

Part 1.
**Educational Functions of African Storytelling:
Challenges and Acquisitions**

**Fonctions éducatives des contes africains :
défis et acquisitions**

Expressing Parenthood through Oral Storytelling: Educational Relationships in a Corpus of Bwa Folktales from Mali

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ABSTRACT

It is a time of great upheaval for Bwa young people due to the significant increase in formal schooling and the development of youth labour migration since the 1990s. In such a context, can the educational relationships depicted in traditional folktales be considered subversive, or are they indicative of a new situation where parents are struggling to fulfil their roles? More fundamentally, are parents the best people to educate their own children? This article approaches the educational parenting relationship by investigating the contrasting child figures identified in a corpus of 39 folktales. A first contrast is between the ill-treated orphan and the spoilt child. Likewise, the presence of an obedient child counterbalances the more frequently encountered naughty or difficult children. Lastly, different types of extreme child characters capture our attention, obliging us to think more deeply about their parents' role in their education. The parent-child relationships in these folktales might seem paradoxical and even subversive, because in them we encounter children who are more mature and reasonable than their parents.

Keywords: *parent-child relationships, childhood, parenthood, education, folktales, Bwa (Mali).*

1. INTRODUCTION

During a collective research project¹ bringing together French and Malian researchers from various disciplines² whose overall objective was to reach a better understanding of rural parent-child relationships, my interest was drawn to the family relationships portrayed in the folktales of a rapidly changing society. This type of literary expression has seen revitalization, following the development of rural radio stations in Mali since the 1990s (Leguy 2007).

The Bwa people of Mali speak the Boomu language (ISO 639-3: bmq), a dialect of Bwamu, a Gur language. The corpus was selected from a collection of classic folktales recorded by Radio Parana, a local radio station created in 1995 by Alexis Dembele, which broadcasts principally in Boomu from the small village of Parana, four kilometres from San, and which covers a radius of around 100 kilometres (Dembele 2010). The programme in question is on air for half an hour every Sunday night and always contains two or three folktales. Some popular ones – for example, those performed by the talented storyteller Alexandre Coulibaly – are more frequently broadcasted than the others. However, all of them are archived on audio cassette – the current total is just over 200 folktales in 36 volumes – and it is possible to buy any of these for private listening.

The performance context can be qualified as “induced natural”, according to Goldstein’s third category (1964: 87ff). The folktales are recorded in ordinary, everyday settings in various villages for the radio programme, not for our research project. The radio presenter organizes a storytelling evening in advance with one or several storytellers in a particular village, then visits the location for the recording. The storytellers interact directly with their habitual audiences and participants are aware that the performance is recorded. Now and then, the recordings contain allusions to the context, for example when the storyteller asks the radio presenter for some millet beer, or makes reference to international headlines, knowing full well that his listeners recognise him as a news presenter as well.³

The corpus is composed of the 39 folktales most concerned with relations between parents and children.⁴ This choice has the advantage – besides ensuring

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² Demography, sociology, history, anthropology, and information and communication sciences.

³ Leguy (2009) presents a detailed analysis of the consequences of this particular speech act on performance.

⁴ The folktales were translated from Boomu into French by Alexis Dembele and Joseph Tanden Diarra, with the collaboration of Cécile Leguy and Pierre Diarra. See Appendix for a complete list.

richness and diversity – 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 the broadcasts (Leguy 2009). Since they are “family stories”, one can imagine how they impact listeners’ perceptions of parent-child relationships.

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 are, first and foremost, channels of expression offering a certain freedom; they may even be instruments of subversion, as Zipes (2006) clearly shows in the case of published European folktales. They can depict unbelievable events and impossible relationships. The famous story of Oedipus, a myth recounting the macabre destiny of a parricidal, incestuous hero, is an archetypal example of literature’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 seems valuable to analyse the depiction of educational relationships in folktales, which are the principal form of literary expression in this context. What lessons do they offer about parent-child relationships, particularly as it concerns education? How can these relationships be understood in today’s rapidly changing context?

