

The Igbo Folktale: Performance Conditions and Internal Characteristics

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The popularity of the folktale among the Igbo is easily evident in the varying dialectical terminologies with which it is associated. These include *ifo, ife, iro, akuko ufe, akuko ufere, ufe, akuko ifo, inu, ilu, ihwe, and ihwo*. The folktale in Igbo culture enjoys this popularity for more than one reason: it has an entertainment value, it serves a didactic mode for child-rearing, and it is a memorable artistic genre. There is no doubt that the Igbo folktale tradition is on the wane, due in part to the influence of modernization—about which the Igbo have shown much enthusiasm. Equally true is the fact that modernity has to a considerable extent taken education and entertainment away from the family and the folk community and given these functions to such formal social institutions as the school and the popular media.

In spite of these prevailing social changes in Igboland, the folktale remains perhaps the most performed and enjoyed artistic form in the typical villages. Even in some Igbo urban areas where "the past, painfully aware of its weakening hold on the living but reluctant nonetheless to let go of them for good; the present, mindful to be sure of legacies at its disposal but equally conscious that the changing scene urges are adjustment of means and goals" (Okpewho 1983:72), the folktale is as fervently practiced as it is done in the rural communities. In spite of the decades of exposure to Westernization, most elderly Igbo, educated or not, would combine the use of proverbs and folktales in speeches delivered before young audiences to whom these verbal forms are often puzzling. Although the tales in such speech contexts serve anecdotal—sometimes even proverbial—purposes, their sources point to the folk narrative tradition.¹

This paper is an effort to delineate the general conditions for the performance of the Igbo tale rather than to study any single Igbo folktale

performance. In addition, an attempt will be made towards analyzing the internal characterization of the Igbo story which makes it easily recognizable as an Igbo literary art form. To achieve these objectives, a pan-Igbo view of the folktale is adopted. In other words, there will be no effort to focus on dialectal or geopolitical distinctions, these being tangential to my emphasis here.

Because of the interrelatedness of the terms, performance as a folkloric concept is often used interchangeably with behavior and conduct. However, Dell Hymes has sought to show their distinctness while acknowledging their links as situational concepts. He has described behavior as anything or everything that happens in a performative context; conduct, for Hymes, is the behavior which keeps to social norms, while performance is the cultural behavior for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience (1975:18).

In his theory of verbal art performance, Richard Bauman gives the concept of performance more depth and clarity when he regards it as involving "on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content" (1977:11). Bauman further states that "performance . . . calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performance with special intensity" (1977:11). In the case of Igbo folktale performance, the special intensity is highlighted since there are steps and processes which ought to be followed by a narrator if he or she is not to be booed at by the audience. "The members of a typical audience in Africa," remarks Kofi Anyidoho, "will probably not applaud a bad performance out of politeness and then walk away mumbling their disgust to themselves" (1991:43). It is this likely reaction of an African audience to a poor performance that has made Helen Nabasuta (1983:46-47) and Kwesi Yankah (1985:145) regard the performative exercise as risk-taking.

These apparently distinct but related elements of the performative context are basic to our identification of what constitutes the performance conditions and internal features of the Igbo tale, for they underscore that "without relating the oral text to the context it becomes a lifeless file of words" (Nwachukwu-Agbada 1988:59). One of the principal issues arising from performance context and audience influence is the question of judgment. In other words, who are those qualified to criticize the performance of an Igbo folktale? What Stanley Macebuh says about the criticism of old African art would also apply to the assessment of the Igbo folktale aesthetic: "except on those occasions when expert opinion was called for, the farmer, the hunter, and the wine-tapper could be relied upon to muster a sufficiently meaningful response to art, and this merely as part

of their general awareness as citizens of a community of beings" (1974:22). Although the audience of an Igbo folktale session is usually made up of children, the tellers could be adults or children; aesthetic verdicts could be delivered by anyone who is sufficiently confident of his or her knowledge of performance criteria. This makes performance more risky since any violation of the order and balance in a folktale narration attracts an interruption from the audience, the age of the listeners notwithstanding.

