

# Opinion Article

## ORAL LITERATURE: A TOOL FOR SECURITY AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION

### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to discuss oral literature as a vital instrument for security and national integration. All through human history, literature and culture has been a vehicle for revolutionary change in the society. Oral literature has contributed a lot in this regard. The importance of folktales in African tradition and in the Nigerian society in particular in ensuring peace and harmony cannot be overemphasized. A number of scholars in the last two decades have emphasized on the issue of security and the causes of insecurity in Nigeria. Proper attention has not been given to security matters in the country. On the contrary, contemporary African societies including Nigeria are experiencing disharmony and are most often engulfed with conflicts and social disorder, which are threatening their peace and corporate existence as one nation. It is against this background that the paper examines some ways in which oral literature could inculcate the virtue of love, peace, unity, moral and ethical revolution in the society not only in Nigeria but in other African societies. In doing this, we examine Igbo folktales. Our findings show that oral literature is the best and easiest way to ensure that security is maintained and to restore national integration.

**Keywords:** Literature, oral literature, a tool for security, insecurity and national integration.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature plays a vital role in the overall development of any nation. In fact, the place of literature in changing morals cannot be over-emphasized. The Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary (2002) [1] defines it as the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by the people of a particular country. Suffice is to say that what distinguish mankind from other animals are his spoken and written languages, which help him in expressing his ideas, plans and potentials. Nwadike (2002) [2] asserts that through oral literature, the people are taught the philosophy and ideology of their people through the wisdom of their fathers, namely: proverbs, anecdotes etc. For example, right from the beginning, the child is made to know that the proverb 'Egbe bere, Ugo bere...' which is translated in English as 'live and let live' is a golden rule of life which should not be violated under any guise. He further said that the reason for literature is to direct the minds of the people towards societal values, attitude, test, feelings and behavioral patterns.

Ndubueze (2006) [3] opines that literature as a study concerns itself with human life and activities. These could be represented in physical nature, in dramatic, poetry or prose forms. It shows to the reader what individuals found interesting in a certain period. It preoccupies itself with everyday life happenings. While language provides the instrument for effective communication, literature makes use of it to interpret the cultural values and problems of the society that speaks it. Harris (1979) as cited in Brown (2017) [4] asserted that "the study of culture is to show

how emic (native) thoughts and behaviors are a result of material considerations". He wrote that "cultural materialism is based on the simple premise that human life is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence" (Harris, 1979 as cited in Buzney and Marcoux, 2023) [5]. The significance and of course inevitable primacy of literature in human life need not be over stressed, because no nation is known to exist without literature.

For Ikeokwu (2009) [6], literature changes an individual's identity or role with a view of playing a role, which in abinitio was not assigned to him/her either by nature or culture. By this view, Ikeokwu is trying to buttress the point that literature has the capacity to change one from a negative attitude of life to a positive one and we subscribe to this view. According to Njemanze (2010) [7], great African values were transmitted in the past to the younger generation through oral literature. This consists of oral traditions which include: storytelling, riddles, songs, lullabies, plays etc. This cultural preservation is aimed at inculcating the community's values like brotherly relationship, honesty, diligence and perseverance. Oral literature is therefore the literature produced by traditional artist by the word of the mouth and transmitted from one generation to another.

Literature whether written or oral has the capacity for changing attitudes and conducts. In Nigeria, oral literature is the foundation of written literature and has following characteristics:

- i. Orality - no fixed form
- ii. Authorism - narrator's ingenuity or skill
- iii. Date - cannot be ascertained.

Igbo oral literature refers to the unwritten literally form. It gives expression or formulates the feelings of the people or their ideas about the realities of human experiences. These human experiences range from fear, aspirations, feelings, ideas, interdependence or spiritual and natural phenomena e.g. marriage, death, birth etc. Igbo oral literature also expresses admiration for some people in the society because of their sterling qualities. It also preaches moral, lays emphasis on communal values. In doing this it helps to integrate people thereby giving them a sense of belonging. Igbo folktale is a means of enduring peace, stability and good relationship in the society. Any society where there is no moral integrity, development will elude her.

