

IGBO FOLKTALES AND IGBO YOUTHS DEVELOPMENT: THE NEED FOR REVITALIZATION OF IGBO FOLKTALES

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Abstract

The present-day Igbo society is influenced by foreign cultures and practices which are alien to Igbo culture and tradition. These practices are seriously capturing the interest and psyche of many Igbo youths. Consequently, some Igbo cultural values, norms and beliefs are gradually disappearing in Igbo society today. The popularity of Igbo folktales is fast declining and on the verge of extinction. Some previous studies on Igbo oral tradition have failed to recognize the essence and value in revitalizing and modernizing the Igbo folktales to meet current social needs of the present-day society. There have been little or no efforts by prominent Igbo personalities towards reviving and rekindling the interest of Igbo people; especially the youths, to Igbo folktales. It is this lacuna that has motivated the present research. This study advocates the need for revitalization, modernization and digitization of Igbo folktales. It is envisaged that this will enhance better consumption of Igbo folktales by the Igbo people especially the Igbo youths in Nigeria and those in diasporas.

Introduction

Igbo folktales are traditional stories usually based on human or animal experiences, set on natural or supernatural environment. These stories deal mainly on adventures and incidents usually masterminded and championed by trickster characters or quest heroes. Folktales embody cultural values, norms and beliefs, mainly told for didactic and entertainment purposes. Folktales are didactic in nature, with animal tale characters believed to have the power of speech, and ability to conduct themselves in forms representative of humans (as could be seen in *Ojaaiili*). For example, the tiger “agu” often referred to as the king of the animals, the tortoise “mbe” as the master trickster, chameleon (ogwumagala) as the doctor, etc. Events in Igbo folktales could take place in human world or in the land of the spirits or in the heavens. Igbo folktales generally have themes and motifs emphasizing hard work, obedience, humility, morality, etc. Through these themes, Igbo folktales mirror activities of members in the society.

In the early Igbo traditional society, Igbo children and youths participated actively during traditional performances, especially in folktale presentations. The Igbo oral literature and traditional performances played an indispensable role in training and moral upbringing of the early Igbo children. They served as veritable means through which the Igbo inculcated their beliefs, norms, philosophy, worldview, etc to their young ones in the past.

But today, it has been observed that the Igbo folktales are on the verge of extinction. This is a result of some factors; the influence of foreign culture on the Igbo, especially the youths, impact of colonization, technology advancement, negative attitudes of the Igbo toward their language, among other factors. Therefore, this paper advocates for revitalization and modernization of Igbo folktales. This is hoped to enhance maximum consumption of the Igbo cultural values embodied in these tales by Igbo children. It is also envisaged that the revitalized Igbo folktales will not only be invaluable to Igbo children in Nigerian. Igbo children in diasporas will gain immensely from it.

Features and Functions

Igbo folktales embody Igbo traditional themes. The prominent theme in most Igbo folktales is “evil acts do not pay”. The storytellers project these themes in their tales for didactic purposes. Uzochukwu (2001) comments on the features and functions of folktales thus,

Apparently simple in language and characterization, the folktale invariably contains some lesson which serves as a tool for correcting antisocial behaviours. As is often the case, wickedness does not go unpunished in the moral world of the folktale. As the guilty is always punished, retribution is always a recurring theme. The implication is always a warning to people to adhere to the norms of the society or else they meet the fate of the guilty.

Besides, some Igbo scholars, (Uba-Mgbemena, (19820); Ebeogu, (2001) Nwaozuzu, (2007); Ikeokwu, (2007); Obi, (2008); Obi, (2009); Awugosi, (2009); Epuchie and Amaechi, (2009); Onuko and Ezeuko, (2012); etc. have equally highlighted some functions of Igbo folktales.

Based on stylistic features of Igbo folktales Mbah and Mbah (2007: 192) assert:

A stylistic feature of akukọ ifo, which needs close examination is the style of presentation of ifo tales. The first unifying force in ifo is the use of songs with choric refrains to mark the points of intense emotion of the drama of the narrative. Quite often, the songs are prophetic in the sense that they foretell the future. They warn characters about what could befall them. They suggest approaches to the solution of some problems in the future. Songs of this type are usually realized in some prophetic animals especially birds.

