

# ANIMATED GRAPHIC FILM FOR THE REJUVENATION OF A FADING AFRICAN CULTURE: THE CASE OF AN IGBO HERITAGE

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## **Abstract**

Many Nigerian folk heritage, including that of the Igbo race are going extinct. The oral nature of folklore is largely responsible for this gradual extinction. One way of preserving such heritage is by making folk stories accessible to the very young because generational transfer of folk heritage ensures that cultures do not die out. Therefore, a paradigm for transmitting culture to the children must be developed and deployed. Beyond entertainment, Igbo folktales are a veritable means of transmitting pristine traditional values that distinguish the race and transfer race memory encoded in symbols, idioms, allegory and other mechanisms of ancient non-literary cultures. This makes it imperative that these heritage be properly transmitted to the young for the purposes of continuity, entertainment, and storing of knowledge. Yet, there seems to be a weak interface between the children and the adults regarding the transmission of folk heritage. Traditional grandmothers that had the duty of telling didactic stories to children hardly play that role in present societies and communities due to urbanization and atomization of families, among other factors. This problem was investigated through personal observation and bibliothecal inquiry which indicated that Igbo children prefer new fangled 'gizmo' and new media as channel and forms of entertainment. This paper investigates the bleak future of Igbo folk heritage under the circumstances. It notes that writers have stored these race memories in books, but recommends that for their dynamic propagation through children, the electronic platforms must be adopted through the adaptation of Igbo folktales to drama, developmental theatre, video and television formats of cartoon animation and video games. This paradigm shift should bring the benefits of the Igbo folktale to the children of today, thereby propagating and sustaining it.

*Key words:* culture, language, video format, values, heritage

## **Introduction**

There is growing urgency to stem the death of cultures. It is estimated that several hundreds of cultures are dying out and in a few years, many more would join the growing rank. Indeed, over four hundred and seventy-three languages (a component of culture) are classified in the Ethnologue as nearly extinct because "only a few elderly speakers are still living." In Africa alone, forty-six languages are listed as extinct. ([http://www.ethnologue.com/nearly\\_extinct.asp](http://www.ethnologue.com/nearly_extinct.asp)); and the figure is surely on the rise with the relentless surge of vampire cultures, that are aided, even if unwittingly, by the very people who ought to preserve them: the owners of the culture. These people are blinded by the glitter of other cultures and being bereft of the preserving love for their heritage and history, readily absorb what they consider better and more acceptable.

The first victim of culture death is folklore; for, when a people begin to forget the values that are embedded in stories, myths, and the mores of their tribe that distinguish them from others; their past and how they have developed over the millennia, they begin to lose their identity which is what makes them unique members of the human family. Some of these very cultures have evolved into traditions that sustain the people.

The globalization of the world derives its impetus and perhaps sustenance from the diversity of peoples. A world of sameness would be sterile, monotonous, and lacking the variety that introduces a complimentarity which fertilizes development. Therefore, it is in the diversity of cultures that humanity derives its existence and development. This is perhaps why there is a deliberate effort to revive dying cultures of which folk heritage is

primary.

Nastasi notes that UNESCO is disturbed about the world's endangered intangible cultural traditions. Chinese shadow puppetry, Mexican mariachi music, poetic dueling in Cyprus, are all disappearing. The Igbo folktale is in this league of the oral traditions, art forms, and rituals in danger of becoming lost. "Yet, these practices encourage community participation and cultural unity..." (<http://www.eve-tal.com/about.html>.) It is important to protect "... outstanding but endangered heritage – (as) forms of popular and traditional expression..." which include languages, oral literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, costumes, craftwork know-how, and architecture. ([http://www.unesco.org/bpi/intangible\\_heritage/background.htm](http://www.unesco.org/bpi/intangible_heritage/background.htm)) If the drift in culture is contained, the threat to the extinction of Igbo heritage will be stemmed.

