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Language, Literature and Children in Emerging African
Society: A Focus on the Nigerian Igbo Child Language**Christopher Amaechi UGWU**njiagbo@gmail.com

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Abstract

We are living in a changing world which needs also changing attitude towards issues that confront us as the world changes. We often hear that the youths (children) are the leaders of tomorrow. How do we intend to set a pace for the growing child who would become the leader tomorrow? What approaches should we adopt in order to ensure a smooth take-off and sail of these leaders of tomorrow in the turbulent and tumultuous world that is emerging? Language and literature can be a sure bet. The use of children's literature can be a turn-around in inculcating in the growing child the norms and ethics of the Igbo race. This can be done both at homes and in schools as we talk about emerging Africa in this era. The growing Nigerian-Igbo child can be acquainted with the cultures, norms, ethics, values and morals of the race using fictional narratives and dramatic works of literature as exemplified by Isaac Emeka Ufondu's *The Fruit of Honesty* and Inno Uzoma Nwadike's *Omume Onye na-edu Ya*. This paper sets out to discuss how these two works of literature (one in the English language and the other in Igbo language) can be of immense help in addressing the issues bearing in mind the functions of literature as an art in the life of the growing child.

Key words: **Language, Literature, Igbo, children's literature.**

Introduction

Language is the human use of spoken or written words as communication system; the speech of a country, region, or group of people, including its vocabulary, syntax, and grammar; a system of communication with its own set of conventions or special words. Traditionally however, language is seen as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which thought is communicated from one human being to another. By extension, language has further been defined as "an expression of ideas by means of speech sounds combined into words, words combined into sentences, (and) this combination answering to that of thoughts" (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 10, 1981:642*). Aborcombie (1965:16) sees it as "a system of conventional signals used for communication by a whole community. This convention covers sound units, inflexions and the arrangements and association of meaning with words".

Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. This implies that language or human speech is a variety of speech or

body of words and idioms especially that of a nation or race which expresses thought or feeling.

Literature is an art. Like other branches of art (drawing, film, music, sculpture etc), literature is a product of an inspired imagination. "It is a written work that is recognized as having important or permanent artistic value" (Encarta). Literature entertains, educates and instructs. It provides aesthetic satisfaction as well and is often written except for the oral mode. According to Nwachukwu-Agbada (2001:2)

Unlike the other arts whose raw materials are physical objects, creative writing is an imaginative act whose expression is dependent on words. The painter uses his brush, the carver his knife...but the creative writer...makes use of words as his medium of expression. Through the use of the imagination, he selects, orders and interprets life experiences, employing words as his basic tools.

The literary artist is expected to ensure that whatever statements he makes are relevant to his society. "He has enormous task to handle bearing in mind the experiences of the emerging world in its complexities and its pace of changes coupled with the conditioning local environment" (Jowitt, 2009:326).

Who is the Nigerian-Igbo child? The Igbo are an African people that profoundly reside in Nigeria. In Nigeria, they live mainly in the South-eastern part of the country which has five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. Besides these states, there are other handfuls of Igbo speaking areas in Delta, Rivers, and Cross River states on the South. Their occupation is mainly farming, trading, hunting and fishing. This is more the reason their rich tradition flourish in times of holiday. The Igbo have rich cultural practices and traditions which modernity is trying to erode. These are riddles, proverbs, oral traditions, festivals, folktales and folklores among others. It is on this backdrop that we want to see how children's literature can be used to inculcate into the growing child the rich traditional and cultural practices of the race geared towards preparing him for the challenges ahead.

The Igbo as a people have a language and literature which is gradually being eroded because of modernity which has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Igbo life. This should not be the case considering the fact that language is the essence of a people through which they share their views, mores, values, traditions and culture which distinguishes them from other creatures as man can represent his language through arbitrary signs and symbols. This does not mean that other species do not have language, but it is not developed. Unlike man, the mother hen that calls its chicks with the 'kwoko' does so but cannot represent it with symbols. Therefore, man has more essence than other species.

Children's Literature and Its Contents

What is Children's literature? To the child, reading means listening to stories read or watching stories acted as well as reading to oneself. Children's

literature perhaps will include any book for children containing short stories – fables, legends, folktales, etc, to be read, acted or listened to (Ikhigbonoareme, 2012). As the name suggests,

children’s literature is designed with children in mind as the primary consumers...we should bear in mind the age bracket of between one and sixteen fits into the category of children and therefore because of the developmental and intellectual variations within this group, it becomes imperative to create literature that is appropriate for each stage within the bracket (Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 2009:235).

