



**NARRATOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF IGBO FOLKLORIC DISCOURSE: A
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL ENCODING IN
SELECTED IGBO TALES**

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ABSTRACT: *That society is dynamic entails that no society is static; as days progress, new things come to replace old ones. With the coming of the Europeans in parts of African society, traditionalism gave way to modernism. To an extent, the society being dynamic seems detrimental to the Igbo tradition as modern civilization tends to make the Igbo tradition and culture extinct. With our people developing more penchant for the Western tradition, things keep falling apart in the contemporary Igbo society as the Igbo tradition and culture seem highly neglected. This paper therefore delves into the intricate cultural complexities of the Igbo people of southern Nigeria with the aim of exploring the linguistic feature of folklore as it heralds understanding and preserving of the Igbo tales. With a lucid and comprehensive exploration of the Igbo folklore, the realistic facts of the Igbo identity are X-rayed. With the folkloric language parsed, the importance of folklore, with specific reference to folktale, is vivified. The researchers believe that as most aspects of folklore are basically performed, then Schechner's Performance Theory is considered an apt theoretical framework for the analysis of the research.*

KEYWORDS: Folklore, the Igbo Heritage, Igbo Tradition, Culture, Folktale.



INTRODUCTION

Alan Dundes (1965) defines folklore as the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture, including myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles, and superstitions. To William Bascom (1965), folklore is the study of human expression, including oral traditions, customs, beliefs, and articles. In his own view, Richard Dorson agrees with Bascom that oral tradition is an appendage of folklore when he defines folklore as the body of traditional, customary, and popular culture, including oral traditions, material culture, and social customs. Uche Nnyagu in his *Nigerian Folklore and the Oral Tradition: A Cultural Heritage* believes that Nigerian folklore and oral tradition are a vital part of the country's cultural heritage, reflecting the beliefs, values, and experiences of its diverse ethnic groups." According to him, all aspects of folklore have been passed down through generations, shaping the nation's identity and influencing its literature, art, music, and everyday life. At this point, it is good to illustrate the difference between oral tradition and folklore. Although both are very closely related, they are not exactly the same. Folklore is the totality of traditional cultural expressions, including material lore, customary lore and, of course, verbal lore. Oral tradition, on the other hand, entails the mode of transmission of folklore. It is the primary means by which folklore is transmitted and preserved. Nnyagu further vivifies that folklore encompasses the collective wisdom, myths, legends, tales, and proverbs that have been shared through word of mouth. Oral tradition represents the cultural expression and transmission of these stories, songs, and performances. Together, they offer a unique window into Nigeria's rich cultural landscape, revealing the complexities and nuances of its history, social norms, and spiritual beliefs.

Linguistic Features of Igbo Folktales

Folktale, according to Kennedy, X. J., Dana Gioia and Mark Bauerlein (2009), is a short anonymous narrative that forms part of the folklore of the people and a region and it is passed down through oral tradition. They disclose that while the contents of folktales may appear simple and conventional, they amount to more than just single stories having entertainment value. To Abrams M. H. (2005), folktale is a short narrative in prose of unknown authorship which has been transmitted orally. Abrams believes that folktales however could be written and sometimes tend to be long. Though he includes myth as an example of folktale probably because both myth and folktale are verbal lore, in the real sense of it, there are areas of disparity between the two. Generally, folktale is a non-realistic tale, not meant to be believed by any reasonable adult. Folktale is interesting and didactic, so it is significant in the society; most people listen to it not because they believe the story to be true, but because the tales teach lessons and also entertain the audience. Myth, on the other hand, serves to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Myths could be didactic but teaching moral lessons is not the major aim of myths; their major aim is to solve a mystery and explain why and how certain things came to be.

As folktales are aimed to teach morals and they are used to educate the young ones about certain tenets of the society, they have to be presented in such a language that would enhance understanding and appreciation. Generally, language of literature is emotive and since folktale is an aspect of literature, language of folktale must while being emotive be very simple, direct and conversational to appeal to the listener as well as enhance understanding and appreciation. Apt imagery and metaphorical language are used in folktales to convey the morals of the



folktale. A good raconteur is one who tells stories to spike interest and enthusiasm and not one whose tale lulls the audience to sleep. To be able to tell a good story, language is the key factor. If the language of the raconteur is boring, the folktale would not entice the listener and so the message may not be well passed. Folktale becomes interesting when the language is vivid and punctuated with apt proverbs.

