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From Oral Performance to Written Text: Narrative Style, Audience Participation and Cultural Preservation in Selected Igbo Folktale Collections

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Abstract

The transition of oral narratives into books changes what readers can know about storytelling as an event. This article examines that transition in four Igbo folktale collections: Rems Nna Umeasiegbu's The Way We Lived (1969) and Words Are Sweet (1982), and Frederick C. Ogbalu's Nza na Obu (1966) and Mbediogu (1975). Using comparative qualitative textual analysis, it considers opening formulas, dialogue, performer–audience exchanges, stage-like annotations, classification and editorial framing. The study finds a marked contrast between the performance-centred representation of storytelling in Words Are Sweet and the primarily reading-oriented presentation described in Ogbalu's collections. The transcribed performance of "How the Dog Started Barking," for example, records audience responses, pauses, gestures and changes in narrative pace; these cues help a reader understand the tale as interaction rather than plot alone. In Mbediogu, recurring openings, illustrations and pedagogical questions instead shape the text for young readers and teachers. The article argues that neither approach simply reproduces an original oral event: each preserves certain features while leaving others less visible. It recommends that future preservation projects link carefully edited texts with audio or video recordings, contextual metadata and ethically managed community participation. The article distinguishes print documentation from digitisation and proposes a more precise account of what sustainable preservation entails.

Keywords: Igbo storytelling; oral performance; narrative style; audience participation; textualisation; cultural preservation

1. Introduction

An oral folktale is not merely a sequence of sentences waiting to be written down. It is also a social event: someone speaks, listeners respond, the performer adjusts the pace, and the meaning of the narrative emerges through that exchange. Written collections are valuable because they make tales available beyond a single occasion, yet they necessarily select what can be carried from the event into print. The challenge for scholarship is to recognise both the achievement and the limitations of such collections.

This article examines the narrative style and editorial treatment of Igbo folktales in four works associated with Rems Nna Umeasiegbu and Frederick C. Ogbalu. The books provide contrasting approaches to the preservation of oral narratives. The Way We Lived combines accounts of Igbo customs with stories. Words Are Sweet gives explicit attention to storytelling occasions, performers and responses from listeners. Nza na Obu offers varied narratives in Igbo, while Mbediogu presents a largely tortoise-centred repertoire aimed in part at children and teachers. These different forms of presentation raise an important question: which features of a performed tale remain legible when the story becomes a book?

The four collections present narrative structure, style and cultural preservation as its central concerns. This article develops those concerns into a focused argument about textualisation: the transformation of a variable, participatory performance into a relatively stable written artifact. It does not assume that a more detailed printed transcript is automatically a fuller representation of cultural meaning. Rather, it asks what each editorial form makes visible and what remains outside the page.

2. Oral performance and the problem of textualisation

African oral literature has long required approaches that consider performance alongside verbal content. Finnegan (1970) emphasises the significance of the circumstances in which oral forms are produced and experienced. Ben-Amos (1971) similarly treats folklore as a communicative process situated within social relations. These insights are especially important for written folktale collections because a text can record words without fully reproducing voice, timing, gesture or audience response.

Bauman (1977) offers a useful account of verbal art as performance: communicative skill, framing and evaluation shape what participants recognise as a special kind of speech event. From this perspective, a recurring opening formula does more than decorate a story. It can mark the transition from ordinary conversation into a narrative mode. A song can generate participation, while a pause may create anticipation or invite reaction. These features should be read as part of literary form rather than as dispensable additions to the plot.

Textualisation also involves editorial choices. A collector may provide the name of a performer, translate a story, identify the circumstances of telling, add illustrations, supply a title or arrange narratives into categories. Such choices can enable research and teaching, but they also frame what counts as the tale. The printed version is therefore not a transparent window onto an unchanging oral original. It is a mediated record with its own audience and purpose.

3. Corpus and analytical procedure

The corpus comprises Umeasiegbu's The Way We Lived (1969) and Words Are Sweet (1982), and Ogbalu's Nza na Obu (1966) and Mbediogu (1975). The analysis examines the books' organisation and selected textual illustrations, especially the represented performance of "How the Dog Started Barking" in Words Are Sweet. The present analysis works from that documented evidence. It does not assert that all physical editions have been personally inspected or that original recordings of the performances were available.

Four features guide the comparison: (1) the organisation and classification of tales; (2) openings and closings; (3) the representation of performance, including speech, gestures and listeners' responses; and (4) paratextual elements, including illustrations and classroom questions. The method is descriptive and interpretive. Its purpose is to identify the implications of these differences for literary analysis and preservation, not to rank the collectors or reconstruct any unrecorded performance.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1. Arrangement and classification as editorial interpretation

The Way We Lived places material on customs beside folktales. In its present arrangement, its second part presents many narratives without a systematic thematic classification or an explicit moral appended to each story. This arrangement permits relatively open reading, but it requires the reader to discover relationships among texts. Placing tales beside discussions of customary life nevertheless provides a broad cultural frame.