Amali (1986) [8] asserts that through Igbo folktales, one can see how the society looks at itself. They also convey the notion of justice, rights and citizen's social obligations. This genre of traditional literature plays an important role in enhancing peace, unity and love for one another in the society. Igbo folktales help in promoting peace, unity and love in the Igbo society. This is usually observed in the timing of the stories and in the moral lessons they conveyed. Folktales are normally told in the evening after work. This shows that they are used to restore peace of mind. In the story sessions, children normally sit round the story teller to listen to folktales after which they tell their own stories one after the other in a relaxed atmosphere. This sitting arrangement in itself encourages love and unity. In other instances, proverb, riddle and tongue twisting competitions are organized for the children. The winners are usually very happy at the end of such competitions. Such storytelling and competition help to inculcate in the children important societal values which include: humility, gratitude and respect for elders. The Igbo folktales encompass the culture of the people, their view of the world, their norms, their spiritual life, hopes and aspirations. This is perhaps why Emenyonu (1987:1) [9] had noted that oral literature "has a definite purpose to instruct the young in the principles of right and wrong in the society".

Similarly, Okebalama (2003) [10] had noted that folktales naturally are an integral part of the African oral society. They are according to him regarded as fictitious, mythical and totally removed from real life situations and events. Akangwa (2008) [11] has further noted that, Folktales are all about life in functionality whether they are expressed orally or in written form. In his view, they educate, entertain, unite, satirize and guide the society that own and use

them. He went further to explain that folktales portray in a large extent some truth about life in the society. This is why members of the society react to these folktales in real life as if they are real stories in true life situations.

## **2. THEMATIC CLARIFICATION**

In this section for proper understanding of the study, we shall be looking at concepts of some key themes. These include national integration, national security and insecurity.

### **2.1 National Integration**

National integration is the only way we can strengthen the bounds existing between the different component units of the society. It promotes oneness in its totality. It is the process by which the various ethnic groups of the society are integrating together into a new nation-state. In doing this, they will willingly strive towards its national unity and aspiration as well as favoring her economic development.

National integration demands the establishment of common national institutions and facilities such as school, parks, hospital etc., which are often made available to the citizens as symbols of their common identity. It may be observed that one of the interrogative efforts being pursued by government of Nigeria is the principle of national character. This is expected to be reflected in appointments and allocation of federal government projects. The adoption of the federal or national character principle is intended to promote national unity, foster national loyalty and give every citizen of ethnic origin, culture, language and religion a sense of belonging.

### **2.2 National security**

Ibidapo-obe (2008) [12] defines National security as that situation that exists as a result of the establishment of measures for the protection of persons, information and property against hostile persons, influences and actions. Furthermore, Otto and Ukpere (2012:6767) [13] asserts that "security means protection from hidden and hurtful disruption in the patterns of daily life in homes, offices or communities...security must be related to the presence of peace, safety, happiness and the protection of human and physical resources or absence of crisis, threats to human injury among others". National security may be regarded as the collective security of the people in a particular nation and not the security of the person or the political party in power. Akinfeleye (2008:3) [14] asserts therefore that national security could simply be defined as the protection or the safety of a country's secrets and its citizens hence emphasizing the overall security of a nation.

No nation can survive in the absence of adequate security of lives and properties. The system will be lawless, full of chaos which can eventually lead to disintegration. This is why national security is regarded as a dynamic condition, which involves the relative ability of a state to counter threats to its core values and interests. Accordingly, it is necessary for every nation to have what it takes to maintain a smooth functioning and reproduction of the society. McGrew (1988:101) [15] opines that the security of a nation is predicated on two central pillars: on one hand, it entails the maintenance and protection of the socio- economic order in the face of internal and external threat, on the other hand, it entails the promotion of a preferred international order, which minimizes the threat to core values and interests, as well as to the domestic order.

### **2.3 Insecurity**

The concept of insecurity connotes different meanings such as: absence of safety, danger, hazard, uncertainty, lack of protection, and lack of safety. Achumba et al (2013) [16] define insecurity from two perspectives: firstly, insecurity is the state of being open or subject to danger or threat of danger, where danger is the condition of being susceptible to harm or injury. Secondly, insecurity is the state of being exposed to risk or anxiety, where anxiety is a vague unpleasant emotion that is experienced in anticipation of some misfortune. These definitions of insecurity underscore a major point that those affected by insecurity are not only uncertain or unaware of what would happen but they are also vulnerable to the threats and dangers when they occur.

