

VALUES OF ORAL LITERATURE IN THE SOCIETY: A STUDY OF FOLKTALES OF OGBA IN RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT : Oral literature is a creative work of art that portends high merit and has the creative use of imagination in preliterate societies. It adopts the genres of literature: drama, prose and poetry in the oral milieu, using performance as its hallmark. It thrives on the use of oral data because of its orality. This paper focuses on the moral values of oral literature in the society using Ogba as a spring board. The study was carried out in communities of Ogba. The population of the study consists of ten towns and village, in Ogba. The theoretical framework used is Dell Hyme's ethno-poetics because the works of oral literature relate to the society. This paper concludes that oral literature serves to against all odds; communicate ideas, emotions, beliefs and appreciation of life. The folktales in Ogba for instance, serve similar purpose through their rendition/performance. Through the stories, the younger generation in Ogba society is familiarised with the customs, traditions, and rituals prevalent in the society. This paper therefore recommends the use of oral literature in all its genres to inculcate moral values and lessons to the teenagers and youths. Against this background, Ogba (African) themselves must cease to regard oral literature as primitive and fetish.

KEYWORDS: *Values, Oral Literature, Society, Ogba, Folktales.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The most cogent need for oral literature particularly Ogba oral literature is the exposition it affords to the rich indigenous tradition that nurtured the refreshing vigorous creative genius of modern Nigerian writers. Hence, there is the need for the study of Ogba oral literature, bringing a total awareness of the Ogba ethos, culture and world-view. Therefore, the songs we sing at playground, work, war or funeral; the stories we tell beside the fire in the hearths of our mothers, or outdoors in the clearings of the compound enclosures in the moon-cloaked nights, the riddles children swap and compete in; masquerade displays that drew together whole communities in a theatrical frenzy, festivals, funerals, proverbs and oratorical sayings are all part of Ogba (African) oral literature. They are products of the creative use of imagination by the artist of the spoken words in pre-literate Ogba (African) communities. They are stored in the memory and then spoken, recited, chanted or sung on specific occasions. "The core of these literary practices is tradition, which is handed down from one generation to another, communally owned and communally transmitted (Chukwuma 1994, p.viii).

Through various practices, stories and performances, the younger generation in Ogba society is familiarised with the customs, traditions and rituals of the past generation. Many mythological stories have a way for teaching morals, ethics and manners to the younger ones. According to Finnegan (1970), this literature (oral literature) defines, interprets, and elaborates on the society's vision of reality and the dangers in the world. (p54). It deals with the human adventure and achievements. Oral literature teaches values. "Values are all inclusive, deeply internalised personal feeling that directs actions". Thus values may not be seen, but are recognised in the behaviour of the child. Therefore, the use of Ogba folktale *atitaa* as a tool for value inculcation to children and youths is very much extolled and is the concern of this paper. Similarly, Yitah (2019) states that: African oral literature is being re-visioned and recreated by women and children in ways that engage critically with the social rules and cultural values in the traditional lore" (p.9).

It would seem that the study of the cultural achievements in Ogba that make us humans should hold a pride of place in our value system. Such cultural achievements should include the use of Ogba folktales for the education of the younger ones in order to inculcate the right value system in them as the leaders of tomorrow. More often than not parent's and elder's core mission is rooted in their good parenthood – in the teaching of culture, history, language, literature, philosophy, religion, and the folklore. The folklore has a clear practical value: it teaches critical and analytical thinking while at the same time stimulating the imagination and promoting ethical values. Citizens need them to participate actively in public life. The folklore goes beyond

cultural education and training. The paper emphasises on the values of oral literature in the society, focusing on the study of folktales in Ogba of Rivers State, Nigeria.

Thus, oral literature (folktale) provides the proper milieu for the release of creative energy necessary for the development of a sense of cultural belonging that sustains the foundation of a common identity. This identity sustained by oral literature enhances the value system of my society and also strengthens morality in the society and individual in particular.

II. OGBA FOLKTALES AND THEIR VALUES

The fact is that oral literature sustains value in the individual and society, in essence a process of developing the human personality in all its dimensions – intellectual, physical, social, ethical and moral undisputed and universally accepted. The African folktale is unimaginable if it fails to inculcate values essential to good life and social wellbeing. Value orientation is necessary in all stages of upbringing, formal education, interaction between individuals and social groups.

