

Of Themes and Narrative Styles: Interrogating the Socio-Cultural Ethos of Igbo Folktales

Anselm Nnamdi Achebe

Department of Linguistic/Igbo
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam
&

Clara Oluchukwu Azichoba

Department of Linguistic/Igbo
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam
&

Ruphina Chibugo Orizu

Department of Linguistic/Igbo
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam

ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates themes and styles in Igbo proverbs as well as the socio-cultural ethos enshrined in them. It also intends to look into the two terminologies- Igbo folktales and Igbo folklore to further showcase their various uses and differences in a society. It will go further to discuss some notable features of themes and styles in Igbo folktales. The themes were classified into three major themes – oral stories, tortoise stories, and “why” stories. In case of the moral stories, the constantly recurring themes are those of jealousy among co-wives, exhibition of wickedness and vices especially to an adopted child. It also includes treachery, theft, greed, cruelty, ingratitude, envy etc. The main purpose of the story in each case is to show a character guilty of any of those vices. And, for every vice there is a punishment. The second noticeable theme is tortoise stories. Most of these stories are concerned with the display of cleverness and mischief. Sometimes, the tortoise is shown as treacherous, greedy, ungrateful, untrustworthy and wicked. Most times, it escapes before it is caught. Then the WHY stories are designed to explain some natural phenomenon like the

origin of the reason behind the observance or discontinuance of certain customs. The paper also looks into the methods of styles of delivery. It observes the differences in delivery of fictional and non-fictional narratives. The teachings these folktales convey were also analyzed. The paper suggests that society should use the knowledge from the folktales/folklores in raising their children/wards.

INTRODUCTION

Igbo folktales are confused greatly with Igbo folklore. Many scholars are still not at home with the striking differences between the two terminologies. Folklore and Folktales are oral/written literatures of which had been handed down from generation to generation. They are associated with the cultural needs of the community being recited on social occasions- weddings, funerals, work periods, religious occasions, masquerade ceremonies etc. Folklore has been described by many authors. For instance, while the New Standard Encyclopedia Dictionary describes it as “the tradition, beliefs, customs, sayings, stories etc that are preserved among the common people, Shiley (1970) says “it is normally confined to spoken or written traditions of people, to traditional aesthetic expressions”. Folklore based on the definition of New Standard Encyclopedia (1978) involves traditions, beliefs, customs, sayings, stories etc prescribed among the common people. This implies that it deals with different aspect of life in a Community of which depends on what people believe in. For instance, the Igbo belief that a pregnant mother who eats snails (Ejula) would deliver a child that spits saliva in infant stage; that the patches on the skin on the back of the tortoise is because of his greed when the animals visited heaven and he cunningly ate up the food presented to them that he was dropped from heaven and got his back broken into pieces which later healed and gave him patches at the back. There is also this belief the Igbo's have that the reason mosquitoes fly around the ear is that it begged the ear to

marry him but the ear refused saying that he will not live long, so mosquitoes now visits the ear assuring that he is still alive. The definitions goes to involve the customs of the people. For instance, the Igbo true sons separate themselves from the Osu, ohu and the Chimas accusing them of either being bought as slaves, sacrificed to idols and other negative vices. Britain has its beliefs system too which despise no. 13. They claims that it attracts witches wherever they are written.

Folktale according to Shipley, (1970) is “a story of giants, gods, heroes etc which has been handed down from father to son for hundreds of years”. It went further to say that the quality that determines whether a particular story is a folktale or not would seem to be the fact that it is handed down traditionally, whether by word of mouth or on the written or printed page. An animal tale or creation myth of a Central African tribe, a fairy tale like snow white, the ugly duck etc provided they keep being told. Folktales like Igbo proverbs enhance the language that is greatly respected. They present larger real life stories but are hidden in folklore of Igbo people Achebe, (1958).

However, the thrust of this work is to identify the features of themes and styles in Igbo folktales. In other to do this, folktales will be classified into three major types- moral stories, tortoise stories and why stories. Amongst the moral stories, the constantly recurring theme are those of jealousy: co-wives quarrel, wicked stepmother, trial by tasks, the beautiful girl and her suitors, etc. The theme of jealousy is found repeatedly most commonly among co-wives. These tales are used for the socialization of the young and therefore embody the mores of the society. The murder of a woman by a co-wife is recounted in several tales. Co-wives, it would appear are constantly on the lookout for any sign that their husband is favouring one of them and are quick to react whenever they think they can detect such favouritism. A typical example is in a polygamous family where one wife usually, the youngest bears a male child which others were unable to be get any.