I

The Igbo folktale session usually starts after twilight, never before. Neither does it occur before dinner since it is meant for relaxation and education. Moreover, because the people are mostly farmers, folktale telling follows every other domestic chore. Night too adds its own aura to the realization of a typical folktale plot. Abarry, writing on storytelling among the Gas of Ghana, says nighttime is the choicest time because it "provides a fantasy-inducing aura emanating from the ethereal effulgence of the moon, or the wistful scintillations of the stars; and the dismal glow of the evening log-fire" (1982:24). Among the Igbo it is an anomaly to narrate folktales in daytime. In fact, only orphans are authorized by tradition to tell and listen to folktales in the daytime, presumably to forestall license and laziness among the children who, rather than perform their domestic tasks, may swap tales.

In practice, specific Igbo market nights are sanctioned for storytelling—a further way of reducing idleness and unmerited relaxation. In parts of the state of Imo, the Igbo set aside the *Orie*² market night as the designated time for telling tales. Two traditional events gave rise to the choice of *Orie* market night for such a purpose. The first was that by tradition the *Orie* day was usually the day on which a wife or wives and their children were duty-bound to work for the man, the owner of the household. This was especially true in polygamous families. The man, on the other hand, was supposed to feast his household after the day's work on his farms. Secondly, the *Orie* day was, and is still, a day in most Imo-Igbo communities on which the *umunna* (kinsmen) gather to drink *Mmi Ori* (*Orie* drink) or *Awuruawu Mmi* (collective drink). On *Orie* day every member of the community whose palm tree is tapped surrenders all that day's palm wine to kinsmen. This is the background for choosing *Orie* day for folktale narration. In other words, not only would the owner of the household be in a good mood, his wives and children having worked on his farms, but all adult members of the family would also have taken hornfuls of palm wine at the *Mmi Ori* gathering and would therefore be very relaxed to tell tales if they wanted to do so.

Although storytelling sessions among the Igbo can take place all the year round, in practice they only occur in the dry season, and most often on moonlit nights. The dry season is a more pleasurable time for two reasons: first, the time is auspicious, the ground being neater and tidier to sit on; and second, the burdens of farm work are virtually over for the year, light work on the farm ensuring a light-heartedness as night draws near. Otherwise a typical farm day is a tiring day, after which parents go to sleep early. Moreover, real farm work takes place during the rainy season. Again, when the beauty of the moonlit night is not threatened by rainfall and its nimbus clouds, the compound or village ground may be so wet as to make a gathering of children virtually impossible. However, night tales are not told when someone has died, either within the kin-group or within the village.

II

The beginning and closure of Igbo tales³ are easily recognizable since they are marked by stock phrases. The narrator begins by drawing the attention of children with formulaic utterances such as the following:

Narrator: Ụmuaka, o nwere akuko m ga akoro unu.
Children, I have a tale to tell you.

Audience: Koro anyi ka obi di anyi mma.
Koro anyi kama ya dikwa mma.

Tell us so as to make us happy.
Tell us but let it be a nice one.

If the narrator is a child, she will not address the audience, comprised mostly of children, as *umuaka* (children); she will often say "*umunne m na umunna m*" ("my brothers and sisters"). When the folktale session is part of the whole program of typical moonlight play, including *igba oro* (hide-and-seek game), tales could be preceded by riddling, proverb contests, or *iko onu* (verbal insult exchange). Occasionally, a proverb segment of the call-and-response pattern between the narrator and the audience, called *mgbusu ufere*, comes before the formulaic introduction:

Narrator: Agbara raa nsi,
If a deity begins to show off,

Audience: A gwa ya osisi e ji tuo ya.
You tell him the tree with which it was carved.

- Narrator: A na agwa ntị ma o geghi;
You tell the ear and it does not listen;
- Audience: E bere isi; e bere ntị.
You cut off the head; you cut off the ear.
- Narrator: Isi kote ebu
The head that attracts the wasp
- Audience: O gbaa ya.
Gets the sting.
- Narrator: A nọọ chaa ngwo;
You finish a tree's palm wine;
- Audience: A kpọọ ya okpokoro.
You call the tree an empty log.
- Narrator: E liwe ụzọ liwe ehi.
Tether a road and a cow.
- Audience: Ma toro ụzọ ghara ehi.
I'll take the road and forget about the cow.
- Narrator: A gbara aka na-azọ ala.
You struggle for a piece of land without anything.
- Audience: Onye ji ji ana-akonye.
He who has seed-yams continues to plant them.