It is a literary work that takes the interest of this group into consideration based on their developing mentality. These works of literature could be prose, poetry or drama but most profoundly prose and sometimes drama. This is because the poetry genre is always or most of the time a desert of sand where no fountain flows even for the adults let alone the children. It is only those initiated into the world of the unseen, which are translated to the world of high and logical reasoning that can tread the road of poetry. Be that as it may, children’s literature are meant to capture the interests of these teenagers via stories that thrill them and teach them some morals, ethics, mores, norms and value of the society which they are likely to become part of. From what we already know, the content of most of the children’s literature is gleaned from the oral tradition of the people. Certain themes stand out in (African) children’s literature. “Prominent among them is the worthiness of African culture which the European ideas brought by colonial rule had tended to devalue or obscure” (Jowitt, 2009:363). This would be observed in the analysis of the texts chosen for this essay. Several of such literature abound, *Chike and the River*, *Eze goes to School*, *One week, one trouble*, *Stories my Mother told me*, *The Fruit of Honesty* among others, all in the English language, and *Nza na Obu*, *Ihe onye Metere*, *Nwata Rie Awo*, *Anu Gbaa Ajo Oso* and *Omume Onye na – edu Ya* among others, all in Igbo Language. In the words of Ernest Emenyeonu quoted in Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2009: 237) “we should focus attention on children / adolescent literature because we need to build the character of our children, who at that stage are vulnerable to all kinds of influences. We don’t want to pick our children from the street”. This indicates that we should be conscious of what our children read and pay attention to.

In this essay therefore we’ve chosen two titles namely: *The Fruit of Honesty* by Isaac Emeka Ufodu, and *Omume Onye na- edu Ya* by Inno Uzoma Nwadike as our points of reference to show case how these imaginary works of literature can aid the growing Nigerian-Igbo child in coping with emerging issues of his time.

The Fruit of Honesty

Ufondu tells a story of a young boy Nkem who happens to be the last son of his father Ezike in a village called Udokoha-Utu. The first son was Mba, the second being Ofo. Nkem the third and last son was obedient to his father’s words that he imbibed every word that proceeded out of his mouth. A day came when he (Ezike) took ill and was not sure of his survival. This made him to call his three

sons Mba, Ofo, and Nkem to advise them in case the worst happens and he is no more. Of all the things said by Mr Ezike, the only thing that his last son was able to anchor on was his last statement which was that the fruit of honesty in God's blessing from where the title of this work was taken. Meanwhile, Nkem was only eleven years of age at the time and in primary school. He went and wrote down the father's last words and was resolute to live by them. Unlike Nkem, the elder brothers Mba and Ofo were more interested in the property left behind by their father and not the words of wisdom he dropped before his demise. They went ahead with their pursuit in life uninhibited but Nkem was to stick to the dear father's last words in order to gain God's blessing.

The first litmus test was in the class where he mistakenly broke the drinking water pot after coming back from break and accepted the punishment that went with it even when nobody saw him broke the pot. He would have denied it as would other pupils but he remembered his father's last word and was conscious of inheriting God's blessing. He was beaten, sent on suspension, mocked by his elder brother for being honest, but his mother encouraged him. His father's appearance to him in his dream where he re-echoed his last words to him thus: "Nkem, Nkem keep to my last words before I left the world - the fruit of honesty in God's blessing for in keeping them you will prosper; don't copy other people" (p.5) was a boost to his resolution.

On resumption after suspension, Nkem was told stories of what transpired in his absence including the stealing of teacher Okoye's chalk from his cupboard and how nobody agreed to be the culprit in order to avert punishment. His question why nobody owned up the theft was answered by Obi thus: "nobody agreed that he was the offender for nobody wanted to be flogged and be suspended like you" (p.6).

We are talking about the influence of language and literature in emerging African society. Children's literature has a way of imprinting in the mind of the growing child the ethics and values of the Igbo world view just as Nkem has developed love for his father's advice to him in so much way that even when teacher Okoye wanted to dissuade him from being honest, Nkem told him that he has chosen to live that way opining that his father Ezike has never deceived him in his life time and therefore he was ready to die being honest believing that God's blessing must accompany it.

Nkem's resolute behaviour forced the teacher to think and even repent in some of the ways he has been telling lies to the children. He also was forced to choose a monitor for the class which providence made Nkem the class monitor through the headmaster of the school himself after enquiries about Nkem's character from the teacher. So the fruit of honesty became ripe, and lifted Nkem up to the post of class monitor (p.5)

The death of his mother after six months of being made the class monitor generated unprecedented problem for Nkem and his brothers Mba and Ofo sent him out of house due his honesty for according to them, they wanted to embark on a business which Nkem's honesty would be a clog on their wheel of progress. They therefore threw him out and once again God came to his rescue and he was

handed over to the night guard in the school to stay with and finally taken to reside with the headmaster and granted scholarship after the narration of his ordeal in the hands of his brothers. “So Nkem plucked another ripe fruit of honesty as he got scholarship award and went to the headmaster’s house happily” (p.20).

