

Developing the mental and worldview of the Igbo child through Igbo epic poetry

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Abstract

The study focuses on these and aimed at unraveling how the mental and worldview of the Igbo child can be developed via epic poetry. The study is a documentary research and uses the descriptive approach in the analysis of data collected from *Eke Une* an Igbo epic poem. The findings of the study indicate that Igbo epic poems *Eke Une* is capable of developing the mental and worldview of the Igbo child as it is capable of inculcating the belief in the supernatural being, making him be on the know of the Igbo man's quest to achieve greatness despite the risk involved, communalism among the Igbo nation and more importantly the belief by the Igbo people that lust usually go with negative consequences. The study concludes that Igbo epic poems which are some of the Igbo rich oral heritage are essential in children's overall development.

Keywords: Mental development, Worldview, Epic poem, Communalism, Igbo

1. Introduction

Mental development is crucial to human existence and starts long before the child is born. Due to the fundamental functions the brain play in human existence, most of the dynamic activity of brain development occurs in womb but changes continue for the first two postnatal years (Casey, Gidedd & Thomas, 2000). The infant brain according to Usha (2015) has a number of powerful learning mechanisms at its disposal, even prior to birth. The foetus is equipped to hear the mother's voice in native language through the amniotic fluid during the third trimester in the womb (Decasper & Spence, 1986 and Hopson, 2001).

While the child is still in the womb, there are some levels of cognitive/mental development and right there is the womb, the foetus mental development have serious link with the environment. Right from the womb, the mothers' voice performs a dual role, helping in the mental development of the child and linking the child to the outside world (the environment). The much popularized bucket theory or the notion of the child's brain being blank at birth lack any empirical backing. The voice the child hears in the womb though is the mothers' voice, is the voice of the people (the child's community) and at birth, birth songs are sang to welcome the child into the world in traditional Igbo society. At birth the child is welcomed into the world with songs/poem which is an affirmation that the child have been born and accepted into a particular culture.

Whether the child understands the songs is another thing, but Tomasello (2000) opines:

Human beings are biologically adapted for culture in ways that other primates are not ... the human adaptation for cultural learning is best seen ontogenetically and in the context of infant's other social and cognitive activities. The key transition occurs at 9 to 12 months of age as infants begin to engage in interactions that are triadic in the sense that they involve the referential triangle of child, adult, and some outside entity to which they are both attending... (p. 37 & 38).

The human mind/cognition were fashioned to adapt to culture and when we look closely to cultural practices that affect the brain, what comes to mind is the oral tradition or what may be referred to as oral literature in literary world. Oral literature shapes the child imagination and thinking, since it is rich in the people's culture (Abonyi, 2012).

In the field of oral literature, poems and specifically the epic poems are well equipped with fictional and non-fictional elements in the society which can shape the child's imagination and thinking and subsequently make a lasting impression on the mental and the development of worldview that is in consonance with his people. The present study appraises, *Eke Une* an Igbo epic poem and assesses its potential in the development of the mental and worldview of the Igbo child.

2. Culture and the development of mental and world view of the children: An overview

Culture encapsulates whatever the people believe, practice and holds as their heritage. These heritage and the peculiarities of each society are said to be passed from one generation to the other. But then how does the way of life of the people get to the young ones? How does the way of life of the people shape the worldview of the child? And how does a child develop from a less knowledgeable entity to one that is filled with knowledge and the wisdom of his people.

To understand how the brain develop, Hawley (2000) states that we need to understand a bit about how the brain works. Hawley observe that the brain is composed of many regions that performs specific actions. While projecting the views of Huttenlocher & Dabholkar, (1997), Hawley (2000) went ahead to state:

In most region of the brain, no new neurons are formed after birth. Instead, brain development consists of an ongoing process of wiring and re-wiring the connections among neurons. New synapses between cells are constantly being formed, while others are broken or pruned away. This happens throughout life. However, in early childhood, the brain is genetically programmed to produce more synapses than it will ultimately use. Indeed, by 8 months of age a baby may have an astounding 1,000 trillion synapse in his brain! This blooming of synapses happens at different times in different areas of the brain. Development then proceeds by keeping the synapses that are used and pruning away those that aren't. The pruning of synapses happens over the childhood years as the different areas of the brain develop (p.2).

Hawley (2000) observes further that pruning gives the brain the opportunity to keep the connections that have a purpose, while eliminating those that aren't doing anything. The brain operates on the "use it or lose it" rule, but "over – pruning" of the connections can occur when a child is deprived of normally expected experiences in the early year. These points to the fact that experiences and physical environment have the ability to affect the brain either positively or otherwise. The environment the child encounters at birth and throughout childhood is the child immediate family which is part of the community/society with the accompanying way of life – culture. The brain of the child and subsequent development lean greatly on the culture of his people.