There are many proverbs that fit into the above paradigm. Apart from their use for claiming audience attention, the call-and-response structure of the proverbs hints at the ultimate message of the story. In other words, the meaning of the proverbs ought to bear out the contents and moral of the ensuing story. Otherwise the narrator has not done his or her job well. The essence of the proverb session—in contrast with the proverb contest—is an opportunity for the narrator to test his popularity. If the narrator is not wanted, his proverbs will not be responded to. This happens especially when two narrators are simultaneously seeking the attention of a single audience; the narrator whose call-proverbs elicit a response is the desired narrator. The other narrator may wait for his or her turn or may forever wait to be heard. This treatment is usually reserved for child-narrators; on the other hand, the adult-narrators, especially invited to narrate tales, most often do not suffer such ridicule or competition. There are three reasons why an intending narrator may be discouraged by the audience: first, he or

she is not popular among members of the peer group; second, his or her stories are known to be usually dull and uninteresting; and third, it is suspected that the narrator is about to tell a story that is commonplace or that has been heard over and over again.

The beginning of the story proper may also be preceded by another narrator-audience interaction:

Narrator: O ruru otu mgbe.
There was a time.

Audience: Otu mgbe e ruo.
A time there was.

In the introduction to *Omalinze*, E. N. Emenanjo says this part of the storytelling among the Aniocha-Igbo may be introduced by the narrator respectfully requesting his audience to give him *nzu* (a native chalk):

Narrator: Yenụ m nzu.
Give me nzu.

Audience: Igwoa, o lea.
Here it is.

These stages constitute checks. In a situation where a narrator-to-be is not acceptable to the audience, his calls could be ignored at any of these stages. If he receives the appropriate responses as he progresses, the storyteller may now go straight to the tale. Sometimes the tale text may begin with a proverb or proverbs. These proverbs are not meant to elicit a response but are tied more neatly to the story. There may or may not be an immediate explanation of the introductory proverb, but the events of the story must bear out its relevance. In the Igbo tale "Nnyemaka Di N'Etiti Umu-anumanu" ("The Mutual Assistance among Animals"), the story begins with:

Ndi ilu turu otu ilu si na onye bitechara ugba otu o miri na-eji isi ekwe ala ekele.

Proverb-sayers say that he who must cut all branches of an *ugba* tree shakes the hands of the ground with his head.

An explanation follows almost immediately:

Ilu a putara na o bughi ogbe ugba dum ka onye na-ebite ugba nwere ike ibite.

This proverb means that it is not every part of the ugba tree that the tree-climber can cut.

Having used the proverb and its elaboration as the thesis and restriction, the illustration then follows. The illustration begins with a time and a setting which exist in almost all Igbo tales. The "time of action" is often indicated as *otu mgbe* (a time or once upon a time), *o nwere oge o bu* (there was a time), *na oge gara aga* (in times past), *n'oge gboo gboo* (in the dim past), or *otu ubochi* (one day). There is no effort to place the time of action within any kind of calendrical system, except perhaps to say that the action took place in the dry or rainy season—the two principal seasons in Igboland. To indicate the timelessness of the story-events to be narrated, a story's time-setting could be ascribed to *mgbe uwa ka di oḣuru / ka gba otọ* (when the world was still new/naked), *mgbe ezi di n'ukwu ukwa* (when breadfruit trees dotted the entire earth), or *mgbe uwa di n'anyu isi* (when the world was still in darkness). Two impressions are encouraged by such a timing mode: first, there is a difference between the world of the time of action and our world; and second, the moral of the story is time-tested. These together help to heighten a tale's credibility.

