

Folktale as Artistic Representation of History: A Study of Selected Igbo Folktales

Nneka Ibeli

Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

Every society's growth depends largely on the literacy of the people living within the environment. With the technological advancement, our society solemnly depends on the innovations of the next generation for social and economic advancement. To advance the contemporary society, there is need to look into the past as a mirror and use it to evaluate the present and predict the future, especially in current need to rebrand the present society. Folktales are powerful tools used in the idyllic Igbo communities to come to terms with the culture and philosophy of the people. It is also used to foster the classroom learning of children thereby inspiring them individually. The objective of this paper is to explore the moral lessons imbedded in the folktales selected from many Igbo societies and x-ray how they can contribute to the process of learning and growth of children.

Introduction

Since the advent of mankind, man has puzzled over the constitution of the universe and wondered what controls it, the elemental features, and their various functions, especially with regard to birth and death, reincarnation and other rhetorical questions and ontological issues. These and many other questions arouse the consciousness that led storytellers to interpret and find suitable answer to their problems through folktales.

Folktale is important in the life of every African. Right from childhood, the Igbo child sees folktale as the first type of oral literature they were exposed to, and this ultimately prepares them for formal education, and for the task of being responsible people in the society. Folktale is handed down to the society from generation to generation. This gives rise to the theory of polygenesis, and it is interesting to note that this situation does not reduce the aesthetics and efficacy of the folktale. Each story told is very relevant to the society at large, and has its unique function to children and adult alike. Beyond its entertainment functions, it kindles the imagination of a child and helps to communicate appropriate cultural and societal traits to him, thus making an important contribution to the educational process. Writers have also shown considerable interest in folktales, as evidenced in a plethora works on this important genre. For instance, David Ker has pointed out that;

There has been a flourishing oral tradition; the beginning of written literature can be confidently dated within the last quarter of the century. In the oral tradition, there was both the voice and the consciousness...Indeed, all art was functional; and most of it was tied to one religious festival or another' (25).

It is necessary to note, at this juncture, that many writers, even canonized writers like Chinua Achebe have used the folktale to develop appropriate children's stories. Such publications as *How the Leopard Got its Claws* by Iroaganachi and Chinua Achebe's *The Tortoise* belong to this category. It is also refreshing to note that traditional literature has formed the foundation to the understanding of contemporary literary works. In some of the works, folktale is used as a motif in the development of a novel or a full length play, as exemplified in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, where the rebel girl's motive and the African folktale are used to develop the play.

Concept of Folktales

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, folktales constitute the moral and ethical component of the people's culture and philosophy. They constitute the traditional beliefs and customs passed on orally, either during moon light or around the fire at night. Folktales are accompanied with songs which the recipients sing to add beauty and taste to the story for the concentration and attention of the audience.

The characters in folktales range from human beings through animals to spirits. Each character is portrayed in all the features of its existence, and made to act, speak, and communicate according to the archetypal characteristics of the person being portrayed, whether a spirit, an animal or a human being. As a result, these characters commingle, and the setting and situation cause them to understand each other. In a typical folktale, trees talk, animals converse with human beings and each other, as well as spirits in a very unique way. The communication is based on the uniqueness of the situation..

Folktale, as has been already hinted upon, is crucial to the imparting of appropriate knowledge to the younger generation. Culture is a constitution of the behavior of the people, and contains what the people consider moral excel of existence. It also contains the characteristics which the society considers deviant and inappropriate behavior. Hence, culture is acquired by each individual from the components of societal mores.

Culture by Edward Tylor in Law Ikay's essay is ; " that complex whole which includes knowledge,

belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (99). In view of this, Oyekani in Olatunde Joel and co, opines that culture is what “we learn from our forbearers and contemporaries, and then pass it to future generations”.(55) One can say that Culture incorporates an individual living in a given society. Igbo folktales are powerful tools that carry, norms, values, behaviors and patterns of life. It is defined as all forms of narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years (254). Khalid Iman adds that; “tale is apparently, one of the genres of traditional fiction prose narratives deployed to pass moral instructions’ (116).

Many societies through their stories have traced where they migrated and originated from. Igbo is one of the ethnic groups who have found their origin through folktale and it still stands till today. As observed by victor Eyisi: “Eri and his companions later moved into the hinter land to the place now known as Enugu Aguleri where Eri built a house “obi” in honor of his father. He dedicated the altar to the god which remains a tourist site in Aguleri town of Anambra till date (3). Because of the relevance of folktales, modern technologists have made films from folktales films like “Odum and Akwa Eke, the land of men and a popular Igbo play titled “*Ojadili*’ by Oduke artist.

An erudite professor, Sam Ukala recently propounded the theory of folkism, according to him, folkism, refers to “an indigenous dramatic aesthetic principle which may derive from the use in the African literary theatre of folk linguistic, structural and performance styles (38). Folkism has a link with African folktales and it constitutes the construction of dramatic works that adheres to appropriate folktale characteristics, especially in the development of theme and characterization.

Two Selected Folktales.

