

Chapter Thirty One

IGBO FOLKTALES: POSITIVE FACTORS FOR MORAL REBIRTH

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Abstract

As other peoples of the world, the Igbo people of Nigeria have the folktales that they developed from the time immemorial. The folktales which are creative stories might not fail to emanate from the factual issues of the lives of the people over millennia. Apart from the entertainment purposes of the folktales, they are useful in shaping the moral characters of the people. The folktales contain didactic lessons on crimes and punishment for those that committed them. Should the lessons of the folktales be imbibed, there is no doubt that those trained with Igbo folktales would be morally upright.

Introduction

Africans enthrone morality in their ways of life. This developed from their roots as they need good ways of life so that they can relate very well in their communal system of life. They have so much internalised morality. It is an age-long value of life. John S. Mbiti observes this:

Morals deal with the questions of what is right and good, and what is wrong and evil, in human conduct. African peoples have a deep sense of right and wrong. In the course of the years, this moral sense has produced customs, rules, laws, traditions and taboos which can be observed in each society. Their morals are embedded in these systems of behaviours and conduct (175).

These morals were sustained by the peoples' belief in African Traditional Religion and its sanctity which are protected by the gods and spirits of ancestors. When all Africans were devout believers, they feared and dreaded violations of their custom and traditions because such offences were punished by immediate justice of gods and spirits with instant death etc.

When the white man brought his culture of Christianity, Africans left their culture to embrace it. The white man's culture does not visit offenders with immediate wrath and so people

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started looking sideways from morality. Lack of morality increased with the jet age and its exposure of people to crime waves in oral and written literature, programmes of cables and the internet; television; cinemas and projectors and home videos. By all these means people have learnt various evil ways of life. Today, morality has been thrown to the dogs to some extent as a result of the effects of the jet age.

Because undisciplined people cheat and so, make gains, they would like a state of lawlessness from which they benefit. This is because orderliness will not enable them to commit crimes and go scot-free. It is for the purpose of protecting society from different offences of the violators of rules, regulations and laws that various organisations like churches, schools, trade unions, clubs or societies as well as governments of all tiers make rules, regulations and laws. Frank Schmallerger has ever since explained this view:

Crime, simply defined is human conduct in violation of the criminal laws of a state, the federal government, in a local jurisdiction that has the power to make such laws. Without a law that circumscribes a particular form of behaviour, there can be no crime, no matter how deviant or socially repugnant the report in question may be (6).

Many persons are afraid that they might be caught by rules, regulations or laws and so behave themselves. They endeavour to play games according to the rules and regulations applicable.

There are various offenders who violate rules, regulations and laws in order to cheat individuals as well as corporate bodies so that they can achieve their selfish interests. Such people demonstrate lacks of senses of morality to be patriotic enough in protecting their countries. Such people are all over the place in Nigeria, even in the government offices. Nigeria's ex-President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, describes various immoral acts of corruption which he agrees abound everywhere but did not fail to raise an alarm at the rate of corruption in Nigeria (Obasanjo, 13).

It is not a local matter. It has so much gone international that Nigerians worth less than other nationals. People of other countries get worried whenever they are transacting businesses with Nigerians because a lot of them have breached their contract terms so much that people no longer have trust in business dealings with Nigerians. The corrupt tendencies of Nigerians have caused their country (Nigeria) its prestige. The Transparency International studied the globe to find out that Nigeria is the second in terms of the grading of the corrupt nations.

The forte of this work is making a call for resorting to story telling as a means of inculcating moral values in our people especially children who need to develop good moral mentalities early in their lives. Aylward Shorter W.F has been advocating for story telling:

African oral literature is a very important source for discovering African categories of thought, African concepts of man, the world and God. Story telling is the chat way that social and moral values are inculcated into children by parents and grandparents in the African home. (83).