The road to success has never been easy for anyone. But with hard work and determination, lofty heights were attained. This was the case of Nkem the protagonist of *The Fruit of Honesty*. His going to live with the headmaster and his family was no better as his honesty threw him yet out from the headmaster’s house. The headmaster’s wife Mrs. Oji had asked if the boy’s stay was going to be a blessing or a problem (p.22). The reason for the question was that “the headmaster’s family loved anyone who was honest but were not honest themselves” (p.23). Mr. Oji the headmaster instead of breaking his home and divorcing his wife and children decided that birds of a feather should flock together seeing Nkem as odd in their house (p.26).

The rest of the journey for Nkem was rough, tough and turbulent in that even in the market place where he was keeping the shop for Mr. Chike, tragedy still struck as the king’s son knocked down a soldier with his car. Nkem must tell the truth of the incident and he did just exactly that to the police. There was a plot to kill him but for the intervention of the police officer Mr. Ibe who in turn could not stay with Nkem due to his honesty because of the nature of his job. He was therefore sent to his (Ibe’s) relation Mr. Uzoma who was a company manager. Mr. Uzoma was told how honest Nkem is and he tried to inquire what has prompted Nkem’s sincerity which Nkem always answered that it was those words of his father in his dying bed that has propelled him this far. Uzoma was forced to remember that his own father has told him many things which he did not pay heed to (p.39).

Mr. Uzoma enrolled Nkem into school. Nkem gained scholarship because he was yet honest in the robbery incident in his school where the principal rewarded his honesty. Nkem graduated from school, worked in the bank but was sacked because of his sincerity but was still called back to head another branch of the bank and was finally crowned the king of Udokoha-Utu because of his honesty. No mention was made about his brothers Mba and Ofo.

Omume Onye na-edu Ya (One’s Character guides One)

The text *Omume Onye na-edu Ya* is like the first as it highlights the time and life of Eze Udogadi – the king of Umuezeala who had three sons namely: Uche, Ikechi and Onochie in the order of their seniority. Though a dramatic work, it has the story weaved around a man who loves his community so much that he was afraid of what would become of her at his demise. He therefore called his cabinet members to intimate them with his fears and worries.

The kingship is through lineage and should the man (the king) pass on, the future of Umuezeala would be uncertain he told his *Ichies* (cabinet members). They tried to convince him that he has three sons that can replace him whenever

he joins his ancestors. But Eze Udogadi is the type that would not hand over the sceptre to a reckless successor hence he said:

...Mana a na m ekwu n'ih i na a naghi ama ihe mere nwa diochi, a si na o bu mmanya nkwu elu nna ya kutara gburu ya. Umu m ndia nwere omume di iche iche. A maghi onye ga-ano n'okwa eze ala adi jii, na onye ganodunu, obodo esukee (p.10).

Translation:

...But I am saying because it may not be known what happened to the child of the wine-tapper and it would be said that the palm-wine his father tapped killed him. These children of mine have different characters and temperament. It is not known who would be crowned king and peace would reign or there would be chaos in the land (p.10).

He therefore tasked them to investigate his children to know who best suits the position of a king. He was assured that his problem is solved as both Ichie Echefu and Ichie Nwandu were all handy to handle the situation hence Ichie Echefu says:

O buru na nke a bu ihe na-echu gi ura, ya kwusi maka na a chowa ahu akoghi n'akpa onye dibia. Ichoputa n'ime umuaka gi ato nke ga-akacha achi ezigbo ochichi adighi ike (p.10-11).

Translation:

If that is your worry, let it stop because the native doctor has solution to your several puzzles. Finding out who among these three children would lead well is not difficult (p.10-11).

They decided to engage them one-on-one with the view to ascertaining what kind of a person each is using the bird as a parameter. Uche, being the first son was to see the Ichies first. He was asked what kind of bird he would like to become should God decided to turn him from human being to a bird. He answered and said that he would like to be a hawk. What was his reason? Uche says:

Egbe bu nnunu siri ike nke ukwu nke na-adighi atu egwu. O bu dike n'agha. E nweghi nnunu nke igwe o na-atu egwu. O bu nnunu di nka, nke nwere ike ifedata n'etiti igwe mmadu, buru okuko ha laa n'enweghi nsogbu. N'ih ihe ndia ka m jiri horo egbe karia nnunu igwe o bula (p.17).

Translation:

Hawk is a strong bird that doesn't fear. It is mighty in battle. It is not afraid of any bird of the air. It is tactful and can come down in the midst of people and carry a chick without any problem. These are why I chose to be hawk than any other bird of the air (p.17).