How Death came into the World

In the olden days, God called goat and sent him to the earth to go tell mankind that there will be no death as long as there is procreation. Goat moved and began to eat grass at every nearby bush, a times she stopped by to great and chat with his friends he wasted time so much time. God then, sent dog and tortoise to take the message of immortality to mankind. Dog became boastful because he trusted his speed. Knowing full well that tortoise crawls he felt he could do other things and still send the message. He went inside the bush and began to eat defecated things. At some point, his mind would come back as he remembered his mission. As he tries to hasten up, tortoise will defecate for him because tortoise had seen that dog’s love and weakness. This act will distracted him. Tortoise been slow and steady got to the world he became so excited that he was the first to reach, excitedly delivered the message wrongly. He said that God sent him to come and tell you humans that starting from today you will all begin to die. Before dog could remember that he was sent for an errand. He ran to his heels only to meet man crying and dying.

Story of Origin

Igbo people have a story that traces their origin. The story is thus : Among the Igbo, it is believed that they had their origin from Nri. Nri is a town in Anambra state (Igbo land) The founding father was Eri who came from heaven with his wife Namaku., by *Chukwu* God , landed and settled in Aguleri. When Eri and his wife came, the land was *tolitoli* very marshy , that he could not find a place to rest his legs. He lived on anthill. Later he complained to God about his present condition and God sent down an Awka blacksmith with his bellows, fire and charcoal to dry up the land. (This is a direct reference to the expertise of awka people in blacksmithing profession). When the Awka blacksmith rounded off his assignment, Eri rewarded him with an *ofo* a symbol of authority which confer on him special claims to the snitching profession. According to Afigbo ; Eri lived on the benevolence of God. He was not buying or planting food, instead god was providing for him and his family. After his death this act of manner stopped because the covenant with Eri and god had finished. As men were dying of hunger Nri the first son complained to God of their starvation. God gave him an order, which was to kill his first daughter and son and bury them on a separate grave. He obeyed, killed and buried them after *izu ato*, three weeks, yam and cocoyam germinated from their graves, the people ate and became happy. As time went by, Nri was directed by God to kill his slaves and bury them separately as he buried his children, after that palm tree and palm fruit germinated on the graves. Nri became so prosperous that God told him to distribute the food to other people who had extended through him but he refused and held all the food alone, because he acquired his wealth with the blood of his children and slaves, and this act of refusal made him richer and gave him rights over those surrounding him

The Essence of Folktale to Children

According to Charlotte S. and co;

Anthropologists study folklore in order to understand the inherent values and beliefs of a culture. Psychologists look at folklores and myths and discover something of motivations and inner feelings of human; while folklorists themselves collect and categorize various stories,

types and motifs from around the world (253).

These are all adult folk researchers, which mean that stories were originally associated with adults alone. How then do we always associate children with folk literatures? Children giggle whenever they hear a good story. According to Igbo tradition a child is someone within the age of 0-13years. They are under the scrutiny of their parents. At this age, they are vulnerable, gullible and dependant. At this level, knowledge is acquired through constant reoccurring of stories or shared experiences. According to Socrates in his theory of recollection; "all knowledge is known from previous experience". In view of this, Jean Piaget in Nkiru Ohia essay; knowledge is constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or task" folktale is an activity that allows children to interact and retain to memory what the teller narrated. At the end of every story a child tells what he/she learnt from the story told. It is on this notion that that Nkiru Ohia explains that folklores "are said to be the oldest educational and therapeutic tool on earth"(170). folktale appeals to the child sense of judgment, he begins to form the image of poetic justice where the good is rewarded and the evil is punished but most importantly, they learn that every task needs fulfillments before a reward. Bruno maintains that fairy tales help children to cope with their dreams and inner turmoil, each tale he says "is a magic mirror which reflects some aspects of our inner world and of the steps required by our evolution from immaturity to maturity". (259). It serves as an informal education which every home in Igboland use to prepare a child to formal classroom learning. Pearman opines that ;

There is something in a storytelling experience for every type of learner. Stories give us vicarious experience. This is as close to actual experience as you can get because stories engage us on so many levels, and because of its logical flow, we easily retain it in memory for use as needed. It has all the stuff we care about; people, problems and solutions. A story is really just a bunch of information organized in the form of problems which we want to know the answers to, and resolutions that give us hope. Stories are food for thought, they help to discern what is right from wrong and we wish to model ourselves after.

From the selected folktales, the first talks about consistency especially when children are sent to an errand. Instead of being playful, like goat and dog they maintain a speed, this will make them to develop sense of maturity and on the hand, not like tortoise who, out of excitement forgot himself. It gives children the opportunity to learn moderation in life. The next story about the origin of Igbo, the belief still holds that Nri is the centre of Igbo culture and civilization. Up till date, most traditional titles like kingship, cleansing of land and ritual ceremonies are being performed by Nri people. When children are educated with these kind of stories, they will be adequately informed about their origin before their enrollment into school.

Conclusion

Traditional literature is our heritage. It lays the groundplan for understanding of all literatures. A child who begins his life with oral literature will not have difficulty for language and other universal qualities of mankind. This essay has looked at the essential aspect of folktales, as well as its historical values.

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