The place of action, on the other hand, is often distant from the human landscape. The place suggesting a human habitat would be identified merely as *n'otu obodo* (in a certain town or village), *n'otu obodo nta* (in a small community), *n'otu umunna* (in a certain kin-group), or *n'ala di anya* (in a distant land). The eerie places in a typical Igbo folktale include the land of spirits (*ala ndi mmuo*) of animals (*ala umuanumanu*), or simply "far, far land." There are in Igbo tales cases of identifiable locales, but the use of them would still be done with some notion of dimness as the names of the locales may either have lost currency or would not clearly be identified with an extant Igbo town. The most recurring of the identifiable places is Idu whose ruler is called *Oba*; together these would be referred to as *Idu na Oba* (Idu and her king). Recent Igbo studies point to Benin (the land of Edo-speakers) as Idu.

This may yet open out an avenue for further inquiries as to any connection between the Igbo and the Edo in terms of consanguinity, trade, and technological cooperation in the historical past. There is, for instance, an Igbo proverb which says, "*Onye gburu awolo ziri onwe ya Idu*" ("He who kills a leopard has sent himself to Idu"). The proverb refers to the time of the influence of Oba Idu when all leopards that were killed within his area of authority were sent to him as a mark of respect. It is not clear whether this shows that the influence of Oba Idu stretched to Igboland or whether the Igbo coiners of the proverb were reflecting what they, as itinerant travellers, observed happening within the actual Idu (Edo) Kingdom.

There is another reference to an existing human settlement, Chukwu. In "Mbe na Chukwu," the Tortoise is *mbe*; but it is not very clear whether Chukwu refers to the supreme God, as people have always interpreted it, or whether it refers to *Arochukwu*, the seat of the notorious Igbo oracle, *Ibini Ukpabi*, destroyed in 1902 by the British military. The diagram in *Mbediogu*, the book of Igbo tortoise folktales in which the story appears, shows the tortoise and the bust of a being who is supposed to be the Almighty God. In Igbo tales referring to the supreme God, Nwoga has called for caution, saying there is every reason to suggest that the Chukwu in question may in fact be referring to *Arochukwu*, the town that popularized the worship of the Chukwu deity (1984:43). There are two instances in the "Mbe na Chukwu" folktale that Mbe referred to Chukwu as "Chukwu Ukpabi," suggesting some connection with *Ibini Ukapabi*.

A large corpus of Igbo stories is punctuated with songs. Ifionu suggests the term *akuko na ifo* for such tale types since *akuko* is stories and *ifo* is folk songs, "bearing their own stories without any prose setting" (nd:26). This must be a new coinage because *akuko ifo* or *akuko iro* among the Anambra-Igbo refers to folktales as a whole. Okoh rather laments that "the element of narrative texture most frequently discarded is the songs," even though "one of the foremost features of African tales is the preponderance in theme of songs" (1988:36). It is therefore a misrepresentation of the Igbo folktale tradition if collectors, for their own convenience, drop the songs from the stories when Igbo aesthetic judgment tends to regard stories that bear songs within them as superior tales.

The songs in fact constitute the entertainment of Igbo tales and are highly valued for their poetic qualities. Tales which bear such songs that can be shared between a narrator and the audience are more desirable than those that are sung by the narrator alone. This is perhaps responsible for the popularity of "Nwakadinikporo," which by Ifionu's typology would be regarded simply as *Ifo*, a folksong. Whether or not a tale bears a song or songs can determine the audience's desire to hear the narration, as mentioned earlier. The audience can know in advance whether a given tale bears a song or songs, or it can guess, from the musical instrument brought to the narration arena by an intending narrator, that a story will bear a song. Such instruments include *ekwe* (slit wooden drum), *ubu* (native guitar), *ogene* (gong), *udu* (earthen pot), or *igba* (talking drum). Sometimes a narrator uses *ekwerikwe*, the wooden xylophone. In the absence of these instruments, the narrator may instruct that his or her audience clap or hum in order to maintain some level of mellifluity. In addition, this enhances the beauty of the story and makes it more memorable.

