

REVITALISATION OF FOLKTALES AS AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE AMONG THE IGBO YOUTHS

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Abstract

Folktales, rich in cultural heritage, were channels of moral instruction, community values, and historical consciousness. This paper premised on historical approach and development theory, discusses the revitalisation of folktales as agent of social change among Igbo youths. In the past, folktales, as part of oramedia, noticeably served important communication and entertainment functions to youths in Africa, including those in Igbo land. Time was, when elders in Igbo land would gather children by moonlight to tell stories that teach morals. These folktales were either based on fiction or real-life events. Sometimes, the stories involved natural or supernatural elements displaying interactions of animals, humans, or spirits. In the 1980s, folktales were aired on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) through a programme known as 'Tales by Moonlight'. This programme had children gathered around the storyteller, and at the end, the children shared the moral lessons learnt from each tale. Today, amidst new media-induced globalisation and cultural dilution, this system of folktales seems to have been eroded, perhaps, leading to the numerous social ills plaguing Igbo land. There is therefore a need for Igbo youths to reclaim and reinterpret these folktales to strengthen their cultural identities, combat societal malaise, and re-awaken social consciousness. Hence, this paper advocates for the revitalisation of folktales through intentional radio, television and social media programming to recreate folktales.

Keywords: Community values; Cultural heritage; Folktales; Igbo Youths; Oramedia; Social change, Moral instruction.

Introduction

Folktales, an aspect of oramedia, and age-long traditional means of imparting culture, values, norms, morals of a people to their younger generation have being on the tail-end of decline. Folktales are parts and parcels of African cultural system especially in Igboland. No one can claim as the originator of the tales being told by the folks, hence, they can be said to be owned by the community. The narratives are simply handed down orally from generation to generation. Although each ethnicity has their unique tales but all are geared towards building a society with sound moral values as well as inculcating the traditions/culture of a particular society in their young folks. Folktales, though entertaining in nature, communicate messages in social settings. The messages are very educative and informative.

In the pre-colonial Igbo society, parents or elders usually gather children around fire or under moonlight after dinner, when all the day's domestic chores were completed to tell stories. This period comes with a unique atmosphere, so quiet that a pin drop or echoes from distant neighbouring communities could be heard. The children would always eagerly await this time thereby rushing to complete their portions of domestic chores on time. It was one of the moments the parents and elders interact with their young folks. Reiterating Igbara's view as cited in Nsereka and Iyalla (2018), storytelling provides an interactive platform for children and their parents or elders where the children would normally ask questions and share opinions based on the moral lessons in the story. The stories were either based on fictions or real life events. Sometimes, the stories involved natural or supernatural elements displaying interactions of animals, humans or spirits. In fact, storytelling is an essential part of communication across cultures, more especially in the Igbo socio-cultural setting. The people's culture, world-view, philosophy, ideas, thought processes, values, beliefs are embedded in their folktales.

In Igbo traditional setting, folktales were used to instill morals, wisdom, political consciousness and inclinations as well as enforce social change among the younger generation. The stories are always entertaining in nature. They are made to have happy endings or reflect the triumphing of good deeds over evil. Most times, the antagonists in the tales must reap whatever they sow in the end. Moreover, most of Igbo folktales are embodiment of multiplicity of themes with both human and non-human

actors. The non-human actors are made to portray human realities within the confines of their own natural unique characteristics.

Going down the memory lane, around 1980s to mid 90s, folktales were aired on the national television-The Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) stations through a programme known as 'Tales by Moonlight'. The variety of the story lines cuts across different Nigerian cultures such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. The programme had children gathered around the story teller and at the end, the listeners shared the moral lessons gained from each tales. Humans and sometimes puppets were used as actors even if the story was centred on animal kingdom or spirits. Today, this cultural heritage have been battered by western culture and civilisation amidst other factors via the New Media as the youths have lost interest in folktales. This paper is an attempt to support the revitalisation of folktales among the Igbo youth of Nigeria, through intentional radio, television and social media programming such as content creation, skits, dance drama amongst others. This will go a long way to instill cultural values and ethics which are being eroded by the influence of western culture in Igboland.

The Problem

Noticeable among the Nigerian youths today, the Igbo youth in particular, is a total deviation from the traditional inclinations, values and norms. The present Igbo society is so devoid of moral ethics and values that even human life has become meaningless. This moral decadence has eaten deep into the fabrics of our society such that there is a need to retrace our steps back to our age-long traditions that enabled functional morality among the youths.

In the past, the Igbo folktales as stated earlier were avenues of instilling moral values, and norms in the younger generation. The storytelling was passed down from generation to generation through the word of mouth. Folktales are parts and parcels of Igbo cultural heritage. But today, folktales seem to be gradually moving into extinction as families no longer have time for such leisure. The consequences are reflected in the daily happenings in the Igbo society today. Additionally, the Igbo language and culture are also in danger of extinction. The above scenarios call for a revitalization of Igbo language and culture.

Recently, a social media influencer on tiktok, Brainjotter, reenacted the story of *mbe* (tortoise) and *enyi* (elephant) by the music legend, Mr. Mike Ejeagha, which set the media agog with retelling of the story and its associated leg dance. A veteran journalist, Mr. Rufai Oseni's

interpretation of the story on social media brought people to understand its alignment to the Nigerian politics of today. Therefore, it is believed that the Igbo folktales which were previously used to inculcate cultural values and moral traits in their younger generation can still be reenacted to gradually serve the same purpose today. Therefore, this study advocates the revitalization and use of the Igbo folktales through intentional media programming as an agent of social change.

