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## Folktale as a Tool for Character Development

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### Abstract

Folktale is a vital tool for character and skill development as it carries with it such messages that spur one to positive actions. In this paper, the researchers studied different folktales of the Igbo society and discovered that almost all Igbo folktales gear towards extolling virtue and discouraging vice. This was why folktales were used in the time past by our forefathers as a tool for the education of their children. It was discovered that despite the indispensability of folktales, the advent of modern technologies tends to make folktale unpopular and less important. Consequently, it was recommended that serious attention needs to be given to folktales in order that they do not go into extinction.

**Key Words:** Folktale, didactic, literature, culture, orature

### Introduction

Before the coming of the white man to Nigeria, and before colonization, the Igbo were united and they shared a common culture. Then, there was no formal education; formal education came with colonization. The fact that there was no formal education then does not mean that the people had no culture. Achebe made it known in *Things Fall Apart* that the Igbo did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans. Culture and tradition of the traditional Igbo man then, were preserved in the way of the mouth; they were passed down from generation to another from mouth to the ears. They were not written down because then, no Igbo man was literate to document such traditions and cultures in written form. The type of literature that was in existence in Igbo in particular and in Nigeria as whole as of then was *Oral Literature*.

## What is Oral Literature?

The phrase *Oral Literature* seems self contradictory and so, it is difficult to define it. To understand it, it has to be described rather than defined. The term **Literature** denotes that which is written. The way of life of the African man when documented in written form is known as modern African literature. Bamidele (2001) thus, asserted that modern African literature is a sibling of traditional African oral literature. As he put it,

Modern creative writing thrives and flourishes on enduring ‘naval-string’ that weds it securely to African orature. Various forms of traditional oral literature: proverbs, folk-tales, myths, legends, songs and chants, ritual dramaturgy, masquerade performances, riddles and jokes and archetypes all constitute an ocean of experience from which modern literary genres drink. Most often than not, modern African artists, like blacksmiths, remold, re-engineer these oral artifacts, not only to wear modern make-ups and attire, but to articulate their personal world-view, idiosyncrasies and ideology (p 10).

Literature is derived from the root word “Literate” which means being able to read and write. On the other hand, **Literature** is that which is written for one who is literate to read and understand. In other words, true literature must be written down in a particular language and it is only meant for those who are literate. The term **Oral** denotes that which is transmitted orally; from mouth to the ear and is not written down. According to Akporobaro (2006), Oral literature is an expression which appears to be a contradiction in terms. He stated that it is so because the word “Literature” is formed from the Latin word “Literatura” which means “that which is written.” He went further to emphasize that the word literature seems to be emphasizing that it is concerned with the written word and therefore, that it is a contradiction to consider literature as oral by using the phrase “Oral literature. “It is for this reason that the Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu introduced the term *orature* in an attempt to avoid an oxymoron – **oral literature**. According to Nwachukwu Agbada (2008), orature is not different from oral literature. He believes that Pio Zirimu only invented the term to run away from the implication of ‘litera’, meaning that which is written. He looks at orature as “the artistic product of a people as they live out their lives on a minute-by-minute basis.” However, oral literature remains more commonly used in academic and other similar writings because the reason for not accepting the nomenclature **oral literature** is superficial. Anything written down as literature was first conceived in the mind and could be rendered orally. In the view of Akporobaro, literature need not be what is written only, but all verbal creations of oral compositions, recitations and performances of high artistic merit which are products of the creative use of the imagination by artists of the spoken word in pre-literate communities.

Oral literature therefore, entails the totality of norms, traditions and beliefs of a people passed down from generation to generation through spoken words instead of being written down. As observed by Nwokora (2000), Literature is culture expressed in oral or written artistic form with an aim to educate, entertain and preserve tradition for future generations. It has to be noted here that both oral and written literatures make use of language. Routledge (2003) defined oral literature, orature as he prefers to call it as something passed on through the spoken word, and because it is based on the spoken language it comes to life only in a living community.

Although as observed by scholars that oral literature centres on the totality of belief of a society rendered orally rather than being written, Umeasiegbu (2007), observed that a talented creative writer may translate the stories from vernacular into international language and have them published. This assertion consolidates the fact that written literature may first, be rendered orally before being written. In the view of Mmaduabuchi (2007), “...the issue of propositions and entailments of African cultural values arise because these values are embedded in African folklore.” In the same vein, Akporobaro (2006) observed that oral literature is composed mentally by illiterate raconteurs, stored in the

memory and then spoken, recited, chanted or sung on specific occasions. According to him, “They are works which appeal to our aesthetic imagination and are available for committal or writing. These spoken performances deserve to be recognized as part of Literature, i.e. literature proper” (31).