In stories that have this theme, there is usually a sharp contrast between the, good and the bad wives. Most often the senior wife led the group of the bad wives. The senior wife generally does something wicked such as stealing the other wife's child or even killing it. Sometimes, if she cannot steal or kill the child, she parades ugly rumours against the junior wife who had such a child. The enmity between the wives most often is extended to hatred for their children. She may starve them, poison them or give something belonging to them to her own children. In all this rivalry, the husband cannot influence the course of events. Most times, he is not mentioned in the tale, since the purpose is to exhibit the rivalry. Achebe, (2012).

In the theme of rivalry between wives, the wicked wife is always punished; she dies or is disgraced or her children accidentally die mysteriously. Many folktales (Igbo) have as their main theme children exhibition of wickedness and other vices especially to a step-son. The purpose of the story is to show how a woman maltreats a child that does not belong to her. All sorts of wickedness and maltreatments exhibited in this story are all directed to the adopted child by her step mother. Other Igbo folktales have as their main theme the exhibition of some vice or wickedness such as treachery, theft, greed, cruelty, ingratitude, jealousy etc. The main purpose of the story in each case is to show a character that is guilty of these vices. For example, the tortoise ate up the hunters food and defecates into the pot to cover up, the lion killed his fathers rabbit and blamed it on the cat, the fowl ate up a farmers corn and was caught by the farmers trap and, finally the mouse killed his only son for food and never had a son and so on. For every vice, there is a punishment.

Moral Stories

In the moral world of the folktale, wickedness does not go unpunished. This is why the theme of retribution is found in any story in which any wrong has been committed. In the theme of vice, the guilty character is exposed and punished. The themes of

trial by task test the strength, character or endurance of a person. The reason for giving the tasks may be sheer wickedness on the part of the person setting the task. For instance, wicked master may set a very difficult task for his slave. Such tasks might range from picking a coin that fell into the river, digging a tunnel with ordinary hand, or even producing a lost object that had long been forgotten. In such cases, an external agency usually intervenes to help the character perform the task. The character returns victorious to the discomfiture of the wicked person who has set the task. This is seen in the theme of a beautiful girl and her suitor i.e when several suitors contend for a particularly desirable wife, a difficult task is set for them by their would-be in-law. For instance, the suitors may be asked to look for a rare object which would involve a very long journey. The tasks are given to several characters to test their prowess, perseverance, sincerity, or love. The idea being that true; love will brave many difficulty to achieve his objective Asking suitors to make yam heaps and promising the girl to the first person that finishes In some cases, the test can be quite suitable like the king who pretended that his daughter had died and sent for her suitors to take back the presents they had given him in anticipation of marrying her The one suitor that refused to take back his present was then given the daughter in marriage.

The theme of tasks is often linked with that of the beautiful girl and her suitors. It usually involved an only daughter usually the king's daughter Most times, it is the father who determines who the daughter shall marry but occasionally, the girl herself is able to accept or reject suitors. In such a case, the girl may be presented as proud person who eventually gets an undesirable person as her husband. For example, the beautiful girl who refused to marry princes, kings and rich men and eventually married two fishes akum and okpo (onanwaobiaraene). The suitors were coming from all walks of life and almost invariably, the successful suitor was the least expected one like, the youngest of three brothers, the weakest of a number of animal character, the poorest character

or one belonging to the humbles perfection The moral in these stories is that no one should be deposed. The poor and weak may succeed where the rich and strong fail

Tortoise Stories

The tortoise features prominently in Igbo folktales. Most of the tortoise stories are concerned with his display of cleverness. For example, he tricked the elephant and brought; him to be killed, with the impression that he had drunk boiled water when in the actual fact, he had passed the water round showing it to several people by which time the water was already cold. He tricked the birds and borrowed their feathers to a banquet in heaven and later denied them of the meal. He made the elephant and the hippopotamus engage in a tug-of-war with both of them thinking that they were being pulled by him. It sometimes happens, however, that the tortoise who claims to be too clever is outwitted. For instance, he was outwitted by Nwaebuleako in his maternal home. He admitted a murder he had committed after seeing the person wrongly accused of the murder ride on a horse and given a royal reception, by the king whose daughter was killed. He was tricked by the pigeon (who had buried a horse head in the middle of the road) into thinking that ice were growing in the earth; he yam porridge in his hat, and although his head was being burnt he could not remove that hat for his greed, and a host of other tales. Most other tortoise stories are concerned with the exhibition of some vice or mischief. He is shown as treacherous, greedy, ungrateful, untrustworthy, or wicked. Unlike the moral stories, the tortoise sometimes gets away with wrongdoing. Most times, he escapes before he is caught, or when caught, he successfully puts the blame on someone else or gives a plausible excuse. When he is punished (in accordance with the theme of retribution), the punishment is often linked with his anatomy. Like in the case earlier mentioned where he borrowed feathers from birds, built up wings for himself and went with the birds for a banquet in heaven. After tricking them and eaten up the food that was served them, they collected back their feathers and he was left to his fate. He

