

FOLKTALE: A VERITABLE VEHICLE FOR IMPARTATION OF MORAL AND CULTURAL VALUES IN IGBO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper evaluates folktales as a veritable tool for moral and cultural education in the Igbo traditional society. The study was motivated by the fact that the nature of oral literature in African society exposes it to erosion engendered by digital practices, modern pattern of rural settlement and other detrimental factors to the traditional life and setting of the African rural communities. The paper focuses on the importance of folktale as the educative tool in the Igbo society, using Amokwe as a case study. The work reveals that apart from providing the People with pleasure, relaxation, and amusement, Igbo folktale platform also avails the children the opportunity to freely ask questions and get explanations from the experienced elders, who can explain every riddle to the amazement of the sharp young ears. The performance artist, depending on different occasions, and using humans, animals and fairies as characters to mirror the life of man, constructs the tales to tally with the cultural values and ethics of the people that they need to inculcate in the lives of these young ones. Through these, good is made to triumph over evil; evils are punished and good deeds rewarded handsomely.

Introduction

In the pre-literate Igbo society, oral narratives (prose) which included folklore, myths and legends, traditional poetry in the form of praise songs, birth songs, death songs and dirges, work songs, festival songs, riddles, incantations and prayers and proverbs are employed as avenues for impartation of generational ethics and virtues to the younger children and others. The contents are tailored to take care of the needs of the growing children to enable them make wise decisions when faced in life with certain challenges. By hearing how animals or human beings made wise choices, they are enabled to become wise in making theirs. For instance, in the tale of the beautiful girl who rejected several suitors but was deceived to choose a fairy who posed to be a very rich one. This suitor of hers later gave back the human parts he borrowed to the owners after seven seas and seven mountains before getting to the spirit world where he came from. This teaches the young ones about contentment and avoidance of greed in the choice of marriage partners.

The animals and fairies in stories/folktales behave like humans. Some are used to satirize or mirror the human society to point out human follies and emphasize the ideals of the society. Humans, animals and fairies are used as characters to mirror the life of man and by so-doing, good is made to triumph over evil, wrong attitudes are punished while good ones are rewarded. Stories of obedience and disobedience of children and their consequences are narrated to form the cultural values of the growing child. When they imbibe these, they employ the proper ethics that are passed to them from one generation to the other. Even their enemies are known to them as they learn the legends, the heroic activities of the ancestors thereby instilling the love for their people in their hearts.

This paper sets to explore folktale as a tool for imparting moral and cultural values in the younger generation of the Igbo traditional society, focusing on Amokwe, Udi in Enugu State of Nigeria.

Definition of Oral Literature.

Akporobaro (2012, p33) defines oral literature as:

The heritage of the imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to another.

This is because language and folktales are intertwined as the original tongue or dialect the undiluted version is preserved through these narratives. The tales are almost the same raw materials but variance and improvisation are what brings different versions according to the different performance artists.

Oral literature emerged belatedly after the Modern African literature period because of the attitude and mentality of the colonial masters toward the Africans. The earliest colonialists never believed that the black man is actually a man with the normal human emotions which can be expressed in different ways. This impression made the philologists like the ‘Grimm brothers to write, encouraging scholars and amateur from different races towards the serious collection and study of their own folklore’. Godfried Von Herder (1744-1803) was one of the defenders of the primitive men – a folklorist. He was of the view that creativity especially verbal – poetry and music are qualities of all mankind and are to be found in all races irrespective of the stage of development.

Milman Parry quoted in Akporobaro (2012 p41) posits thus: “Literature fall into two great parts not because there are two cultures, but because of two forms. One parts of literature is oral and the other is written”. For him, whether written or oral they are the same. By this implication, the different forms of written literature are found in the or orature as some call it.

The written literature comprises prose, poetry and drama. The oral literature equally has these forms as:

Prose forms Poetic forms Contexts of dramatic performances

Legends	chants	masquerades
Folklore	lyrics	festivals
Epic	praise poetry	ritual ceremonies
Myths	heroic recitations	dances
Proverbs		
Riddles		

Whether literature or orature, they are in our traditional African society before the appearance of the colonial masters. Hence, Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* exposes to us the dramatic Egwugwu Society which is used as the law makers of the Umuofia Society before the coming of the Whiteman.