In Igbo, proverbs are seen as the oil with which words are eaten. According to Okoh (2008), proverbs display a literary capacity for accomplishing a range of other functions, to conceal meaning or veil references, save offence, admonish, persuade, even rebuke. Proverbs, in his own words, “particularly display enormous potential for commenting on a situation, ridiculing a speaker, criticising another’s action or comportment but, more importantly, all this is accomplished in oblique fashion” (127). In an interview with Rems Umeasiegbu in 2012, he disclosed that “Proverbs are the life-wire of the Igbo language without which the language is naked.” Umeasiegbu is of the view that any Igbo person without enough proverbs in his proverb bank is bereft of the essential components of the language. He also disclosed that it is better to understand proverbs and be able to interpret proverbs as used in natural context than having many proverbs without knowing how to use them or interpret them when used in natural context. To him, the beauty of folktale depends on the raconteur’s ability to incorporate proverbs in his tales.

In addition to the use of proverbs, colloquialism and idioms aid the appreciation of folktales. Colloquialisms and idioms are linguistic elements skillfully woven into the narrative to create a rich and authentic storytelling experience. According to Crystal (2013), colloquialism is “a term used to describe a word, phrase, or expression that is used in everyday conversation, but not typically in formal speech or writing.” He believes that colloquialism adds flavour and authenticity to language, but can also be confusing or unclear to those who are not familiar with them. A good raconteur incorporates profuse colloquialism. A good raconteur understands that he must mimic certain animals he uses as part of the characters of the tales. This is where colloquialism comes in. In the story of Tortoise and Elephant, for instance, which is a very popular Igbo folktale, when Tortoise plies Elephant, trying to deceive Elephant to follow it to see the king, the narrator uses colloquialism while trying to speak like Tortoise. One thing about folktales is the fact that they have no historical reality though they teach lessons about the tenets of society. In folktales, impossible things become possible, animals and other natural beings, including human beings, constitute the characters and they live together in a natural setting. In the story of Elephant and Tortoise, a beautiful princess has rejected all the suitors coming to marry her because she wanted any man that would marry her to bring as part of the requirements a live elephant so that anywhere she wants to go, she would mount the elephant as a beautiful princess. No single man qualified to marry the princess because none was able to bring an elephant to the palace. Other animals tried and failed but Tortoise went and deceived Elephant by telling it that the king was hosting a party and that the king had sent Tortoise to come and fetch Elephant whom the king had chosen to be the chairman of the party. Elephant is filled with happiness that the king has chosen it to be the chairman of his party. Elephant believed it would be a perfect opportunity for it to ask for the princess’ hand in marriage. Obviously, Elephant was not aware of the princess’s demand that any suitor that would qualify to marry her must bring an elephant. Tortoise was able to convince Elephant and as they moved, in euphoria, Tortoise, who had convinced Elephant to allow it to climb on its back so that they would get to the palace on time, began to sing, using the colloquialism “gwo gwo gwo ngwo” to describe the onomatopoeic sound of the movement of the enormous animal, the elephant.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We consider performance theory as a theoretical framework for the analysis of the work. Performance theory is a theoretical framework in literature and cultural studies that emerged around the 1960s. The theory was propounded by a group of scholars like Richard Schechner, Victor Turner and Dwight Conquergood. They propounded the theory as an apt theoretical framework for analysing the linguistic features of Igbo folktale. Performance theory affirms that cultural performances, such as storytelling, are, on themselves, active agents that shape and negotiate social measures rather than just mere reflections of reality. Igbo folktales are performed even as the raconteur chronicles the tale. Performance theory highlights the significance of the storyteller's voice, gesture and audience interaction in co-creating the narrative. Schechner believes that stories, such as folktales, are vividly appreciated when performed by the narrator and it would be well understood when the audience participates in the performance. He argues therefore that "performance is a way of knowing, a way of being in the world." By examining the performative aspects of Igbo folktales, we can gain insight into how they not only reflect but also shape cultural values, social norms and communal identity. Conquergood (1995) echoes the importance of considering the performative dimensions of folktales as a means of accessing indigenous knowledge and understanding. Folktales are not just told, or else, they would be boring; folktales are performed so that they excite. Performance theory, therefore, is the most appropriate theory that would aid the appreciation of the Igbo tales.