### **Igbo Oral Heritage**

Nigeria's over 250 ethnic groups, have over 521 languages, 11 of which are extinct.. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigeria#Demographics>). One of the three largest and most influential tribes is the Igbo of south-east Nigeria. (<http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEnglish/imperial/nigeria/origins.htm>). The Igbo tribe are over 20 million people, (Okoroafo, 2002) although this figure is disputed given the fact that the Igbo are widely dispersed worldwide. This dispersal seems to be a major contributor to the threat to Igbo traditional heritage because as they migrated from their ancestral land, they assimilated other cultures and returned to propagate those.

The categories of oral arts of the Igbo include storytelling, poetry, songs, lullaby, incantation, proverbs, witticisms, riddles, tongue-twisters, 'gwam-gwam-gwam'<sup>1</sup>, nkoo<sup>2</sup>, njakiri<sup>3</sup>, etc. This corpus of oral heritage is largely intangible and so is the first casualty of cultural attrition. Therefore there is need to store it in more permanent forms.

Igbo folktale also come in different forms- song, music, quasi-enactment, or plain storytelling. In translation, most of the songs are lost; a major deficiency since many of them contribute to the overall meaning of the story. Even if it is in the vernacular, the music is not written as a guide, leading to loss of meaning. Finnegan (1970, p. 389) admits to this problem:

Since the songs are almost always so much more difficult to record than prose, they are usually omitted in published versions; even when they are included, the extent to which they are repeated and the proportion of time they occupy compared to spoken narration is often not made clear. Yet the singing can at times become the main element of the story... .

Of these oral heritage, the folk tale and songs have the largest repository. The informal, performative and concise nature of the traditional song/ poetry allows it to be largely protected from cultural erosion while the folktale is more susceptible to neglect. It is therefore to the protection of the Igbo folktale that this paper dwells. If folktale is performed, it means that the story is preserved by the narrator and the audience which in turn preserves it through transmission from "father to son"; a practice that vents adaptations, deformities, inaccuracies, and sometimes a loss of the propelling principle of the tale. According to Finnegan (1970, 319),

... the question of originality in oral literature is by no means a closed one. Contrary to the assumptions of many writers, the likelihood of stories having been handed down from generation to generation in a word-perfect form is in practice very remote.

Consistent with his belief that an African writer's responsibility is to rekindle an appreciation of African culture, Achebe turned to Tortoise in two adaptations of Igbo folktales for children that he published in 1977, *The Drum* and *The Flute*. Many before and after this effort have helped to preserve this Igbo heritage in written form.

### **The Igbo folktale**

Abrams (2005) defined folktales as sayings, verbal compositions, and social rituals that have been handed down by word of mouth. It is universal and usually of unknown authorship even if many eventually achieve written form.

According to Onuekwusi (2001, p. 55), the personae include "animals, spirits, and human beings as characters hence the categories: animal stories, stories that involve human and super natural characters, and tales that involve animal, human and supernatural characters."

Animal characters dominate most folk tales in indigenous cultures. These animal characters exhibit all human behaviour, leading to the conclusions that these tales are largely allegories, with Tortoise being the most prominent and most presented as the Igbo Everyman. Being largely didactic, negative behaviour is punished while good is rewarded. Some of these stories have over time been retained in their original animal format; others have been modified as the culture of the people grew or in a deliberate effort to modernize.

Nwachukwu-Agbada admits that

... the Igbo folktale tradition is on the wane, due in part to the influence of modernization—about which the Igbo have shown much enthusiasm. ... modernity has to a considerable extent taken education and entertainment away from the family and the folk community and given these functions to such formal social institutions as the school and the popular media. (2009, p. 19).

