

## REFLECTION ON MORAL EDUCATION IN IGBO FOLKTALE

*Dr. A.A. Ajayi and S.I.C. Iwuagwu*

### **Abstract**

The foundation of all Igbo literature is the Igbo oral tradition (folktale) now called oral performance. Moralistic values of folktale are not taught in dry, abstract, didactic manner but by using exciting situation to generate pleasurable imaginative episode in terms of which moral lessons are carried to the heart and mind. In this era of moral decadence, the paper explains how folktale in our daily life will help uphold our moral virtues. Moral lessons from selected Igbo text were highlighted. Problems militating against it use were enumerated. Recommendations were made on how folktale will be a weapon to inculcate right moral virtues not only in our children but the society.

Every group bound together by common interest and purposes, rural or urban, enlightened or non educated has traditions that may be called its folktale, it is traditional art, literature, knowledge and practice that is disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral examples. The foundation of all Igbo literature is the Igbo oral tradition (folktale) now called oral performance. The narrator is an educator, entertainer, philosopher and counselor; it is a form of relaxation after a day's work when radio, television, newspaper, cinema and various other forms of modern entertainment were either non-existent or not easily accessible to most people. The interaction between folktales and cultural patterns and changes is very remarkable especially as society becomes increasingly sophisticated.

It is regrettable that modernization has led to how moral standard. The low moral standard manifest in moral laxity, indiscipline,

bribery, corruption, armed robbery, exam malpractices, mistrust, laziness, embezzlement of public funds, electoral fraud, drug abuse, take drug, loose sexual life, lying, cheating, kidnapping and drug trafficking. No thanks to pornographic materials, influences of radio, and television that have invaded the country. The moral deficiency appears to be insurmountable. Few of our leaders have tried to improve moral quality, some of the moral detergent applied in Nigeria by government policy-makers to check indiscipline and corruption are codes of conduct Bureau, Ethical revolution, War Against Indiscipline, MANSER and WAIC (War Against Indiscipline and Corruption). Morality is a serious business which concerns our whole way of life, particularly how we ought to live. Every human society not only has its moves, its way of life but also norms, a system of commends and prohibitions which are designed to ensure that members of that particular society live the way they ought to live. Society finds it difficult to survive without morality. Moral education is an indispensable ingredient of life. Folktale is a unman occurrence in human society, literate and non literate. It is not odd or fossilized survival from the far past destined to wither away with increasing modernization. Folktale is a creation both of a particular community and of a particular individual. In Igbo land like all other African societies, folktale utilizes animals such as tortoise, bird, elephants, and sheep as dramatic personnel. It is a literary genre that embraces a range of narratives that vary from explanatory stories, humanistic stories to fairy tales. In the past, children listened to moon light folk stories. Questions were asked at the end of the story and what lessons the story teaches us. Most of the

time, they are moral lessons. The folktale has no fixed form, the language, humour and imagery very according to the narrator, some of the folktales put in writing can capture only a little of the imaginative and dramatic essence. Some of the Igbo folktales in written form are Nza na obu, Akuko ifo Ufodu kwesiri ka umu mmadu mara, oka mgba, Mbediogu, Elelia na ihe o mere and Omalinze, some can also be found in Abu na egwuregwu odinela Igbo. These are collection of folktale in print that can be read without the narrator being around. The television series tales by moonlight depicts how the folktale was narrated in the past.

### **Folktale and Morality**

Life is a story and stories imitate life and life imitates stories, life reflects stories and stories reflect life. Folktale is imaginative narrative (story in prose form). The story may have a basis in real life but generally the story is an imaginative recreation. The identity of folktale is performance, orality, personality of the artists audience memory improvisation and artistic literary qualities. The virtues of folktale are inculcation of values of patriotism, hard work, loyalty, honesty, perseverance, sexual morality, truthfulness, goodness, tolerance, patience, kindness, social responsibilities and forgiveness.

