

**THE PLACE OF IGBO ORAL LITERATURE IN REKINDLING IGBO VALUES: A
SEMANTIC APPROACH**

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Abstract

The world today has drastically changed; human values are no longer cared for. The erosion of values is causing havoc in our society. Today, both developed and developing nations face erosion of humanistic, ethical and moral values. The Igbo nation is not left out. A lot of Igbo cherished values are fast disappearing. The Igbo culture is sated with traditional beliefs which are rooted in native folklore, proverbs and popular legends. Through this oral literature, the Igbo had preserved their rich values until the colonial era. Oral literature encapsulates traditional knowledge, beliefs and values about the environment and the nature of society itself. It contains the history of society and its experiences and society's knowledge to be passed on to succeeding generations. Using semantic approach, the two Igbo aetiological tales collected as data were interpreted. The analysis revealed that Igbo oral literature can be very effective in rekindling the Igbo values in Igbo children. The paper advocates the inclusion of Igbo oral literature in the school curriculum from nursery to post-primary level.

Key words: Oral literature, rekindling, values, aetiological tales

1.0 Introduction

Human values are the foundation for any viable life within society. No peaceful society is possible without values. The problem generated by the neglect of human values and personal

integrity surface under many guises. Sociologists, such as Richard Sennet, speak of the reification that happens to people in an economy which destroys everything that gives meaning to human life and ruins those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnish each with a sense of sustainable self. Shared values are vital for the proper functioning of the economic, political and social network and also for the well-being and development of the potential of every citizen. In recent times, we are losing our moral and human values. Prathapan (2009) as captured in Ezenwa (2017) opines, "Now of course we have machines, if one gadget stops working, you can always buy another, thus hard work, patience, discipline, persistence etc, are forgotten values". Children are growing up without values. Most developed and developing nations face erosion of humanistic, ethical and moral values. Igbo society is not left out in the present extinction of values. Human values are passed by parent to their off-springs throughout children's upbringing. As they grow, children learn more values from their peers, religious leaders, teachers, friends and society at large. With the advent of western education, many of the cherished Igbo values are fast disappearing. The values for which the Igbo are known are no longer in vogue. Igbo children tend to embrace western values in place of Igbo values hence the need for rekindling of Igbo values. This paper argues for the need to rekindle Igbo values through the use of Igbo oral literature.

The first part of the study is the introduction. Review of relevant literature is done in the second section. In the third section, the literary works are presented and interpreted. The work is concluded in the last section.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Values and Human Existence

Values are sets of beliefs and ideas which help a person to determine what is right from what is wrong, and help to build character and personality. They are internal precepts by which we make our decisions. When we are faced with choices, options or moral dilemmas, the decision we make will indicate what values we hold. Human values are the foundation for any viable life within society; they build a space for a drive, a movement towards one another which leads to peace. Human values are closely integrated with human life. They are intertwined with day to day chores. Generally, human values are highly encouraged in society, while negative attributes are discouraged and condemned

2.2 Language Extinction and Erosion of Human Values

Language is the carrier of the cultural heritage of societies. It does not require intellectual analysis to realise that indigenous languages stock peoples' cultural heritage. Indigenous languages contain complex understanding of a person's culture and their connection with their land. The death of a language constitutes the annihilation of norms, attributes, values and beliefs of the owners of the language. (Woodbury 2012).

As Woodbury further emphasizes,

Much of the cultural, spiritual and intellectual life of a people is experienced through language. This ranges from prayers, myths, ceremonies, poetry, oratory and technical vocabulary to everyday greetings, leave-takings, conversational styles, humour, ways of speaking to children and terms of habits, behaviours and emotions. When a language is lost, all of these must be fashioned in the new language - with different words, sounds, and grammar - if it is to be kept at all. Frequently, traditions are abruptly lost in the process and replaced by the cultural habits of the more powerful group.

From the foregoing, it is clear that values are embedded in culture and language is the only vehicle through which culture can be transmitted from one generation to another. Hence, when a language goes into extinction, the culture and values are also lost with the language.

