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The Relevance of Folktale as a Genre of Folklore and Stimulus for Moral Lessons in African Society

Paschal-Mbakwe, Doris
Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
dn.paschal@unizik.edu.ng

&

Okoronkwo, Ezinne Jimia
Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
ej.okoroknwo@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Folklore, a cornerstone of cultural heritage, encompasses a tapestry of traditions, beliefs, and narratives passed down through generations. Drawing within the rich mosaic of African society, it is a vibrant thread, weaving a powerful narrative that reinforces societal norms while inviting the audience to reflect on their own beliefs and values. Folktales have been integral to human culture for centuries, serving as vessels for moral teachings, wisdom, and cultural preservation. Armed with this awareness, the study selects Ikechukwu Asika's *Omalinze,* as it dramatic text. Folklore is a cultural based phenomenon, it is in this regards that this study is guided by the theory of New Historicism, which is the study of literature that investigates social and historical issues, complex ethical issues, encourages empathy and understanding. It ultimately promotes a deeper engagement with *Igbo* culture and its enduring moral lessons from the dramatic lens of the playwright. The researcher did a textual analysis of the play using primary and secondary sources of data collection. The study discovers that incorporating folktales educate people in ethical and moral values, deepens character development, resonates with the audiences,

cautioned against anti-social behaviors and promotes storytelling as a means of moral education, in shaping the youngster, and even adults. The study recommends that folktale should continue to be held in high esteem, as a timeless repository of wisdom, moral lessons, cultural resonance, communal storytelling and cultural identity, as it continues to inspire, educate, and unite audiences across generations, embodying the timeless values and aspirations of African societies through the ages.

Keywords: Folktale, Storytelling, Stimulus, Moral Lesson, African Society**.**

Introduction

Folklore is an essential part of oral tradition. Man is a storyteller, thus commits to different sources of pleasure and living styles, which are basically those oral traditions, hand over from one generation to another, through words of mouth contacts. Oral tradition includes folktales, songs, ballads and dances. Epic narratives, myths and legends, songs, riddles, proverbs, recitations and chants, oration, festival dramas and ritual performances. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh in her book *Trends and Issues in African Literature,* expressed that:

> The Oral Literature of people is an embodiment of their ways of life, their culture and belief. Through this medium, these stories ensure the continuity of their heritage. The oral literature therefore comprises of all values, beliefs, and generation of a community of people. These are passed down generation lane through face to face contact between the elderly, custodian and the younger generation (11).

Folklore is the rich tapestry of traditional beliefs, customs, stories, songs, and practices that have been passed down through generations within a particular culture or community. It serves as a mirror reflecting the collective identity, values, and experiences of

a people. In submission to this, Olumide opines: Folktale (folklore) is an oral tradition form, is a story by word of mouth. Invariable the African story teller repository of knowledge, history and experiences, whose position is fortified by his or her multiple mandates as a historian, entertainer, poet, musician, and an educator who is duty-bound to transfer knowledge from one generation to another (23).

In African societies, folklore is linked to their way of life, the totality of their existence. Most African societies if not all, place great worth in folklore because it is the primary means of conveying culture. It is also a mode of transmitting feelings, and attitudes. For centuries, African people depended on oral tradition to teach important traditional values and morals, pertaining to how to live. In the words of Williams Wilson:

> Surely no other discipline is more concerned with linking us to the cultural heritage from the past than folklore; no other discipline is more concerned with revealing the interrelationship of different culture expression, than folklore; and no other discipline is so concerned… with discovering what is to be human.it is this attempt to cover the basics of our common humanity, the imperatives of existence that put folklore study at the very center of humanistic study (101).