The objectives of folktales are the propagation of history and culture of the people, entertainment and spiritual upliftment, relaxation leisure and amusement. The categories of folktale include: superstitions, proverbs, parables, myths, legends, trickster tales, fairy tales, tales of reversal of fortune, tales of intervention, folk belief, magic and medicine. Ikonne (1983) stated that “all the values which govern the lives of the characters (animas & human beings) in such folktales have their being in their likes and dislikes of the society which tells and hears the tales”. To understand the

culture of the Igbo, one must read or listen to the folktales because they illustrate the simplicity and superstition of the rural people and reflect the stages of development of the society. It conveys important moral ideas or lessons to children since it is the duty of the story teller to initiate children into the wisdom and custom of their society. The moralistic tone is not just for thrilling the audience but also a way to convey deep insights into man’s moral and psychological nature for the general instruction of the audience. Good morals are inculcated to children in early life through properly selected folktales. Moral values of good folktale help to reconstruct experience.

Classie (1989) asserted that:

“folktale has many cultural aspects such as allowing for escape from societal consequences, in addition, folktale can also serve to validate a culture as well transmit culture, moral and values, folktale asserts social pressures, or relieve them in case of humour and carnivals”.

The folklorist never fails to insist the moral at the end of their stories. Corroborating Bascom asserted that:

“Forms of folktale constitute or are a means of escape from harsh geographical conditions and biological limitations into a more exciting world of fantasy; a means for the validation of social, cultural norms, as pedagogic devices for the education of the young, as a means of applying social pressure, and exercising social control”

Folktale has aesthetic and moral function in terms of the kind of story told. Moral lessons are transformed into exciting image pattern which torch the heart causing fear, sympathy or love of the good and a hatred of evil.

The moral lessons are not taught in dry abstract didactic manner but by using exciting

### *Reflection on Moral Education in Igbo Folktale*

situation to generate pleasurable imaginative episode in terms of which moral lessons are carried into the heart and mind. In folktales good always triumph over evil, truth over falsehood, honesty over dishonesty. It strives to shaping and moulding the characters 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. The psychological folklorist following the work of Sigmund Freud maintained that folktale has a lot of function. In Akporobaro (2006), folklore have a “psychotherapeutic function i.e to ease emotional tensions and to express, dissolved, and resolve repressed antisocial passions of anger, hatred, jealousy” The resolving of negative feelings is referred to as catharsis or the expurgation of emotions. Folktale is not just for entertainment ethical value and acceptable norms of the society but also relevant to the development of men in the society.

#### **Moral Themes in Some Igbo Folktale from Text**

Most folktales from the Igbo text instruct the young in the principles of right and wrong and all who mould opinion and characters. It is highly helpful for parental responsibility for the safety, care and upbringing of the young, respect for old age, labour, grace and beauty in women, strength and virility in men, social justice and the spirit of daring. In folktale, good always triumph over evil, truth over falsehood, honesty over dishonesty.

Some of the themes are on virtues of love, kindness, honesty, accountability, fidelity, sympathy, obedience, hard work, endurance and good faith. Goodness as a moral force in nature often triumph and through this, the principle of retributive justice is mentioned, some themes focus on antisocial, criminal behaviours like incest, jealousy, selfishness, betrayals, greed, over ambition, maltreatment, hatred, cruelty,

wickedness, evil diabolical act, injustice that mostly lead to terrible consequences and nemesis. An Igbo adage says, “if a child crawls up to me and pinches me, I will crawl back to him and pinch him”. (Nwata gbere egbere tuo m mbo, m gbere egbere tugwara ya)

The folktale “Nnyemaka di n’etiti umu anumanu” by Anya Iwe, the moral theme of one good turn deserves another was demonstrated by the animals involved. Odum was resting and a small rat that was playing on the roof fell on him. The rat begged Odum not to kill him but to have sympathy on him, Odum kindly spared him and let him go. Odum later entered a trap that would have led to his death. When that rat saw him remembered how he was saved and with his teeth he cut the trap and saved Odum. This shows that kindness as a virtue should be reciprocated.

In “Ndidi na-meri the Uwa” in Nza na obu, the theme of hard work, love and care was manifested. A couple gave birth to a boy and a girl Igwe and Ada respectively. Igwe was hardworking, caring and loving while Ada was greedy, proud and wicked. The parents hated Igwe and drove him out but his kindness to an old man helped him in life. When the old man was dying, he gave Igwe three things that helped him to fulfill difficult task by Aguala. His good virtue paid off. Igwe who was cast away by his parents become a king through endurance, wisdom, hard work and kindness. Human-trait of hatred, wickedness, cruelty and jealousy, as principal source of human tragedy is as old as the world itself.

