

Folklore in Literature: A Tool for Culture Preservation and Entertainment

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ABSTRACT: Folklore, which is traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice that was disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioural examples was initially collected and documented by some writers for culture preservation only because they felt that these elements of folklore are going into extinction and need to be frozen in print. While some writers incorporate folklore materials in their novels, poems, drama for entertainment and culture preservation. These writers are referred to as active or functional writers but the former are referred to as passive. Many creative works were critically analyzed to discover the extent of their use of folklore and it was established that proper understanding of Africa and African literature would be achieved by relating folklore to the cultural context of a literary work. The study concludes that folklore is a tool for both culture preservation and entertainment as Chinua Achebe and many other renowned writers did than just documenting folklore, which does not make for pleasurable reading.

KEYWORDS: Incorporation, folklores, proverbs, passive, preservation, active, functional, folktale, entertainment

INTRODUCTION

Folklore is all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which has come down through the years. It may be folk songs, folktales, riddles, proverbs, or other materials preserved in words or in writing.

Oyekan Owomoyela, (1979), in his book, *African Literature: An Introduction*, expresses that

there is hardly any phase of tradition and life that is not affected or regulated by some aspect of the folklore, because it is the medium through which the behavioural values of the community, the cumulative wisdom and technology devised by, by gone ages are made available to the present generation and preserved for posterity (1).

Henning Cohen (1965) in an article ‘American Literature and American Folklore’ writes that ‘folklore appears in American literature in two ways: passively or actively, that is transcriptive or functionally.’ (240) The passive is elementary and happens when a writer presents folk materials in its original state. It is mere recording or imitation of folklore. This type of folklore becomes lifeless when it is removed from the folk, whose creation it is, and put into print. He also writes that ‘writers who are concerned with creating work of art rather than providing transcriptions from life use folklore functionally.’(242) He goes ahead to say that folklore has been made to advance the plot, to characterize, to provide structure, to explain and to raise questions about the nature of the society.(242-243) Modern folklore writers use folklore to explain or question the society because they have a rich store of native materials to draw upon.

Some writers like John Iroganachi, Theo Ekechukwu, Romanus Egudu, Rems Umeasiegbu, E. Nolue Emenanjo and F.C. Ogbalu have collected and compiled folklore. Some stories explain why women have no beard eg. Rems Ummeasiegbu’s ‘Why Women Do Not Grow Beards’ and Why Hawks Carry Away Chicks in *The Way We Lived* (48)

In F.C. Ogbalu’s *Nza na Obu* where he tells the story about Uremma, we learn that pride is a vice. John Iroaghachi wrote *Oka Mgba*, which is another book of Igbo fables. Nolue Emenanjo wrote *Igbo Maka Sekondiri*, which contains a lot of Igbo folktales. Romanus Egudu’s *The Calabash of Wisdom* contains many Igbo folktales. *Words Are Sweet* also a book by Rems Umeasiegbu, which treats folktales and Igbo culture as well. Onwudufor, F.O.F. in *Mmanu Eji Eri Okwu* (Igbo Proverbs) also compiled proverbs with commentaries. There are folk songs compiled by J.N. Oriji, who wrote ‘The Aba Women Revolt’ in his book *Ngwa History*. One of the folk song is ‘Nzogbu, Enyimba Enyi’. ‘This is a war song meaning ‘We are like elephants, marching to battle, crushing obstacles on our way’.

F.C. Ogbalu in his book *Igbo Poems and Songs* wrote down some folk songs like ‘Abu A Na Abu N’egwu Onwa’.

Number 16 says:

Tufuonu nwa ruru ala-o
Ubochi ozo amuta ozo
Tufuonu nwa ruru ala-o
Ubochi ozo amuta ozo
Tufuonu ya na ozuru ori-o
Ubochi ozo amuta ozo-o (19)

This song means a cast off the one who desecrates the land. Uzochukwu wrote *Mbem Akwamaozu* and *Abu Akwamaozu*, which contains folk songs sung during burial ceremonies. There are some books on riddles; F.C. Ogbalu's *Okwu Ntuh and Amangini? Akwukwo Agwugwa* written by F.C. Ogbalu, Rems Umasegbu and Bamus C. Abazie.

Rems Umasegbu wrote *The Palm Oil of Speech: Igbo proverbs* where he gave the meanings and usage of some proverbs; he wrote down 520 proverbs, their translations and contexts. Ogbalu produced *Ilu Igbo* where he wrote down over one thousand Igbo proverbs with English interpretations of some. He also wrote *Igbo Idioms*, (The Dictionary of Igbo Idioms) without giving the meaning or context making it boring to read.

