

Igbo Oral Literature in a Digital Age: An Appraisal of Igbo Riddles and Tongue Twisters

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Abstract

Igbo oral literature is a type of literature that is rendered orally and appreciated aurally. This study examines the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters. These are forms of Igbo oral literature which embody rich Igbo values. They are regarded as *agwugwa* and *okwuntabirere* respectively. Many Igbo people have not shown reasonable interest in showcasing and projecting the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters in this digital era. The only visible effort has been the use of modern media such as radio and television in showcasing these Igbo oral genres unlike the use of social media. Previous studies have equally shown that these forms of Igbo oral literature have not received desired scholarly attention in spite of the rich Igbo values embodied in them. Unfortunately, some Igbo people, especially the youths and children do not appreciate and utilise the Igbo values and linguistic features embodied in these oral genres. Therefore, this study examines these aspects of the Igbo oral literature so as to determine the extent they have thrived in this digital era and also to identify measures that would be employed to bring them to limelight for the exploration and consumption of the younger generation. However, the study selects data from oral interview and relevant literatures. It adopts literary theory of functionalism and descriptive approach in assessing these literary genres. It is hoped that the present study will encourage the Igbo scholars, youths and children to employ various forms of the social media in projecting and preserving the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters in this digital age.

Keywords: Oral literature, Riddles, Tongue Twisters, Functionalism, Literary Genre

Introduction

Igbo oral literature is an aspect of Igbo oral literature. As the name implies, it is the type of literature that is not written but it is usually presented in oral form as it was inherited from the forefathers. It does not have a known author. Rather, it is communally owned by the members of the society. Igbo oral literature is regarded as the origin of Igbo literature. This explains why many Igbo literary scholars hold the view that Igbo written literature metamorphosed from the Igbo oral literature. Even though that the authors of the Igbo literature are lost in history, it is pertinent to affirm here that they made frantic efforts in articulating various Igbo values and aesthetics of the Igbo language into the oral literature, specifically the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters. This is among the reasons why some literary scholars observed that many Igbo literary writers borrow extensively from oral literature which is regarded as the model for the written literature.

In the early Igbo society, various forms of the Igbo oral literature played major role in enhancing communal living among the Igbo race. Unlike the situation in the early Igbo era, the Igbo oral literature is faced with survival challenge in this digital age. Amazingly, unlike the owners and custodians of these oral genres, it appears that some non-Igbo speakers appreciate, utilise and appreciate these Igbo oral genres through various technological devices more than the Igbo. Some Igbo scholars like Nwadike (2003), Maduka (2007), Ikwubuzo (2008), Nwokoye (2018), among others, lament that globalization, modern technology and negative attitude of some Igbo people have contributed to the extinction of some aspects of the Igbo oral genre. But this study posits that it ought not to be so. However, Nnyigide (2018) advocates that different forms of Igbo oral literature should be revitalised to align with the technological innovations of the 21st century.

Obviously, the Igbo oral literature should blend and embrace the current technological trend. Various technological devices should be the tools for the projection and the preservation of the Igbo oral forms. Hence, this present study which appraises the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters in order to identify measures for their enhancement and projection in this digital age. There are various forms of the Igbo oral literature but this study focuses on Igbo riddles and tongue twisters because of the immense role they played and would continue to play in transferring the Igbo values, norms, ethics and worldview to the younger generation.

Conceptual Framework

The major concepts prominent in this study would be examined based on the context of this study. These concepts are: Igbo oral literature, Igbo riddles, Igbo tongue twisters and digital age.

Igbo Oral Literature

As the name implies, it is a type of Igbo literature that is not written but it is in oral form. It embodies the Igbo values, beliefs, thoughts, norms, ethics and worldview. Nwadike (1992, 2003) affirms that the Igbo oral literature is not written. It is transferred from one generation to another. Besides, Okoh, (2008) observes, "In contrast to the written form, oral literature is spoken, sung, intoned, recited, or chanted, depending on the context" (p.72). This shows that there are various contexts for presentation of the oral literature unlike the written literature. Also, Okoh adds that oral literature is oral and appreciated aurally. In addition, Ikwubuzo (2008) believes that Oral literature is a living and dynamic art which has survived successive generations. In traditional Igbo society, for instance, the performance of oral literature permeates the social, religious, cultural, political or informal occasions.