Ogba folktale *atitaa* is a longer form of oral literature when compared to the shorter forms of proverbs *eluu* and riddle *eeghno*. Ogba folktale as an oral prose narrative is interspersed with songs. “A story’s structure can be discovered through an examination of the constituent incidents and what they incorporate. “An incident is a narrative situation which is here taken as a minimum plot unit” (Chukwuma 1994, p.121).

The narrative incident that creates value in Ogba folktale *atitaa* consists of actors and their performed actions. However, archetypes such as the trickster exist. In Ogba animal trickster tales *atitaa ka umuanu*, the tortoise always fills the trickster slot. Actors are variable while actions are constant in a common category of stories. In Ogbafolktale, the child-ram *nwaebuluako* takes the role of the wisest animal alongside the tortoise. A clear case in Ogbatale is when the animals had a puzzle on how many times occurrence of an event or incident, they can learn from. When all animals have answered with two, -three, four times respectively, the child-ram *nwaebuluako* answered that one learns from an occurrence in the life of another and if it is allowed to happen to oneself, it may claim one’s life.

Actors in Ogba animal tales *atitaa ka umuanu* and the actions they perform differ considerably in their nature and sequence from actors and actions in Ogbamyths *ataa*. Although the actors in the tales perform actions, there is a point of convergence among folktales, proverbs and riddle. Ohia (2018) says: “Ogbamyths are transmitted in a similar pattern as *eluu* (proverb), *atitaa* (folktale)... and *eeghno/ikne*(riddle)” (p.20).

Apart from the animal tales that teach morality through the animal actors as portrayed in the tale of child-ram *ebuluako* as the wisest animal, and not the tortoise as presented in many animal tales, other tales abound where animal characters perform varied roles in such tales, animal characters take the centre stage as actors. However, there are other tales with human and supernatural characters that teach morals to teenagers and youth. In this tale, there is no hero, no one central character, but several characters on whose actions the story is based. The style of performance of this tale is different from tales laced with animal characters. It is in this context that Ohia (2017) avers:

It is important to note that works of art cannot be appreciated purely on the surface level. Literature (written or oral) is more than mere speech, discourse or writing and its vehicle (language) is coated with deep connotative meaning that does not lend itself wholly to ordinary interpretations (p.131).

It is worth mentioning that these tales might have the Dupe, the villain and intervener as a human or supernatural character to move the tale to its conclusion.

In Ogbatales with human or supernatural characters, there is the Dupe who is presented as a good, kind, peace-loving in the ordinary way, the Dupe, (human) triggers off the action in the tale the Dupe is the victim of the villain’s aggression.

The villain is usually a trickster and often aggressive. He comes into direct confrontation with the Dupe because of his infringes which are in affront to the Dupe. However, he is a less intelligent trickster who does not easily outwit the Dupe and the intervener (supernatural character). In any circumstance, the villain is punished for his action in the tale. The intervener is usually a supernatural character (spirit). It is a minor character that intervenes in the conflict between the Dupe and the villain in Ogbafolktales. In Ogbatales, the intervener takes sides with the Dupe to restore the dignity of the Dupe and tilts the balance of power hastening the story’s resolution to benefit of the Dupe and punishes the villain for his villainity in the story.

In Ogbatales with human and supernatural characters, the human characters (Dupe and villain) stand in opposition, manifesting a clearly defined polarity. The Ogbatales start with a state of disequilibrium where the villain (trickster) exhibits his vices against the Dupe, either as a result of envy and jealousy. This is a negative and unusual situation. This is either as a result of domestic disputes in the household involving two step brothers/sisters which a step-mother interferes in a negative way against her step-son/daughter. In this case while the child is the Dupe, the step-mother becomes the villain (trickster) who attempts to distance the success/achievement of her step son/daughter. Sometimes the initial statement may introduce the main characters, their traits and the relationship between them.

The body of the tale involves the two main human characters in conflict and confrontation before the intervention of the third minor character (spirit) as a broker. This is built up with suspense in the preparations which are climaxed in the encounter. Conflict ensures between the two human characters when each action pairs off with a counteraction. In all circumstances, the end is resolution of the two human characters by the intervener (spirit) shows a complete rectification of the issue in conflict and a return to normalcy. Usually in all conflict resolution, moral is attached to the resolution as a form of conclusion eliminating in the punishment meted to the villain while the Dupeis rewarded handsomely.