The notion of 'insecurity' is usually ascribed different interpretations because of the very many ways in which insecurity affects human life and existence. Insecurity include: trouble, lack of protection, want of safety, hazard, unsafe, subject to danger etc. All these show that insecurity is the complete opposite of security. Okeke (2012) [17] observed the problem of insecurity in Nigeria has gone beyond what the government alone can handle. We believe that effective and appropriate use of oral literature will promote peaceful co-existence and contribute in ensuring that national security and integration is accomplished.

### **3. THE WAYS OF INCULCATING MORAL VALUES AMONG THE IGBOS FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AND INTEGRATION**

Folktales objectives include telling stories, tales, proverbs and riddles that address matters involving peace, unity and love in homes, schools and entire community where there is violence, war or conflict. They are different ways folktales help in inculcating moral values. The Igbo people believe that man and his world are created by God (Chukwu). He created heaven and earth. He owns the society and the people that make up the society. God sees and controls man's heart and people believe that no sin committed in the sight of God shall go unpunished, so man always knows in his heart what is good or bad. With this knowledge about God in man's heart, it makes man to be truthful always. The fear of falling into the judgment of God makes man shun evil deeds and uphold moral integrity. Below are some of the medium through which moral values are passed to the people:

#### **3.1 The use of proverbs**

One of the way of inculcating moral values among the Igbo people is through the use of proverbs by the elders. Proverbs occur informally in day-to-day verbal communication. The intent is to instill moral values to the hearers. According to Nwadike (2009) [18] every Igbo proverb or group of proverbs has a function to perform. They are not cited in isolation of life what can be called citing for citing sake. Each in its own gene has something to underscore such as caution, praise, encouragement, dissuasion, children's upbringing, self-control, thrift, hard work etc. They are employed in communication for the purpose of embellishment and reinforcing the power of argument (Egudu, 1977) [19].

Proverbs are used to express the moral as well as societal ethics. They are acceptable standards for appreciating behavior in terms of the approved norms. For example, laziness is denounced in 'Ike ogwugwu (Ngana) kpuo ute, aguṛ ekpughee ya' which is interpreted in English as 'When laziness wraps a mat, hunger unwraps it'. A slothful person prefers loafing about to working but hunger teaches him that he cannot eat without working. No sweat, no sweet. Another proverb 'nwanyo nwayo ka eji aracha ofe di oku' (slowly and steady wins the race) is a proverb to caution the youth that there is no hurry in life, if anybody both old and young cannot wait to take gradual step to success, any short cut can involve anti-social behavior which can lead to prosecution.

The elders also inculcate the moral values among the igbo youths through the virtue of their experiences and exposures. That is why the Igbos say: 'Okenye anaghị anọ n'ụlọ ewu amụọ n'ogbu' (An elder will not be in the house and goat deliver with rope). This means that the elders have a duty to see to it that moral conduct is maintained so that orderliness and peace will reign supreme in the society. The Elders also make use of storytelling to impact moral value to children.

### 3.2 The use of storytelling

The Igbos believe that through storytelling, children will be able to denounce immoral acts. For example, in the story of tortoise and the ant, the character of tortoise depicts/teaches wisdom while that of ant encourages hard work. In the same vein, the story of the soldier ant and the grasshopper in preparing for the raining day will help in shunning laziness. During the dry season, the ant was busy gathering for the raining season, the grasshopper was busy loafing about. When famine came, he came to beg the ant for food but the ant turned him down. This shows that there is no food for a lazy man.

The story of the tortoise and the birds at the feast where the tortoise choose to be called 'Unu dum' meaning 'all of you' with the intention of claiming that all the food that was brought for them belong to him alone. Out of annoyance, the birds requested for their wings they gave to tortoise and instantly, the tortoise incurred the wrath of the birds for cheating on them. He received instant punishment. In this story, children will learn that cheating is not good.

The story of 'Udara Nwa Enwe Nne' (The motherless child's udara) talks about the woman who starved her step-son and refused to give him the 'udara' she bought from the market, after giving her own son. Later the step-son got the 'udara' seed and planted it. It grew and bore fruit through some magical means. The step-mother made an attempt to prevent the boy from enjoying his 'udara' tree. She sent her own son to climb the 'udara' tree and pluck all the fruits. The boy chanted some musical incantation and his half-brother is carried off into the sky. The step-mother out of fear begged her step-son to reverse the musical incantation. The step-son reversed the curse and the 'udara' tree returned to its normal position and his half-brother came down. With this story, the children will know that wickedness and maltreatment of others is not good. It also warns people of the dire consequences of committing such an offence and its punishment.