Furthermore, the songs ensure a rapport between the storyteller and his audience, and this is maintained from the beginning of the tale with its

formulaic introduction. Nwosu informs us that a good narrator "enters his audience just as his audience enters into him through the intermittent responses at the beginning, middle and the end of the story" (1981:69). Only Finnegan has emphasized in detail this dimension of African tales: "In all this the participation of the audience is essential. It is common for members of it to be expected to make verbal contributions—spontaneous exclamations, actual questions, echoing of the speaker's words, emotional reaction to the development of yet another parallel and repetitious episode.... The audience contributes to the choruses of the songs so often introduced into the narration, and without which, in many cases, the stories would be only a bare framework of words" (1970:385). Songs enable the narrator to achieve this rapport, especially in the middle of long tales. Longer tales without songs tend to be boring, unless, of course, they are imbued with a particularly sustaining dramatic effect.

Although most of the songs are integral to the tales bearing them, they serve more as interactional, recreational, and diversionary devices than as techniques for advancing the content of the tales. On their own, some of these songs bear no immediate meaning or meanings to the action of the story. Most often the refrains in particular have no meanings; their import lies in their service as sound and rhythmic devices. In "Ndi Oru Nna m Agu" ("The Tiger's Workers"), the refrain of the song borne by the tale is *Awuru tenji-tenjilo / Awuru tenji-tenji owe / Awuru tenji-tenjilo*. Egudu's "Working for the Tiger," the equivalent of "Ndi Oru Nna m Agu" in his *A Calabash of Wisdom* (1973), shows the refrain of the song as *kiri bamba kiri*. (In "Osa na Umuanumanu," the refrain of the song is *kwa ngele ngele geleree / kwangele*). A popular folksong refrain, *ajambele*, is now an Igbo neologism for jibberish or an uncoordinated account of an event. Often the little meaning that may be derived from some refrains are located in the ideophonic sounds. In the folksong "Kpoo! kpoo! kpoo!" the refrain is

kpoo! kpoo! kpoo!
 Anatara kporogidi kporokporo anataara'.
 kpoo! kpoo! kpoo!
 anataara kporogidi kporokporo anataara!

Occasionally the sounds of the musical instruments that ought to be used in the rendition of the song are ideophonically imitated. In "Enendu Igboanugo. Nwa ka Nna Ya" ("Enendu Igboanugo, The Child Who Claims to be Greater than his Father"), the sounds of *udu* (earthen pot) and *ogene* (gong) are imitated in *Ti tim ko kom, ti tim ko kom*. Ojaadili's dog's wooden whistle, *Oja* in the "Ojaadili" folktale, is said to have sounded *Ngororo ngoro didi ngoro* when Ojaadili, the wonder wrestler, decided to wrestle with his *chi*, his guardian god.

Apart from songs, another means for keeping the interactional level between the narrator and the audience is the use of transitional expressions such as *ugwua* (now), *ge ni nti ka unu nuru ihe mere nu* (you listen so that you hear what happened), *unu o mara ihe mere nu?* (do you know what happened?), *nke mbo* (first), and *ozo kwa / ozo kwasi* (again or also). Others include the Igbo equivalents of *and*, *so*, *when*, *therefore*, and *consequently*. In the middle of the tale, a teller may experience embarrassments from members of the audience if he or she is violating the narrative flow with inconsequential and illogical diversions, even if for explanatory purposes. A member of the audience, we must remember, is free to question any aspect of the narration once there is an indication of its incongruity or disalignment with the overall run of the tale. A narrator is bound to answer any question as logically as possible; otherwise, the tale might as well end there and then. Consequently, the performer of Igbo folk narratives must practice storytelling in private. The practice can entail a narrator-to-be recounting the tale to himself in order to be sure of its unity, or first trying it out before younger brothers and sisters in his immediate family on days when the storytelling sessions are not likely to be held. Some children have their mothers listen to their tales for critical purposes before they go out to a larger storytelling arena.

The end of an Igbo folktale is marked by a restatement; this is especially so in a tale with an announced thesis at the very beginning of the story. The restatement may be summed up in a proverb or it could be a descriptive summary of the narrative's moral. In "Obaraedo," the narration concludes with *ihe mmuta* (what is learned): children must always obey their parents. In "Eze Riri Ji Aja" ("The King that Ate the Sacrificial Yam"), the moral is that we must not be gluttonous. In the typical Igbo "Why" tale, there is at the end an effort to summarize the central point of the tale in a sentence or two. In "Nnunu Na-Ekwu Okwu" ("The Bird that Speaks"), for instance, the story tells us why human beings do not just eat any bird and ends in this way:

Site oge ahu, ndi mmadu na-akpacharazi anya ha n'iri anu nnonu. O buru na nnonu ekwuo okwu, a mara na a naghị eri ya eri.