In “Enyi na Nwanyi” in Oka Mgba, evil deeds has its reward. A woman normally leave her child in the custody of animals. Enyi killed the child and eat her up. The animals were annoyed and wanted to know the truth about the death by swearing of oath. They dug a pit and each will sing and jump over the pit. All the animals jumped over to show their innocence. Enyi was the last to swear and jump over the pit

but in an attempt to jump over he fell inside the pit and was covered and died there; he refused to accept his evil deed and was rewarded by death.

In another folktale “Nwa Agbogho Na-agba Iho di” in Oka Mgba the theme of arrogance and disobedience to parental advice was her undoing. A beautiful lady from a rich family was very selective of husband; she refused all suitors that came to marry her despite entreaties from the parents. She was too selective that the spirit world was aware of her arrogance and proud. A spirit borrowed human parts to become human and came to marry her. The parents refused and advised against the marriage on the spirit could not explain his identity well. The lady refused and followed the spirit, the spirit advised her in the way to go back that he is non human but she refused. Even the spirit returned all the borrowed parts and become a round object she refused to go back. On the verge of being killed by the spirit, she called a kite to inform her parents of her predicament. The kite saved her on the condition that he will be given a chick always.

In another folktale, Mazi Ndubuisi in Nza na obu, the theme of fraud false life, deceit laziness and divorce was manifested. Mazi Ndubuisi is a product of broken marriage, there was no moral upbringing. He was handsome, intelligent but wicked. At his place of work, he will lavish money on hotel, cigarette and merriment with friends. He has no wife and does not cook. His source of expenses was questionable. All that glitters is not gold; Mazi Ndubuisi embezzled a lot of money from his office which he spend extravagantly. When his sins found him out, he committed suicide so as not to face disgrace.

In yet another folktale “Ndi mmoo ano na umu ntakiri abua” in Nza na obu the evils of polygamy was highlighted. Ikonne forgot his

flute in the far and when he went to collect it, he obeyed the four spirits, praised them and they blessed him with riches. When he returned home, there was jubilation and merriment. The stepmother, greedy, angry, and jealous sent his son to the farm and instructed him to forget the flute. On getting back to collect the flute so that he will also be rich, he insulted the spirits with his foul mouth, he was stingy with his yams and insulted the spirits with his flute, the spirits killed him, the greedy and jealous step mother lost her son and wealth. Many folktale in the texts highlight good and bad themes as moral lessons.

### **Problems Militating Against the Role of Folktale**

The problem of folktale is associated with the state of Igbo language. The poor attitude of Ndigbo to their language is reflected on the lack of cooperation from the five eastern states. If care is not taken, Igbo language will loose its status as one of the major languages. Nobody insists that Igbo be made compulsory in nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Igbo land. Where is the love for our language? Which constitution says we should not promote our language in schools? Does passing Igbo language deny one job opportunity or practice, a profession or passing other subjects? The solution is not in “Igbo kwenu”, holding and acquisition of titles. A state of emergency in the Igbo language should be declared else the language will disappear.

Reaping the dividends of neglect of their Igbo language, Prof. Mrs. Chineye Ohiri-Aniche presented a brilliant paper titled “Annihilation of Ancestral language as Human Right Violation of the Igbo” Haward University, U.S.A in 2008. She stated that Fulbright foreign language Teaching Assistance Programme offers scholarships to Nigeria students majoring in English in Nigerian Universities. The scholars visit the USA for a one year programme where they also teach Hausa and

### Reflection on Moral Education in Igbo Folktale

---

Yoruba while improving their knowledge of the English language. The privilege not extended to those who teach Igbo language. How else does a language die?

Language is culture and culture is stored in the language that one speaks. With this apathy in Igbo language, how then can the role of folktale be inculcated?

The school has taken over the primary purpose of the didactic folktales. Moral instructions in schools and religious studies can hardly correct the moral laxity.

The impact of folktale is diminishing with the increasing awareness of modern inventions. Writing diminished the life of the folktale as a cultural phenomena. Western civilization has dealt with folktale became the environment under which it flourished in the past has changed rapidly. People prefer to relax on TV, novels, newspaper video and various other forms of modern entertainment. Emphasis on examination is on foreign languages as against Nigerian languages used for folktale. Folktale is not odd or fossilized survival from the far past destined to wither away with increasing modernization. The neglect of folktale one of the national heritage has negative repercussion. The children are not taught morals, they imbibe negative western culture ie scientific robbery, rapes, forgery, cultism, social vices, kidnapping inordinate quest for wealth, pornography and nudity. No thanks to parents, government and the society that had relegated folktale to the background.