Values are inseparable from life of the individual. Since literary education is an essential requirement of young ones in any society, the education in terms of oral literature of the society is equally important, the aims of educating teenagers in content and methodology of oral literature is viewed in terms of value development. The aim of this kind of education is growth or development both intellectually and morally in oral tradition and culture of the local communities. In its full meaning, it is an education of teenagers according to moral standards and education towards the inculcation of values and it includes developing the appropriate sensibilities – moral, cultural and spiritual. Moral or value development is an integral part of oral literature as it is a process that teaches all the aspects of personality. The Ogba(African) folktale is a core area for the cultivation of social and moral values in the society.

Conceptualising Ogbafolklore/oral tradition is a trajectory of moral value foundation in the society. Folklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of the Ogba culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, feelings and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms in word of mouth. In Ogba, as it is in other African communities, folktale manifests itself in many oral and verbal forms (mentifacts), in kinesiological forms (customary behaviour or social facts) and in material forms (artifacts), but folktale itself is the whole traditional complex of thought, content, and process which ultimately can never be fixed or recorded in its entirety; it lives only in performance or communication as people interact with one another. Folktale comprises the unrecorded traditions of people; it includes both form and content of these traditions and their style or technique of communication from person to person. It is a compendium of the genius of a people and therefore a living phenomenon.

III. OGBA FOLKTALES: CULTURAL AND SYMBOLIC MEANINGS

The forms of folklore (that accommodate) folktale have cultural and symbolic meanings. Texts framed into genres and performed in socially defined communicative situations; acquire significances beyond the literal meanings of their constituent words. Songs in folktales, for example, which abound in Ogba folktales with repetitions and obscure terms, are rendered meaningless outside their verbal or social contexts; or in other cases, their transition, from one context to another involves a transformation of meanings. According to Ben-Amos (1974):

Genealogies and legends function towards the promotion of social stability because they are symbolic expressions of political power and historical truth; parables are effective in settling personal disputes due to their capacity to symbolise moral truth, and talks and riddles can entertain because of their inherent ability to unsettle reality (Pp.10-12).

The Ogba folktales examined in this study were collected over two decades (2002-2023) from many communities in Ogba. They are stories told by adult male and female to their children and grand children as the audience. Ogba folktales (oral literature) teach among other things, the tenets of self-constraint, humility, modesty, tolerance, patience, understanding, altruism, and transparency in humans' dealings with others. Above all, it exhorts people to put intellectual and technical competence of the service of the society. It may interest the reader to know that through folklore and literary studies in general, people learn to be self-reliant and foresighted rather than to rely on others. Above all they learn to take self-decision in life for better for worse and to live with the consequences of their own action.

Through oral literature, Africans take advantage of their ability to dance, sing, chant, narrate and use language in order to show the world how they live, who they are and what they can do. The values of oral literature cannot be swept under the carpet. Oral literary forms such as stories, songs and proverbs are metaphors to guide moral choice and self-examination. They are mirrors for viewing things in a particular way; and serve as pedagogic devices [and are] a significant tool for reaching values and guide children's concrete behaviour in society. They are used to project societal norms, beliefs and taboos. Folktale as a form of oral literature emphasises the African world view, environment and knowledge systems which enhance the liberation of African from Eurocentric paradigms.

Oral literature started in Africa to showcase Africa's traditions as against the Eurocentric view of African oral traditions. The spread was a geometrical speed throughout the continent. From the 1930s, the negritude movement encouraged enthusiastic collection of African folklore and oral tradition. The leading intellectuals in this effort in the French-speaking countries included Leopold Sedar Senghor and David Diop of Senegal. The negritude effort dovetailed into the anti-colonial resurgence of the 1940s and this current generated more recordings of materials on oral poetry, epic narratives, and allied genres. The London school of oriental

and African studies and its counterparts in France, Germany and Belgium supported field research into African traditions. By the 1970s, the Oxford library of African literature had published dozens of titles based on African folklore written by both African and western scholars.