Folktale as a Genre of Folklore: An Overview

Folktale, as a genre, embodies the essence of oral tradition, passed down from elders to youths across continents and civilizations. Its roots dig deep into the soil of human imagination, sprouting tales of wonder, wisdom, and whimsy. Through the lens of the folktale, we peer into the collective psyche of societies, discerning their fears, dreams, and aspirations. Within the African context, the folktale assumes a central position, serving as both a mirror reflecting the cultural ethos and a lantern illuminating the path to

communal understanding. Embedded within the rhythms of African life, storytelling pulsates with vitality, resonating in the hearts of listeners gathered around flickering fires under starlit skies. Within the intricate mosaic of African society, the role of folktale and storytelling transcends mere entertainment, assuming the mantle of cultural custodian and moral compass. Embedded within the very fabric of daily life, storytelling in Africa serves as a communal ritual, binding individuals together in a shared narrative tapestry. From the bustling marketplaces of Lagos to the remote villages of the Sahara, the echoes of ancestral wisdom reverberate through the oral tradition, shaping identities and forging bonds of solidarity. In submission to this, F.B.O Akporobaro in his book *Introduction to African Oral Literature*, posits:

> Folktale is an imaginative narrative (story) in prose form. The story that constitute a prose folktale may have a basis in real life but generally the story is an imaginative recreation of a memorable experience that is intended essentially to entertain rather than to record history, or social experience. A folktale may be believed. Generally, however, they are considered to be untrue stories and hence not objects of serious belief (51).

In modern times, folklore continues to play a vital role in shaping identities, fostering community cohesion, and preserving cultural heritage. By recognizing and honoring the traditions of the past, we pave the way for a more interconnected and culturally rich future, where the stories of our ancestors continue to resonate, educate, and inspire generations to come. Ikechukwu Asika and Ifeoma Azubuike in their book *African Prose Narrative (An Introductory Text)* asserted that:

> Folktale is in the form of stories often involving human beings, spirits and animals in the struggle to survive in an enigmatic world. It is a unique genre of literature for it teaches with stories belived to have happened in the time past and its essential

> purpose is to inculcate morals and build on a lasting ethical values and accepted way of life in society (58).

New Historicism as Theoretical Anchor

The researcher examines the use of folktale for moral lessons through storytelling. Folktale is a cultural based phenomenon, it is in this regards that the theory is guided by the theory of New Historicism. The literary theory of New Historicism which Greenblatt, Stephen propounded is developed in the late 1970s in response to perceived excesses of New Criticism, which tended to ignore the importance of historical context of a work of art. It is therefore the theory that connects literary works to the social and historical currents of their time. Then theory assumes that we cannot know (study and understand) the text separate from their historical context of a work of art.

The theory suggests that literature must be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the critic. It insists that all interpretations are subjectively filtered through one's own set of historically conditioned viewpoints. History is an intersection of discourses that establish a dominant ideology. The real center of enquiry is not the text but the history. The play is an example of many types of discourse that reveal history. Consequently, it can be said that New Historicism investigates the life of the playwright, social rules found within the play, the manner in which the play reveals historical situations and the way in which other historical texts can help us understand the play.

Role of Folktale and Storytelling in African Society

Folktale and storytelling play a crucial role in African society, serving as a means of preserving cultural heritage, passing down traditions, teaching moral lessons, and fostering community cohesion. In African cultures, oral tradition has been the primary mode of communication for generations, with stories being shared through spoken word, music, dance, and performance. The role of

folktale and storytelling in African society is multifaceted, encompassing functions ranging from cultural preservation and education to community cohesion, spiritual connection, resistance, and adaptation. Through the power of narrative, African communities affirm their collective identity, transmit traditional knowledge, forge social bonds, and navigate the complexities of life with resilience, creativity, and wisdom. Storytelling continues to serve as a vibrant and indispensable aspect of African cultural heritage, enriching the lives of individuals and communities across the continent. Here are some key aspects of the role of folktale and storytelling in African society.

Storytelling in African society serves as a vital means of preserving and transmitting cultural heritage from one generation to another. Through the retelling of folktales, oral histories, and traditional narratives, African communities safeguard and transmit important aspects of a community's history, their customs, beliefs, values, ensuring their continuity and relevance in a rapidly changing world. These stories often contain elements that reflect the unique identity and worldview of a particular culture or ethnic group.