These writers listed above merely collected and compiled folklore with little or no commentaries. The folklore that they compiled are only for culture preservation and not for entertainment but folklore used by creative writers serve the purpose of entertainment and for culture preservation. They write fiction which afford them the opportunity to insert folklores into narration and dialogue and this gives us new insights into our understanding of their creative writing.

Songs as Entertainment Tool in Creative Writing

Songs incorporated in creative writing makes reading pleasurable and serve the following function;

One of the functions of songs in the narrative is that they often mark the structure of the story in a clear attractive way. Songs add a musical aspect, an extra dimension of both enjoyment and skill (In some areas advanced by drum or instrumental accompaniment or prelude to the narration) for instance, drama- *The Gods are Not to Blame* by Ola Rotimi. In addition, Ladipo and Ogunmola write their plays in Yoruba language and they use singing, dancing and drumming as an integral part of their plays.

J.P. Clark in *Ozidi* saga tries to recreate a folk saga that is traditionally told over a period of seven days with attendant religious ceremonies, dancing, drumming and singing. The lyrics quality in his book and *Song of a Goat* by J.P. Clark makes traditional Oral literature alive in recreated form.

Another function is that songs provide a formalized means for audience participation. The common pattern is for the narrator who acts as the leader to introduce the songs whether old or new and the audience will then provide the chorus. It makes reading a pleasurable endeavour.

Chinua Achebe's Use of Folklore

Rems Umasegbu in his article titled 'African Literature and the Oral Tradition' points out that tales may be used by novelists to pass moral judgment on their characters. Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* tells a story of a vulture who was asked to go to the sky to ask for rain. The author uses this story to castigate Okonkwo. In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe tells us a story of how a tortoise goes on a long journey and asks his people not to send for him until something unusual happens. When his mother dies, his people tell him a lie to bring him back; he comes back and takes care of all the funeral expenses (153). This story is used by the author to show the type of person Obi is. A tale about a man who married two wives in *Arrow of God* criticizes Ezeulu for his lack of constancy. (142)

One of the folktales in *Arrow of God* is centered on a man who had two wives. The senior wife has many children while the second wife has only a son. This only son proves to be obedient and truthful by obeying the spirit of the yam-field and receiving a pot filled with 'every good thing'. His half brother that disobeys the spirits is given a pot containing horrible diseases and abominations. (214-218)

John Povey commends Achebe's use of folklore in his novels. He writes in the *Introduction to Nigerian Literature* edited by B. King that:

Achebe manages to convey the essential elements of belief of the importance of the yam festival in *Arrow of God* for example without there being a sense that one is reading a series of notes in parenthesis. He makes them an integral part of the structure of his story, so that we are informed, almost as it were without recognizing it and our attention is not directed away from the essential elements which give novels their power of concentration.(98)

Again, another important element of folklore Achebe used effectively is proverb. Proverbial sayings, expressions and smiles rank first among the types of folklore extracted, probably because they are easier to cull. Achebe uses proverbs and smiles to narrate his stories, which help to evoke the cultural milieu in which the

actions take place. Achebe uses proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* to show Unoka's weakness, and among others Okonkwo's achievement; Okonkwo comes from a very poor family but through his achievement rises to wealth. Achebe writes, 'Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings.' (6)

Austin Shelton(1969) in his paper titled 'The 'Palm-oil' of language: Proverbs in Chinua Achebe's Novels' writes that proper understanding of African and other literatures will be achieved by relating the literary works to cultural context. He goes ahead to bring out Achebe's method of blending traditional African and European literary forms in the development of a new and Africanized Literature. According to him, Achebe uses folklores to combine traditional Africa and modern Africa and to support both plot and characterization. (87) Shelton writes that Achebe uses folklores in *Things Fall Apart* to show:

- Reaction to Okonkwo's father's weakness.
- Okonkwo's achievement.
- Okonkwo's pride and inflexibility, which leads him to kill Ikemefuna. Okonkwo says 'A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into his palm.' (59)

He also uses folklore on *No longer at Ease* to show:

- Obi's pride and individualism that led to his downfall.
- Obi and abomination.
- The individual and the group.

Achebe uses proverbs in his novel to show Okonkwo's pride and inflexibility as it is again seen in the novel when Okonkwo starts violating basic communal value in his society. Okonkwo beats one of his wives during the Week of Peace, thereby committing an evil deed. Achebe writes, '...and so people said he had no respect for gods of the clan. His enemies said his good fortune had gone to his head. They called him the little bird 'nza' who so far forget himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his Chi.' (Things Fall Apart, 26)

The issue of Ogbanje appears in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where Ezinma, the only daughter of Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi, falls sick, and it took the intervention of a medicine man Okagbue, to restore her by digging up the girl's 'Iyi-Uwa' (a covenant with Ogbanje spirit) for destruction.