But Rubin (1998), states that the study of social and emotional development has long been recognized for its complexity. This is based on the fact that culture is dynamic and diverse. That notwithstanding, children are fast language learners, and they are capable of successfully learning different languages from different cultural background. Though culture and cultural practices are complex, it is still the peoples culture that provides the child the learning experiences that help him waddle across these complexities and rather than retarding the brain or over-working it, help in the development of the brain.

Brain development in childhood is facilitated through the oral tradition and whether the child seats down and watch the mother perform domestic functions (Greenfield, 1999) or learn words via social activity from caregivers, these crucial experiences are needed in the child's mental development (NewPort, 2015). Children thus start their life via the oral tradition and specifically via the instrumentality of the oral literature. In line with above, Abonyi (2012, p. 250), sees oral literature as being superior to written literature not just because it is the foundation of written literature and its spring-board but based on the fact that in relation to language development, it is that aspect of literature that is capable of getting to the child before he is born, and continues to nurture him in his language task after birth. Oral literature which is basically rich in oral tradition opens the way of life of the people to the child.

Oral literature, nurtures the child and shows him the way of life of his people and the brain is nurtured in that direction. The child thus has a worldview (Okonkwo, 2003) which may also be seen as his worldhood. In oral literature, the epic poems are good in inculcating the way of the people to its young ones. Epic poems contain lots of cultural practices, beliefs and even the psyche/mentality of the people involve. Due to its various climaxes and in view of the facts that Igbo epic poems mainly focus on expedition/strange travels, it provide a lot of fantasies and breath taking experiences which is necessary for the mental development of the Igbo child. The study appreciates *Eke Une* and assesses the suitability of the poem in developing the mental faculty and the worldview of the child in line with the cultural practices and beliefs of the Igbo people.

2.1 *Eke Une* and the mental development of the child

Literary works play important natural role in children's lives in most cultures. These works have universal appeal and provide a rich source of language and imaginative input (Ellison, 2010) and are basically useful in cognitive/mental development of children. *Eke Une* according to Nnabuihe (1977) is the only Igbo epic Poem written so far. In the present study, *Eke Une* is seen as an epic poem which is capable of developing the mental and worldview of the child. This were structured under the following subheadings;

- (a) The inculcation of the belief in Supernatural Being.
- (b) The Igbo man's quest to achieve greatness.
- (c) Communalism among the Igbo nation
- (d) Lust and its consequences

2.2 Inculcation of the belief in supernatural beings

Ndi Igbo are known for their belief in the Supernatural and this belief is contained in most of their activities. Right from the time an Igbo man gets up from sleep, he gives thanks to the supernatural. It is not then surprising that Obike started the epic poem "Eke Une" with prayers;

Abadaba, iyi ukwu
Nke na-akx otuto...
Nke na-alo xwa
Mgbe ji na – eru

Towe iyi Une nne m
Sọputa o jezuru Igbo (p. 1).

With praise, 'Eke Une' is being called to come out as it is worthy of praise. The belief in reincarnation is stated. Thus, Nke na – alq xwa ...", showing that 'Eke Une' has the power of reincarnation especially during the rainy season. Later-on sacrifice was made to the supernatural being thus;

Gaan nye ya ọkukọ!
Werenu abuba ochai ji qhuu
Na qbara oke okpa choo ya mma
Kpokotakwanu ikwu na ibe
N'ime mbara juru oyi
Ka ha kesaa ji e siri esi

Here a call was made for a sacrifice of a fowl, eagle feather and new yam to given to "Eke Une". This should be beautified with the blood of a cock. Thereafter the community had to assemble at the village square to eat the cooked yam. This is not only a celebration but a mark of respect for the supernatural being, "Eke Une".

From the poem, the young can also learn that at times, the gods can be angry and when this happens, they do the unimaginable as can be seen below;

Le ya ka o na – abia
Iwere ndi nke ya
Chakam, Vukum
O burula mmadu abia bilie (p. 8).

In this instance the python was not happy with the people of Isieke and the poet describe it as coming gradually to take away his people and within a twinkle of an eye, he has swallowed two people. In another instance, "Eke Une" did not only swallow the sacrificial object but also swallowed the hand that giveth. All these are the belief system of the Igbo people and right from infancy, the child partake in ritual celebration and this conditions not just effect his cognition but also his worldview.