The inculcation of moral values by story-telling will be achieved by telling stories of crimes and punishment suffered by offenders. In such stories well behaved characters that toed the path of morality will be portrayed. Those that exhibit moral character would be shown as beneficiaries for good behaviours. Below are summaries of folktales that would inculcate morality:

1. Tortoise's Plan on the King's Cow.

The king's cow grazed everywhere in the community. One day Tortoise saw the cow in his farm and imagined how much beef he would get from the cow if he could successfully carry out a crafty scheme. He arranged on a fateful day, how he and his son would cut the cow's intestines and belly into pieces and come out alive. He taught his son to shout in the cow's belly that it is Tortoise that should eat the cow alone otherwise the Kingdom would be doomed.

When the cow swallowed the son of Tortoise, he shouted in the stomach of the cow. This sounded mysterious and the king told Tortoise to slaughter the cow and eat so that the kingdom might be saved. Tortoise developed cold feet and told the king that he had no option of tasting the cow so that he would die and the kingdom be saved. He then took the cow home. At home, his son cut the belly of the cow open and came out. Tortoise and his son then prepared the meat of the cow. Before they could eat the beef, Lizard that was on the fence round Tortoise's house went in and told them that he saw them very well and that he would report them to the king.

Tortoise asked him to join him and his son provided he (Lizard) would not report them to the king. Lizard accepted the bargain and joined them. Tortoise suggested that he and Lizard would feed each other. Lizard fed Tortoise first and when it was the turn of Tortoise to feed

Lizard he forced a piece of bone into his tongue repeatedly and injured him so much that he could not talk even till now.

Lizard felt cheated and went to the king to report Tortoise. When he was received by the king, he could not tell him his mission. The king felt offended and ordered his palace guards to beat him. They beat the hell out of Lizard that day. He ended up in the hospital. The king said that a lot of visitors had embarrassed him in the past and that the fate of Lizard would serve as deterrence to future visitors (Ogbalu 53-55).

Comment: The audience will learn from this story that it is risky for people to join offenders as accomplices. They should learn to report offenders in future rather than join them in their crimes. This will go a long way in correcting the immoral tendencies of people to turn accomplices especially if they learn at the tender age of seven or there about.

2. The Reason for Tortoise's Checkered Shell I

Once upon a time all animals gathered for a meeting at which they decided to contribute some funds and build a palace for their king. Tortoise nominated Rat the Treasurer and other animals agreed because Rat has a big hole at the foot of a hill

When Tortoise felt that the money contributed was much, he thought up a plan of stealing the money in the absence of Rat when nobody would be on the road. He convened a meeting of all animals and told them that God talked to him in a dream and asked them to pray otherwise they would not achieve their laudable venture of building the palace. He led them in prayers after which he asked the animals to meditate and that nobody should get up until God touched them. As the animals lay on the ground with their faces buried in the sand, Tortoise rushed to the hole and looted the public treasury. He took the money to his house before he returned to the venue of the meeting where the animals were waiting for God to touch them. He spread sand on the animals. So animals presumed that the sand that touched them was the hand of God. They rose up and went home.

Some days later, Rat realised that the money he kept for all animals was missing. He sounded a metal gong round the community and informed all animals that the public funds in his custody was missing. The animals gathered and Tortoise became mostly offended. When the anger of the animals lessened, they appointed Wren the next Treasurer with hope that he would do better. Wren collected the money and kept it in his nest on top of a tree. Tortoise once again planned to loot the treasury. He repeated his strategy of prayers and left the

animals to climb the tree on which Wren hid the money. Unfortunately, he fell down and broke his shell. Up till today the shell he wears is checkered (Egudu, 37-39).

Comment: In the above story, Tortoise has the habit of looting public treasury until luck fell out on him and he fell from a tree and got injured. From this story people, especially children, will understand that it is not an easy thing to steal. They will learn that stealing involves a lot of risks and that some people sustain injuries or lose their lives. In the human society, one can see that some thieves are shot by police men and other security operatives. They also sustain injuries in the course of climbing or jumping down walls or other objects.