Ngozi Ohakanma in her study of 'The Significance of Oral Tradition in the Works of Achebe' observes that through proverbs Achebe depicts the communal nature of the Igbo traditional society... This accounts for why we have this proverb in *Arrow of God*: when a man sees a snake all by himself he may wonder whether it is an ordinary snake or the untouchable python...(253)

Achebe's use of folklore in his novels is deliberate to show the Whites (Europeans) that Africans had culture before colonization. He successfully exploited his cultural heritage as he consequently uses folklore, especially songs, proverbs, tales, myths consistently and thoroughly in his novels. He influenced many Igbo writers like Nkem Nwankwo, Chukwuemeka Ike, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, Onuorah Nzekwu, E.C.C. Uzodimma, John Munonye and Clement Agunwa in his use of folklore`. His inspiration is more evident in the way these authors use proverbs and other oral lore in their novels.

Nzekwu's Use of Folklore

Onuorah Nzekwu in *Highlife for Lizards* (1965) succeeded in creating a vivid portrait of rural Ibo society, a portrait that captured the colour and rhythm of village life by faithfully reproducing the proverb-rich language of Africans. In the novel, a man accuses his neighbour of treachery in a meeting of clan, an elder says: '... but you and your wife forgot something- a smooth tongue carries snail across thorns. It was providence that sent the wind that blew aside the fowl's tail-feathers to expose its anus: else, how could I have suspected you were planning to snatch my Land from me?' (77)

Bernth Lindfors (1973) writes about Nzekwe: 'Nzekwe had finally learned to make functional use of folklore.... He had also learned how to exploit large units of traditional oral lore artistically by deploying them strategically in his narrative'. (42)

Halfway through *Highlife for Lizards*, Nzekwu has one of his players narrate a tale. The tale is about a king who hates one of his wives. This unlucky wife befriends a monkey who borrowed the woman's buttocks for an event and cannot bring it back on time. The woman is about being killed for physical deformity but luckily, for her as she is lamenting in the forest singing so that the monkey will bring back her buttocks, a parrot passes the message to the monkey who immediately gives her back her buttocks with a gift of bananas not to be eaten by her. Incidentally, her co-wife eats it and she sprouts a long tail. The folklore functions as a parable as well as a paradigm.

Bernth Lindfors in his book *Folklore in Nigeria Literature* writes that the folklore in Nzekwu's *Highlife for Lizards* about a king who hates one of his wives, 'elaborates the novel's larger moral concerns while duplicating in miniature its basic artistic design.' (44)

Folklores in Chukwuemeka Ike's Novels

In Chukwuemeka Ike's novels like *The Naked God's*, *Bottled Leopard*, *The Potter's Wheel* and *Sunset at Dawn*, he uses such folkloric materials as proverbs, folksongs, myths, idioms and idiomatic expressions realistically.

The subject matter of Ike's novels incorporates several myths, legends and mysterious incidents. In *The Naked Gods*, (Ike.1977) the conflict between Prof Ikin and Dr. Okoro who fight for the post of Vice- Chancellor of Songhai University leads them to use charms. Okoro consults Ebenebe, the great medicine man reputed to treat many cases, which had defied orthodox medical attention. 'Patients with one foot in the land of the dead had been moved from government hospitals to Ebenebe and he had cured them. '(48). The culmination of the consultation of Ebenebe is the preparation of a charm to enable Okoro strike fear into Ikin's heart.

In *Chukwuemeka Ike: A Critical Reader*, Ezenwa Ohaeto explains in a paper 'Structural Synthesis: Oral Traditions in the Novels of Chukwuemeka Ike', that the use of charms features in folklore for the production of either protective powers or aggressive power as the heroes or protagonists embark on their difficult task.' (qtd in Okoli Maxwell, 20) Ohaeto says that the issue of myths and legends is particularly significant in *The Bottled Leopard* where Amobi, the protagonist, inherits the leopard power of his ancestors. One night, Amobi's friend, Chuk, was horrified to see Amobi in a vicious struggle with nothing. 'You could see his muscles tense and sweat all over him as he rolled from side to side on the floor, lifted his trunk and lowered it, all the time breathing noisily and uttering incomprehensible sound'. (119)

Nma and Erinma in *The Bottled Leopard* also experience mysterious incidents. Nma has a problem of mysterious headache, which is revealed to be the handwork of a playmate. Erinma whose story was presented through Nma, tells of a mermaid's desire 'Mammy water' to take her away. Erinma would disappear unusually at night for several hours and her late elder sister had behaved the same way 'until a dibia later claimed it was the work of mammy water and outlined the rituals for freeing her. '(75)

Ike appears to be saying that there are mysteries in life that cannot be explained through modern scientific analysis. Explaining the mysteries in life, the dibia who cures Amobi explains that he was almost ruined through blindness and many mysterious events 'until he agreed to become a priest of Agwu Ngene'.