Western education may have something to do with it, but Igbo people are not alone in the embrace of western education. However, while other races are able to differentiate between its own cultural heritage and classroom education, and retain the ennobling aspects, the Igbo, instead of adapting, seem to have adopted these invasive cultures, Okwechime's submission (2004) that highly sophisticated knowledge in modern technology and urbanization have alienated the people from their culture, notwithstanding. The Igbo substituted the pristine homogeneous village setting, which permitted close-knit interaction for the cities where the next door neighbour has other interests beyond sitting around telling folk stories. Besides,

- Contemporary parents work late and come home tired.
- Over time, they have lost the art and interest in telling the stories.
- Television and other home-grown entertainment are also providing convenient alternatives.

Interest has shifted from the villages with the common culture and traditions of, among others practices, the moonlight night tales, to the urban centres and their attendant heterogeneity and atomization.

### Functions of Igbo folktales

Igbo folk tales stories come in different categories depending on the purpose: aetiological, didactic, satirical, or mere entertainment; and these are drawn from their functions.

1. *Entertainment:* Imagine this scenario—After supper a family sits by a fire. Someone, often the elder begins to tell a story they heard from another storyteller. When the story is over, the children ask for another. Soon eyes grow heavy, and sleep comes. A refreshing and educating evening has thus passed. Often with a lesson, and some chorus, Igbo tales are traditionally used in that society to educate the younger generations to man's weaknesses and pretensions, even where allegorical characters are used. Clearly, folktales afforded relaxation and pleasure to the senses.

2. *Socialization and community values:* Igbo folktales serve other purposes beyond entertainment. According to Obiechina (1991, 26), Folktale makes us

think, feel, perceive, and therefore, empathize; it enables us to integrate our consciousness, educate our minds, purify our souls, and refine our sensibilities. It is the key to a humane and humanized existence. The story speaks directly to human heart and soul and mind, and engages our sympathy in a manner that straight forward ideas and logical argumentations do not.

Folktales also ensure that “the Igbo child was sociable, truthful, brave, and humble ...” (Okwechime, 2004, p. 112), and teaches truthfulness and good manners. This is consistent with the view expressed by Opata, (1998, p. 88) when he identifies the “strong dose of moral orientation... and the conception of truth” in Igbo traditional society.

The folktale performance also serves to harmonize the society for, when children sit together to listen to the tales, they learn to cooperate, understand each other better and also develop team spirit and self esteem. Their imagination is exercised and their intelligence tested in the question-answer periods. Again, they also learn proverbs and music that are intrinsic in the story. Okeke (1982, p.19) adds that proverbs and riddles are used to “hide a saying from the ordinary turn of mind... tongue-twisters train the child's capacity to retain the sequence of events.”

3. Education is another function of Igbo folktale which

- contains folk's skeptical views about life which are based on their observation of people's behaviour in the society. (Ogbalu)
- inspires the young and provides moral standard cherished by their society. (Ogbalu, nd; Ogu, 1992)
- Instills obedience and respect, national consciousness and patriotism. Children learn bravery, selflessness etc. (Ogu, 1992)
- provides them a common line for their action.

- mirrors the activities of members of the society- the problems and successes embodied in their folktale are the problems and the successes of the society. (nd. 56)
4. *Moral lesson*: Some folktales are didactic. Ogu, (1992) informs that for the traditional Igbo child story telling sessions affords opportunity of “using imagination to decipher the truth and develop the child’s intellectual ability. Their wits are tested by allowing them give quick answers to questions posed to them.”(68) Most stories and songs condemn bad behaviour as good always triumphs over evil, truth over falsehood, honesty over dishonesty. Every story has a lesson to teach just as the stories about heroes and heroine encourage children to be brave in the defense of their society (p. 22). Folktale is used to satirize the deviant characters in the society thereby making them change their bad behaviours for good.