Another story that helps to preserve Igbo custom of values is the story of 'Enenebe Eje Oru'. This is a beautiful girl, the only child of her parents. She was always refusing to marry people that proposed to marry her. Her friends told her that too much turning people down will make her to marry a python. One day, a very handsome young man came to seek for her hand in marriage and she accepted. In Igbo culture before marriage, there used to be an intermediary (onye akaebe) who will investigate the behavior and family of the bride to be and the groom to be. When 'Enenebe Eje Oru' informed her parents about the marriage between her and this handsome young man, they informed her of the investigation which is to done in accordance with Igbo marriage custom. She refused to listen to her parents and forcefully followed the young man without knowing that the young man was a python. On their way to the young man's house, 'Enenebe Eje Oru' asked him where his house was, the young man lied to her that his parents did not like the noise of the town that is why they built their house in the bush. Foolishly 'Enenebe Eje Oru' believed him. When they got into the bush, this young man turned into a big python and devoured 'Enenebe Eje Oru'. This story teaches the children and the youths the importance of the custom of their land and also warns them to always listen and obey their parents in all things.

The story of tortoise and dog shows how peace was restored and the effect of peace in the community. In the land of the animals, famine was a big challenge but in the midst of it, the dog was not affected. The tortoise asked the dog how he has managed to survive. The dog told the tortoise that it was through a wrestling which takes place in the land of the goat that he got all the meat he used to eat and that it wasn't easy. There is a law guiding the wrestling competition: anyone who loses will not return back. He automatically becomes meat for his opponent. If you win, your opponent will be your meat. This information helped tortoise and he followed the dog to the wrestling venue. Tortoise had confidence in himself and that made him to go for the wrestling. Tortoise succeeded in the wrestling and came back with the dog. He then had peace of mind brought by his bravery. This story teaches us that whatever anyone wants to do, there is need to be convinced within oneself and be confident. No one should be afraid of taking risks or asking questions. One should also be ready to take whatsoever comes out of his actions. Asking questions when one is confuse about any issue of life at times brings solutions to problems and restores peace of mind. This is the principle the tortoise used to know the secret of dog's wellbeing in the mist of famine.

### 3.3 The use of songs

The society recognizes the value of oral and written expressions in inculcating morals in the society. In Igbo land, people use different kinds of songs to teach good values and morals. Some of these songs have been used to condemn societal vices, while some have been used to encourage hard work. Let us examine some of these songs:

1. Edina Edina!  
Oh oh oh  
Edina Edina oh o o  
Oh oh oh  
Edina Edina oh o o  
Edina ga-agwa m ebe o jere mgbe ọnwá n'eti oh oh o o  
Edina ga-agwa m ebe o jere mgbe ọnwá n'eti oh oh o o  
Edina mụrụ ụmụ na-abụọ, ha ncha bụ ashawo oh oh o o  
Edina nwere moto na-abụọ ma ukwu ka o ji aga oh oh o o  
Edina Edina oh oh o o.

#### Translation 1

Edina Edina!  
Oh oh oh  
Edina Edina oh o o  
Oh oh oh  
Edina Edina oh o o  
Edina will tell me where she went to in the moon light oh oh oo  
Edina will tell me where she went to in the moon light oh oh oo  
Edna has two children but they are all prostitutes oh oh oo  
Edina has two cars but she treks always oh oh oo  
Edina Edina oh oh oo

This song is a satirical song that deals with immorality. It is used to sanitize the society more especially youths. With this song, the youths will know that Igbo people frowns at the sexual immorality, they would like to avoid anything that will involve them in such act.

The second song below is taken from Omaluize (1977) [20]. It is about a rich pregnant woman who desired to eat the caterpillar that usually fall from the tree near her house but she could not struggle with the animals that usually gather to pick the caterpillar. She pleaded with them to allow her pick some. They all refused except the animal called Ogini who had compassion on her and gave her the caterpillar to eat. In appreciation, she promised to give her daughter's hand in marriage to him when she put to bed as a reward for his kindness to her in time of need. When the time was ripe for daughter to marry, goat came and was turned down. When Ogini came, he was welcome and was giving Onalu, the woman's daughter in marriage.