In *Sunset at Dawn*, Ike writes songs of the revolution that rent the air as jubilant Biafra celebrate the capture of the Midwest. He borrowed songs from F.C. Ogbalu's Igbo Poems and songs, which he incorporated in *Sunset at Dawn*. The song, 'Abu E ji Ebu Agha' (125) was sung in the book while rejoicing for the recognition of the defunct Biafra. Ogbanje also appears in Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Potter's Wheel*, as Obiechina is perceived by the father, Mazi Laza, as fitting 'into the picture since the ogbanje chooses to be born into the families which provide him employment, not sweat.'(59)

Wole Soyinka's Use of Folklore

Bernth Lindfors (1973) in *Folklore in Nigerian Literature* writes: 'Soyinka returns folklore to the folk, and in so doing, enriches his theatrical art immeasurably. '(106)

In *A Dance of the Forest*, (Soyinka, 1963) Soyinka uses proverbs to illustrate things like 'The eye that looks downwards will certainly see the nose. The hand that dips to the bottom of the pot will eat the biggest snail. The sky grows no grass but if the earth called her barren, it will drink no more milk. The foot of the snake is not split in two like a centipede's but if Agere could dance patiently like the snake, he would uncoil the chain that leads into the dead ...'(38)

Soyinka uses proverbs in *The Lion and the Jewel* to define the nature of the dramatic conflict as a battle of the sexes. *Kongi's Harvest* is Soyinka's most proverb-riddled play, and it deals with African politics.

The most significant traditional element in at least three of his plays is the overall design of a festival. Lindfors (1973) posits that *Kongi's festival* is modeled on a Yoruba king's festival, *The Strong Breed* on a purification festival, and *A Dance of the Forests* is on an averted Yoruba Egungun festival (18).

He stresses the fact that 'the personalities of Soyinka's characters are often very clearly defined by the proverbs they use. In *A Dance of the Forests*, 'Agboreko.... is a garrulous old windbag' (106). Lindfors explains further that

Soyinka frequently weaves them (proverbs) so intricately into the fabric of dramatic action that they become a vital part of the total artistic design, a part which could not be altered or eliminated without destroying the complex patterns of human interaction upon which the drama itself depends... they are not meaningless, exotic decorations but elements central to the intense theatrical experience Soyinka attempts to create'(108).

He writes that proverbs in *The Trails of Brother Jero* are used to spell out Baroka's intentions and to keep the audience amused and alert to what is going on. The proverbs function as independent statements about the nature of human wisdom, the deceptiveness of outward appearance and the complementary interaction of opposites-age and youth, male and female, tradition and change (112)

Flora Nwapa, a female Igbo writer wrote many novels which include *Efuru* and *Idu*. She uses folklore to narrate her stories. The mention of masquerade, dibia, Eke day, Kola, sheep, Goat, Moonlight stories, dowry, bamboo beds, ogene, Mat, mud-bench, thatched roof, goddess, ogbono, Uhamiri, 'Ogbu Madu ubosi ndu na agu ya' (151) etc shows the unfettered use of Igbo words in the novel *Efuru*. She uses other aspects of folklore like proverbs, folktales similes, riddle and songs. Flora Nwapa borrowed a lot from oral tradition and employed many vernacular items in presenting her story.

Conclusion

It is interesting to note that folklore in novels instruct and entertain. E.N. Obiechina (1968) comments on 'Amos Tutuola and Oral Traditions':

Within the folklore, the essential factors are the moral lessons conveyed by the particular story and its entertainment value. Where and when the story takes place is not important. Instead of the novels interest in a particular character, the folktale is interested in morally defined character-types... heroes and villains of all kinds.(122)

Passive folklore writers document folklore in order to preserve Igbo language and culture because they felt that it would disappear if not documented. To avert this, these writers quickly documented any folklore they come across, even if it means repeating them. This documentation is not good enough for serious students of Igbo culture and folklore, though they exposed the young ones to the history and culture of the community through them. While functional or active writers incorporate folklores in plays and novels (narratives) to enhance the understanding, entertainment of their readers and preservation of our culture for future generation. Folklores used in creative works of African writers do not occur by accident rather were being used for specific roles and significances which they perform in our culture.

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