From the above, it could be seen that songs are very useful in the presentation of folktales. Other stylistic features of folktales according to the above scholars are the use of idiophones and other kinds of phonoaesthetic devices, mime, personalization and adaptability to the environment.

The Impact of Igbo Folktales in Moral and Psychological Development of Igbo Youths in the Past

In traditional Igbo society, life was full of cultural activities. Presentation of folktales was usually done during the moonlight night. This encouraged moral development of the children as well as communal living among the people. Folktales are normally told in the evening after the evening chores. Children normally sit round the fire side in their father’s “obi” or in their mother’s hut to listen to folktales. Normally the elders, their father or mother tells the story. Children then turns in telling their own stories. These story telling sessions normally take place in the evening after the evening chores. They take place in the relaxed atmosphere unlike today’s education which is characterized by the strictness and rigidity. Traditional Igbo child listens to the folktale from infancy to adult life (Ogbalu, 2011: 57). This reveals that the early Igbo people really enjoyed the traditional stories especially their folktales unlike what is obtainable in Igbo society today.

Prior to western education, Africa, particularly in Igbo society, folktales played an indispensable role in traditional education. It was a veritable means through which morals, culture, beliefs, values, worldview and consciousness of the Igbo were handed down to the younger generation. In the early Igbo traditional community, Igbo folktales were invaluable to the early Igbo people due to the communal attributes of the stories. The tales served as tools for conflict resolution in the communities, and is still thought to weld same capability for enhanced consciousness.

Some scholars affirm that Igbo youths participated actively in Igbo traditional performances and that the Igbo folktales impacted positively on Igbo children. Prior to the embracing of the western way of life which muffled indigenous African way of life, Uba-Mgbemena (1982:55) observes, “Ifo tales were among the chief means of mounding the characters of the Igbo child”.

In the past, youths played active role in the performance and transmission of oral literature. In a typical communal traditional drama, for instance, the youths constituted active players or actors in the enactment of various dramatic activities – chanting, dancing, acrobatic displaying, story-telling spell-binding, etc. the vigour, vitality and vibrancy, which they brought to bear in their performance always aroused and thrilled the audience a great deal. There are a lot of skills and talent, which the youths possess, that cannot be displayed by the aged in oral arts (Ikwubuzo, 2008:39).

Similarly, Epuchie and Amaechi assert, “During the pre-colonial days, the Igbo people use folktales to educate their young ones on various aspects of Igbo history, values, norms, beliefs, language and so forth”. In support of the above view, Onuko and Ezuko (2012:127) posit; “The pedagogical impact of such stories in children is immense because the subjects discussed are meaningful to their immediate natural environments. The stories not only entertain but, also have some purging effects on their listeners. They teach morals by exposing the follies and wicked characters and extol the virtuous action in the story. Whether the stories had animals, human being or spirits as their characters, they often ended with some moral lessons for the listeners”.

Some scholars are of the view that folktales are presented for only entertainment. Contrarily, Uba-Mgbemena (1982:55) opines that folktales were not only told for entertainment in the past. But the tales enhanced the mental and psychological development of the Igbo children. According to him;

It used to be the practice for parents and seniors when at leisure, to gather children in open spaces in the home during moonlight night, and in the family obi on rainy days to tell them interesting ifo tales. When mothers went to the market and fathers to the farm, nurses used to gather children to tell the ravishing tortoise stories... these are geared to teaching the Igbo child what to do and what to avoid, what to appreciate and what to disdain. They also intended for entertainment and for proper mental and psychological development.

From the above, it could be seen that Igbo folktales encouraged communal living among Igbo children in the past. The views reveal that the early Igbo people enjoyed their traditional stories especially their folktales unlike what can be seen in Igbo society today. Igbo values and norms were also inculcated in the Igbo children through Igbo folktales in the past.