3. The Igbo man's quest to achieve greatness

The Igbo man is known for hard work and this has no age barrier. Mazi Ulku the protagonist started working hard right from childhood. He was alone in the sea with the canoe when he first encountered the Mermaid and the father and never showed any sign of fear. Even when the Python tried to frighten him, he showed no sign of fear as seen in this stanza;

O wee rue n'etiti ehie ahu,
Na ada eke miri n'une,
O kookwara nna ya ihe nile
Nke mere ka nna ya jikere onwe ya,
Lee ha ka ha na-abia
I were ubiri mara kpuruchim,
Mgbe Ada nyisiri elu nturukpa
Ma lee eke sahene onu ya
Wee chqba ikpuru Ulku
Ma Ulku atughi egwu
Nke a mere ka o were ire
Wee malite iracha ya iku (p.35).

In above stanza, the Mermaid narrated to the father the Python her love affair with the young boy and that Ulku was ready (the boy) for the 'test'. The father then got prepared. As they reached the scene, the daughter climbed to an elevated platform as the Python opened his mouth to pick/swallow Ulku. But the boy showed no sign of fear. Even when the Python started leaking his face, he stood still till the end.

At various places, Ulku took many risks. These include; covering the diamond being used by the Python in its hunting expedition, climbing the tallest trees in the village to get the eagles' eggs, refusing to give back the charm to 'Eke Une' and daring the Python. However, when the fight ensued, the Python lived up to the expectation and when Ulku demanded for water, the Python made the water to be filled with worms. In retaliation, Ulku climbed the tall tree and instead of bring the eggs alone as usual, he took both the eggs and little birds. This angered the eagles and other birds when the power of the charm used on them expired. As they could see only the Python and the mermaid, they descended on them and dealt with them.

Ulku knew that the solution to the problem was to bring back the charm given to him by the Python but refused. In all this, children who listen, watch or read this poem will understand that an Igbo child/man does not give-up easily. The child will thus see challenges as a test of manhood and the road to greatness.

4. Communalism among the Igbo people/nation

Igbo people are known for communal living and most often people do not just strive to better the lots of his family members but that of the community. One is not recognized as a hero in Igbo land due to what he has done to his family and extended family members but due to what he has done to the whole community and humanity in general. This manifests itself in various places in *Eke Une* as Ulku the hero and chief character never thought of the family but what can be beneficial to the whole community. Ulku went for the diamond despite the danger and the possibility of being killed by the Python;

N'etiti ndaeri
Odegwu dinta,
Esitele n'elu osisi wuda
O wee buru ite ya
Kpum! Na diamon!
Uzo wee ghoru eke ohia
Ma mgbe o huru onyinyo
Di ka nke mmadu
O wee kuru eze,
We kuru odudu
Na-ajx ohia nile
"Olee Onwa m? (p.)

In above stanza, the poet narrates that Ulku jumps down from the tree and after using the pot to cover the diamond being used by the Python for its game, the python could not see again (road became bush) But when it noticed the shadow of a human being, he used both the teeth and the tail to bring down the bush in an attempt to get the culprit that covered its light, while asking the big question, "Where is my light/moon?"

Above narration is a heroic act by the young Ulku and he did all these to move his community forward. A young child listening to or reading this poem will see that an Igbo man is not one who seats down waiting for God to transform his community but one who go all out to take risk for humanity. Right from childhood the child's cognitive development is being programmed by these types of stories and subsequently the Igbo child develop this type of worldview.

The child is even thrilled more to see that immediately Ulku brought in the diamond, the elders took over and went to the river to break any bond that existed between them and the "Python" which they had hitherto worshipped as a god. As such;

N'xtxtx ndi ichie ala m
Wee were ntxrxkpa ga n'une
Werekwa xdio
Na oji gbara asaa
Qgbxgba ndx adaala.
Mmxo na ahaji chi
Kpxba n'ime Une !
Any[ji ntxrxkpa ndi a
Na – akpara gi oke;
Apxtakwala apxta
Enyola enyo
Da[mqn gi o furu ma o fughi
Enyola enyo
Akpala
N'ezi anyi ozo xkwx! (p.6)

The following morning after Ulku brought the diamond home; the elders went to the river to break the bond between them and the Python. They went with kola nut and other things and told the python that their covenant with it has ceased to exist henceforth. As such whether the python's diamond is missing or not, they ordered the python to take the sacrifice and henceforth stop coming out in any part of their community.