2.i. Kpam! Kpam! Kpam!

Ole anu na-aku n'uzo?	- Kparanuma
Ole anu na-aku n'ozu?	- Kparanuma
O bu ewu na-aku n'uzo	- Kparanuma
Wuwuru bi chighaa azu	- Kparanuma
I nyere m egu ona?	- Kparanuma
Oge m di ime Onalu	- Kparanuma
Onalu aku ego e e	- Kparanuma
Anu turu agwa ga-alu Onalu	- Kparanuma

Translation 2.i.

Knock! Knock! Knock!	
Which animal is knocking at the door?	- Kparanuma
Which animal is knocking at the door?	- Kparanuma
Goat is knocking at the door	- Kparanuma
You goatee go back	- Kparanuma
Did you give me caterpillar?	- Kparanuma
When I was pregnant of Onalu	- Kparanuma
Onalu is for wealth	- Kparanuma
Only the spotted animal will marry Onalu	- Kparanuma

2.ii. Kpam! Kpam! Kpam!

Ole anu na-aku n'uzo?	- Kparanuma
Ole anu na-aku n'ozu?	- Kparanuma
O bu Ogini na-aku n'uzo	- Kparanuma
Gigiri gi batawa o o	- Kparanuma
I nyere m egu ona o o	- Kparanuma
Oge m di ime Onalu o o	- Kparanuma
Onalu aku nwa	- Kparanuma
O bu ga ga-alu Onalu	- Kparanuma

Translation 2.ii.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Which animal is knocking at the door?	- Kparanuma
Which animal is knocking at the door?	- Kparanuma
Ogini is knocking at the door	- Kparanuma
Gigiri you come inside o o	- Kparanuma
You gave me caterpillar to eat	- Kparanuma
When I was pregnant of Onalu	- Kparanuma
Onalu is a child of wealth o	- Kparanuma
You are the one to marry Onalu o	- Kparanuma
And they lived happily	

This song is teaching us kindness. Children will learn the virtue of being kind to their parents, siblings, elderly ones and to everyone in the society.

Another aspect of Folklore that is ethical in orientation is greeting. Greeting for appropriate occasion are thought to the children at any available opportunity. Children are indoctrinated with societal values like showing respect for parents, elders, seniors and age mates through various agencies like parents, older siblings or members of the society, even their peers. These forms of informal education are so practical because they are dramatized for them to emulate or imitate, and that is why dramatic method of teaching has been adjudged the most effective over the years.

## 5. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that we have seen the usefulness of oral literature as catalyst of enhancing moral value among the Igbo people. In the past, proverbs, storytelling and songs were created by the society to inculcate moral discipline and appropriate behavior. But today morality has gone haywire and the nation is witnessing all sort of moral decadence and inappropriate conduct. The benefits highlighted in this paper will indeed change the life style of the citizenry and make them better human beings. These important benefits derived from the lessons from folktales help to disseminate and promote Igbo culture from one generation to another and maintain a peaceful coexistence. They play the function of educating both the children and the adults that may have been misled by the influence of the social media to be good citizens. There is no doubt that the knowledge of oral literature is essential in molding and remolding the lives of the people that own and practice it. Introducing oral literature at all levels of the school system will help inculcate high level moral societal values on the citizenry. Chiegeonu (2007:101-109) [21] suggests that oral literature should be included in the secondary school curriculum and should follow the three genres of literature - prose, poetry and drama to make it closer to the present generation so as to preserve the moral values and have sanity, peace and political stability in Nigeria.

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. This paper recommends that in spite the effect of modernization on our society, parents and elders should try as much as possible to continue to use proverbs, songs and storytelling to inculcate moral values to the younger ones.
2. The Igbo literary authors should be encouraged to write more texts that teach the moral values of the community so as to maintain peace and order in the society.
3. Giving that the Federal Government of Nigeria is very much concerned with fostering national integration, peace and unity through language education, it should provide adequate funding for the survey of Nigeria language project with a view to ensuring its immediate implementation which include: language planning, language development and language use purposes.

4. Oral literature should be included in language education curriculum at all levels. This will expose the younger generation to the acceptable societal values.

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