### **The need to translate into English language**

For the folktale integrity to be maintained, and variations diminished, a standardized tale may well be assured by writing. Igbo scholars have since realized the advantage of scripting the tales leading to a long line of Igbo tales that have been written down. A majority are in English translations some of which do not quite convey the nuances of the original language, Igbo. The loss of aesthetic and meaning is often apparent, but one needs to be a speaker of Igbo to realize this. This therefore limits the use and appreciation of idioms by translation because there is nothing in the English language experience that even approximates to most Igbo idiom. Many Igbo people do not read Igbo script. Again, there is also the need to address the world, and Igbo is not spoken by non-Igbo outside Nigeria. These complexities can be tackled however through the deployment of literary adaptation in order to create different fronts for the fight to keep Igbo folktales alive.

Because of the lack of writing, oral tradition was the primary means of transfer of values, stories, myths, etc. Therefore much folktale came from mouth-to-ear. Obiechina (1994, p. 8) admits that in the preliterate societies “past traditions were largely preserved in human memory and transmitted orally.... (it was) slow and limited in effecting diffusion of knowledge...” Another limitation was the doubtful accuracy and difficulty to trace source. The folktales also achieve variety being deformed or modified according to the skill and memory of the storyteller. But, in order to preserve the folktale much more effectively and widely, they are being translated and written in English language. But there must be care in doing this as accuracy and closeness to the original are key to sustaining the essence of the stories, the entertainment values, and the lessons therein.

Sule recognizes this ‘devil’s alternative’ when he wrote that “We stand the great risk of losing some of our most positive cultural treasures in the form of ...values, and knowledge ... in various areas of human endeavour if proper attention is not readily accorded this task of the documentation of oral evidence.” (1991, p. 20).

### **Igbo folktale performance scheme**

The folk story sessions are best in moonlit nights where the children in the family gather around an elder, mostly the matriarch of the family to listen to her tell stories of long ago, often beginning with “once upon a time...” The presentation style of the folktale ensures that the session enhances the values that are enshrined in the community ethos. Nwachukwu-Agbada agrees:

The Igbo folktale session usually starts after twilight, (after dinner) ...since it is meant for relaxation and education.... Night too adds its own aura to the realization of a typical folktale plot....Although storytelling sessions among the Igbo can take place all the year round, in practice they only occur in the dry season,... is a more pleasurable time for two reasons: first, the time is auspicious, the ground being neater and tidier to sit on; and second, the burdens of farm work are virtually over for the year... (1990, p.21)

The Igbo folktale is often concluded by a thematic statement. The story teller may also ask the audience to identify the lesson of the story. This is an extension of the audience participation which is encouraged in the session particularly during the song sequences. The audience may ask questions of the storyteller which another child can also attempt to answer. Sometimes altercation arises, but this is always resolved to maintain group harmony.

The use of songs in some of the stories is critical as they are not just for rhythmic entertainment but contain lyrics that are relevant to and enhance the meaning of the story. The songs also drive the audience participation. Basic improvised musical items may be used to improve the song and provide the music. Nwachukwu-Agbada adds that sometimes the songs

... serve more as interactional, recreational, and diversionary devices than as techniques for advancing the content of the tales... (and may) bear no immediate meaning ... to the action... (and) the refrains ... have no meanings; (other than) as sound and rhythmic devices. (1990, p.27).

Finnegan (1970, p.389) noted however that songs do not occur in every story but are “infinitely more common than would appear from a cursory reading of the published collections... (and) the singing can at times become the main element of the story...” These songs, collaborates Nwachukwu-Agbada, (p. 26) constitute the entertainment of Igbo tales and are highly valued for their poetic qualities. Tales which bear such songs that “can be shared between a narrator and the audience are more desirable than those that are sung by the narrator alone.” This is perhaps the origin of the type of indigenous minstrelsy the Igbo call *Akuko n'egwu* (tale-in-music).

The documentation of Igbo folktale is critical to the survival of the Igbo cultures but an application of this interest in different media is essential to successfully actualizing that goal. The folktale's primacy in this documentation is informed by the fact that more than any other aesthetic form, storytelling projects the psycho-social values of the Igbo most through.