IV. OGBA FOLKTALES AND THE INCULCATION OF VALUE IN THE CHILDREN

Parents in the past used to express their ideas, values, norms, beliefs and culture to their children orally, using their native language prior to the introduction of modern education. A family supplements for any deficiency that any elder family members discover in the children's values and characters through the use of folktales, folksongs, proverbs and riddles as pedagogic tools. Parents, especially the mothers in the traditional families were seen gathering their children and grandchildren to render folktales, folksongs and riddles. The children regale especially in the evening to listen to the performances centering on some of the legendary animals, for instance, tortoise (mbekni), elephant (eyni), He-goat (mkpi), child-ram (Ebuluako) and even birds – dove (nduru), vulture (udela) and human characters.

The interpretations of folktales, folksongs, proverbs and riddles are based on how the people perceive and construct their world.

The rendition of these oral pieces may enhance the teaching of values which enable children to perceive and think of how to behave at any given time and situation. This may create fertile ground for the children to develop the ability to understand the dos and don'ts in the society and may enhance peace and harmony in the society. In oral tradition, parental influence starts from the day a child is born. Mothers start the training of the child in Ogba core values through folksongs – lullaby (egwu ka nwna). From then, the child begins to imbibe the values which are embedded in the songs.

Most children grow up hearing folktales from their grandparents or parents and this rich oral tradition is instrumental in shaping their personality in their formative stages of life. It has the role of creating values-based, socially responsible and civil individuals. Similarly, oral literature has played a big role in presenting Ogba culture and in doing so people do not make concerted efforts; they do it by merely living their daily lives. Any action, work or participation in daily life is equivalent to using the culture and more so the transmission of the culture and values to the younger generations.

Thus, parents, grandparents and elders are the mirror or models through which the children imitate the right moral values. This is corroborated by Oladele (1991) when he says that a child's behaviour is often a reflection of his home training and emulation of both parents and teachers; hence these adults should be alive to their responsibilities and practice what they preach (p.53). In a similar vein, Onwuka (1991) notes that one of the best ways to teach anything is to present a concrete example of it because young people of today are quick to spot adults who do not keep to their words by doing thing in opposite of what they say (p.206). This advice is for parents in their dealings with children and youths in their homes. In the present situation, it has been observed that in some homes, parents and grandparents use English in rendering Ogba folktales. This is absolutely wrong as Ogba cultural values cannot be properly explained using the English language or any foreign language.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that oral literature is a store of values in the traditional setting. As vividly explicated, Ogba folktale is a value by itself. It is a means of transmitting the cultural traditions of the Ogba ethnic nationality as it is in other African communities; it then means that parents' inability to transmit folktales to their children will deny such children the opportunity of understanding their culture and traditions. This is so because it is through folktales that oral culture and traditions are understood by the children. It is through folktales that traditional festivals and ceremonies which create avenues for the enactment of the histrionics and rendition of song associated with dramatic forms are made manifest. Since there is no time for moonlight plays, dances, games, and storytelling through which children learns the right attitude to life, the most available replacement should be in the rendition of folktales.

The fact remains that children and youths hold a grip to the values of Ogba culture and traditions. When they lose these values, there is every tendency that there will be rise in cases of juvenile delinquency, disruptive or anti-social behaviour, disobedience, dishonesty, stealing and other deviant behaviours that are generally associated with anti-social vices among youths. This ravaging phenomenon is the cause of some of the major problems faced by Ogba (African) child today. This paper posits that one way to get rid of these societal vices is to return to the core values of our ancestors. These core values are embedded in folktales and folksongs, and they should be used to educate and entertain our children and youths so as to inculcate traditional values in them. Therefore, parents and grandparents should wake up to their responsibilities by rendering folktales.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends value inculcation to our children by parents using the folktales. The stories told in folktales should touch on every aspect of Ogba philosophy, world-view and tradition ghost stories, fantasies, the supernatural and stories emanating from myth, legend and history are suitable for the upbringing of the youths. In addition to the folktales, proverbs and riddles should be made available to the youths. The art of conversation and the application of proverbs, myths and riddles should be taught to the children by the parents and grandparents. The molding and re-molding the minds of the youths with the core values abundantly found in our folklore should be the primary duty of every parent in Ogba society and African continent. By using folktales at home, parents can help their children to develop the moral values they need to succeed in life.

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