eventually fell from heaven and crashed to pieces. This is attributed to the reason for the nature of his back-shell.

The Why Stories

The third major type of Igbo folktales is the “WHY” stories. They are stories designed to explain either some natural phenomenon (especially in the animal world) or the origin of the observance or discontinuance of certain customs. The natural phenomenon may be connected with human anatomy, animal anatomy, animal behavior, animal noises, plants or general physical or metaphysical questions. There is a story showing that mosquito goes to the ear because the ear rejects marrying the mosquito believing that it will not live long because of his nature. There is also another story which explains “why” women do not grow beard because a certain woman hid the king's ring in her beard, she was caught and after sharing clean, tortoise excreta was rubbed on her jaw to prevent beards from growing on it. Another story explains “why” tortoise got bald head (he put hot porridge in his hat) etc.

Different kinds of animals behaviour are accounted for: why does the kite prey on chicks? It does because of a pledge broken by the fowl. Why does the hen scratch the ground? It is looking for a lost coin. Why doesn't the bat come out in the day time? It is ashamed of an act of treachery previously committed. Why does the cat eat mice? The first mouse was disloyal to it, etc. This offers explanation to general phenomena like the question about the origin of death, why the dead don't mix with the living? Why the sun appears in the daytime and the moon in the night etcetera.

The “why” stories are not concerned with moral attitudes of animals or living things. There are folktales incorporating both the moral element and the “why” element. A folktale about the tortoise may even incorporate the three major types. There is no question of learning a lesson from it. That is why “why” stories

end in a set phrase indicating that it was from such and such a time that such and such a phenomenon or custom came into existence Achebe (2012)

Features of style

There are stylistic ways of rendering Igbo folktales. For instance, there is a difference in style of delivery between non-fictional and fictional narratives. The former are delivered as historical narrative, with little attempt at dramatization; they usually contain little, if any, direct speech, and no songs, and are not heightened by audience participation. The stylistic features above are peculiar to non-fictional narratives. For the fictional narratives, Igbo folktales enjoy introductory and closing formulas. The folktales are usually introduced or concluded with conventionalized formulas which vary from place to place in Igbo land. In parts of Imo State, the tale may be introduced by **the would** be narrator saying twice one of the following words which seem to have more sounds than sense:

Chääkpii; chääkpii; Tääkwi; Tääkwi; Ootii; Ufetu, EduulElue.

The audience then responds with one of the following words which is also said twice:

Yoo, Hää, Woo; Oyoo; Iyaa.

After this follows an interesting type of 'inverted' repartee between the narrator and the audience. The repartee is interesting and 'inverted' because rather than the comments of each of the two speakers cancelling out each other, they complement each other. In actual fact, what happens is that the narrator gives one part of a proverb of some such saying, which the audience completes

For instance:

Narrator – Nkịta nyara akpa,
 Audience - Nsiagwu n'ohja.
 Narrator - Agụ baa n'ohja,
 Audience - Mgbada achịrịume n'aka.
 Narrator - Mmiri riri ụgbọala,
 Audience - Anaghị egwu ya egwu.

Translate

Narrator: If the dog hangs a bag,
 Audience: It collects all the faeces in the bush.
 Narrator: If the lion enters the bush,
 Audience: The antelope will not beat ease.
 Narrator: A river that drowns the eagle,
 Audience: Nobody swims in the river.

At times, in some places, when the narrator indicates that he has a story to tell, the audience could ask; a story about what and the following dialogue ensues:

Narrator: O nwere akụkọ m ga - akọrọ ụnu.
 Audience: Akụkọ maka gịni?
 Narrator: Akụkọ maka Mbe na Nwunye ya.
 Audience: Kọkọkọkwasị, anyị na-egenti ka anyị mara ihe ị ga-ekwu ma ọbuntuka ị na-atụ, ma ọ bụ asị ka ị na-asị.