Folktales are also used as a tool for transmitting knowledge and wisdom. Elders within African communities often serve as storytellers, sharing their experiences and teachings through narratives that are passed down orally. These stories contain valuable lessons about life skills, survival strategies, ethical behavior, and societal norms. Also, folktales play a central role in educating and imparting moral values to individuals, particularly the youth, within African societies. Beyond their cultural significance, instructive and educational functions, folktales provide entertainment and serve as vehicles for creative expression within African societies. Storytelling sessions, often accompanied by music, dance, and dramatic performances, offer opportunities for artistic expression and celebration of cultural diversity, enriching the social and cultural fabric of communities. Festivals

dedicated to storytelling showcase the creativity and talent of performers while engaging audiences in lively narrative.

The Relevance of Folktale as a Stimulus for Moral Lessons in African Societies

Folktales have long served as powerful vehicles for conveying moral lessons across cultures and generations. To every Folktale there are moral lessons attached to it, more especially from our play which embodies lots of moral lessons, this therefore makes it a Morality Play. In the context of the play *Omalinze,* incorporating folktales can enhance its impact and resonate with audiences.

Folktales often emerge from specific cultural contexts, carrying the wisdom, beliefs, and values of a community. By weaving folktales into the play, the playwright connects the audience to the cultural roots and traditions that shape the characters' lives. In *Omalinze*, folktales can provide insights into the characters' worldviews, rituals, and shared experiences. They create a bridge between the fictional narrative and the real-world cultural fabric. Folktales also address universal themes such as love, betrayal, courage, greed, and justice. These themes resonate with human experiences regardless of time or place. By incorporating folktales, *Omalinze* explore these timeless themes, allowing the audience to reflect on their own lives and choices. For instance, a folktale about honesty might parallel a character's internal struggle.

Folktales often feature archetypal characters—heroes, tricksters, wise elders, and villains. These archetypes serve as mirrors for human behavior. In the play, folktales can influence character development. Perhaps *Omalinze* encounters an old storyteller who imparts wisdom through a tale, prompting her to reconsider her actions or beliefs. Also, folktales present characters with moral dilemmas and consequences. These dilemmas force characters to make choices that reveal their true nature, *Omalinze* uses folktales to introduce moral quandaries. For instance, a folktale about

loyalty might parallel *Omalinze's* loyalty to her tribe versus her personal desires.

Folktales captivate audiences with their vivid imagery, magical elements, and suspense. They evoke emotions and keep listeners engaged. In the play, folktales can serve as interludes, providing moments of reflection or comic relief. They break the tension and allow the audience to absorb the unfolding drama. Folktales in addition, educate without being didactic. They teach through storytelling, allowing listeners to draw their own conclusions. By incorporating folktales, *Omalinze* educates the audience subtly. The play becomes more than mere entertainment. It becomes a vessel for cultural preservation and moral exploration.

The Exploration of Timeless Moral Themes in the Play

The play titled *Omalinze,* by Ikechukwu Asika, is a folktale based on morality. It is a folktale told for the purpose of moral lesson. It is a moral lesson on humility and simplicity, as opposed to pride. *Omalinze* is an Igbo adaptation of the classic tragedy Antigone, there are several moral lessons woven into the narrative.

Firstly, the importance of family loyalty, one of the central themes in both Antigone and *Omalinze* is the conflict between familial duty and obedience to the state. In *Omalinze*, the protagonist *Omalinze* chooses to defy the king's decree and bury her brother, despite the consequences, King Kanayo makes a decree that Opuluiche will not be buried because he caused the war in the Iduu kingdom, she, *Omalinze*, the late King's daughter is not pleased with this decree. She resolves to go against the King's order to bury her brother Opuluiche. She believes it is the right thing to do for a loved one. This demonstrates her unwavering love to her family and her commitment to upholding their honor and dignity.

Omalinze: Whatever I did, my king, I did it for the love of a brother, so that his desperate soul will find the measure of peace he seeks in the afterlife (44).