The Bwa region of Mali is a fairly isolated rural area which has little infrastructure 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 are under 15). Over the last 35 years, the family has varied little, consisting of large units with complex structures, about half of which are polynuclear.

Another major change is that formal schooling has expanded since the 1990s, partly through the building of community schools (Lange, 2003). 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 young people have migrated at least 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 at an early age from their parents.

Some of the child figures presented in these folktales, especially orphans, lead the audience to question whether parents are really the best people to educate their children. Indeed, certain attitudes call into question 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 oral literature, exchanged in idle moments or listened to for pleasure on the radio.

Among the folktales in the corpus, various child figures stand out, and can be contrasted with each other: for each main type of central figure identified, its opposite is also present in a subsidiary role. This article approaches the educational parenting relationship by investigating the contrasting child figures that can be identified within the corpus. A first contrast is between the ill-treated orphan and the spoiled child. Likewise, the presence of an obedient child counterbalances the more frequently encountered naughty or difficult children. Lastly, different types of extreme child characters capture our attention, obliging us to think more deeply about their parents' role in their education. The parent-child relationships in these folktales might seem paradoxical and even subversive, because in them we encounter children who are more mature and reasonable than their parents. However, this corresponds to a social reality, since nowadays children are learning outside of the family circle what they need to succeed in their adult lives.

2. DO ORPHANS RECEIVE A BETTER EDUCATION THAN OTHER CHILDREN?

One particular child figure draws our attention straight away because it stands in opposition to the familiar image of the mistreated child (folktales 2, 5), who is often an orphan (folktales 15, 16, 17, 22).⁵ This is the spoiled child who is the hero of folktale 30. This spoiled child is an only child, born after the deaths of several siblings, referred to in Boomu as *hínb̀wè* (died and reborn). At birth, such children generally receive protective "foil names" (Houis, 1963) and often get 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 (folktale 2). Here, a mother spoils her children with shea fruit, refusing to give any 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 fruit.

⁵ In Görög-Karady and Baumgardt (1988), three of six chapters are devoted to "The mistreated child", "The abandoned child", and "The black sheep".

Two folktales describe extremes of mistreatment. Folktale 5 relates the suffering of Masira, the orphaned daughter of the “hated wife”,⁶ 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. Folktale 22 takes place 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; see Paulme 1976: 138–164) 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 (Folktales 15, 16, 17), ultimately finding a good husband more easily than their sisters. However, these children are often obliged to seek help 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.

Among the Bwa people, as in many rural African societies, “good education” consists of nurturing the child to becoming an adult who is respectful of social norms, primarily by providing behavioural models to imitate. Traditionally marked by a masked initiation during adolescence (Capron 1957, 1962, 1973), learning about cultural values comes about gradually, in successive stages lived and shared by those of the same age set (Capron 1971). These necessarily lead the individual towards the culmination in death – the ultimate initiation – that bequeaths to him the status of ancestor. Indeed, it is considered one’s duty not just to become an adult but also a productive and hard-working individual, who knows how to strengthen existing networks and establish new ones, whose actions allow the family to prosper and who leaves behind many descendants; an adult whose exemplary life will, in turn, serve as a model for future generations. Folktales 15, 16 and 17 all clearly deal with the subject of initiation. Calame-Griaule shows, particularly in *Des cauris au marché* (1987), how frequently folktales can be considered as stories about initiation, with the hero undergoing successive stages of separation, marginalization and re-integration such as define any rite of passage (Van Gennep 1909/1981). The purpose of these three folktales is to show how an abused young girl shows her maturity, in contrast to another child who is spoiled by her mother. The stories 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.

⁶ In a polygamous setting, the husband frequently loves one wife more than the other: generally, the better worker is preferred. In Boomu, the favourite wife is called *hán-bárá*, from the Bambara *baramuso* (beloved wife) – *bárá* also refers to work – while the other is named *hán-ní’a* (hated wife).