### **Brief Origin of Literature**

Literature has its origin in the classical period. During this period, not so many people could read and write. Therefore, literature then, was mainly oral. Drama and poetry were the only genres of literature within this period. These literature genres did not necessarily require that they must be written. For poetry, people (not literates), who were blessed with the gift of composition, composed songs (poetry) and chanted them before a direct audience. Greek drama emanated with the honour of Greek god, Dionysus. It was around 532 BC and Thespis was the earliest recorded actor. During this period, the two genres of literature were rendered through oral means and were never written down.

Prose which today, is a very popular genre of literature, only emerged during the eighteenth century. The reason for the late arrival of the prose is basically because prose has to be written down for the enjoyment of the literates. The emphasis here is to consolidate the fact that literature could be in oral form too and that any written literature was first conceived and be performed before being written down. The important thing about literature (written or oral) is that it has to educate the audience about society.

### **The Folktale**

“The folktale,” according to Abrams (2005), “strictly defined, is a short narrative in prose of unknown authorship which has been transmitted orally; many of these tales eventually achieve written form. The term, however, is often extended to include stories invented by a known author – such as “The Three Bears” by Robert Southey (1774-1843). The fact that folktale, as noted by Abrams, is a narrative in prose shows that folktale is akin to the novel. The term novel is described as an extended narrative work of fiction written in prose. The only major difference between folktale and novel apart from their mode of transmission; one written and the other unwritten, is the length. While novel is seen as an extended narrative, folktale is short and less complicated.

Baldick (2004) looked at folktale as “a story passed on by word of mouth rather than by writing, and thus, partly modified by successive retelling before being written down or recorded. The category includes legends, fables, jokes, tall stories and fairy tales or *Marchen*. Many folktales involve mythical creations and magical transformations.” Baldick’s opinion here goes to support the fact that indeed, oral literature can be written. Achebe incorporates quite a good number of them in his *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*.

### **Aim and Objectives of Folktales**

In most parts of Africa, Nigeria in general and particularly, Igbo, folktale was highly valued and regarded as an indispensable means of educating children. In the words of Akporobaro (2006),

Apart from the aesthetic pleasure derived by those who tell the tales at moonlight after dinner, they also help in shaping and moulding the character and life of the young ones who listen to them, by way of bringing to their focus, the consequences and rewards of evil and brave deeds.

Similarly, in an interview with Mike Ejeagha, he has this to say; “Folktales are very important as they are used to educate our people. They are full of moral lessons and thus, I cannot conclude my tales without pointing out the moral lessons that they carry.” It is for the lessons of wit carried by folktales that parents, in the past, dedicated time, mainly at night, to tell folktales to their children. In the end of each folktale, the children would contribute by saying what they have learnt from the tales. Generally,

folktales extol virtue and condemn vice. A wicked one in a folktale is always made to pay the price of his wickedness while kind gesture is always rewarded. It is believed that the moral lessons carried by folktales would help to positively affect the life of the child.

A child for instance, who listens to the folktale about why toads are deprived of having tails would shun procrastination so as not to end up like the toad. In the folktale, toad is presented as a character that prefers not to do things when other animals do them. It would continue to procrastinate as though time waits for anyone. Eventually, when it is time for fortune to share tails to all animals, toad, as usual, procrastinates going with other animals to be given its own tail and when it is late, when other animals have received their tails and all the tails finished, toad goes to the venue but there is no more tail to be given to it. Similarly, the folktale told by Okonkwo Asaa in his *Egwu Ekpiri* music carries the same message. His is about the fate of chicken. In the end of the story, we see clearly why chicken, among other animals and birds are predominantly slaughtered and used for every occasion. According to the story, in the time past, all the animals and birds convened a meeting to discuss their way forward. When all animals and birds have gathered for the meeting, chicken was conspicuously missing from the crowd. When it was sent for, chicken said that it was busy and that they should continue with the meeting in her absence. It was thus, concluded in the meeting that all perils to be suffered by all the animals and birds should be suffered by chicken alone. The folktale reveals that it was for that reason that chicken is used for and slaughtered at any occasion; it is used for sacrifice, killed in every occasion, given to *dibia*, presented to big and strong masquerades, used for thanksgiving in the churches and at the shrines and more painfully, fellow birds, the kite and hawk were asked to kill and eat chicken any time they are seen. All the perils, the chicken is to suffer for not attending the meeting of the animals and birds. In the end of the tale, one sees the need not to be absent in any positive gathering unanimously convened. One listening to the tale sees reasons to blame chicken for being the architect of its own misfortune. The message carried by the folktale helps to reform human character.