From above, children will come to the understanding that the Igbo's do not cling to a union that is no more working in the name of tradition. The Igbo people and their culture is dynamic, hence they discovered that the python was not all that powerful as they thought since Ulku was able to battle it and returned with its most precious object, then it should not be reverence again. But even at, they still had to perform the ceremony/sacrifice severing their relationship with it. Through this means, the child learns that everything has order.

Thereafter, the community of Isieke erected the diamond in a tower and barricaded it from the god that owned it:

Ugbu a, e mee ka d[amqn a.
Ghqq qku na-enwuru qha n'ama
Wee wekwara igwe na mbidi
Gbaa ya Okirikiri rue n'igwe
Ime ka chi nke nwe ya
Ghara inyovo ihe ya site n'une (p. 7).

In above, the poet explains that now that the diamond has been placed on a tower heavily fortified with walls, it is now impossible for the god that owns it to see it from the river. The community thus celebrated it and stated that they have gone to various 'lands' but they have found out that Isieke was the best as it is a land that has both water and diamond.

All these show that communalism is instituted in Igbo culture and the achievement of one man is seen as that of the community and is celebrated by all. The child while growing up will hear such heroic did and all these have varying effect on the mind of the child. Through epic poems like *Eke Une* the child's worldview is fashioned in such a manner that the development of his community is uppermost in his mind.

5. Lust and Its Consequences

It is lust that brought Atxmbalaria (the Mermaid) and Ulku together. Though Atumbalaria is not normal human being, she got attracted to Ulku while she was on her way to their annual vacation which took them to the ocean. Ulku not minding the fact that she was half human appreciated her admiration in return:

Tupu ha apalite njem,
Mami na – efere xmxokoroqb[a aka
O lere anya hxkwa otu onye
A na – akpq Mazi Ulku;
Ihe Ulku Mas[r] ya
N'ih na q mara mma
Bxrxkwa nwoke nta;
O nyekwara ya mgbalaka qla –edo
Q bx qla majik ... (p. 16)

The excerpt above indicates that before mermaid and the father (the Python) began the journey, the mermaid waved at the young men. However on sighting Ulku, she was pleased with his "good look" and was attracted not just because he was handsome but also because he was young. She now gave him a magic ring made of gold. It is lust that made them attractive to each other and later-on Ulku saw her and described her as being so beautiful.

Site n'isi rue n'ukwu
O legghi nwagbogho India
Odu azu ba o ji kwara ukwu (pp. 22-23)

From hear 'to toe', she looked like an Indian lady but the lower part of her body was that of a fish. Despite this, their relationship continued until she told Ulku how she can change to a beautiful lady with all the features of a lady.

But when Ulku seemed to have gotten what he needed, he was not ready to give back anything he received, hence the fight:

Kamgbe Xnyahx (eke) hudara isi ya
Nke mere ka Mami dakwasi
Ulku n'ahx n'ehihie ahx!
Ulku luru ulu wee tie ya n'ala
... Mgbe O bilitere
Iwe were ya nke ukwu
Nke mere ka o tiputa ara aka nri
O weekwara ya tie Ulku n'ukwu
O wee daa n'ala wee bilikwa

When the Python and the daughter were ready to fight Ulku they came and waited for a whole day and when Ulku came out, the Python threw the daughter at him but Ulku fought back and threw the mermaid on the ground. This infuriated the mermaid who brought out one of her breast (the right hand one) and hit Ulku on the waist. This made Ulku to fall down and on rising up the Python and the daughter were already on the run.

All these action and counter action came as a result of lust. They all suffered, as both the villagers and the beast had cause to regret the relationship. At last the "almighty" *eke une* resorted to eating frogs and toads at old age. None had it easy when the relationship failed. And this brings the question of didactic lessons inherent in

Igbo traditional narratives. In Igbo narratives, be it folktales, drama or poems, there are always moral lessons to be learnt. There is always a “cause and effect” aspect of the narrative, which most often is meant to inculcate moral lessons. Thus, the whole story points to the fact that lust and illicit relationship should be avoided. From childhood, an Igbo child is immersed with this type of stories and its conditions both the worldview and how the child perceives the world.

Conclusion

All normal humans are biologically pre-wired and equipped to adapt to human environment. However, all human environment are not the same, hence each environment moulds its inhabitant. Basically, as have been seen in this study, the human minds are usually affected more by the oral literature/tradition. The child need to develop the brain and epic poems of all cultures are equipped to challenge the young brain. The poems take the child to how the people see the world, the supernatural and other fanatics. Thus, effort should be made to avail the Igbo child of the opportunity of not just being told the story in *Eke Une*, but all other epic stories in Igbo language. This will in no small measure enrich the child’s cognition and programme same in line with the worldview of his people.

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