Summary of folktale 15: A man with a son and a daughter from a previous 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 family 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 griot⁷ in the village, the young women must go to another village to get their hair braided. As the girl's stepmother demands that she finish her work, she cannot leave with her friends. So she asks them to mark the way for her with a leaf, but the leaf is blown away and lands on another path. Meanwhile, the stepmother holds the girl back by asking her to sort seeds. With the help of some ants, the girl 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 snake tells her that from now on she must no longer giggle like a little 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.

In this folktale, the young woman is tested several times: she is separated from her group of friends, subject to chores including seed sorting, in which she is helped by ants, and then she is sent down the wrong path. The old genie woman – as Calame-Griaule shows in her analysis of the Dogon version of *The Kind and the Unkind Girls*⁸ (1987: 177–206) – is often a sort of initiator figure.

Folktale 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 own 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 "kind 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

⁷ 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.

⁸ ATU 480 (Uther 2004 : 281-283).

to be ready to leave childhood behind more quickly than a girl whose mother is still alive.

Now let us turn to a counter-example, the spoiled child presented in Folktale 30:

Summary: This is the folktale 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. The temperamental boy does not want to eat or drink unless he is sitting on the stool. 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. The song's lyrics confess that he deserves what is happening to him: "*Father, I really asked for this. Mother, I really asked for this*". Finally he reaches home, so afraid that he says to his parents: "I'm never going to be naughty again!"

Here, too, the folktale'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 their child's whims, otherwise parenting an only child becomes 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 seduces them with a song. 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 folktales about mistreated orphans, ultimately shows that the parents alone are not always the best people to bring up their own children. In these stories, children seem to mature better and more quickly without a parent, whilst the spoiled child suffers from never being truly educated at all. Does this mean that, in real life too, it takes several people to bring up a child well? This question can be compared with the child's environment as it is observed in Bwa society. The ordinary organization of the family usually places children in the presence of many other people besides the

parents themselves. The Boomu term for the basic family unit, *zun*, covers the wives, sons and daughters-in-law of a single patriarch, as well as all their children. The role of educator is thus ensured as much by the two paternal grandparents and the other adults present as by the child's parents themselves. Nevertheless, as Platiel (1981: 157) notes concerning other similar West African corpora, members of the extended family are not particularly visible in folktales. No grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles or aunts figure in the corpus; the only adult characters are the parents of the child and the co-wife of the mother.

In the current context, this investigation into the educational role of parents finds an echo in the dilemmas faced by families today. One example is schooling which offers successful children a better social position through an education that is beyond the reach of their illiterate parents, and is transmitted by adults from outside the family, and sometimes even from a different region. Another example is the phenomenon of rural exodus. For young people, especially those who have never attended school, working as a house-help in a town is a way of acquiring useful skills that they could never have acquired by staying in the village (cooking and cleaning, literacy and numeracy, health and hygiene, Bambara language acquisition etc.). Young people today can thus envisage a life beyond the family context. Encouraged by school children returning to spend their holidays in the village, and house-helps who return proud of their migration experience (Leguy 2014), young people may start to wonder if it is really necessary to obey their parents in order to be well-educated.

3. MUST CHILDREN REALLY OBEY THEIR PARENTS?

A certain number of folktales in the corpus portray children who are antisocial (folktales 6, 20, 26, 27) or disobedient (19, 31, 39), “defiant girls” (*filles difficiles*)⁹ (34, 35, 36, 37) (Görög-Karady and Seydou 2001) or even “terrible children” (*enfants terribles*) (28, 29) (Görög *et al.*, 1980). But the antithetical character, the obedient child, is also the hero of one folktale (38), which it is interesting to consider alongside the others. To what extent is the relationship of obedience, a social expectation of children towards their elders, truly constructive for the children themselves and for society? How can children's disobedience in folktales be understood in a context in which the model offered by parents does not always lead to success?