Secondly, the consequences of hubris and pride, similar to the original Greek tragedy, *Omalinze* highlights the destructive nature of hubris and excessive pride in the character of king Kanayo, after Omalinze went against his order, King Kanayo ordered the apprehension of Omalinze. She is kept in the prison at the hills of the Ebenebe River. As he doesn't want to be seen as a coward by the people of Iduu and their surrounding communities. Hence, he paid deaf ears to the people and elders Chief Udeh and Chief Agumba, even Otagburuagu the Seer, who plead with him to pardon Omalinze to stop the bloodshed and avert the evil that will befall the kingdom because of the spirit of Opuluiche that he saw roaming restlessly. Chief Udeh: Please my king, listen to the voice of your people. It is only wisdom that the king feels then pulse and heart of his subjects (51).

Chief Agumba: Igwee, your enemies in all the kingdom of Olu and Igbo, even beyond know you. We are the sons of the lions, and a lion cannot beget a lamb. What the snake sired must be long. But please spare this life. The land has witnessed enough bloodshed. Spare this life and your people will rejoice (52).
Otagburuagu: I was deep in meditation when I saw him, Opuluiche, the late son of King Odumegwu III. I saw his spirit roaming, seeking a place of final rest. His restlessness can only bring evil rain, chaos, and untold catastrophe to the kingdom if nothing is urgent done to avert it. It will be more than anything Iduu kingdom has ever seen and not many will survive this hurricane I see coming (66).

Hamachi persuades his father, the King to pardon the wrong of Omalinze and listen to his subjects and voice of reason, that a good king is also remembered for the mercies he showed, not just the wars he war (53). The king refuses, still keeps up with his pride and stubbornness. He swore:

King Kanayo: As long as I live, no one will save her from the death penalty except she renounces her deeds and placate the thrown. If not, she must die, Omalinze must die (53)!

The prince Hamachi leaves in anger while his father paces about. But before he leaves, he warns the king of the impending danger if he refuses to pardon Omalinze's wrongdoing, thus:
Hamachi: I shall go, father, but remember my words. I hope the heart of the King will be brave enough to bear what is now lurking in the darkness before him (54).

Towards the end of the play, *Omalinze* tears a portion of her waistcloth and uses it to fashion a rope ready to end her life with it. She finally hangs herself while Hamachi stabs himself because he cannot bear to go on without the love of his life. Completing the circle of tragedy, the queen takes her own life in her chambers. The king's refusal to listen to reason and his insistence on enforcing his decree without considering the consequences ultimately leads to tragedy. His arrogance blinds him to the wisdom of others and causes an avoidable evil and for his people.
King Kanayo: … Someone should hold my murderous hand and lead me away from here. Lead me to embrace my pride and foolishness. Lead me away. This is my last command (76).

Moreover, the clash between tradition and modernity can be seen clearly depicted in play. *Omalinze* explores the tension between traditional values and modern governance. The conflict arises when Omalinze's actions challenge the king's authority and the established order of society. This conflict reflects broader societal debates about the balance between preserving cultural heritage and embracing progress.

Omalinze: … I love my brother, and only my death will see me not fulfilling that one last act of kindness to a brother. The deed gives me peace, my prince (38).

Also, the power of civil disobedience can have a devastating effect on a society as Omalinze's act of burying her brother in defiance of the king's decree serves as a powerful example of civil disobedience. Her willingness to stand up for what she believes is right, even in the face of opposition, inspires others to question unjust laws and oppressive authority. *Omalinze* disobeyed King Kanayo's decree and buried her brother, Opuluiche because she felt it was the right thing to do. She finds herself in a situation where she has to choose between the love of a brother and a civil law made by the king. Not minding the death penalty attached to the disobedience of the law, she prefers to die than not to bury her late brother. This underscores the importance of individuals taking a stand against injustice, even at great personal risk.

Omalinze: Opuluiche is my brother, and the duty of love must be duly fulfilled. If the body of my brother is exhumed ten times over, ten more times over will I still bury him (45)!

Furthermore, the tragic cost of inflexibility can be found among the concepts of the play. In *Omalinze,* the tragic outcome of the story emphasizes the consequences of inflexible leadership and rigid adherence to laws without considering their moral implications. The refusal to compromise or seek alternative solutions leads to unnecessary bloodshed and sorrow, highlighting the need for leaders to exercise empathy and compassion in their decision-making. This submission is seen the play where Otagburuagu came to the palace to warn the king that Amadioha is about to punish Iduu kingdom if he doesn’t heed to the message of the gods.