The second son Ikechi was called in and the same question posed before him. He answered and said that he would prefer eagle to any other bird. Why? Ikechi says:

O ga-amasi m I bu Ugo n'ih i na o bu eze nnunu niile. O bu Nnunu nganga karia umu nnunu niile nke igwe. Na nnunu niile Chineke

kere, o bu ya kachasi ike. Nnunu niile na-atu ya egwu. Mgbe o bula Ugo putara, nnunu ndi ozo adi ka ohu n'ebe o no. Abuba Ugo di oke onu karia nke nnunu ozo. Onye mere ihe ukwu di ka inweta nzere akwukwo, a si na onye ahu eturula ugo (p.22).

Translation:

I would like to be Eagle because it is the king of all the birds. It is a proud bird more than other birds of the air. Among all the birds created by God, it is the strongest. All the birds fear it. Any time it comes out, other birds looks like slaves before it. Its feather is costly more than other birds'. When one thrives in a task like in academics, it is said that the person has worn the eagle feather (p.22).

The third and last son Onochie was brought in and the question was thrown to him. And he answered that he would like to be a wren. His father, the king shouted at him, why have you chosen to be a wren of all the birds of the air, a bird that has no worth? Onochie replies thus:

Nna m, oo kwa I gwara m ka m chezie echiche nke oma tupu m zawa? O bu ihe m chetara ka m zara n'atufughi oge o bula. Eji m n'aka na nke a agaghi ewe gi iwe o bula. N'eziokwu, nza bu nnunu na-adighi ike. A na-ahu ya ebe niile mana o di ezigbo umeala ma nweekwa obi ebere. O dighi onye o na-enye nsogbu. Ya na umu nnunu ndi ozo adighikwa n'iro. Nezie, o bu enyi ndi oru ugbo n'ihina o

na-eri umu ahuhu ndi nke na-atagbucha ihe ha kuru n'ubi. N'ihinihunanya Chineke nwere n'ebe o no, e nweghi mgbe ndi dinta ji ebu egbe na-acho igba ya di ka ha na-eme n'ebe umu nnunu ndi ozo di ka egbe na ugo no (p.24&26).

Translation:

Father, you told me to think very well before I answer. It is what I thought that I answered without hesitation. I believe this will not offend you. Sincerely, wren is a powerless bird. It is seen everywhere but it is very meek and humble. No one troubles it. It is not in enmity with other birds. Of a fact, it is the friend of the farmers because it eats up pests that attack the crops which they planted in their farms. Due to God's love towards it, hunters do not carry their guns looking for it to shoot as they do other birds like hawk and eagle (p.24 & 26).

The king Eze Udogadi and his chiefs were happy with their findings. They were able to understand the temperament of all the three boys based on their choices of which bird they would like to become should God wish to turn them to birds. From their responses, it is obvious that Uche the first son would be fearless and heartless like the hawk. Besides, he would not tolerate any insult from his subjects. Ikechi on the other hand has chosen to be eagle the king of all the birds.

He would be domineering, imposing, proud and hated by his people. Onochie is the one with a heart full of kindness, peaceful, loving and lovable in that his demise would be a great loss to the whole community. He has the kingship and leadership qualities.

After some years, Eze Udogadi died and Ikechi the second son becomes the king because Uche the first son like the hawk he is has even died before their father the king in an inter-community war and his corpse was not even seen. Ikechi on the other hand became pompous, disrespectful and domineering as the eagle that he has chosen to be. It got to a stage where the people of Umuezeala became unruly and passed a vote of no confidence on him. They then crowned Onochie the man-wren who has more leadership and kingship qualities the king of Umuezeala and peace reigned like in the days of his father.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The corruption and decadence in our society today calls for concern. These two literary works reveal to us how we can use children's literature to inculcate in our growing children the ethics and traditions of our people including language which is the driving force or propeller. *The Calabash of Wisdom and Other Stories* by Egudu is another good example of Children's literature which is in form of short stories. Whether we are at home or in school, we can teach our children our roots and our culture. The telling of these stories to our children by our parents in our language both at home and in school would help the growing child in the emerging world of ours. Besides, reading of these stories by the children as well should be encouraged. The situation where some parents try to be more Catholic than the Pope in terms of speaking foreign languages instead of their native Igbo language to their children should be re-appraised. The time spent in watching foreign cartoons and films which have no bearing with our culture should be check-mated. We should be ashamed that what our fore-parents handed down to us is about getting destroyed. Even the names we give to our children should reflect our roots just as we saw in the above works – Mba, Ofo, Nkem, Uche, Ikechi and Onochie.

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