The objectives

This paper seeks to advocate for the revitalization of the Igbo folktales as an agent of social change among their youths. The objectives include:

1. to establish the features of Igbo folktales
2. to identify various themes in the Igbo folktales that make them potent tools for social change
3. to advance the use of Igbo folktales as agent of social change among the Igbo youths.

The literature review and the theoretical framework

This study is built within the frameworks of development and social development theories. Development theory embodies a set of models and frameworks that explicates the processes and elements influencing social, economic and cultural development in individuals, communities and the societies in general. The principles provide a guide in understanding the intricacies of development and supply strategies for bringing social change and reducing moral decadence in the society today to its barest minimum. Development communication gears towards the use of communication and media to produce positive behavioral change and economic enhancement. It covers a variety of approaches and media which folktale is part of it.

On the other hand, social development theory is characterized by social interactions with the sole aim of bringing qualitative change in the society. It lays emphasis on the role of culture, language and social interaction in shaping or reshaping individuals as well as societal idealized social norms and values. The Igbo youths social development is more or less dependent on cultural norms and values of their society leading to diverse outcomes.

Nsereka and Iyalla (2018, p.522) opine that what drives social change is ‘increasing awareness leading to better organization’ continuing, they note “when society senses new and better opportunities

for progress, it develops new forms of organization to exploit these new openings successfully”. The retelling of the story of the tortoise and the elephant by the music legend Mr. Mike Ejegha through folk music and its dramatic turn orchestrated by the social media influencer, Brainjotter brought a new angle to folktales. This new format of storytelling shows that folktales could be repackaged in such a way to appeal to the interest of the modern youths while achieving the intended goals.

Several researches have been done on folktales across cultures from different perspectives. Chukwukere (1986) as cited in Eze (2022) carried out a study on the relationship between children moral upbringing and folktales. She opines that folktales can be used to inculcate acceptable cultural norms and values in children. She suggests that the narratives should be tales that involves traditional values and concepts. She further intones that not only would the children be told the stories with moral lessons, belief system and myth but also, should be made to know the consequences of choosing the wrong pathways.

Nkoli and Okoye (2016) in their work on folktales and Igbo youth development calls for the revitalization of Igbo folktales, lament the fast disappearing of Igbo folktales due to invasion of foreign culture and tradition. They further lament that the lack of much interest and efforts by prominent Igbo personalities in reviving the interest of Igbo people especially the youths to Igbo folktales. Consequently, some Igbo cultural values, norms and beliefs are moving to extinction. Thus, they suggest a revitalization, modernization and digitization of Igbo folktales. This they believe would redirect the Igbo people especially the Igbo youths in Nigeria and those in diasporas to appreciate Igbo folktales.

Nsereka and Iyalla's (2018) study is an appraisal of folktales in the socio-political development of Engenni communities in Rivers. The research anchors on development communication and social development theories. The study data was generated from interviews and Focus group discussion. Engenni folktales were categorized within contexts and meaning that redirect socio-political realities and still hold sway for socio-political development of the communities. They assert that African cultures including folktales are endangered as the youths have no interest in the art due to the advent of the new media. Therefore, they suggest that government in collaboration with relevant stakeholders should put in place a strategic programme to ensure the revitalization of folktales/storytelling in Engenni.

Obika and Eke (2021) in their study on realities of Igbo folktales examine stories with animal characters and realities in their portrayals.

They posit that stories based on animal characters should not be seen as fabricated tales. Based on their analysis, such stories communicate realities as animals relate intelligently and have social organizations in the same ways as man.

Eze (2022) in her study on “the sequence of Igbo folktale as a revelation of the Igbo philosophy of life” decries the state of Igbo folktales in the present age. She reiterates the fact that the degeneration of Igbo folktales results from the influence of western culture leaving in its wake a dearth of Igbo culture and philosophy. Her study is an attempt to establish the relevance of folktale in unraveling the philosophy of the Igbo drawing insights from the tales of *Ọjaadịlị* and *Ọmalinze*. The study adopts the structural analytic approach of Vladimir Proop. The findings of her study portray the Igbo as race which believes in hard work. This race eulogises industriousness and has insatiable quest for wealth. The study also reveals the belief of the Igbos that good name is better than silver and gold. The researcher thus suggests the teaching of indigenous literature and culture in schools to foster and restore the Igbo cultural heritage.

A common factor transcends most of the studies above which is the dying state of African cultural heritage especially the folktales. As observed from the reviewed literatures, the major cause of the culture endangerment is the invasion of the western culture on African tradition through the media. Hence, there is a serious need to revive the folktales as they had helped in directing the youths to the right path from time immemorial.

Methodology

Survey design was adopted for this study. Consequently, the survey approach was used in collection of relevant stories from library works in addition to the researcher’s introspection.

Features of Igbo folktales

Igbo folktales have rich diverse features reflecting several concepts such as the people’s culture, norms, values as well as their language. Naturally, storytelling known as folktales is passed down from generation to generation through the word of mouth. It is a communal art which has the gathering of children and young adults around the storyteller. Folktales are community owned as they have no known author. Notwithstanding the characters involved in the story, the realities are cultural based as they expressed the owners’ belief system. Prior to the advent of western education, which led to the documentation of Igbo