3. Why Tortoise Lives in River Swamps

Tortoise and Beetle are friendly and live together. They were doing everything in common. One day they killed an antelope with which they made good stew and ate together. Tortoise became greedy. He wanted to have a lion share, but Beetle refused. Both of them quarrelled. Tortoise beat Beetle. Beetle fell into the dish of food and feigned death. Tortoise appalled to him to come out of the dish. He refused and Tortoise thought him dead and decided to run for his dear life. He ran into the bush. Beetle used the voices of different animals to threaten Tortoise that he would be killed. With the voices, Beetle made Tortoise to hear that a price has been paid on his head. So he (Tortoise) ran inner and inner (Egudu, 45-8).

Comment: The audience will imbibe that greed and avarice are not in any way good. They should avoid being greedy for taking over the property that belongs to someone else would cause the brewing of bad blood and subsequently bring about a dispute that would affect the two parties involved. People will learn that the gain from the quarrel is far less than the outcome of the dispute.

4. The Feast of Tortoise and Birds

Once upon a time, birds planned to attend a feast in the sky. Tortoise heard of the meeting and begged birds to allow him join them. They did not like it but after some considerations, they allowed him to attend in their company. On the said day, Tortoise came out and begged some birds to lend him feathers. They obliged him some feathers. They elected Tortoise their spokesmen and he told them that the culture of their prospective hosts was that they should take new names. He deceived the birds who were unaware of his intention He then took his new name of "All of You".

When they arrived, their hosts received them cordially. They presented food and drinks and told Tortoise and birds that the edible things they presented were for "all of you". Tortoise told the birds that the food and drinks were for him because his name was "All of You". He told birds to exercise patience for their shares would be brought later. He then ate and drink as much as he could leaving little or nothing for the birds. At the end of the feast, birds ate nothing and got angry. When they returned, birds took away their respective feathers.

Birds decided to retaliate. They invited Tortoise to a feast somewhere on the earth. At the host's house, the food and drinks were placed before them. Birds decreed that they should wash hands in a nearby stream before eating. Birds flew to and fro the stream and washed their hands. Tortoise crawled slowly to the stream and washed his hands. He then crawled back to the venue, Birds asked him to go back to the stream for his hands were already dirty. This was what he continued doing until the feast was over. Tortoise went home in anger. (Egudu, 61-65).

Comment: People would learn that to be greedy is to be immoral and that the offended party would likely retaliate and if it does it is always worse. People should not allow their selfish interests to make them cheat others. If they are trained from their early stages of life, they will be just in sharing any goodies among people.

5. Palm Nuts on Leaves:

When Tortoise's father was sick, he assessed the situation of his father's ill health and learnt that there was no hope of survival. He became worried of his incapability of giving his father a befitting funeral ceremony as the culture of his people demands. The poor funeral ceremony of a man is seen as a sacrilege. Tortoise decided to avoid the shame of the poor funeral. He told his people that he would be going on a far journey as a matter of the call of his profession of medicine making. He told his people that he had the chances of getting the medicine that would cure his father. He told his people that if something usual happend let them do it the way it was done but if unusual let them send for him.

When he left, his father died. Animals gathered to discuss the absence of Tortoise on the death of his father. All the animals except one fell prey to his trick. They felt that the death of Tortoise's father was not abnormal. People usually die so they should contribute for the man's burial. But the one that was sensible enough told others that Tortoise was evading his responsibility of giving his father a good burial and that he should be called home to take the responsibility. Other animals agreed with him and sent their minds on the message for him. They resolved to tell him that something unusual had happened in their village and that is that

palm nuts have ripped on the palm leaves. The animals then dispatched a message to Tortoise.

When Tortoise received the message he agreed that it was a wonderful thing to learn that palm nuts had grown on palm leaves and had ripped. He rushed home to see the wonder. On return, he was shown his father's corpse and told to arrange for his funeral. He cried profusely like women. Other animals knew that his cry was not as a result of the emotions of losing his father but for his poor finance for the large ceremony. They jeered at him and gossiped that they would have helped him if he had the moral tendency to accept his true life rather than trickishly shirking his responsibilities to them (Egudu,73-75). Comment: Tortoise lacks the morality of accepting his standard of life. He had wanted to stay away from his father's sick bed and his subsequent funeral only to return later and claim that he would have performed wonders if he were around. People should learn that great problems would better be solved by telling the people the truth and then soliciting for their help in a society of communal living.