Folktale 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

⁹ Corresponding to several categories of the *Aarne-Thompson-Uther Classification of Folk Tales* such as ATU 311, 312, 425, 471, and 900 (Haring 105).

being badly behaved and antisocial. Her parents send her into the bush, where she gets rid of her “baby” by tempting it with honey then wandering off, 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 antisocial girl finds the means of becoming a well brought-up woman. This is also true of certain “defiant girls” (Görög-Karady & Seydou 2001), like the one in folktale 35 who is saved by her little sister, or Masira (folktale 36) who is rescued by the domestic animals who accompanied her, or the young woman in folktale 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 antisocial or disobedient children. Because she refuses to listen to her mother’s suspicions, Mama, another “defiant girl”, is led to the bottom of the river by the python disguised as a handsome young man (folktale 34). The race between Porinabwè and Zè’è, the terrible twins (folktales 28, 29), ends with the first becoming a 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 (folktale 19), brings about her tragic end through his obstinacy.

However, these disobedient children, whether they fall in line or remain rebels, do play a warning role by calling into question the usual social rules, in the same way as Görög *et al.* (1980: 40ff) claim concerning the “terrible child” and other “incomplete beings” who are careless of social norms.

The lazy young girl in folktale 6, who manages to get rid of her evil genie in the bush, just like the “filles difficiles” who finally accept the marriage arranged by their parents, find new vistas opening for them in spite of everything. In a society where work is considered a fundamental value and where one usually chooses a wife for her ability to work hard rather than for her beauty, the attitude of the lazy girl seems to suggest that there may be a “right to be lazy”. Moreover, her parents let her indulge in her laziness until divine punishment forces them to wake up to her waywardness. However, they do not try to solve the problem themselves, but instead send her off into the bush, that is, beyond the limits of the family, to find for herself the means of getting rid of the evil genie. The genie’s many eyes symbolize the girl’s antisocial nature, but perhaps they also represent other ways of viewing the world. For example, in a modern world that condemns child labour¹⁰ and that considers schooling to be

¹⁰ The Malian Labour Code (Act 92-020, 23 September 1992) regulates child labour. In the workplace, according to Article L187 (p. 32), a child cannot be employed even as an apprentice before the age of 14 without special dispensation. According to Article D189-14 (p. 82), children under 18 must not be expected to perform agricultural, commercial or industrial tasks that are “beyond their strength, expose them to danger, or which, by their nature and the conditions under which they are undertaken, are likely to harm their morals”. However, agricultural and domestic employers pay scant regard to this code, especially when it comes to employing domestic workers from outside the family (See Lesclingand, 2004a, 2004b, 2011. See also Marcoux *et al.*, 2002).

mandatory, it is conceivable that a child might escape from domestic work by being educated.

As for the “defiant girls” in the corpus, although three are finally saved by accepting the social rules of marriage (folktales 35, 36, 37), the other two persist in their negative attitude and die (folktales 34, 20). The story of Dabi (folktale 20) is different from the archetype presented by Görög-Karady & Seydou (2001: 415–470), although it also depicts a girl who refuses to marry an ordinary young man and finds herself hoist with her own petard.

Summary of folktale 20: Dabi is a girl who says she will only marry a boy who will make her laugh and talk. Her father urges her to get engaged because he wants the wedding gifts, but she resists and refuses to talk to anyone. The young men are worried. Some from two neighbouring villages come to see her, but she refuses to talk to them. They return home weeping. Then a leper announces that he would like to try his luck, but the other young men from his village won't let him go with them. When they return weeping like the others, the leper decides to go to Dabi's village by himself, determined to seduce her. When he gets there, since she refuses to greet him, he provokes her in various ways: defecating in the fireplace, urinating in the water jar, and putting porridge in her puppies' anuses. All this causes the girl to react by speaking to him. And since she has talked, she must now marry the leper. Dabi's father is desperate: he had wanted a son-in-law who could work for him. The leper goes off to search for manure to spread on the father's field; so the father cannot now refuse the marriage. The leper also gives Dabi's mother some tobacco; so she cannot now refuse the marriage either. The parents tell the young couple to leave together. Dabi throws herself on the ground in despair, but there is nothing for it: she has no choice but to leave with her leper-fiancé. She climbs to the top of a palmyra palm tree, but the leper does so too. So she jumps from the tree and dies, transforming into fonio as she falls. The leper, falling after her, becomes the sorrel from which the fonio seeds are now inseparable, just as men and women are.

