject. Yet this understandable desire, which is sometimes satisfied thanks to a promise or outside help (from an animal or plant), does not prevent parents from being imprudent, either through overconfidence or a loose tongue (in Tale 1, for example, the mother gives away her secret to a griotte) or through some other flaw – such as gluttony in Tale 4.

Thus, pride in having children – considered the greatest human riches in Bwa society, as in many African cultures – sometimes veers towards arrogance. In Tale 13, a man thinks he can do whatever he likes because he has four children (or, in Tale 14, twelve!).

**Summary** of Tale 13: A man marries a very beautiful girl, who bears him four handsome sons. Once the boys have grown up, he decides that he no longer needs to farm, because they will do it for him. They harvest lots of millet, fonio and sorrel. As his pile of sorrel is enormous, he decides that they will collect it tomorrow, whether or not God wills it. But a hedgehog has given birth under the pile of sorrel. The hedgehog starts to cry, and tells God what is happening. God asks her whether the man has left things up to Him: she says no. God tells her not to worry and to go to sleep. The next day, the oldest boy dies, and his funeral gives the hedgehog a day’s respite. However, the man wants to collect the sorrel the next day, whether or not God wills it. In this way, he loses two more sons. So he decides to ask other people to help his family harvest the sorrel, God willing. As he has left it up to God, the hedgehog is no longer protected and God advises her to leave with her young. When he finds hedgehog droppings under the sorrel, the man understands that he has missed something.

This over-proud father did not know how to protect his children, valuing his own success above their lives. The tale suggests that educating children is not the primary concern of parents who have brought them into the world first and foremost out of a desire to gain more social power, and so take no interest in their offspring’s future. (This is even more striking in the version with twelve children.) There are also many parents who even demonstrate jealousy towards their children. This is generally true of stepmothers who cannot stand their co-wife’s daughter being prettier (Tale 5) or betrothed to a better man (Tale 15),

but it can also be true of mothers themselves; for example, those who cannot resist a good fish (Tales 8, 9 and 31) even at the risk of bringing about their child's downfall and their own.

Although the children in these tales include boys who are afraid of growing up and girls who are afraid of marrying, there are also parents who refuse to allow their children to grow up, leave them, and get married.<sup>18</sup> In Tale 7, the parents do not want their three sons to see anyone apart from them; the boys have to scheme to find wives, even after their parents' deaths. In Tale 25, a witch kills all her seven daughters' suitors, until a dwarf accompanied by his seven brothers – a sort of African “Hop-o'-my-Thumb” – tricks her into slitting her daughters' throats. Tale 10, in particular, shows a father's reluctance to see his children married, as the father falls in love with his youngest son's wife and is prepared to kill the son to keep his wife for himself.

One observation emerges clearly from any reading of the tales in this corpus: parents' flaws often seem more excessive and destructive than their children's!

## **5. Conclusion: children as teachers?**

Despite the parents' role in educating their children, these tales do not always show them setting a good example by their own behaviour. On the contrary, the children themselves – whose maturity may be revealed by comparison with the stupidity or folly of their parents – often develop so positively over the course of the story that we have good reason to wonder whether they play more of an educational role than their parents.

Is it through a sense of irony or even subversion that storytellers like to show children giving lessons to parents who are proud, greedy, preoccupied, or uninterested in really parenting their children? Might not the process of educating children – showcased in the numerous tales in the oral tradition that deal with initiation into the adult world – primarily

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<sup>18</sup> Tales 7, 10, 18 and 25.

represent an opportunity for parents to be educated themselves? In a shifting context, where numbers in formal schooling are constantly rising and young women are increasingly leaving to work in towns without asking permission from family authorities, this question takes on a new dimension, requiring us to examine how the relationships between children and parents within these tales echo contemporary realities.

### **List of folktales in the corpus**

- 1/ The palmyra palm's children
- 2/ Nyani, the unloved orphan
- 3/ Who are the Diarra? The child who was adopted by a lioness
- 4/ The tortoise who made a promise
- 5/ Masira, the child mistreated by her stepmother
- 6/ The lazy girl
- 7/ The man, his wife and their three children
- 8/ Handsome Naalo (Version 1)
- 9/ Naalo the orphan (Version 2)
- 10/ The man who takes his son's wife
- 11/ The cowardly young man (Version 1)
- 12/ The child who is too afraid (Version 2)
- 13/ The man and his four sons (Version 1)
- 14/ The man and his twelve children (Version 2)
- 15/ The orphaned girl (Version 1)
- 16/ The orphaned girl's jealous co-wife (Version 2)
- 17/ The orphaned girl (Version 3)
- 18/ The parents who didn't want their daughter to marry
- 19/ The woman who doesn't want her son Manburu to call her by name
- 20/ Dabi, or the girl who didn't want to speak to anyone
- 21/ The lying leper (the orphan protected by animals)
- 22/ Where does the orphan come from?
- 23/ The man who couldn't have a child
- 24/ The man with two wives
- 25/ The woman who was a witch
- 26/ The young man who fears nothing
- 27/ The orphaned shepherd
- 28/ Porinabwè and his brother Zè'è (The terrible child) (Version 1)
- 29/ Porinabwè and his brother Zè'è (The terrible child) (Version 2)
- 30/ The spoiled child
- 31/ The reckless young man
- 32/ The hunter and the wild animals (Version 1)
- 33/ The hunter and the wild animals (Version 2)
- 34/ Mama the young woman (another version of the difficult girl)
- 35/ The young man without a scar (The difficult girl, version 1)
- 36/ Masira, the girl who didn't want a boy with a scar (The difficult girl, version 2)



- 37/ The girl who didn't want to marry a man with a scratch (The difficult girl, version 3)
- 38/ The child who obeyed his father
- 39/ The rich man

BRILL

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