For the moral lessons of folktales which help in effecting the human character, parents in the past engaged the services of professional raconteurs to tell folktales to their children. Other children trekked to far away destination to listen to the tales and in the end, they would go home fulfilled and their character would change for better because the folktales they listened to would have impacted positively in their lives.

### **Folktales for Character and Skills Development**

Folktales are highly didactic and the lessons thereof contained are for the education of the young ones. Any tale that has no lesson that the child can derive from it, is absolutely not a folktale. As had stated earlier, writers incorporate folktales in their works, especially those written for children basically because of the lessons in them. Children's novels are highly didactic with the lessons made so vivid in such a way that the character of the child would be positively affected after reading the novels. As it is the case with most folktales, animals are used mainly as the characters. These animals act and speak like human beings they symbolize. In *Kite and Chicken* for instance, the message of the folktale is that we should not be too garrulous, rather we should always try to make use of our senses more than we make use of our tongues. Silence is golden and he who keeps silent overcomes a lot of perils. When we talk and react so quickly to certain issues, our enemies tend to see the limits of our prowess. In the novel, mother kite calls its child, the kite and tells it that it (mother kite) is famished and needs something to eat. Kite decides to go down to the land of human beings to look for what its mother would eat. It sees mother duck taking care of the ducklings and quickly carries one of the ducklings. The duck whose duckling has been carried away by the kite only looks at it as it carries the duckling away. The kite takes the duckling to its mother who is very glad seeing what to eat. However, as the saying goes that he who asks questions does not usually miss his way, the Kite asks its son about the

reaction of the duck when it took the duckling and the kite says that the duck only looked at it and then took the other ducklings away. Mother kite after listening to kite, asks the kite to quickly return the duckling to its mother because the silence of the mother means a lot. On returning the duckling to its mother, it carries a chick. The mother hen whose chick it carries only yells and yells. When the chick is given to the mother kite, it again, asks to know the reaction of the mother hen and the kite says that the chick yelled and vituperated. "We shall now eat the chick," says the kite. According to Nnyagu (2008) in his children's novel, the mother kite says, "And my child, as from today, you will always go and hunt for chicks. The mother hen cannot do anything because she who talks a lot does not perform any action." The folktale concludes that it was based on that that kite hunts for chicks up till today. At the end of the tale, the child learns not to talk and make a fuss over any problem knowing full well that when he or she talks, he or she has disclosed his or her intention and so, the foe devises another means to excel. In the same vein, *Lizard and Chameleon* possesses such lessons of wit that would help in no small means in the character and skill development of the child. When the story is told to a recalcitrant child who has refused to shun bad company, the fate of lizard in the tale would help him have a positive change of character. Mother lizard has persistently advised lizard to shun bad company, particularly, chameleon but lizard prefers to be like the heedless fly that goes down the grave with the corpse. It follows chameleon to steal from a man's farm. When the man comes to the farm, chameleon sees him first and changes its colour so that it cannot be distinguished from the vegetables in the farm. The man catches lizard and swears to show it pepper. Outside the farm, lizard sees chameleon and it laughs at lizard and calls it a thief. It was only then that lizard understands that its mother meant well for it for refraining it from befriending chameleon. Lizard also understands then that in reality, chameleon was never a good friend. The fate of lizard in the tale makes it vivid to the child that in reality, no sane parent would like to lead his or her child astray and as the saying goes, "what an elderly person sees as he or she sits down, a child cannot see it even when he stands on a valley."

The message carried by *Lizard and Chameleon* is not different from that of the tale "Elephant and Tortoise." The tale of Elephant and Tortoise was made popular by Mike Ejeagha, who made it clear, at the beginning that he was not the initiator of the tale, rather, as a genre of oral literature, it was handed down to him. As a folktale, "Elephant and Tortoise" is both interesting and didactic. The message of the tale, like that of *Lizard and Chameleon*, is that not all that glitters is gold and that one should be wary of the people one regards as one's friends. It is not all that we regard as friends are actually friends. Some are indeed, enemies who would come to give one the impression that they are friends. Their aims would thus, be to come close to the unwary ones and steal their happiness. The tale of Elephant and Tortoise states that a certain king has a very beautiful daughter. The princess has become of age and hundreds of suitors come on regular basis to seek the hand of the pretty princess in marriage. She refuses all the suitors on the ground that whoever that would be her husband must first, bring elephant to the palace so that she would always ride on the elephant. Tortoise and elephant are close friends. Both tortoise and elephant are interested in having the princess as a wife. Tortoise is in the palace of the king when the princess gives the condition and it quickly crawls straight to elephant's place. Fortunately, tortoise meets elephant in the house and tells him that why he has come is because the king sent him to come and tell him (elephant) that he (the king) is organizing a big occasion and that he, elephant will be the chairman of the occasion.