The Folktale

In the words of Akporobaro (2012 p51) the folktale is:

An imaginative recreation of a memorable experience that is intended essentially to entertain rather than record history or social experience. It may or may not be believed but is considered to be untrue stories and are not objects of serious beliefs.

In Igbo traditional society, the tortoise (Mbe) is seen in the folklore as a clever animal. In most stories, it outwits other animals and scarcely loses in any contest not because of strength but as a trickster just like the spider (Ananse) in the Ghanaian folklore. It performs all kinds of roles and emerges a winner and escapes death by outwitting its opponents. Through well-constructed folktales, Igbo children are introduced to beneficial ideas and ideals that would lead them through adolescence to adulthood with ease. They learn the ethics and culture of their land like the sanctity of life, law of sowing and reaping as well as the end of the wicked.

These naturally make them respect the elders, desire to work hard instead of using cheap cooked ways to get rich quick and die prematurely. The performance artist employs these moral and ethical values of the of the people to weave the stories adding freshness to the same old stories and depending on his prowess leaves the children alert, wise and attentive throughout the story time. The children bombard the elders with questions on what happened to this character and that which the artist keeps them in suspense by telling them that the next day he will continue the story when they come back from the farm.

Although the plot of these Igbo folklores are the same and serve as raw materials, the artist through expertise brings different oratory devices like, refrains, chant, proverbs voicing idioms, etc. to enliven and increase the participation by all. He emphasizes on the vices that should be eschewed and the virtues that the children should imbibe. The different stylistic deliveries make the tales fresh and unique to the ears of the listeners. This prevents them from boredom listening to same stories over and over again. This was one of the strongest avenues for the education of the society and upbringing of profitable children in it.

Characteristics of the Folktales.

Proper stories have varied versions in different Igbo communities and have no authors but they have distinct features. Firstly, there is a way of beginning and ending a folktale by different people. In Amokwe, folktale is started this way (a kind of set induction);

Artist

Response

Gbunu isi ifo

chata nchata

Gbunu isi ifo

chata nchata

Nwoke nguturu

n'ukwu akpakoro

Nwanyi nguturu

n'ukwu akpakoro

Nwoke buru ji puta

nwanyi buru ede puta

Onye omara

okoo

In some parts of Ebonyi State, Oshiri, Onicha L.G.A, to be specific, folktales are started thus:

Artist	Response
<i>Oti</i>	<i>oyo</i>
<i>Oyo</i>	<i>oti</i>
<i>O ruru otu mgbe</i>	<i>otu mgbe nwerue</i>

Secondly, there is a narrator and there is an audience. Since the performances are in the night, families gather around a fire or sit under a full moon. This creates room for relaxation and helps to prevent the children from sleeping without taking their supper after a busy day. Some of the tales are for children, women or for mixed audience. The tales meant for children include such stories about children who attain good fortune and fame in adult life because of little acts mercy, honesty, obedience, and bravery they did in their childhood. Through such stories, children are prepared early in life to pursue certain ideals and values such as being considerate, truthful, charitable, forbearing, obedient, avoiding greed especially taking gifts from strangers, and respect for elders. In other words, the narrator aims at entertaining his audience in addition to teaching them certain values. The tales please and entertain in a number of ways so the style of the narrator may be altered at will many a time. Songs are introduced in the course of the narration and such songs fulfill certain functions like:

- They ensure the full participation of the audience and reduce the monotony of hearing one voice like this:

After the telling of the story, a song like this comes in:

Artist	Response
<i>Onye talu ukwam</i>	<i>dele mkwudelele dele</i>
<i>Ngozi talu ukwam</i>	(Ngozi responds, denying the accusation)
	<i>Atanukwem dele</i>
	<i>Inyi nihin dele</i>

Opu nihin dele

Iyi egbunekweghi dele

Opu egbunekweghi dele

Artist shifts to ask another person

Ono nukwu ukwa

Ukwa n'eke ntigbu

Onye talu ukwam

dele mkwudelele dele

After the introduction of this search song on who ate my breadfruit, all participants are alert to deny that they are innocent then the artist continues with the story. The zeal of everyone is rekindled by the song and they now listen to the rest of the story. There are always implicit and explicit lessons in any folktale. Like the story of the who forgot his flute in the farm and went back to collect it. Some versions have it that his parents advised him not to go. When the siblings waited and went to look for him and they all died on meeting the fairy with many heads and meeting the challenges, when 'avuke' (a special kind of domestic fowl believed to have occultic powers) went to look for them, she was able to restore all of them except that boy who could not listen to the parents.