Otagburuagu: You force words out of my mouth. Soon, before the sunset and the dawn of a new day, you shall pay for your pride and foolishness. Corpse for corpse! I pray that the god you do not respect would show you mercy at the end (67).

Overall, *Omalinze* offers a compelling exploration of timeless moral themes, such as family love and loyalty, the dangers of pride, the clash between tradition and progress, the power of civil disobedience, and the tragic cost of inflexibility.

Universal Lessons from the Play, with Unique Insights and Perspectives

Through the lens of Igbo culture and tradition, the play enriches these universal lessons with unique insights and perspectives.

Firstly, folktales serve as a source of entertainment. Asika's use of folktales adds depth and flavor to his narratives, captivating readers with intriguing stories from the past. - These tales transport readers to a time best known to the originators, creating a sense of continuity with tradition. Significantly, the inappropriateness of traditional folksong in place of dirge is noted in the play. In Act Three, Scene I of the play, the Igbo folksong employed therein coveys a different content or message and invariably did not suit the situation at hand. An Igbo folksong comes from the background as thus:

O! Nwa mmuo nkam kara gi -inine
O! Nwa mmuo kam kara gi -inine
Nwunye dim di njo -inine
Agaram kuru mmiri nga enye nwam -inine
Osimu kwuo ya ugwo mmiri, mmiri nwa -inine
Mbute mmiri enu oju. -inine
Mbute mmiri ala oju. -inine
Osi m chuwe idejili n'eke. -inine
Mmiri sere amuma ka onwa n'eti. -inine
Mmiri sere amuma na ago n'igwe. -inine
Ewoh! Nne nwa ndo -inine
Doo! Doo! Doo -inine
Doo! Doo! Doo -inine! (55).

The song is not a dirge but portrays a complaint of a woman who has a wicked co-wife. Aside from these weaknesses, the play

reveals the rich culture of the Igbo people of Nigeria and showcases every aspect of royalty in the Igbo land and entertain the readers.

Secondly, beyond entertainment, folktales convey important life lessons and moral values. Asika strategically places them within the fabric of his storytelling. The curse placed on Oedipus lingers and haunts a younger generation in this new and brilliant translation of Sophocles' classic drama; Antigone. Likewise, in *Omalinze,* the curse placed on King Odumegwu III finds its way into the younger generation, causing Omalinze to be a flower of doom. The character of Omalinze is worth taking note of, as she appears to be the voice of morality, tradition, and reason. Had she not insisted on burying her brother, the other side of King Kanayo would not have been revealed. No one would have imagined that King Kanayo harbored so much pride and arrogance in him until a situation presented it to the public.

King Kanayo: And the kingdom now teaches me how to rule? How to run the affairs of this kingdom? How dare you? All of you? (53). Drunk with power, King Kanayo makes a declaration that leads to his downfall and shatters the peace of the land, and his doom at last. Through these tales, characters learn valuable lessons, and readers gain insights into cultural norms and ethical behaviour.

Finally, Asika's incorporation of folktales gives his works a distinct local flavor and beauty. In the Igbo ancient society, a praise singer must always keep the King entertained and ensure his sanity. This is made manifest in Act Three, Scene I of the play. The praise singer eulogizes the King with great names, showing how great and important the King is to the people. The use of proverbs portrays the richness of African tradition in the play. Asika deliberately makes use of this device to add taste to his work. According to Chinua Achebe, *Proverbs are the palm oil*

with which words are eaten (Achebe). Proverbs are short sayings that convey some acquired wisdom. They are specifically important to the Igbo people because they serve as a means of passing on culture and wisdom through the generations. Examples abound in the play:

King Kanayo: The palm fruit that goes into the mortar can hardly escape without a scratch. The hand that goes into the anus can only come out with either shit or a foul mess. When a man goes ahead of his chi, he runs all his life, perhaps, to a journey of no return (20).