Words Are Sweet is more openly analytical about classification. The analysis describes groups devoted to the tortoise, the church, husbands and wives, kings, animals, children of unmarried women and explanatory narratives, among others. The categories overlap, as a tale about a tortoise might also be a tale about social conduct or an explanation of an animal characteristic. This overlap is not simply an editorial weakness; it reveals that narratives can be organised according to protagonists, themes or the beliefs and expectations of those who tell them. In the project's account, Umeasiegbu explicitly recognises these competing principles (Umeasiegbu, 1982).

Ogbalu's Nza na Obu contains narratives with varying subjects and no comparable thematic scheme identified in the published volumes. By contrast, Mbediogu establishes continuity through its concentration on Mbe, the tortoise. The difference is instructive: a heterogeneous collection foregrounds the breadth of a repertoire, whereas a character-centred collection makes recurring narrative strategies and contrasts easier to perceive. Classification affects discovery and comparison, not merely the order of contents.

4.2. The oral opening and the written beginning

The selected accounts show the recurrent Igbo opening Otu mgbe ("Once upon a time") in Mbediogu. Formulaic openings are important because they establish the narrative frame: listeners understand that an imaginative account is beginning and that events may follow the conventions of folktale rather than everyday factual reporting. The analysis also records a variation in an opening that places the action in an earlier world and introduces the tortoise's boast about his intelligence.

Variation within a familiar formula can create an initial emphasis. A teller who begins by foregrounding the tortoise's pride may direct attention to the coming test of that pride. On the page, however, the formula mainly survives as a linguistic pattern. In a live session, its pronunciation, rhythm, intonation and relation to audience responses could be equally significant. The act of writing down the opening preserves words but may leave these performance features unspecified.

The discussion of Nza na Obu makes a related point. Its tales do not display a single opening pattern in this comparison, and their endings are generally reported without detailed performer–audience exchange. This does not prove that the tales were never performed dramatically. It demonstrates the more limited proposition that the printed forms described in the published volumes give readers less information about such performances.

4.3. "How the Dog Started Barking" as recorded interaction

The clearest performance evidence in the collections comes from Umeasiegbu's Words Are Sweet. Its example, "How the Dog Started Barking," is presented with a repeated storyteller's call, a collective audience response, stage-like indications of the listeners' movement and excitement, pauses, facial expression, changes of pace and the response to the dog's discomfort. The analysis associates such enactment with a performer named Mbaga Otuonye.

These details alter what can be analysed. First, the performer's opening call and the audience's answer establish participation before the plot begins. The story is not delivered to passive listeners: their reply helps create the occasion. Second, annotations concerning pauses and facial expression show how the teller controls suspense and humour. Third, the account of listeners anticipating the story, yet still wanting to hear this particular performer, shows that familiarity with a plot does not remove the appeal of an individual rendition. Finally, the audience's sympathy and praise form part of the outcome of the performance, alongside the resolution of the dog's predicament.

The point is not that a printed transcript can fully reproduce this encounter. Rather, the annotations allow a reader to infer several dimensions of the encounter that would disappear from a bare prose retelling. A transcript with performance cues thus offers a different evidentiary resource from a collection that presents only the sequence of narrated events. Ben-Amos's (1971) contextual

orientation and Bauman's (1977) attention to performance help explain why these cues matter: a folktale is made meaningful through situated communicative action.

4.4. Ogbalu's Mbediogu and the pedagogical page

Mbediogu is organised around tortoise narratives and includes illustrations. Its introductory remarks emphasise accessibility to children and usefulness to teachers, and the collection incorporates questions intended to support comprehension. This is a different but legitimate editorial aim from producing a detailed record of an actual storytelling event.

Illustrations can help younger readers follow actions and identify characters. Comprehension questions can encourage reflection on plot and conduct, while recurring characters help students draw comparisons among tales. At the same time, the movement from performance to school-oriented reading changes the way authority is distributed. A live audience can interrupt, respond, sing or influence the duration of a tale; a reader of a printed school text encounters a fixed sequence and may be directed by the editor's questions toward selected interpretations.

This does not make the printed form less valuable. It makes its educational function more visible than its performance context. A careful literary analysis should therefore avoid presenting the lack of recorded gestures or audience reactions as evidence that the Igbo narratives themselves lack dramatic qualities. What is missing from a collection may be information about the event, not a property of the tradition.