To recover the almost eroded human values in a country like Nigeria, the historic warning given by Phelps-Stroke commission comes to play. The Commission warned as early as 1920-21 as quoted in Omolewa (1975) that the

Native tongue is immensely more vital in that it is one of the chief means of preserving whatever is good in nature, customs, ideas and ideals.... All people have an inherent right to their own language. It is the means of giving expression to their own personality. No greater injustice can be committed against a people than to deprive them of their own language.

The cultural background of a people is so intertwined with language that one cannot fully understand and appreciate one without the knowledge of the other (Omego 2005:202).

Language extinction is the process that affects speech communities where the level of linguistic competence that speakers possess of a given language variety is decreased, eventually resulting in no native or fluent speakers of the variety. The most common process leading to language extinction is one in which a community of speakers of one language becomes bilingual with another language and gradually shifts allegiance to the second language until they cease to use their original heritage language. This happens when speakers of a particular language abandon the language based on economic or utilitarian grounds in favour of languages regarded as having greater utility or prestige. With the extinction of a language, the cultural heritage embedded in the language is lost with the language.

2.3 Education in Traditional Igbo Society

Prior to the introduction of formal education, Igbo people had their own way of educating their children. Using informal method of education, different values are inculcated from generation to generation. In Igbo traditional society, all hands are on deck in the training of a child. Onuora, Obiakor, obayi and Chinagorom (2019 47) observe that,

The Igbo traditional education has the family household or compound as its setting, habitat or teaching-learning environment, whereas the grown up people, parents and elders within the community are automatically the instructors of the children who are also the pupils or students.

Part of traditional Igbo training viewed as the most important is the issue of moral education/character training. This is because lack of good morals paints a very bad picture of an Igbo child.

Onuora and others expatiating further add that,

.....moral education in Igbo traditional education stipulates standard behaviour expected of all and sundry, be it man or woman, young and old. It focuses on what is right and wrong and do's and don'ts to ones fellow man and the society. Virtually, all the moral codes are passed on to the child through folktales mostly to drive home the ideal way of living. These teachings

mostly come from the mother who is always in the house while the father is away searching for daily bread.

Child training is also seen as a very important aspect of Igbo traditional education and a collective responsibility. A child is seen as belonging to society and not just to a particular family.

2.4 Effects of Western Education on Igbo Values

Igbo people from the pre-colonial era have their culture which is evidenced in their way of life but with the advent of Western education, a lot of the core Igbo values are seriously endangered. Western education no doubt brought a lot of developments in Igbo land but on the contrary, it has led to the relegation of cherished Igbo values. Kwazu (1999) as represented in Ezenwa (2017) points out that the post-Nigerian Biafra war period opened a new page in Igbo traditional society. The stronghold, the unity, the communal identity and spirit that was earlier practiced was lost and gave way to individualism. Igbo people now embrace foreign cultures in their day to day activities. They prefer everything different to their lifestyle. This trend of decline in Igbo values does not only pose serious threat to the development of the Igbo nation but even for its survival, respect and authority itself. Igbo values and cultural heritage is being quickly destroyed rather than preserved and nurtured. The nature of the Igbo culture is evidenced in their way of life depicted in marriages and family relationships, legal systems, religious, economic and political structure. Igbo people have values that are worthy of preservation in the face of western cultural onslaught.

2.5 Features and Purpose of Oral Literature

Oral literature is a broad term which may include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, aetiological tales, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, word games, recitations, life histories or historical narratives (World Oral Literature Project, 2011). Oral literature defines, interprets and elaborates society's vision of reality and the dangers in the world. It is the repository of the critical knowledge, philosophy and wisdom for non-literate societies. It encapsulates traditional knowledge beliefs and values about the environment and the nature of society itself. It arises in response to the universal aesthetic impulse to provide narrative that explains the nature of life and describes human responses to challenges. This literature portrays how one is to live a moral life and explains the nature of one's relationships to divinity (Fellowship for the documentation of Oral

literature and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, 2016). The Fellowship further outlines the functions of oral literature as follows:

- It provides a portrait of the meaning of life as experienced by society at its particular time and place with its unique existential challenges. It thus retains society's knowledge to be passed on to succeeding generations.
- It contains the history of society and its experiences.
- It provides a guide to human behaviour and how to live one's life.
- Oral literature is a response to the universal human instinct to find balance, harmony and beauty in the world and the need to understand pain, suffering and evil.
- It explains the causes of human suffering justifies them, and suggests ways of mediation and healing of suffering.
- It recounts the works of gods, explains how the world and human existence came about and reveals the nature of human frailty.
- It serves to communicate ideas, emotions, beliefs and appreciation of life.
- It deals with human adventures and achievements against odds.
- It is a form of entertainment and fosters feelings of solidarity with others who have had similar experiences.
- Oral literature makes us aware of ourselves, other human beings our environment and our history. It also recounts events and happening in our lives and in the history of our societies. Hence these performances stimulate our observations and imagination.
- It also functions to fulfil the need for religious belief and spiritual fulfilment necessary for human existence.

With the arrival of literacy, the core of this literature and its art rapidly disappears.

3.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

3.1 The place of oral literature in rekindling Igbo values

The Igbo culture is stuffed with traditional beliefs which are nested in native folklore, proverbs and popular legends. Igbo oral literature played an indispensable role in the training and moral upbringing of Igbo children. Through oral literature, the Igbo had preserved their

cherished values until the colonial era. In the present study, only two aetiological tales are interpreted to show that they can be used to rekindle Igbo values.

The Igbo oral literature form used in this study are two Aetiological tales namely: "The origin of day and night" and "Why women do not grow beards".

Aetiological tale 1: Origin of Day and Night

In the beginning of the world, before there was either Day or Night, a certain man had many wives. One of his wives was barren and the other wives tormented her. "You are an evil woman," they would say, "that is why you are cursed with barrenness."

One day this unfortunate woman heard of a "dibia" who could make a woman fertile by rubbing his naked palm on her belly. Off she went to seek him out. She had to trek to a distant land beyond seven hills.

When she arrived at the dibias' shrine she told her woes to him. The dibia was sympathetic but told her she had to wait a little while because there was no child of good breed in stock. "All I have now are devilish babies and I do not want to bring you a curse. You should wait for a good baby." The woman was so anxious to have a baby that she insisted she have whatever was available. "Give me a child. Good or bad, as long as it has the shape of a human being. I am tired of being insulted by my husbands' wives," she said.

"I shall give you what I have but I fear for you woman," said the dibia wondering at her impatience. It reminds me, he thought, of the proverbial little animal who although he had been trapped in a cesspool for many years first complained of the stench when he saw some people coming to help him out.

Again the dibia said, "Woman it is a terrible gift you ask for."

But the woman begged him, "Please give me a child... please."

The dibia rubbed his palm on her belly. At once it began to swell.

Almost mad with joy, the woman hurried home. When the other wives saw her belly, they were filled with awe. But, they were suspicious too. Soon after, she gave birth to a male child who grew rapidly in height and mischief. He insulted his seniors and bullied his juniors. But because he was the only child of his mother, his parents neither reprimanded nor punished him. The boy began to use his freedom most shockingly.

With the aid of a charm given him by a magician, he killed all the domestic animals in the kingdom. Then he killed all the people. Lastly he killed his parents as well. Only an old woman escaped death from his hands. She had her own powerful charms with which she defended herself and tried to kill the boy. Whenever the old woman waved her charm in the air, there was darkness. Whenever the boy waved his charm, there was blazing light. As the battle continued it became apparent that their charms worked for twelve hours at a time.

Soon both of them fell dead.

Since then darkness and light have continued to appear alternately, each for twelve hours. And because there is nobody who knows the secret of their charms, Day and Night have continued to appear on earth (Oguine, P.N. (1986).

Aetiological Tale 2: Why Women do not Grow Beards

There was a time when women grew beards more than men. In truth their beards were thicker, more beautiful, and often much longer than the beards men grew.

At that time there was a man named Enyioma whose four beautiful daughters were greatly admired on account of their gorgeous beards. One of these daughters was so very proud of her beard that she looked down on all men including her own husband!