Since then, human beings are often careful when eating birds. If a bird makes an utterance, you know it is not edible.

The tale telling would end with the exchange of conventionalized formulas between the narrator and audience:

Narrator: Chaakpii / Chaakwi / Taakpii / Taakwii / Ootii!

Audience: Woo / Yoo / Haa / Oyoo / Iyaa!

A well-told tale usually receives spontaneous applause from the audience. According to Emenanjo, a well-narrated tale merits the teller the Igbo greeting of *nnoa* (welcome) because folktale-telling is regarded as a journey; the successful rendition of a tale is likened to a safe arrival from a long journey. As Emenanjo puts it, "Is it not that the audience is welcoming the narrator from the world of make-believe to which his tale has forced him to travel? And are all folktales not set in worlds of make-believe? The world where men, animals, and spirits live cheek by jowl" (1977: xiv). A poorly related story would either attract a dignified silence or a sneaking comment such as "This one is not sweet." Such a comment among children could lead to a fracas or exchange of insults.

III

Part of the aesthetics of the Igbo tale resides in its stock characterization as well as in the naming of the *dramatis personae*. Characterization and naming enhance the symbolic complexity of a tale. Every character, whether human, animal, spirit, or plant, behaves like a human being—an acceptable phenomenon in the Igbo folktale tradition, where reality is highly fluid. Moreover, because of "the old society's pressing sense of the real, the desire to have 'the world inapprehensible clutched,' it would seem logical to suggest that it had human experience as its fundamental frame of reference" (Okpewho 1975:43-44). Specific recurring stock characters in Igbo tales include the *dibia* (medicine man), *oka mgba* (champion wrestler), *dinta* or *onye egbe ohia* (hunter), *eze* (king), *nwanyi aga* (barren woman), *nwanyi eshikpe/ nwanyị ajadu* (widow) and the polygamous man. Among the unforgettable animal characters that possess human characteristics are tortoise (*mbe*, *mbekwu*, *mbediogu*, *nnabe*, *nna nnabe*) and his wife (*alij*, *aniga*). Others are Tiger (*agu*), Antelope (*ele*, *ene*), Elephant (*enyi*), Duiker (*mgbada*), Toad (*awo*), Bird (*nnunu*), Kite (*egbe*), Python (*eke*), and the domestic animals—Dog (*nkiṭa*), Sheep (*aturu*), and Goat (*Eghu*). Human beings can converse with the creatures, as in the folksong "Nwa Nnunu Nwa Nnunu Nta," in which a human child on a farmland asks a small bird, possibly a wren, what it is doing in a maizefield:

Nwa nnunu nwa nnunu nta.
 krujanja kurunja.
 I no ebe ahu a mee gini?
 kurujanja kurunja.
 A no m ebe a aturijo oka.

kurujanja kurunja.

Little bird, so little bird.

krujanja kurunja.

What are you doing up there?

krujanja kurunja.

I am pecking maize grains here.

krujanja kurunja.

These are animal characters but they act, cry, laugh, and talk like human beings.

The animals also reason like humans. Emenanjo remarks that in the Igbo folktale "one really requires a willing suspension of disbelief to comprehend and appreciate what happens therein: with animals speaking and behaving like humans, with the elements speaking and behaving like men, with men being born and reaching maturity within the twinkle of an eye" (1982:61). These animals are, like human beings, victims of such weaknesses as envy, treachery, distrust, passion, and hatred. However, those who are guilty of evil are adequately punished except Tortoise, the master trickster who is never tracked down. Tortoise plays on the intelligence of both human beings and animals in a majority of the trickster stories. In some tales, he may be caught and exposed, yet somehow he manages to survive and in the end makes fun of the person or animal who attempts to expose him. Tortoise is usually a wise old man. As the Igbo say, "O nwere mgbe Mbe bu okoro?" ("Is there ever anytime that Tortoise is a youth?").