4.5. What printed collections preserve and what they do not

All four books contribute to preservation by making particular versions available for reading and study. They secure titles, narrative sequences, vocabulary, motifs and, in some cases, contextual details that might otherwise be difficult to access. Words Are Sweet is especially informative where it documents interactions within a storytelling session. Mbediogu is especially relevant where it adapts material for school use. Each form widens access in a different way.

There are nevertheless limits. Translation can increase readership while reducing visibility of sound play, rhythm, lexical nuance and locally meaningful expressions. Selection and classification may obscure variants omitted from the edition. A printed transcript can record an audience's words without preserving the quality of a chorus or the movement of the body. Moreover, recording a folktale at one historical moment does not end its later transformation.

The published collections repeatedly calls the written documentation of folklore "digitisation." A more accurate distinction is needed. Publication in print is documentation or textual preservation; digitisation means converting material into digital form. Digital preservation is a further and sustained process requiring file management, metadata, access arrangements and maintenance. A

scan of a book can preserve its pages, but it cannot recover an undocumented voice or gesture. Conversely, an audio or video recording can preserve aspects of delivery while still requiring transcription, translation and contextual description.

For a fuller record, a community-centred preservation project could bring together an edited Igbo-language text, an audio or video recording where available, a translation, the name or agreed attribution of the performer, the approximate occasion and place of performance, and an account of permitted uses. Consent and culturally appropriate access should be considered before public distribution. Such a multimodal approach does not replace the older printed collections; it builds on them and acknowledges what they could not record.

4.6. The relationship between narrative voice and audience knowledge

The account of "How the Dog Started Barking" offers an unusually clear case of narrative meaning being distributed across speaker and listeners. The opening exchanges are not merely preliminaries to a finished plot. By calling and responding, the participants mark a temporary social space in which ordinary conversation gives way to narrated action. The recorded remarks from listeners also imply shared knowledge of recurring characters. When an audience member reacts to the return of the tortoise, the comment draws upon expectations formed by other tellings, not simply information contained in the present story. Narrative recognition therefore depends in part on a repertoire that extends beyond any single textual unit. This is consistent with Ben-Amos's (1971) treatment of folklore as communication within a social setting rather than as an isolated inventory of traditional plots.

A further layer is the teller's management of anticipation. The episode in which the dog is persuaded to eat honey with his eyes closed depends upon the audience knowing more than the deceived character. The hidden bees establish a gap between the dog's understanding and the listeners' expectations. Recorded bodily reactions—shaking heads, laughter, excited attention and gestures that mimic action—make that gap visible. The movement between mounting suspense and eventual release also shows why a bare synopsis of the tale would not capture its full literary force. The narrator's pacing, feigned sympathy and deliberate pauses become part of the artistic construction of the event. Bauman's (1977) performance approach helps explain why attention to communicative skill is necessary in addition to plot analysis.

However, a transcription can record that a gesture occurred without preserving exactly how that gesture was performed or how every listener understood it. The presence of editorial comments should therefore be treated as evidence of an attempt to represent performance, not as transparent access to a complete event. The descriptive record selects those audience behaviours that the collector deemed significant. Other expressions, social relations and local circumstances may have gone unrecorded. This observation neither invalidates the collection nor diminishes its value. It

identifies the documentary status of the evidence and protects the analysis from confusing a mediated record with a total reproduction of lived performance (Umeasiegbu, 1982).

4.7. Formula, variation and the architecture of a tale

The recurring opening "Otu Mgbe" in Mbediogu illustrates how a conventional formula can coexist with narrative innovation. An opening of this kind establishes a recognisable temporal distance and announces a shift into the imaginative world of storytelling. Its recurrence also helps readers identify the text as belonging to a larger narrative tradition. Yet the reported variation in the tenth story, which foregrounds an ancient time and the tortoise's claim to superior intelligence, shows that formula does not eliminate difference. The opening prepares the reader for a particular conflict over wisdom and self-assessment. A comparative stylistic account should therefore attend to how a repeated pattern is adapted to local narrative needs rather than treating it as a mechanical convention (Ogbalu, 1975).

The narrative openings described for Nza na Obu create a different textual profile. One tale begins by locating its events in an exceptional relationship between heaven and the earth of the squirrel, whereas another opens with an address to the cold. Such openings suggest that a collection's stylistic identity cannot be reduced to a single standard sentence. Changes in address, setting and implied speaker may govern how readers enter the narrated world. A prose presentation that omits audience replies can nevertheless preserve traces of oral poetics, such as patterned expression, apostrophe or song. Silence about the performance setting is consequently not evidence that the source tradition lacked interaction. The defensible observation is narrower: this printed presentation supplies fewer details through which interaction can be analysed (Ogbalu, 1966).