Narrative Structures in Igbo Folktales

Folktales are non-realistic fiction and, unlike the written prose fiction, they do not have any historical reality; they are only told for the moral lessons that they teach. When Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that no writer writes in a vacuum, probably he did not have folktales in mind. Even though folktales have some cultural sensibility, they do not, like the novel, represent society. The narrative structure of folktales are not as complex as that of advanced fiction. Folktales are shaped in a way that virtue is encouraged and vice is discouraged, so the narrative structure is not complex, or else, the aim of folktales may be thwarted. According to Ihechukwu Madubuike (2007), the narrative structure of Igbo folktales is characterized by *A Loose, Episodic Structure, Flexible Narrative Movement* and *Story within a Story Structure*.

Characteristics of Folktales

* **Igbo Folktales Are Not Long:** Folktales are told in a sitting and the plot is not complex as few characters (mainly natural beings and not supernatural) are used. Folktales often have a flexible narrative structure, consisting of loosely connected episodes. Folktales are meant to be understood by all, so not so many episodes feature in them. When so many episodes and conflicts feature in folktales, the audience tends to be confused and the aim of folktales – to extol virtue and condemn vice – may not be easily realisable. "Story of Tortoise and Elephant" has a linear plot as the entire story revolves majorly on how Tortoise deceived Elephant and brought it to the king as a requirement to marry the king's daughter. In the tale of "Tortoise and the Foolish Goat," we have as well a short story revolving basically around how the cunning tortoise deceived the foolish goat and got it punished and retained by man. The stories are without any complexities which characterised the advanced prose fiction.



*** Folktales Are Not Characterised by Any Complex Plot:** The loose structure enables the raconteur to freely and easily move between the simple narrative thread. The characters are not rounded but flat and the narrator is not inundated with an onerous task of conflict twisting as the plot progresses. When the story of folktales begins, the audience can easily predict how it would end because some characters are stoic. In Igbo tales, whenever the tortoise features, the audience understands immediately that the story will end with the tortoise scheming to outsmart the other characters. In the two examples given above, the tortoise outsmarted the elephant and the goat. As the narrative structure of the Igbo folktale is not complex but linear, the narrative sequence is sequential. This entails that the progress is both chronological and in medias res. When the plot begins from the middle, the audience is kept in suspense. Children love stories with suspense as such stories excite them. In such a situation, vivid flashbacks are employed to give the audience a clear picture of the episodes that had taken place in the past. The story of “The Tale of the Tortoise and the Birds” is a good example of the Igbo folktale that has its plot start in medias res. The story started at the point where Tortoise is already in a heated dispute with the birds over a piece of land. The audience is not first told how the dispute actually started but with clear flashback, the audience understands what had transpired. Madubuike suggests that this technique involves embedding a smaller narrative within a larger one, creating a layered storytelling effect. This technique adds suspense, depth, complexity and meaning to the tale, thereby exciting the audience.

Cultural Encoding in Igbo Folktale

Folktales are indispensable means of mirroring and X-raying the Igbo culture. Cultural encoding refers to the subtle incorporation of Igbo cultural values, beliefs and practices into the narrative. Although folktales are non realistic tales, the story of folktales shades light into the traditional way of life of the Igbo. Folktales are traditional tales not owned by any single individual. It is a collective tale of a particular society transmitted via oral tradition. This being the case, folktale tells the collective story of a people. Cultural encoding in Igbo serves the following purposes:

I. Cultural Preservation: Igbo folktales are passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. Folktales transmit cultural traditions, customs, and practices from one generation to another thus ensuring the continuity of those aspects of the Igbo heritage. The Story of the Ant and the Grasshopper is a good example. In Igbo, the tradition is that able bodied men are not lazy. This is basically the reason why folktales are told at night and not in the day time. In the day time, able bodied men are expected to be in their respective workplaces working so assiduously to provide food for the family. At night, when they come back, the father or any other elderly person tells folktales to the children to keep them awake until the food being cooked by the man’s wife is done. In the folktale, Ant symbolises the industrious Igbo man while Grasshopper symbolises a lazy fellow. This folktale uses the two characters to portray the belief of the Igbo. In the folktale, Ant goes to the house of Grasshopper during the harvest period and asks Grasshopper to follow it (Ant) to gather food and store for the season of scarce. The lazy grasshopper tells the ant to forget about going to gather food but to join it (Grasshopper) to make merry. Ant looks at Grasshopper with pity and decides to go and gather food and store them for the period of scarcity. Soon, it is time of scarcity and the lazy grasshopper has nothing to eat. It goes to Ant to borrow food. Ant is surprised that Grasshopper did not later gather food. Ant tells Grasshopper that it would not share the food it had gathered for itself and for its family with Grasshopper. Ignominiously, Grasshopper leaves to face its