The State of Igbo Folktales Today

Akijobi (2001:170) observes, “Before the Western and the criteria intrusions into African, story-telling was pretty active in many African and rural and urban areas, but it is a pity that it’s almost on the verge of extinction...” Akijobi’s observation above is very clear because presently, the Igbo have been seen to abandon their once revered folktales, forsaking the once popular and prominent medium for which cultures, values, morals, and ethic were communicated and inculcated into the young. Folktales are now being regarded as stories that lack sense, and devoid of truth. Undoubtedly, several factors have accounted for the sustained disdainful attitude towards the propagation and preservation of the Igbo folktales. The dispirited responsiveness to

the use of the Igbo language and interference by foreign languages and cultures, colonialism, western education, religious practices, insecurity, conflict, and modern technology; especially the social media, are all contributing factors.

Many Igbo youths now prefer foreign stories, cartoons, home movies, etc to Igbo folktales. Consequently, storytelling and moonlight activities are disappearing scenes in many Igbo communities, upsetting the initial cultural scheme of teaching and training for Igbo youths. Regrettably, Igbo folktale characters like Mbe, Agu, Ewi, Ezi, Aturū, etc, now appear very strange to many Igbo children, who have become better familiar with foreign media characters like Tom and Jerry, lion king, etc.

Today, in contemporary Nigeria, oral literature has been affected by a number of factors. There is the factor of the influence of literacy and urbanization, which encourage rural-urban drift and consequently cause urban dwellers to abandon some aspects of their cultural tradition... other forms of modern influences on our traditional life threaten the sustainability, continuity and preservation of the oral mode of our literary tradition (Ikwubuzo, 2008:39).

In similar vein, Epuchie and Amaechi (2009:154-155) observe, “The impact of folktales is rapidly diminishing with the increasing awareness of modern inventions. The pastime of tale-telling is fast disappearing because of other technological innovations like television, radio, C.D’s, DVD’s and so forth. Children have therefore various other ways of having fun... Again, the schools seem to be taking over the primary purpose of the didactic folktales”. In evaluating the state of Igbo folktales today, Utoh-Ezeajugh (2012:208) laments, “Folktales are enacted in traditional Igbo communities usually after the evening meal and mostly in open spaces on moonlit nights. Sadly many of the younger generations of the Igbos (sic) do not know these stories anymore”. In these tales, elders who are vast in the art of oral transmission weave highly engaging tales around animals, spirit and human characters with the aim of impacting socially, morally and culturally on the audiences. Some other Igbo literary scholars (Ogbalu, (2011); Nnyigide, (2015); Meludu, (2015); etc) agree with the above observations.

Negative Impact of Foreign Culture on Igbo Youths

It is obvious that some foreign cultures, literatures, music, etc have influenced the psyche of many Nigerian youth especially the Igbo negatively. Consequently, some Igbo youths have been deprived of Igbo cultural values and norms which are embodied in Igbo folktales. Akijobi (2001:171) observes, “The effects of foreign “morals” that sneaked into our societies under various cloaks, especially religious have been added to or in most cases substituted for authentic African native “morals”. The above observation shows that foreign religion also impacted negatively on Africans.

It has been observed that foreign culture has impacted on the Igbo especially the youths negatively. Nnabuihe (2001:478) affirms, “Present crop of the Nigerian youths suffers (sic) deprivation. One of the deprivations, and clearly the worst of them all, is a lack of folkloric upbringing. The omission of folklore education in the early lives of our children is grave”. According to him, some of the consequences of abandonment of folkloric education are that the present day youths “dream wild, act wild, live wild” and sometimes ‘take to violence because their value vault is bankrupt’. Some Igbo scholars share the same opinion with Nnabuihe. Ikwubuzo (2008:48) while commenting on the negative impact of foreign cartoon films on Igbo youths says, “... yet the imported cartoon films contain nothing but European, American and Asian fairy and animal tales, the parallels of which abound in Igbo traditional tales. The themes of hardwork, obedience, humility, morality, the consequences of disobedience and all that which

are embodies in Igbo traditional prose narratives are very relevant to children upbringing...” But unfortunately, parents, these days, “deny their children indigenous cultural values by making them part of westernization, eroding old tradition of folklore... The result is that the Nigerian youths today lack discipline because they lack proper upbringing” (Nnabuihe, 2001:485).