Highly delighted that at least, he would use the opportunity to discuss with the king, his intention to be his in law, elephant agrees to go with tortoise to see the king. On getting to the palace, tortoise out of excitement raises its voice and tells the king that it has brought elephant to marry the princess. It is at this juncture that elephant realizes that tortoise is never a good friend and that it has been tricked by its so-called friend. Mike Ejeagha had earlier indicated that the moral lesson of the tale is that one should be wary of certain friends one keeps for some are wolves in sheep's skin.

## Preservation of Folktales

The fear that if nothing was done to keep folktales alive, they would go into extinction with lessons of wit that they contain made concerned individuals to devise means of keeping them alive. Around 1980s, the curriculum planners decided to add storytelling as part of the school curriculum. There was therefore, time mainly after break when under the moderation of the teacher, pupils and students would tell folktales to themselves and in the end, other students who formed the audience would tell what they learnt from their individual tales.

Mike Ejeagha is aware of the indispensability of folktales, so, he decided to keep a good number of them alive by incorporating them in his *Akuko n' Egwu* music. Because of the didactic nature of folktales and because of the ingenuity of Ejeagha in incorporating them, his music albums sell like sachet water in Nigeria and beyond despite the fact that it was sung in Igbo. According to Umeasiegbu (1999), Mike Ejeagha specializes in countryside music; his songs are based on Igbo folklore and are usually sung in Igbo. In December 1987, Polygram awarded him a silver disc for his "*Akuko n'Egwu*" Vol. 1 which sold over 50,000 copies. Okonkwo Asaa, aka Seven-Seven also documented plethora of folktales by incorporating them in his *Egwu Ekpiri*.

Today, novelist and writers of plays and poetry decided too, to have folktales preserved in book form. Amos Tutuola pioneered this when he published *The Palmwine Drinkard*. The novel is criticized for poor grammar and illogical assembling of different folktales. In 1958, Chinua Achebe published *Things Fall Apart*. A good number of folktales in line with the message aimed to pass across are well incorporated in the novel. Many folktales are also found in Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God*. We have good number of them in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. F. C Ogbalu documented a good number of them in his *Mbediogu*. It has to be emphasized at this juncture, that the chief aim of preserving folktales is because the lessons thereof, aid character and of course, skill development. Recently, Uche Nnyagu published *Kite and Chicken, Ugomma and the Apple, Ola and Her Ghost Husnabdand Lizard and Chameleon*. They centre on folktales, meticulously written for children.

## Conclusion

Folktales perform two major functions in the life of the audience; one, they entertain the listener and two, they educate the listener. Although folktales contain tales that are not possible to happen in real life, the stylistic aestheticism employed by the raconteur keeps the listener seated as long as the story lasted. In the end of the story, the listener goes home determined to have a change of attitude because the folktales he or she has listened to, condemn vice and encourage virtue. The moral nature of folktales helps in no small means in the character and skills development of individuals.

## Recommendations

The researchers found out that presently, attention is no longer given the storytelling despite the fact that it is a panacea against moral decadence pervading our contemporary society. Parents no longer have time to tell folktales to their children and wards. Again, the curriculum planners no longer see the need to retain the period for story telling in the school curriculum. Based on these findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Parents and guardians should cultivate the habit of telling folktales to their children and wards for folktales help in the moral upbringing of the child
2. Curriculum planners should readjust the school curriculum to incorporate time for story telling as it was in the 80s. Preferably double periods should be allotted for storytelling.
3. Literature writers should emulate the style of Chinua Achebe, F. C Ogbalu and others who saw the need to preserve folktales in book form.

4. Film actors and musicians should try to integrate folktales in their business

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### Musical Albums

- Ejeagha, Mike. *Akuko n'egwu*. (Musical album).
- Okonkwo, Asaa. *Egwu Ekpiri*. (Musical album)