In this story, Dabi's rebellion is all about words: she refuses to speak to the young men who come to court her, but announces that she will marry whoever succeeds in getting her to talk. To refuse conversation and to ignore greetings is the worst kind of antisocial attitude imaginable: it makes Dabi practically inhuman. But the one who finally manages to break her silence also behaves without regard to social rules. He visits her by himself and woos her on his own behalf, in a context where it is usually the suitor's companions who intervene on his behalf. The leper's behaviour is also disrespectful both with regard to the fireplace (since it represents the family) and the water jar (since it specifically symbolizes the maternal presence in the household). However, it is when the

leper attacks the puppies that Dabi finally reacts, again showing her antisocial nature and lack of humanity. By committing suicide, Dabi reinforces her identity as a rebel, refusing to live the life that her society offers her. The two outcasts die together and are united in death as fonio and sorrel, two crops that are always sown together.

Similarly, the “terrible” twins (folktales 28, 29),¹¹ fruit of a union between a girl who is excessively beautiful and a chameleon, are constantly breaking the law, putting their own lives in danger, until, having done all the evil they can, they are transformed into a turbulent whirlwind. These disobedient children, although at first glance they seem to be the primary victims of their own attitude, also highlight the power that every child has to refuse the education they are offered, to oppose social rules, and to overthrow their parents’ values. In this, they cause us to reflect on the relevance of standards inherited from the previous generation, and this subversive aspect of the story tantalizes both the storyteller and his listeners.

In folktale 39, a disobedient character plays an educational role – but for his father rather than for himself.

Summary of folktale 39: A certain man is so rich that he has a house built for himself out of *tô*, the millet paste which is the staple rural food of the region. Full of pride, 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 ruined: his children and wives die, and he has nothing left to eat but the walls of his *tô* 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 proud, 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

¹¹ Our versions of this folktale are similar to those that Görög *et al.* (1980: 59-72) collected in Bambara.

initiation leads him into another world, 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”, “defiant” or disobedient children – all headstrong and therefore, with the exception of the one in folktale 39, very difficult to educate – an astonishingly obedient child features in just one folktale (38).

Summary of folktale 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 cowrie, 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 folktale, 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 something worth 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.

Disobedient and antisocial children, just like the over-obedient boy in folktale 38 who teaches his father a lesson, actually have a lot in common with those children who leave home very early to attend a school. There, they learn rules other than those transmitted by the family, which, in turn, force the adults to call into question their own behaviour and values. Likewise, the girls who do not hesitate to leave their village without even asking permission of the head of the family (Lesclingand 2004b: 38), upsetting not only the family organization but also the usual matrimonial networks, are another illustration of the disruption that the unexpected behaviour of a child may cause.

Perhaps the young house-helpers recognise something of themselves in these rebel characters who are causing the boundaries of their society to shift. Perhaps that is why they love to tell folktales to the children of the city-dwellers for whom they work, or listen to them broadcast on the radio on Sunday evenings in San (Leguy 2009)? But are children really responsible for their excessive or controversial behaviour?

4. ARE CHILDREN TO BLAME FOR THEIR EXCESSES?

The folktales in this corpus also depict children who behave unacceptably, but their faults are often accentuated by the attitudes of their own parents. So the question to ask, once again, is whether parents are really fulfilling their educational role.

The fearless child is well represented in the corpus (folktales 26, 27, 31, 32, 33) as are the "terrible children" (28; 29). These are extraordinary children, with inordinate destructive powers, who kill many more animals than is reasonable (folktales 32 and 33). This is dangerous, not only for the children who find themselves in thorny situations (in folktale 32, for example, one is taken prisoner by sable antelopes who want to kill him), but also for their parents. In folktale 26, the intrepid child who kills too many animals meets a man-killing monster in the bush. He befriends the monster, 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, excess is perceived as being a family affair; ultimately, the son shows himself more reasonable than his mother.