Narrator: There is a tale I have for you.
 Audience: Tale about what?
 Narrator: Tale about the tortoise and his wife
 Audience: Tell the tale again and again so we may know if you are lying

Another stylistic feature of Igbo folktales is that it normally starts with a sentence like-once upon a time, a king married four wives...
 There was once a village. In this village, people were not allowed to kill monkeys ...
 A young man who was a magician once lived...

Chorus is another stylistic feature which Igbo folktales enjoy. Most Igbo folktales are chorused. This is mostly achieved through the audience participation. This very essential in Igbo folktales. The audience choruses the opening formula, they chorus the songs in the tale and at the same time, they provide answers to the questions asked in the folktale. They even go to the extent of correcting an incompetent narrator. The story is not known by one person but the artistry lies on the creative ingenuity of the narrator. Pathorne (1969).

The **language** of the narrator is another stylistic feature that needs to be discussed. The language of the narrator of Igbo folktale is direct and intimate. He, as far as possible, talks directly to the audience in his own words. He makes little or no use of dialogue in his narration. The language of folktale is simple and straight forward by the fact that the composition of the audience are mainly children and women who natively are not conversant with a complex figurative language, we may also mention that ideophones are lavishly employed by the folktale artist's e.g. the arrow is shot “fiam”. The lightening flashed, “viam” etc.

metaphoric language is made less use of. A good story-teller also makes use of simile as another linguistics device which helps him to achieve his objective. They also develop a different manner of speaking for each protagonist so as to make his tale lively and entertaining. Finnegan (1970).

Mimicry is also another stylistic feature of Igbo folktale. For instance, while imitating the tortoise, the narrator talks in a nasal twang, because the tortoise talks in that way. Sometimes also in the song, the narrator employs the first person pronoun *i* e singing as though, he was the character involved. In one Igbo tale, it makes serious use of repetition of words, phrases or even sentence, for example *gagagakata*.

Further Teachings

Folktales try to teach lessons about right and wrong which are called morals. This often involves fight between good and evil. Some noticeable lessons folktale teaches include- sincerity, honesty, acceptance, harmony and patience. The moral lessons include the importance of good prevailing over evil, the value of hardwork and honesty and consequences of corruption.

A very good instance is the popular folktale OBAREDO. She was instructed by her parents before embarking on their trip to remain within the confines of their home and eat just yam and snail when hungry. The parents asked her to roast the yam first before roasting the snail as the snail would eventually quench the fire. Unfortunately, the girl being greedy, having a strong lust for meat, roasted the snail first and fire went off. Still hungry, she set out of her home, in disobedience to her parents, to get matchstick from neighbours. On her way, she encounters a demon that steals her beauty and leaves her with his own ugliness.

The folktale has themes like – greed, disobedience to an instruction, and lust for things of the world. One could simply notice the evil consequences of the traits. The girl lost her beauty and was left with the ugliness of the demon.

Another good lesson will be learnt from another tales of “How the tortoise got bumpy shell”. Achebe told this story to represent the invasion of colonizers into the Igbo society. He saw the colonizers as representing tortoise while the Igbo people were the welcoming birds. On a further analysis of the folktale, there are other teachings like

- (i) Greed begets evil consequences
- (ii) The dangers associated with borrowing
- (iii) The dangers of welcoming unknown people.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is clear that folk-tales are very simple stories in which only the simplest device is employed in the plot, theme and even the style. The language too is simple and contains a lot of expressions. In general, the emphasis is on the story, themes, and the moral lessons they teach. There are also stylistic ways of rendering these tales. Although, this paper limited its analysis on the theme and styles, most of these features are to be found in varying degrees in Igbo novels. Finally, every folktale has a lesson it conveys to the society which when adhered to strictly helps to clear some of the societal ills. It should be encouraged as one of the means of bringing up the youths.

References

Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. Heineman Ltd

Achebe, N. (2012). Some Features of Themes and Styles in Igbo Folktales in *Oja: An International Journal of Igbo. African And Asian Studies*. NnamdiAzikiwe University, Awka

Dathorne, O.R. (1969). *African Poetry for Schools and Colleges*. Canada Macmillan and Company Limited.

Finnegan, R. (1970). *Oral Literature in Africa*. Great Britain, Oxford Press.

Shiple, J.T. (1970). *Dictionary of World Literary Terms*. London: George Atten and Unwin Ltd.

Standard Educational Corporation (1978). *New Standard Encyclopedia*.