However, some Igbo literary writers are really concerned about the above situation. Onuko and Ezeuko (2012:128) acknowledge the contributions made so far by some Nigerian writers like Cyprian Ekwensi; Chynua Achebe, Onuorah Nzekwu, Emeka Ike, Tagbo Nzeako etc, who envisaged the negative impact of the above situation and write prolifically on African values, norms and ethics for better consumption of Igbo children. These writers according to them, “saw it as their duty to decolonize and rehabilitate the minds of the Nigerian children of whom Segun Mabel remarked “had imbibed western ideas and were brain-washed into believing that everything traditional was “bush” and wrong while everything western was “civilized” and “right”.

From the discussions above, one observes that there are some factors that militate against the survival and development of Igbo folktales today. Some of these factors are: colonization, emergence of foreign religion, modern technology, urbanization, social media, literacy, negative attitude of some Igbo parents and youths towards the Igbo language and culture, etc.

The Need to Revitalize the Igbo Folktales

The positive impact of Igbo folktales on moral and psychological development of Igbo youths cannot be over emphasized. In considering the present state of Igbo folktales and the negative impact of foreign stories on Igbo youths as highlighted above, it is obvious that Igbo folktales are facing a lot of challenges. Therefore, frantic effort should be made so as to encourage and enhance continuity and perpetuation of Igbo folktales. Akijobi (2001: 172) advises thus;

...we should encourage the young ones to develop the interest of free-form life histories, known as ethno-historical tradition or oral history via the documentation of life and times of our people in different areas... Above all, they should be introduced to the African folklore tradition early in life, folklore in particular should be used tellingly especially at home because it is an abridgement of the African wisdom.

The above advice reveals that Igbo youths should be properly guided and encouraged from tender age as to develop better interest in Igbo folktales. Besides, Ifechelobi (2009:113) observes;

Many writers and scholars of children’s literature have stressed the importance of oral tradition to children’s literature. Chinua Achebe in his clarion call to save the African child from what he termed “the beautifully packaged poison” imported into the continent in form of children’s storybooks (sic) has advised African writers for children to exploit the infinite treasury of African oral traditional. Achebe, of course is alarmed at the way African children are being fed with story books that do not reflect in any way the realities of their immediate social cultural values.

In addition to the above observation, Usman (2013:36-37) asserts, “...folktales are universal and can be used to unite mankind more remotely than sports or the internet is currently doing every

country has got its own share of folktale which its people can share with others, thereby demonstrating the oneness of mankind”.

The above observations also show that the oral tradition plays an immense role in children’s life. Therefore, there is every need to revitalize the Igbo folktales. As could be seen in Usman’s view above, revitalization of Igbo folktales will not only be beneficial to Igbo children. Children from other tribes can equally benefit from the revitalized tales.

It is hoped that revitalization of Igbo folktales is very significant in cultural, social and political orientation of Igbo youths. Ikwubuzo (2008: 51) asserts, “The youths must be culturally and politically oriented. This means that the youths from cradle must be reared to imbibe all the forms of cultural expressions of their society, its oral tradition, history and folklore”.

Steps that can be taken to Revitalize the Igbo Folktales Documentation of Igbo Folktales

Documentation is very vital in the process of revitalizing the Igbo folktales. Some Igbo scholars who are very much concerned about Igbo language and culture have contributed in this direction. At this juncture, it is very pertinent to acknowledge the effort made by Late Chief Chidozie Ogbalu in this regard among others. His *Nza na Obu* and *Mbediogu* are invaluable to students and teachers in Igbo studies. However, many Igbo Folktales are yet to be documented. Evidence has shown that there are many elders in rural areas who are vast in the art of oral transmission. Therefore, students, researchers, scholars and those who have interest in the development of Igbo oral tradition should be encourage to carry out field research into these areas, meet and interact with these elders so as to exploit their wealth of experience.