6. Tortoise and Lizard

Once upon a time, there was very biting scarcity of salt in the land of animals. Animals were finding it difficult to prepare good food without salt. In fact a lot of animals were not finding their meals tasteful. Because of this a spoonful of salt was priced as if it were gold. One day, Tortoise went to a distant land in search of salt. He suffered a lot before he finally succeeded in procuring a bag of salt. He tied a long rope to it by the rope, he dragged it home.

Lizard saw Tortoise from a distance and thought up a plan for taking away the bag of salt. Before Tortoise could understand the confusion Lizard threw him into, Lizard had cut off the bag of salt. He became dejected and went home with a broken heart. He swore to retaliate in such a way that he would leave a scare on Lizard.

One day, it was raining heavily while all animals were seeking shelter at different safe places. Before Lizard could crawl to a safe place it had started raining heavily. He decided to hide his head in a hole on a tree and left his tail outside. As Tortoise was passing by, he saw the Lizard's tail and cut it off. He took it home.

Lizard took him to court. At the court he told the jury how Lizard cut off his bag of salt. When Lizard was asked why he did so, he told the court that he picked the bag of salt on the road. On cross examination of Tortoise, he replied that he equally picked the tail of Lizard on

the road. The court agreed that the retaliation should be upheld. They discharged and acquitted Tortoise. He went Scot-free. (Ogbalu 19-20).

Comment: There is a didactic lesson in this story. People should learn not to make trouble for the outcome may not favour them at all. Lizard has now lost his tail and feels bitter in the dispute he started. He might have been guarding himself against Tortoise's retaliation but he ran out of luck on the rainy day.

7. Tortoise and the Death of his Mother

Tortoise's mother was sick and Tortoise has no money for giving her a standard burial as her relatives would demand. He left his house with an instruction that when something usual happened let them take charge of handling it. But if an extraordinary thing happened they should send for him.

When his mother, died every animal said that death was usual. But they thought up to send for him for something extraordinary had happened. They sent him a message to come home for an unusual thing had happened. They sent him the message stating that a man was pregnant, a lamb had horns, that something on the ground fell upon something above and killed it; and that a palm head got ripped at the tail end of a palm frond.

These pieces of information made Tortoise to return. When he returned, the relatives of his mother gathered and told him, to accord their sister a good burial she deserved. He was shocked and having not been preparing for the funeral ceremony of his mother he had it tough (Ogbalu, 60-61).

Comment: People should learn that the attempt of shirking responsibilities is not the best for one's responsibility would be there waiting for him. It carries a lot of shame if one does not show the level of relationship between oneself and somebody else because one is unconcerned. People should have the moral tendency of not denying their relatives.

8. Tortoise and Birds

Once upon a time, birds received an invitation to attend a feast in the sky. Tortoise heard of the feast and begged that he joined birds in attending the feast. They obliged him to attend in their company. On the appointed day, he borrowed one feather from each of the birds. He

suggested the need for them to take new names and the birds agreed. All the birds took new names and he took the name- "All of You".

They flew to the sky and their hosts received them cordially. They placed food and drinks before them and told them that the food and drinks were for all of you Tortoise capitalised on this and ate the food and drank the wine alone while the birds starved. He promised them that their hosts would bring their own food and drinks but it was untrue. Birds grew angry and took away their feathers. They flew home and left Tortoise at the venue. He could not fly down. He shouted at his wife to bring out all soft property and keep outside their compound. His wife thought he said hard things, and so pieces of stone etc. When he felt that she had brought out many enough he crash landed on the ground and broke himself into pieces. This is why Tortoise has a checkered shell (Ogbalu, 51-54)

Comment: People will understand from the above folktale that greed and avarice are not good ways of life. They will understand that Tortoise would not have suffered the fate if he, did not deprive birds the food and drinks given to them by their hosts in the sky. People will then learn that greed and avarice are the pathways to attacks on oneself by the aggrieved party.