Structural analysis may assist in describing recurrent movements such as introduction, difficulty, deception and consequence. Propp's (1968) morphological account is relevant as a methodological point of comparison, though it was developed from a different tale corpus and should not be imposed without testing. A sequence may resemble a recognisable narrative function while bearing meanings specific to an Igbo-language performance. A combined structural and performance approach avoids two extremes: treating a tale as nothing more than a universal plot pattern, or treating its every feature as impossible to compare beyond one local setting. The more productive question is how recurring narrative organisations are made distinctive by voice, culturally situated knowledge and the circumstances of telling.

4.8. Translation, orthography and editorial visibility

Translation raises questions that extend beyond vocabulary equivalence. When a performance is presented in English, readers gain access to plot and selected contextual explanations, but they may not hear phonological patterning, tonal play, internal rhyme or the pragmatic force of familiar expressions in Igbo. The issue is particularly significant where an opening formula, a chant or a

proverb obtains its effect through a shared repertoire. A responsible edition might retain key Igbo expressions with carefully explained translations rather than replacing every expression with a seemingly straightforward English equivalent. Where variants exist, the editor can identify the version presented without implying that alternative renderings are incorrect. These decisions affect not only linguistic detail but also how readers perceive the artistry and authority of the teller (Finnegan, 1970; Umeasiegbu, 1982).

Paratext also influences interpretation. A descriptive title can steer the reader towards a particular outcome; an illustration makes one visual version of a character more prominent; a comprehension question may privilege a moral lesson over a stylistic observation. The reported illustrations and educational questions in Mbediogu therefore deserve scholarly attention as parts of the reading experience rather than as neutral additions. When a text enters a classroom, the printed page can become the main authority for recalling events and deciding what a story means. That shift is useful for stable instruction, but it may narrow the space for improvisation if teachers treat the printed version as the only legitimate telling. An educational edition should encourage retelling and comparison alongside close reading (Ogbalu, 1975).

4.9. Towards a responsible multimodal preservation model

A sustainable preservation programme would begin by distinguishing three related but different activities. Documentation creates a record of a particular tale or performance. Digitisation converts existing material, such as a printed volume or analogue recording, into digital files. Digital preservation manages those files over time through appropriate formats, backups, documentation and stewardship. Treating these activities as synonyms makes it difficult to decide what is actually being protected. A scanned book preserves the visual features of a page but cannot recover an unrecorded singer's voice or an audience's bodily reactions. An audio recording captures sound but not necessarily the performer's movement. Video adds visual evidence yet still represents a selection made from one position and occasion. No medium should be described as an exhaustive substitute for the social practice of storytelling.

For an Igbo folktale archive, the strongest model would link complementary records rather than favour a single format. A catalogue entry might identify the title and variant; the language or dialect as described by participants; the occasion and approximate date of telling where known; the performer's preferred attribution; the collector or recording team; and any agreed restrictions on circulation. Where consent permits, the entry could connect an Igbo transcript, translation, audio, video and relevant notes about gesture or audience participation. Community consultation is essential because public accessibility is not the only legitimate preservation goal. Some recordings may require restricted access, contextual explanation or an agreement about reuse. These are matters of cultural authority as well as technical administration.

The historical collections examined here provide indispensable foundations for such work but also reveal why follow-up documentation is necessary. A modern research project could compare a published telling with recorded versions from different storytellers, identifying what remains stable, what changes and how performers explain those changes. It could also investigate how young readers respond to the difference between text, sound and live presentation. Such work would make claims about audience reception testable rather than assumed. Preservation, in this sense, would be understood as supporting the conditions for continuing expression—not simply safeguarding a fixed body of words.

5. Conclusion

The comparison demonstrates that the move from oral performance to print is not a neutral transfer of content. It involves decisions about classification, framing, translation, participation and audience. In Words Are Sweet, details of calls, responses, pauses and gestures make a performed storytelling event visible within the printed text. In Nza na Obu and Mbediogu, as represented in the selected books, the prose narrative and its potential educational use are more prominent than the original performance encounter. The Way We Lived occupies a further position by placing tales within a broader account of customs.

These are differences of documentation and purpose, not grounds for declaring one collection authentic and another deficient. The most productive scholarly response is to read each as a mediated representation of Igbo oral literature. Future editors and researchers should combine responsible textual editing with audiovisual evidence, clear contextual information and community involvement wherever possible. That combination will support literary study while helping the storytelling tradition remain available for new performances and interpretations.

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