The narrators are few and no more valued. The few folktales aired in TV in the past like Tales by Moonlight are hardly listened to. If this quest for modernization is not checked or corrected, we will be an "albino" that is neither black nor white. Omowumi (2011) asserted that "if care is not taken, the generation that

understands the nitty-gritty of our culture would have been wiped away" Yes, English language is our lingua-franca but must if be allowed to override our cultural heritage? Most names we give our children sound classical. In a naming ceremony, only the surname out of the six names reflect the cultural background of the parents.

Mobile phone has reduced visitation and elaborate greeting common in our culture. Cultural dances are bastardized, foreign dance steps are imported. These prevent our youths from knowing their traditional dance pattern. Our children taught foreign languages in their early years cannot speak Igbo language. No thanks to parents, schools, government, the five eastern states, the Igbos themselves and the student. A child that cannot think in his language cannot bring development.

### **Recommendation and Conclusion**

To change the situation already destroyed by moral decadence, the government should inculcate in the curriculum aspects of moral education from our indigenous languages. These are the moral views or general ethos which is widely acceptable and followed in a society. Morality, is the weakest link in the chain of national development in Nigeria. Moral education should be a regular feature in the curriculum at all levels of the education system to help to the moral health of the nation. Folktale should be introduced in the curriculum to train the child. These are folktales that are relevant to the society. Parents are the first contact of the child in the society, therefore good language, good behaviour and moral lessons from folklores should be inculcated to the children. The folktales whether chanted (ekwemekwe) narrated (akomako) and narrated and chanted (aguekwe) should form part of the Igbo language curriculum in our primary and secondary schools. Efforts should be made to air folktale programmes in the television and radio programmes. This will help

reduce the moral bankruptcy that is rampant in home videos and other communication channels.

The Igbo video artists should focus more on moralistic values of folktale in their scripts as this will attract more moralistic lessons to all. Oral literature is a viable field of study in a Nigerian Universities. It is a new field of study which can open new opportunities for young graduates. Many African as well as European scholars are making new and valuable contributions to understanding and appreciation of traditional literature. School of Oriented and African Studies London, University of Wisconsin USA, University of Benin and University of Lagos efforts should be emulated in promoting oral literature.

The Odenigbo annual lecture organized by Owerri Catholic Dioceses encourages reading and writing in Igbo language. The Ahiajoku lecture held every November brings Igbo scholars, government and stakeholders to deliberate on issues concerning the growth and development of the language. It is saddening that the eminent scholars who are of Igbo descent deliver the lectures in English Language. Is this how to encourage the language? The language policy of the National Policy on Education (2004) should be revisited and efforts made to implement it. A pass in Igbo language should be a condition to gain admission in tertiary institution by the Igbo speaking students.

Igbo language courses should be taught in Igbo language in our tertiary institutions. There is need for workshops, seminars and conferences where approved meta-language in technology, science, social issues, emergent issues, contemporary issues affecting the language will be taught. The Igbo language teachers need to be current with Information Communication Technology (ICT) to be abreast with time. Finally, the onus to develop our

language, use it for the moral upbringing of our youths in this era of moral bankruptcy is the task of all the Igbo speaking people.

#### **References**

- Akporobaro, F.B.O. (2006). *Introduction to African oral literature*, Ikeja, Princeton Publishing Company.
- Bascom, W. (1965). Four functions of folklore in a *Dundes the Study of folklore*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Glassie (1989). *The spirit of folk arts*, New York. Abrams.
- Ikonne, C. (1983). Women in Igbo folktales, *Nka Journal*. Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri.
- Iroaganachi (1979). *Oka Mgba*, Ibadan, Longman Nigeria.
- Iwe (1976). *Akuko Ifo Ufodu Kwesiri ka Umu Mmadu mara*, Aba, African Literature Bureau.
- Ogbalu, F.C. (1980). *Nza na Obu*, Ikeja. Thomas Nelson.
- Omowunmi, O. (2011). Nigeria as victim of alien culture, *Daily Independence*. Sunday, March 15 p.25.

*Dr. A.A. Ajayi*  
*Federal College of Education,*  
*Osiele, Abeokuta.*

*and*

*S. I. C. Iwuagwu*  
*Federal College of Education,*  
*Osiele, Abeokuta.*