9. Tortoise and Pig.

One day Tortoise and Pig won a contract for which they would be paid two pounds each. Both worked very hard and were paid accordingly. Tortoise felt that he would snatch Pig's share from him. He was thinking of a good plot. When they got to the shop of a woman that sells cloths .Tortoise priced a piece of cloth five pounds and the seller refused. He told Pig to help him buy the cloth for his wife. He asked Pig to loan him his wages of two pounds. Pig did not like giving the loan but he was unable to refuse outright. He felt that his loan would make the total four pounds and that Tortoise would never be able to buy the cloth since its cost was five pounds. He gave Tortoise the loan. Tortoise added it to his own wages and pressurised the seller telling him that she saw him borrow money. The seller later had mercy on Tortoise and sold the cloth to him at four pounds. Tortoise thanked Pig very well and promised to pay him the loan.

When Pig waited for Tortoise to pay him and it seemed he had forgotten he went to Tortoise to ask for the money. Tortoise promised to pay. This continued until Pig became angry. One day Tortoise told his wife to hold him as if he is a grindstone when other time Pig would come. As soon as they learnt Pig was at their door, they carried out the plan. When pig came in he could not see Tortoise. He got annoyed and snatched the supposed grindstone Tortoise's

wife was holding and threw it into the bush. Tortoise (the supposed grindstone) crawled from the bush into his compound. When Pig came again to ask for money, Tortoise told him to pick up the grindstone so that he (Tortoise) would pay him. Till today, Pig is thrusting his mouth into the soil looking for the grindstone. This shows that violence could not solve his problem (Ogbalu, 64-65).

Comment: From this folktale, one should learn that violence does nobody any good. One should now see that it would have been better if Pig sued Tortoise to court. This will go a long way towards making people understand that violence is not moral and should be avoided. They should also learn that it complicates issues rather than resolving them.

10. Tortoise and Animals

Once upon a time, Tortoise led other animals in a development project of providing a market place. They cleared a forest to build the market, Eke Mgborogwu, Ironically, Tortoise went about messing up the market place. He defecated there from time to time. This was a problem to the rest of the animals.

They convened a meeting on a certain day to discuss the issue. After due deliberations, the animals resolved to take oath in turns. They took the oath and came out unhurt. Tortoise dogged the oath until at last. But when Tortoise took the oath, it pulled him down and he died (Ogbalu, 88-90).

Comment: One learns from this story that it is morally wrong to commit an offence and deny to the point of taking an oath to conceal it. This is a good note of warning to hardened criminals that it is good to avoid committing offences and better to own up if one committed an offence rather than deceiving oneself by taking false oaths which will kill the offenders.

Conclusion

A look at the folktales above shows very clearly that there are didactic messages they carry. These messages if learnt from the childhood ages would contribute a lot towards making people morally upright. This is because each of the stories portrays immoral acts of the respective characters and the punishment they suffered to serve as deterrence to future offenders. The offences are theft as in the folktale entitled “Tortoise and Lizard”, greed and avarice as in the folktales captioned “Why Tortoise Lives in River Swamps”, “The Feast of Tortoise and Birds”, and “Tortoise and Birds”, whereas the offence of aiding and abetting crimes is punished on Lizard in “Tortoise's Plan on the King's Cow.” Another crime which is

treated is the looting of the public treasury which is addressed in “The Reason for Tortoise's Checkered Shell I”. Shirking of responsibility is an act that shows lack of morality. It is portrayed as an offence that cannot go without punishment in “Palm Nuts on Leaves”, and “Tortoise and the Death of his Mother”. In “Tortoise and Pig”, the audience is taught that violence should not be seen as a solution to any problem. It has been known to complicate problems and so should be avoided. Some culprits always pretend that they are as clear as crystal. Guilty conscience should fear accusations but in some cases offenders came out bold denying, even to the extent of taking oaths to which they fall victims. The folktales captioned "Tortoise and Animals" dissuaded people from such offence.

We can now see that oral literature, folktales specifically, contributes a lot towards the enthronement of moral rebirth. By showing different offences and the punishment of the culprits there is no doubt that folktales are carrying out the function of making people imbibe morality. That is the discharging of the artist's duty about which Ikechukwu Okodo states that "Literature had done a lot in correcting the misbehaviours of various people". (260).

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