In the town of Enyi Mba there was a very famous and wealthy king also called Enyi Mba. He had a gold ring which he greatly treasured and closely guarded.

Enyi Mba had many children. One day one of his daughters collected all the plates in the palace and took them to a nearby stream to wash. Without knowing it, she also took the plate on which the ring was kept. So it happened that as she was washing the plates, the King's ring fell into the stream and was carried away by the water.

At the same time a little boy was fishing at the lower part of the stream. After he caught many fishes he went home. He sold some of the fish and roasted the others in the fire. When he cut-up the first fish he was going to eat, he found a gold ring in its bowel. He was a very happy little boy. He took the ring and sold it to Nkemdiche, a woman of the village. This woman knew that the ring belonged to the king but she vowed to herself not to say a word about it. Instead she hid it in her thick beard.

The king soon discovered that his gold ring was missing. He instructed everyone in the palace to look for it but no one could find it. The daughter who washed the plates was as ignorant as the others. She still did not know that the ring was in one of the plates she washed in the stream.

Confusion reigned in the palace.

The king was distraught. He let his subjects know of the missing gold ring. The little fisher boy heard the news and ran to the king. He told him how he found the gold ring in the bowel of the fish and sold it to Nkemdiche.

The king sent his slaves to every corner of the town to find and arrest Nkemdiche. The slaves searched for days for the woman called Nkemdiche. But nobody seemed to be Nkemdiche or knew anything about her.

The king summoned his counsellors to an emergency meeting. One suggested that the King should pretend that he would marry the woman who had his ring. The king agreed and let it be known all over the kingdom that he would marry the woman who had his gold ring.

A few hours after the announcement was made Nkemdiche hurried into the Kings' palace. With a smile on her face and walking like a queen, she told him that she was the one who had the gold ring. On the King's demand, she brought the ring out from her beard. All the men who saw what happened were shocked and said, "Women's beards are pregnant with danger and destruction."

The king was horrified and immediately ordered that Nkemdiche be executed. But after considering the matter more calmly, he decided to spare her life and instead remove her beard. He also decided to remove the beards of his own wives and of every woman in the kingdom. Within no time at all, all the women were brought forward and their beards were scraped off. And to make completely certain those women's beards would never grow again, the king's slaves collected Tortoise's excrement, dissolved it in water and rubbed it hard on the jaw of the women.

"The corruption of one woman proved the bane of all others," the King growled on his throne. Since that day women have not been growing beards (Oguine, P.N. (1986).S

3.2 Semantic Interpretation and Analysis of the Aetiological Tales

The first Aetiological story is full of vital Igbo values which are lacking in the lives of present day Igbo children.

1. The value of love and understanding: The attitude of the co-wives of the barren wife of the king is very bad and that helped to make the barren woman over anxious and desperate to have anything as long as it is a human being in the name of a child. Today many people do unthinkable things; some take dangerous risks because of the mental torture they have been going through at the hands of their privileged counterparts. The barren woman may have waited for the good baby if not for the lack of understanding demonstrated by her co-wives. The value of love, understanding is being highlighted in the attitude of the other wives of the king,
2. The value of patience and endurance: The barren woman was in a hurry to have her own child and therefore could not wait for a good child as the *dibia* advised her. She failed to weigh the pros and cons of her action. Her immediate situation so overwhelmed her to the level that she was ready to accept any offer. She became so impatient that the *dibia* granted her request. Her impatience led to a temporary satisfaction and then a lifelong agony which eventually resulted to her death. The danger and evil effects of impatience in life are apparent here.
3. The value of discipline in child training: The story has it that the woman and the king would not correct their son for the fact that he is an only son and as a result the boy became very mischievous and recalcitrant which eventually led to the death of both parents and others. This shows that when parents neglect disciplining their children, the children will turn around to become a thorn in their flesh and this will not only affect the immediate family, rather society is also negatively affected.
4. The value of sense of sacredness of life: The only son became notoriously mischievous and could not be controlled by his parents. Soon, he lost the true sense of life and human existence. He got so intoxicated with freedom and power that he annihilated his people. Not yet satisfied, he went into a power tussle with the only surviving old woman because he has no value for human life. He died a miserable death because he would not let others enjoy their being. Igbo children need to know that life is sacred and not to be toyed with. Reckless killings, kidnapping, drug addiction and other vices should be seen as destroying the essence of life.