1.The themes of the tale

2.The performance style of the tale (audience participation) teacher-pupil relationship.

3.The content of the tales (etiological animal tales, culture, values, belief system, morals, teachings, etc).

Now is the time to do something beyond the putting these tales in book form; a somewhat unsuccessful enterprise given that Igbo children would rather watch television than read story books.

### **Adapting the stories for the contemporary child**

A support of the optional methods of preserving and propagating folk heritage ride on the statement that once an intangible heritage is identified as endangered, it should be documented in reliable storage forms. At present, there are tales translated into novels and short stories for reading. This is literary adaptation- the transfer of a literary source to another genre or medium, such as a film, a stage play, or even a video game. It can also involve adapting the same literary work in the same genre or medium, for instance taking a literary classic and transforming it into a completely different medium. Adapting may be limited to superficial changes or may be a radical recasting or rewriting, while even maintaining the medium. (Etherton,1982). The oral medium through the human channel makes way for the channel of the written word to the next logical channel of communication in this proposed model- drama and theatre in its living and electronic forms.

For a society like Nigeria where the interest of the children in reading literature has bowed to the compelling attraction of television soap, and graphic animation, the way to go is to adapt the stories into short plays and author them to animated cartoons and stories. This is a project I am still working on. I have succeeded in adapting a number of folktales to drama and progressively approaching the subsequent stages that should lead to the finished documentation.

The dramatic dialogue I re-worked presents different characters and provides dynamism to the story. It also added immediacy because of the presence of the actor in performance especially in a modelled setting, the moonlight night storytelling performance being often unpredictable and unstructured for the expected outcome. The unpredictability, while embodying good points, may lead to uncertainties in length and a bridging of the story session. For instance, an altercation and stringent questions and interventions by the audience, (which are perfectly acceptable) could lead to disorder if the narrator is not gifted or the audience member is unruly. There is the atmosphere of entertainment rather than didacticism which is an important goal of the folktales even if they are, like satire, soaked in fun. In other words the lessons are embedded in entertainment not the entertainment waving the moral flag. Literary adaptation is the first step to achieving the makeover that I propose, ie. Careful selection of stories from the cast repertoire for literary transfer – stage presentation – screen play – voicing – cartooning and animation –voice synching and sub-titling – DVD storage.

Adaptation is useful as it would give fresh insight into a work, call attention to an otherwise ignored literary work, and bring more interest and attention to an existing work. For these reasons literary adaptation has been useful over the years. Etherton (1982) in noting that adaptations are the means by which play-texts have survived the process of history, recommends the efficacy it has and can confer on a waning aspect of the Igbo culture, the folktale.

Transferring the oral form of folktale to written form practically serves to preserve the tales in book shelves, not the mind, as it does not necessarily grow interest in reading. The major reason is that the reading culture in Nigeria is poor due to alliteracy, among other factors (Duruaku, 2010). The advent of television and the soaps, cartoons and other electronic visual alternatives have put reading in a difficult situation. As the next step, it is beneficial to adapt the written prose folktales to drama and stage the plays to impose the benefits of adaptation identified earlier. Again, since the society has become more visually-oriented, it should be presented visual stories



which can help propagate the tales and preserve them in living form, as deployed by stage drama and television cartoons and soaps.

The entertainment, preservation and propagation of the folktales through enactment for theatre while embodying social reality, also affords an escape from it. It stimulates as it entertains but “while stimulating and entertaining, it remains an integral part of society, reflecting society's feelings and even occasionally acting as its guide.” (Traore, 1970, 103). The basic thing here is that the dramatic form would be developed and then through stage enactment and the refreshing of the stories into cartoons, television stories, and video film, the folk stories can be preserved and the lessons and other values inherent therein can be for the benefit of a great many. Dramatizing these tales will go beyond where the scripted narrative has. Graphic presentation is easily the most powerful method of mass address as it appeals to the twin senses of vision and sound. These tales should be imprisoned in the dramatic format and presented as theatre. This way, the stories will be retained, the fun will be enhanced and the moral preserved. What we will have is a thin, interesting story, enriched by a formidable medium. This goal can be achieved through a careful transfer of the tales from the oral to the theatrical medium and then to the screen in the aforementioned forms.