Obviously, Nigeria especially the Igbo rural communities are very fertile for gathering and documentation of folktales. Usman (2013: 37) affirms thus, “The harvest from Nigeria is even more amazing. In my small community of Biu, which has a population of 452,304, NPC (2006), I collected over 1,000 folktales within two years. Helser had collected over 800 tales in the same community in the 1920s. The potential in Nigeria for gathering folktales is therefore quite enormous.

In addition to the above, Jacob in Usman (2013: 37) says, “Up to 1870, it was said equally of France and of Italy that they possessed no folktales. Yet, within 15 years from that date over 1,000 tales has been collected in each country”. From the above observations, it could be deduced that some Igbo oral artists share the same testimony.

Digitization and Creation of Computer Animation of Igbo Folktale Characters

If one considers the current technology innovations and advancements in the society today, there is every need to create computer animation of animal characters in Igbo animal tales. Some foreign fairy tales have been modified in this form and developed into cartoon films which have been imported into the country and Nigerian parents especially the Igbo have bought for their children’s leisure time. Unfortunately, this development has enabled many Igbo to exploit the foreign attitudes which are embodied in those cartoons and neglect their own Igbo values which are embodied in Igbo folktales. This has impacted negatively on some Igbo youths. To salvage this situation, Ikwubuzo (2008: 53) posits:

Developing our indigenous folktales into cartoons designed for children instead of building up a repository of foreign cartoon films for our children in our homes. Nigerian filmmakers can begin to think in this direction. With their rich creative talents exhibited in various film productions they can develop cartoon films that

are based on our animal tales. They can be made to compete favourably with imported ones.

Ikwubuzo's view above reveals that the contributions of talented Igbo filmmakers are really needed in revitalizing the Igbo folktales.

In our society today, it is very clear that all aspects of human endeavour and experience are digitized. Igbo folktales should not be left out. Since the Igbo folktales are communally owned, that is nobody has copyright over them, they can be retold in more exciting ways. Obi – Obasi as cited in Usman (2013: 40) agrees thus, "Folklores can be retold in any fanciful way as nobody has copyright over them". Therefore, scholars should think in this direction.

Media Promotion and Projection of Igbo Folktales in Igbo Language

Based on the observation of some Igbo literary scholars, the media is said to perpetuate the "alien system imposed on our youths at early childhood" (Nnabuihe, 2001: 285). The media is the fastest means of communicating information. Undoubtedly, contributions of experts in media houses are highly needed in revitalizing the Igbo folktales. The management of these media houses should promote programmes and activities in Igbo language. In support of the above, Ikwubuzo (2008:54) suggests that media houses especially the television should pay less emphasis on foreign forms of entertainment and incorporate some of our indigenous modes of entertainment in Nigerian languages.

He also adds that children's televisions programmes like the "Tales by the Moonlight" relayed on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) network programme should be encouraged, sponsored and modified in such a way that the stories can be told in Nigerian languages especially in Igbo language; for programmes on state televisions and radios in the south east Nigeria. According to him, "Those wealthy Nigerians who spend thousands of naira to take chieftaincy titles can be approached to sponsor such programmes. They should not be traditional chieftains who have in their homes children that have no knowledge of their traditional heritage"

Conclusion

This paper in its advocacy for revitalization of Igbo folktales, examined the impact of Igbo folktales in moral and psychological development of Igbo youths in the past, the state of Igbo folktales today, negative impact of foreign culture on Igbo youths today, the need for revitalisation of Igbo folktales. It suggested some steps that can be taken to revitalize the Igbo folktales. From the discussions above, it is envisaged that revitalization of Igbo folktales will not only rekindle the interest of present Igbo youths in appreciating Igbo traditional stories and exploiting the Igbo cultural values embodied in them. It will also immensely enhance better consumption of Igbo folktales by the Igbo especially Igbo youths in Nigeria and those in Diasporas. Therefore, collective effort of the Igbo people and those that are really concerned about development and growth of Igbo language and culture is highly needed for effective revitalization and modernization of Igbo folktales.

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