Igbo Riddles

The Igbo riddle is a form of Igbo oral literature. In the early Igbo society, it was one of the prominent Igbo oral genres usually presented during the folktale sessions and other occasions where children are gathered. It is presented in two parts; the question and answer. Riddles have special features. According to Okoh, (2008), “Riddle, as well as oral poetry in general, ... is characterised by a highly imaginative and symbolic mode of expression, rather than the plain, ordinary language of everyday discourse” (p. 24). From Okoh's observation, it could be seen that the riddle has creative and imaginative attributes. Besides, Emenanjo, (2007) observes that the riddle is, perhaps, the only genre of oral literature, which involves active participation, since by its nature, it involves two mutually complementary parts: the Question/Proposition and the Answer this observation is correct because during the presentation of the riddles, the presenter and the audience are usually active. This shows that riddle does not entertain any dull moment.

Igbo Tongue Twisters

The Igbo tongue twister is a minor genre of the Igbo oral literature. It is a combination of words that are alliterative in nature which are usually difficult to articulate. It has aesthetic features but rarely express meaning. Emenanjo, (2007) confirms this thus: “The only oral genre, which has no 'moral' or 'inner' message. It is usually a well-made sentence, which is occasionally and accidentally meaningful” (p.6).

Digital Age

This is known as the information age. According to IGI Global (2022), it is a historic period in the 21st century that is characterised by rapid change from traditional industry to an economy based on information technology. It can be described as a time frame in history that the use of digital technology became prevalent and of common use throughout the world.

Theoretical Framework

As stated above, this study adopts the literary theory called

functionalism in analysing the primary data. This is a literary approach that examines the relevance of literature to the society. It emphasises the functional attribute of literature to the society. In other words, it focuses on the functions performed in the society by literature. Ikeokwu, (2007) observes that the precepts of functionalism are based on the concepts of 'social commitment' which is an aspect of social criticism that is used to buttress the point that literature is and ought to be relevant to the society that has given birth to it and nurtures it. Besides, Mbah and Mbah, (2007) observe that functionalism focuses on the practical role of oral literature. Functionalism is more suitable in this study because it x-rays the functions and impacts of the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters on the audience and the society that own them.

Why the Igbo Riddles and Tongue Twisters? - Their Functions

One may wonder and ask why this study has focused on the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters. The reason for focusing on the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters in this study cannot be overemphasized. Tongue twister and riddles perform numerous functions in the society especially in the language teaching and learning of children. They were originally created for fun. Early Igbo elders and parents employed them in training and transferring of their values and language skill to their children. Ogundipe as cited in Emenanjo (2007) observes that riddles and tongue twisters perform outstanding functions in the society. They are vehicles for fun and amusement. According to him, “Like riddles, tongue twisters can be swapped before a tale telling session to warm up the audience. They are not limited to any specific time to day or night... they are used for teaching elocution and for the dramatization and enhancement of verbal skill” (pp. 7-8).

Many literary scholars concur that tongue twisters have entertaining and therapeutic value. Emenanjo (2007) affirms thus: “... they are also employed as therapeutic aids for persons with

minor speech defects. They also serve as a psychological release for the tension of social norm” (p.8). Obviously, the aspects of entertainment and aesthetics are major considerations in literature. Both riddles and tongue twisters pay wonderful attention to these aspects. Okoh, (2008) observe that performers and audience derive great pleasure and excitement from riddles and tongue twisters.