5. The value of sense of chain reaction of every action in life: Life is made in a way that what one does affects others positively or negatively. The negative actions of the co-wives of the barren woman pushed her to impatiently accept a bad breed child. The stubborn and mischievous child later caused the death of his parents and all his people. The power tussle between the only son and the surviving old women eventually led to the death of both of them without any remedy to the problem caused by the magical charms they contracted for power which became the reason for the continued occurrence of night and day that human beings still experience on a daily basis. This teaches the value of avoiding negative values.

The second creation tale -“**Why Women Do Not Grow Beards**” is also an interesting story of the Igbo oral literature used to explain why only men grow beards. The story will be critically interpreted to highlight the embedded values.

1. The value of humility: The story records that women grew beautiful, thick and long beards than men before which made them very proud and arrogant. This negates the value of humility which is a cherished and priceless virtue to the Igbo people. The daughters of *Enyioma* exhibited pride and arrogance as a result of their beautiful beards. In the story we see one of the daughters of *Enyioma* disrespecting her husband on account of her beautiful beards. Also *Nkemdiche* demonstrated a high level of high mindedness in her attitude towards life. She never cared about the announcement made by the king’s servants about the missing gold ring. She only became interested when the king attached marriage to the recovery of the ring. Her attitude shows that she was full of herself. The value expressed here is that of humility and respect for others.
2. The value of dignity of Labour: In the story we see the poor little boy that embarked on fishing rewarded accordingly with great catch of fishes and miraculously with a gold ring which gave him extra money. This shows that there is dignity in labour and God rewards hard work. This can be used to instil the value of dignity of labour and hard work in the Igbo child.
3. The value of honesty: It is always good to be honest. It was the boy’s confession that led to the discovery of the King’s gold ring; though he was not rewarded openly or immediately. On the contrary, *Nkemdiche*, who bought the ring knows that the ring belongs to the king but she decided to hide the ring. She never bothered to say the

truth until the king made a deceitful promise to marry whoever is with the ring. The lesson here teaches the value of honesty.

4. The value of sense of chain reaction of every action in life: It is of great value to think of the positive and negative effects of all actions before taking the action. It was *Nkemdiche's* action of arrogantly going to the palace with the expectation of becoming the queen that brought about the humbling and degrading of the women prestige of growing beards. If she had gone to the king on her own and humbly handed over the gold ring, we believe that she would have been handsomely rewarded and probably allowed to retain her beards without negatively affecting the women fold.

4.0 Conclusion

Igbo oral literature portrays belief systems that makes sense of life. It provides guides to human behaviour and how to live one's life. In this age of fast erosion of human values, there is an urgent need to rekindle Igbo values through emphasizing the use of Igbo oral literature both in schools and Igbo homes.

From the interpretation of the aetiological tales above, the following values are contained in the two stories: love and understanding, patience and endurance, discipline, sense of sacredness of life, sense of chain reaction of every action in life, humility, dignity of labour and honesty. It is obvious that these values are lacking in the lives of present day Igbo children due to the sweeping effects of the Western culture. The inclusion of Igbo oral literature in the curriculum of schools in Igbo states should go a long way in rekindling Igbo values in Igbo children. This is of great importance because these values are better instilled at a tender age.

It is evident that aetiological tales which are part of the Igbo oral literature contain values that would impact the Igbo children positively. It is therefore recommended that the teaching of oral literature be included in the curriculum used in teaching in all Igbo states from nursery to post-primary levels of education. Igbo parents and elders are also called upon to go back to the use of Igbo oral literature in order to rekindle the Igbo consciousness and values in the Igbo children. The Igbo states' governments should also aid the collection and preservation of the rich Igbo oral literature for local and global accessibility and usage.

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