### **The Tortoise stories as typical folktale series for adaptation to animated film**

Very many animal stories have been printed. Clearly however the tortoise is the single most used character in the Igbo folk story corpus. Tortoise (Mbe), variously called ‘Nwaokosioma’, ‘Aniga’, ‘Nnabe’ is a celebrated trickster. Indeed, ‘Mbe’ is to the Igbo people, what “Ananse” (spider) is to the Akan of Ghana, and the hare to the Tiv of Nigeria, is the dominant character in Igbo animal folk tale. He is the Igbo Everyman, mirroring human behaviour in spite of his ‘animalness.’ Nwachukwu-Agbada (1990) concurs that the folk stories focus primarily on the comical tricks perpetrated by the ubiquitous tortoise. In these allegorical satires, he demonstrates guile, wit, folly, and other features of human behaviour. Some of these stories are told for reasons of moral, others for fun. They remain as oral entertainment, but the lessons are not lost. Again, most of the stories are short. There might have been a time when they were long. The encounters between the leopard and the tortoise are so many that it perhaps they were once a string of episodes in one story.

My work on the tortoise repertory of Igbo tales to illustrate the folktale-to-drama-graphic animation adaptation model for preservation and propagation of a dying Igbo oral heritage has been quite enlightening, and I have found the research quite engaging. I have dramatised a few stories of the tales to ‘test the waters’ and would, as a next step re-invent them as cartoon animations in the DVD format so that Nigerian children (and adults alike) would readily watch them as entertainment rather than spend useful time gobbling up lines of *Tom & Jerry*, *Scooby-Doo*, *The Jetsons*, *Top Cat*, *Tom Fat Cat*, and so on that refer to nothing in their tradition and contain little didactic or life-long skills development. This format will encourage non-Igbo to share in the pristine values of the people. Animation has graphic appeal, and provides humor. Although the movies take very long to sync the voice and the animation, the end result will invariably be rewarding.

### **Recommendations**

1. Robust work should be done on the adaptation of selected Igbo folktales from the medium of oral delivery (Igbo-English) to the medium of television drama, video games, and the allied media.
2. Because of the disinterest of the Igbo children to read for various reasons, there is need to go a step further and adapt the stories to drama for performance. This type of adaptation would re-ignite interest through performance. Developmental theatre could adopt the folktale approach to push its agenda.
3. The next logical step is to bring the drama to the home in the video and television formats as cartoon strips, character animations, and tele-video drama. Many children are deeply interested in home video.

### **Conclusion**

What this paper has done is to identify some problems facing the propagation of and Igbo oral heritage: folklore. In doing this, it notes the impediments for a successful transmission of this heritage to children, and offers some ways out. It is expected that the study will generate interest in the development of the new paradigms which the paper has identified.

### **Further study**

This researcher invites relevant specialists and researchers to exploit the foregoing proposal: develop-ing a TV cartoon animation and video games repertory that would be a good framework for media experts to capture Igbo folktales in TV serials, animations and cartoon that children will enjoy. The tortoise tales, for instance, will bring to the children of today the life-long benefits of the Igbo folktale. It will also help to preserve and propagate the

heritage in a form that is more aesthetically enhanced, electronically stored, more dynamic, and readily exportable. In these days of electronic culture, this is the way to go. It is the new language of education through the preservation and propagation of oral heritage.

### Notes

1. *gwam, gwam, gwam* -A mental exercise of question and answer
2. *nkoo* -The Igbo verbal game of jocular abuse or gentle ribbing
3. *njakiri* - A public abuse to make fun of someone else

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