Scholarly contribution on Igbo Riddles and Tongue Twisters

Here, effort would be made to showcase the extent to which some scholars have researched on the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters. This is to enable the researcher to identify the gap in the present study. Emenanjo(2007), in his paper titled, “Two Minor Genres of Igbo Oral Literature: Tongue Twisters and Riddles” observes the riddle is the only genre of oral literature that involves active participation of audience. He went further to categorise the Igbo riddles into two: The single riddles and the chain riddles. Besides, Ojukwu and Igwe (2012), in their article titled, “Igbo Tongue-Twisters: A Linguistic Perspective” explored some linguistic features in Igbo tongue twisters. Ozioko (2021) in her work titled, “Aesthetic Feature and Social Relevance of Igbo Tongue Twisters” examined the aesthetic features in Igbo tongue twisters. She observed that the Igbo tongue twisters are therapeutic in nature among others. Also, Mbah and Mbah (2007) in their book titled, *Azuonye: Lectures on Igbo Literature and Stylistics* argue that Ruth Finnegan has erroneously described riddles as a genre that belongs exclusively to children. According to them, Igbo tradition, riddles are not confined to children. Members of secret societies as well as masquerade societies use riddles in serious initiation rituals. In addition, Ikwubuzo (2008) in his work titled, “Igbo Oral Literature and the Igbo Youths Today: What Literary Legacy for Posterity” observe that a child can through his participation in riddle game imbibe some cultural norms and values of his society which are conveyed in the riddles. In spite of these few research efforts of these scholars, there is still dearth of scholarly works on Igbo riddles and tongue twisters as could be seen in the scholarly contribution above. It is obvious that

these aspects of Igbo oral genres have not received the scholarly attention they deserve in this digital age. Hence, the need for the present study.

Data Presentation and Data Analysis

Examples of Igbo Riddles

Example 1

Original:

Q: Gwa mgwa m gwa m; gwa motinwatan'ihunneya?

A: Agụ

English:

Q: Tell me tell me tell me; tell me that which beats a child in the presence of his mother?

A: Hunger

Among the Igbo, it is believed that the primary role of a mother is to provide food for her children just like the mother hen. She also protects and shields their children jealously from the enemy. Ordinarily, no sane mother would allow anyone to beat or hurt her child in her presence. From the above riddle, the only thing that can beat a child before her is hunger because it cannot be seen and she does not have control over it. The above riddle presents loving and caring nature of mothers. The analysis of this riddle from the literary theory of functionalism reveals that the loving, caring and selfless attributes of a mother can be inculcated in the lives of the Igbo female children in particular and male children in general which they would continue to transfer to their generation for harmony in the society.

Example 2

Original:

Q: Gwa m, gwa m gwa m; gwa m ihemmirisaraahummayarọ?

A: Nnu

English:

Q: Tell me tell me tell me; tell me that, which is bathed in water and the beauty fades away?

Measures to Project the Igbo Riddles and Tongue Twisters in this Digital Era

The following are the measures that could be adopted in projecting the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters in this digital era:

- Documentation of some Igbo riddles and tongue twisters that are not yet documented and recorded.
- Re-introduction of Igbo riddles and tongue twisters in school curriculum especially at nursery and primary levels.
- Annotation of various Igbo riddles and tongue twisters
- Deployment of ICT facilities in transferring the Igbo riddles and tongue twisters to the youths and children.
- Consistent sharing of Igbo riddles and tongue twisters on various modern and social media platforms, among other measures.

Findings and Conclusion

As stated earlier, this study adopted the literary theory of functionalism in analysing the selected riddles from functionalist perspective. From the analysis, this study reveals that various Igbo cultural values and worldviews are embedded in Igbo riddles. Besides, it shows that the Igbo riddles have the capacity to inculcate Igbo values, virtues, wisdom, ethics, among others in the lives of the Igbo youths and children thereby bringing positive change in the lives of members of the society which enhances social harmony.

On the part of the examined Igbo tongue twisters, the analysis shows that they project alliteration and assonance which could be employed as therapeutic measure on children and other members of the society that are faced with speech problems. Therefore, in this digital and information age, it behooves the Igbo scholars, researchers, students, youths in particular and Igbo people in general to employ all the modern technological devices and digital

facilities in projecting, preserving and sustaining these rich Igbo oral genres for posterity.

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