fate. The story of the ant and the lazy grasshopper is akin to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo is likened to the wise ant while his father, Unoka, the lazy one, is likened to the lazy grasshopper. Both the folktale and Achebe's novel vividly mirror the cultural belief of the Igbo.

II. Cultural Values and Norms: Folktales convey important cultural values. Even though animals are used as the characters in most cases, through the activities of the characters, important cultural values, such as the need for hospitality and respect for elders, are relayed to the children. Children are taught such virtues through folktale. The story of a polygamous farmer and the boy who forgot his flute in the farm is a good example. Achebe preserved the tale in his children's fiction, *The Flute*. The man had gone to the farm with his family and in the evening, he called his children to get ready to go back to their house. By the time they got back home, it was already very dark because the farm place was very far away from their home. They were already at home when the only son of the younger wife remembered that he had forgotten his flute in the farm. He insisted that he must go back to the farm that night to get the flute. All the efforts of his parents to dissuade him proved futile. The parents knew that he would encounter ghosts in the farm because it was the time ghosts came to cultivate their own farm. The boy got to the farm and met different types of ghosts playing his flute. He was so humble and truthful to the ghosts that they blessed him with life changing gifts. When he got home, he carried out the instruction of the ghosts and every good thing of the world emanated from the gift. The co-wife became jealous and she rejected the beautiful gifts given to her by the younger wife. She rather cajoled her stubborn son to go to the farm and to forget his flute so that he would also be blessed by the ghosts. But the boy was rude to the ghosts who cursed him and his jealous mother with every negative thing that destroyed them. The folktale encourages the cultural norm of virtue instead of vice. It also discloses the fact that humility begets favour while avariciousness begets destruction.

III. Language Preservation: Language is a vital aspect of folktales. As raconteurs narrate folktales using the Igbo language, the language is preserved. Stories aid in maintaining and preserving the Igbo language. When the tale is told by a professional storyteller, who has many proverbs in his proverb bank and who also knows how to use the proverbs in natural context, the listener acquires proverbs, vocabularies and idioms which they in turn would transmit to his own audience. Through that means, language is preserved.

IV. Moral Lessons: The major aim of folktale is to teach lessons about life. Before the introduction of Western tradition, elders and parents used folktales to teach their young ones lessons about society. Folktales are didactic in nature. They are stories of things that never happened but which are used to teach the younger ones lessons about life and the Igbo society. With adequate language use, folktales teach morals; they aid in guiding children's behaviour and decision making as they pertain to Igbo society. The folktale about how Tortoise deceived Elephant by using cunning means to bring Elephant to the palace as part of the requirement to marry the princess teaches that not everyone you see as a friend is actually a friend. The folktale is a call to the children to be wise and wary of the type of company that they keep. Tortoise and Elephant were best of friends and Elephant trusted Tortoise so much that he never suspected that Tortoise would ever think of tricking it. In the end, Tortoise used cunning means with smart language to Elephant to the palace in order to qualify to marry the princess.

V. Preserving Cultural Practices: Through folktales, cultural practices are preserved. Culture includes the totality of the way of life of a people including their language and



philosophy. The folktale of the polygamous farmer and his boy's encounter with the ghost, vivifies that part of the reason why Africans were polygamous was because they were farmers and they needed large hands to join in farming. Tortoise and Elephant reveals that in Igbo, a man and a woman do not just get together and start procreating; bride price has to be paid by the groom as part of the culture in Igbo society. Tortoise used Elephant to symbolise part of the bride's requirements to be legally married.

Performance of the Igbo Folktale

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu (2017) posits that "Igbo folktales are a reflection of the Igbo people's culture, history and value. Although Igbo folktales fall under the category of folklore known as verbal lore, which entails that they are verbalised, Igbo folktales are not only narrated, they are performed with passion and flair, bringing the community together in a shared experience.