In contrast to these fearless characters, two folktales (11, 12) present a boy who is afraid of everything. Let us investigate the first of these in detail.

Summary of folktale 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 defense. 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 in this way 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 folktale 11 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 strength from outside the family circle, in order to grow up and become a courageous adult.

The other two extreme child figures in the corpus stand in contrast to each other too: the child with too many good qualities (folktales 8, 9, 18) and the one with too many flaws (in particular, the lazy girl in folktale 6, discussed above). The former is generally excessively beautiful, which is a source of misfortune for both the child and the parents.

For example, in folktales 8 and 9, Naalo's 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 her food, will not hear of it. She catches the fish that saved Naalo, kills, cooks, and even (in folktale 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 again, the focus is on a boy who manages to rectify the mistakes of one of his parents.

In folktale 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. Görög-Karady (1997: 33), who analyses Bambara and Malinke folktales about a kidnapped girl from a marital point of view, underlines how, for contemporary listeners, the parents' excessive attitude echoes the tensions experienced in families when young people evade the matrimonial networks governed by the elders.

Numerous folktales 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 folktales – notably 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 folktale 1, for example, the mother gives away her secret to a female griot) or through some other flaw (such as gluttony in folktale 4).

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

Summary of folktale 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 crop 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 placed his trust in 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 placed his trust in 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.

In folktale 13, the over-proud father did not know how to protect his children, valuing his own success above their lives. The story suggests that educating children is not the primary concern of parents. They 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 (folktale 5) or betrothed to a better man (folktale 15), but it can also be true of mothers themselves; for example, those who cannot resist a good fish (folktales 8, 9, 31) even at the risk of bringing about their child's downfall and their own.

Although the children in these folktales 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 (folktales 7, 10, 18, 25). In folktale 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 folktale 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”¹² (Goldberg, 2003) – tricks her into slitting her daughters' throats. Folktale 10, tells of 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 folktales in this corpus: parents' flaws often seem more excessive and destructive than their children's. It would be instructive to undertake a more detailed investigation into the impact that these tales of offending parents, regularly broadcast on the radio, might have on young people today. What is certain is that they demonstrate, as much now as in the past, the complexities of educational relationships and the difficulties faced by parents. On the one hand parents seek to impose rules; on the other hand they have to control their own excesses, which, even when it concerns excessive love, do not always favour their children's development.

¹² ATU 327B, now *The Brothers and the Ogre* (Uther 2004: 213-14).

5. CONCLUSION: CHILDREN AS TEACHERS?

Despite the parents' role in educating their children, these folktales 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 they often seem to 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?

I have examined and identified links between the different kinds of children found in a corpus of 39 folktales collected and broadcast by a local radio station in the region around San. The abused child and the spoiled child, the obedient child and rebellious child, the child with an excess of good or bad qualities... all these children have something in common: a confrontation with the adults who are supposed to be educating them. The educational relationship is not always easy in these family stories. It is noticeable that the adult often has difficulty assuming his or her role and that the child ends up taking responsibility for his or her own progress toward maturity, perhaps even serving as a model to his elders. Are the role reversals described (immature parents who are taught a lesson by their children etc.) a literary shock device used to make the story more memorable and drive home the lesson?

One cannot neglect the element of social protest that some folktales contain, with the storyteller slipping into the mode of spokesperson for the downtrodden or the outcast. But even though the young people in these stories may, historically, have been employed to call into question social norms and values, this ability to challenge, articulated by storytelling, takes on a whole new meaning in the context of contemporary rural Mali. The analysed tales seem to indicate that when children seek education their quest – whether at school or more independently and adventurously by way of a job as a house-help in town – distances them from their parents whose way of life is no longer valued as a model.

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 defiant girl)
- 35/ The young man without a scar (The defiant girl, version 1)
- 36/ Masira, the girl who didn't want a boy with a scar (The defiant girl, version 2)
- 37/ The girl who didn't want to marry a man with a scratch (The defiant girl, version 3)
- 38/ The child who obeyed his father
- 39/ The rich man

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