These proverbs above are used by King Kanayo when he is addressing the Chiefs in his palace. By drawing from oral traditions, he infuses authenticity into his narratives as seen above. Readers experience the richness of African culture through these tales, enhancing their appreciation of the stories and their understanding of their cultural background.

Significance of Folktale in African Society

Folktales contribute to the understanding of a community's worldview and social dynamics, offering valuable insights into the human experience. By studying folktales, scholars can glean information about the cultural practices, beliefs, and values of the group from which the tales originated. As a genre of folklore, folktales reflect the shared heritage and experiences of a community, fostering a sense of belonging and unity. By engaging with these stories, individuals can connect with their cultural roots and develop a stronger appreciation for their unique identity.

In the play, the incorporation of Igbo folktales serves as a powerful stimulus for moral lessons, reflecting the rich cultural heritage and values of the Igbo people. Asika skillfully weaves these tales into the narrative, emphasizing their relevance to contemporary life and their ability to guide individuals in navigating modern challenges.

Furthermore, folktales in Asika's adaptation serve to reinforce Igbo cultural values and traditions. Storytelling has long been an

integral part of Igbo oral tradition, fostering a shared understanding of cultural norms and expectations. By featuring characters who engage with folktales, Asika emphasizes the significance of preserving and celebrating Igbo culture, demonstrating how traditional narratives can enrich and enlighten modern life.

The integration of folktales also serves to promote a sense of community among the characters, uniting them through their shared cultural heritage. Storytelling functions as a powerful cohesive force, connecting individuals and affirming their collective identity. In this way, Asika underscores the potential of folktales to maintain cultural continuity and foster social cohesion in the face of contemporary challenges.

Moreover, the inclusion of folktales encourages critical reflection on important social and moral issues. By presenting these tales to the audience, Asika prompts them to consider the relevance of traditional wisdom in addressing contemporary concerns, such as gender inequality, environmental degradation, and political corruption. In doing so, he highlights the transformative potential of storytelling, challenging audiences to reassess their assumptions and rethink their relationship with the world.

Folktales are essential elements of African folklore. Alongside proverbs, riddles, songs, beliefs, myths, legends, charms, magic incantations, omens, and superstitions. Folktales contribute to the rich cultural heritage of African societies, these oral traditions are passed down from generation to generation, preserving the collective wisdom, values, and worldview of the people. Folktales can also be used in writing of books, as it can serve as medium to portray culture, beautify the work of art, and also teach morals to the society. Hence, Folktales can promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation by providing insights into the beliefs, values, and experiences of different communities. By

sharing and engaging with folktales from diverse cultural backgrounds, individuals can broaden their perspectives and cultivate respect for the richness and diversity of human storytelling.

Folktales are a powerful and significant genre of folklore that play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage, offering moral guidance, fostering community bonds, and promoting intergenerational connection. Their enduring relevance underscores the importance of preserving and celebrating the diverse storytelling traditions that enrich our global cultural landscape. Their enduring significance highlights the importance of preserving and celebrating the rich storytelling traditions that contribute to the vibrant cultural fabric of Africa.

In conclusion, the integration of folktale elements in Ikechukwu Asika's *Omalinze* emphasizes the crucial role of folktales as a vehicle for teaching moral lessons and preserving cultural heritage. Folktales in Asika's adaptation function as a vehicle for conveying moral lessons and ethical principles. Characters draw upon these stories to inform their decisions and make sense of their experiences, highlighting the enduring value of traditional wisdom. For instance, the tale of the tortoise, a recurring motif in Igbo folklore, imparts lessons about the importance of perseverance, resourcefulness, and communal solidarity.

By integrating such tales into the play, Asika invites audiences to reflect on their own moral values and contemplate the role of collective responsibility in addressing contemporary issues. Through its compelling narrative and cautionary tale, the play recommends and invites the audiences to engage with important themes and values while celebrating the rich storytelling traditions of the Igbo people. By weaving Igbo folktales into the narrative, Asika emphasizes their capacity to impart ethical principles, reinforce cultural values, foster community, and encourage critical reflection. In this way, the play serves as a potent reminder of the

vital role storytelling continues to play in teaching moral lessons, shaping our understanding of the world and informing our actions within it.

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