To appreciate the Igbo folktale, it has to be performed. According to Chukwuemeka Odumegwu (2017), "Igbo tales were performed under the Iroko tree before the coming of the white man." Similarly, to Ezeigbo, T. A. (2013), "in pre-colonial Igbo society, storytelling was a communal affair, often taking place under the shade of a majestic Iroko tree." Before the introduction of the western education, folktales used to be the major source of educating the young ones. Then, parents who were not endowed with the gift of storytelling took their children to the stage where professional raconteurs performed folktales to the delight and education of the young ones.

Elements/Aspects of Performing Igbo Folktale

Igbo folktales are like drama which, M. H. Abrams (2005) believes, cannot be fully appreciated if not performed on the stage. According to him, drama is written in dramatic form, with dialogue, indicated settings, and stage directions. As in the case of drama, below are some aspects/elements of the Igbo folktale performance:

i. **Setting:** Setting, according to M. H. Abrams, refers to the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which an action occurs. By setting, we imply the physical space where the storytelling takes place. In the past, a conducive environment where children were brought together for the sake of folktale performance was always the first point of consideration. The location here, referred to as setting, serves as a uniting factor where children from different families gather during the moonlight for the purpose of being entertained and educated by a professional raconteur.

ii. **The Storyteller:** The storyteller is like a classroom teacher in contemporary society whose responsibility is to educate the pupils under their care. The storyteller, in folklore, is a professional raconteur for they meet such essential requirements as: having knowledge of the tale, good communication skills, performance skills and, of course, cultural sensitivity.

iii. **Performing Technique:** As already mentioned, the storyteller is like a teacher in the modern system of education. A teacher understands that performance skills enhance cognition; in folktale, performing techniques are parts of the performance skills requirements that include:

* **Vocal Inflections:** Changes in tone, pitch and volume to convey emotions, emphasize points and bring characters to life.



* **Facial Expressions:** The storyteller understands that facial expression is a factor for the appreciation of the folktale performance. He must learn to use facial muscles to convey emotions, reactions, and character traits in engaging the audience visually.

* **Mimicry:** To make the story seem real, the storyteller must imitate the characters' voices, sounds, or movements to create a vivid representation as such would engage the audience and enhance understanding. Mike Ejeagha is a veteran storyteller and, in his songs, he appropriately mimics each character. As mentioned earlier, the refrain "gwo gwo gwo ngwo" in his folktale, "Ka Esi Lee Onye Isi Oche, is a mimicry of the movement of the gigantic animal, elephant as it trudges to the king's palace to marry the beautiful princess.

* **Audience Participation:** In folktales, the audience refers to the young ones who listen to the storyteller as he performs the folktale. The members of the audience are not passive listeners; they participate by singing and dancing when the performance becomes rhythmical. As folktales are performed, the audience are expected to participate in the performance by singing the ditties where necessary. On some occasions, they jeer at any character that displays certain traits through the mimicry of the performer, and they clap when necessary. Audience participation is one major performance skill that endears the audience to remain awake all through the performance of the folktale. As the performance comes to an end, the audience is asked questions on what they learnt from the folktale because of the didactic nature of the folktale.

SUMMARY

Igbo folktales have been an indispensable means of educating the young ones. Before the coming of the colonial masters, Igbo people had been using folktales to raise the children. Folktale has been distinguished from other verbal arts as it is the only narrative genre that aims majorly to teach moral lessons. Folktales have among their functions, using language to educate, entertain as well as preserve culture. Achebe believes that one who does not know where rain started beating him would not realise where his body dries. Today, folktales seem to be gradually going into extinction because the Europeans disillusioned our people that everything about Africa, including folktale, is barbaric. The truth however remains that the Europeans, as Achebe posits, were ignorant of our belief system. They condemned our folktale because they are told at night, believing that they are barbaric. The paper serves as a teacher, revealing the simple truth that the reason our tales were told at night was because our people are industrious and they should not be idle, telling stories in the daytime when they should be in their various workplaces. The paper recommends that the Igbo folktales should not be allowed to go into extinction; they are part of the Igbo culture, used to educate and entertain the audience. Storytellers should reinvigorate the Igbo folktale. Performance is recommended as a means of documentation. Performance of Igbo folktale is a vibrant tapestry of storytelling, weaving together the threads of culture, tradition, and community. With each tale, the storyteller breathes life into the ancestors' words, using vocal inflections, facial expressions, and gestures to transport the audience to a world of wonders.



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