Some of the axioms help to explain why certain things happen in certain ways in the society. The 'why' stories or etiological stories contain enough convincing answers to satisfy the inquisitive mind of children. The explanations seem convincing to these young minds but when one grows up, they find out that they are not absolute truths because tales are not meant to be factual but for children, their 'why' are momentarily stilled by the explanations provided by the stories. For example, the story why women do not have beards like men is simply illustrated in the story of the woman that hid the king's royal ring in her beard which resulted in the order to shave all women as a punishment.

Thirdly, there are relationships that exist between the performance artist, the audience and the occasion of the performance. In the traditional setting, orature occurs naturally in the life of the people such that every occasion attracts the kind of performance needed. There is rarely any occasion that is void of oral performance by seasoned artists. Even during funeral, work, marriages, birth etc there are performances suitable to enliven and make the people merry. If the situation is such that they need to cry, there are such artists that would sing dirges that would inspire the audience and move them to tears by narrating what the deceased had done for the people or even the vacuum that no one can fill for the people. This is because oral literature in general is about the holistic life of the people. Proverbs riddles and jokes are part of orature which help to make the younger generation think. When they hear proverbs they go home and require the meaning from their parents who would take the opportunity to instruct them on the ideals of their society and the need to mature by imbibing these. They are made early in life to desire to become men in action. The girls are made to know their roles and the boys are made to know that they have to grow to become men. Foolish sons are laughed at by all when behave in public like girls. It is not a manly action to beat a girl. So, the boy who fights with a girl is laugh at by others. As the boys grow into manhood, they already know that to beat a woman is not a noble act. In the present society where the televisions have taken over these roles, our little boys see men beating their wives and fellow boys using violence to rape the girls, they imbibe these and grow up without respect for womanhood. These are the reasons for the societal cry for censorship of programmes in our home videos and televisions.

In this season where violence and wickedness are the order of the day, if the government can move or sponsor searches for those folktales from different people in our society and package for use by the families and schools or they reintegrate folktales a part of the school curriculum, who knows whether we can recover the lost values in the society instead of what

we have presently. Our people are known to be hospitable, friendly and respectful to elders in the past, but what we see today is an indication that our tomorrow is pregnant and what it will bring birth to is inconceivable enough to warrant a rethink.

Challenges of folktales

The major challenges of the folktales which need modern approach to be applied are as follow: availability, durability, authorship and time gap. The oral folktales are not like the written which must be read by those who are literate. It is not when the occasion demands that the tales are told. This means that you don't just desire to have it and easily get it. If the project is followed up, it can equally be available in audio form though with limitations.

Again as the tales are told by different artists, the individual flavours that make it unique is such that cannot be easily stored and accessed in the way the written form is preserved. In addition to traditional settings, only a few between the ages of seventy and above are the ones that have the knowledge of these tales. Once they die, the knowledge they have will equally die. In fact, with the home videos in the villages, stories are no longer passed to the younger generation. This should be reactivated to enable us recover some of these.

Since the stories came from word of mouth from generation to generation, they lack authorship but current works have authorship. Time is another challenge. When these artists are performing, the audience and the occasion tally. But the written forms have a lot of processes like typing and publication processes. This time gap is a challenge that should be addressed as far as the import of the folktale as a vehicle for education and inculcating our values to the younger generation is concerned.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if we consider the number of creative artists, singers that are from Igbo land one would discover that it is because of the repertoire of knowledge passed to them from generations past that leads them to great heights in the social ladder. The Igbo are a people that believe that “we sing when we fight, when we love and even at death”. This means that every situation is a means of expression of our situation. It is still the artistic heritage lacking expression that now finds it in the social media. If these are filtered and given to the younger generation, they will be saved from drinking all the garbage from the electronic media hook line and sinker.

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