The spirits also have a stock portrayal. They are often said to have many heads, always speaking through their noses, having legs which are as tiny as broomsticks and mouths at their back. Although this is a picture of ugliness, Macebuh reminds us that "ugliness in African art can at times serve the function of the sublime, precisely because it is employed often as a means of duplicating the deformity of human behavior" (1974:17). The spirits and animals inhabit landscapes much like those of humans. Although the spirits behave like human beings and inhabit a human-like world, their abode is usually a far-away land or place where any human being visiting them may have to cross seven seas and seven hills.

Naming is important in imaginative literatures like the Igbo folktale. As Izevbaye has noted, "apart from acting as pointers to meaning in certain kinds of narrative (folktales, allegories, romances), names help to characterize the work for the reader," or for the listener (1981:166). In his study of Gbaya folk narratives, Noss observes that "names may be a device for telling the reader something about the character bearing the name" (1972:79). In allegorical tales, characters reflect their names such as *Obi*

oma (Kindness), *Ebere* (Forgiveness), *Iwe* (Anger), *Ekworo* (Jealousy), and *Mma* (Beauty). Characters may bear names which are less abstract but which nevertheless reveal something about their lives or their inner motivations. The very common ones include *Eze Onyeagwalam* (King Do-Not-Advise-Me), *Arugbukatam* (I-Have-Been-Cheated-Enough), *Anukambeako* (The Animal-That-Is-Wiser-Than-The-Tortoise), and *Akaanu* (Strong-Headedness). Some of these names not only serve to represent characters, but also to intimate the direction of the story. Some of the characters, particularly the animal characters, bear names which depict human perception of them. For instance, *Nwaeveleako*, *Ebiliako*, or *Ebuneako* is the name that describes the intelligent ram. *Nurumosisi* or *Oturukpokpo* is the mouthy woodpecker who is said to have boasted that on the day his mother would die, he would peck down a tree. But when the day arrived, he had boils on his lips! *Okiri* or *Okili* of the weaverbird family is both noisy and impatient to learn, which is why his nest, unlike that of the *asha* (another member of the weaverbird household), lacks the artistic touch. The animals are variously characterized from human estimation of their appearance and behavior; for example, *Mgbada ozo* (Fleet-Footed Duiker), *Aturu ilu-ilu* (Sheep, the foolish one), *Eghu, o ta mgbugha* (Goat, the cud chewer), *Ele/Ene nwe ngwugwa* (Antelope, the master stylish sprinter), and *Ugo nwaoma* (Eagle, the beautiful one).

One internal characteristic of the Igbo narrative tradition which enhances the level of its symbolism is numbering. The significance of certain numbers in Igbo rituals somehow finds a similar expression in folktales. The most recurring numbers are two, three, four, and seven. The number two serves to contrast characters such as the saintly and the devilish, the tall and the short, the loved and the hated, and the childless and the productive. This contrasting ensures a passion for balance and order, in keeping with the Igbo view of the universe. This has been described as duality or dualism.⁴ The number three is also ritualistic. The three forms of entities inherent in Igbo thought are the physical, the spiritual, and the conceptual. These, like the tripod, offer another unconscious level of balance for the Igbo. The number four is also important in Igbo ritualistic order because it bears the significance of the four Igbo market days of *Eke*, *Orie (Oye)*, *Afo* and *Nkwo*. Diviners would always ask their clients to "greet Eke / greet Orié / greet Afo / greet Nkwo" as a way of invoking the spirits inhabiting the Igbo market squares. Seven is a crucial number in *Ozo* title-taking, about the highest title in traditional Igboland. Igbo folktales in which spirits are characters would always refer to those spirits with seven heads, whose abode is seven seas away from the land of human beings, and who visit the human world once every seven years. Spirits with seven heads, in contrast to those with fewer

heads, are usually thought to be dastardly and resilient. It is common to hear in Igbo tales about a hunter (*dinta*) who has seven hunting dogs and who crosses seven seas, climbs seven hills and in the end comes home with seven games. The polygamous male characters would often have seven wives whose allegiance the men test from time to time using their self-determined criteria. In "Nwa-Ka-Nna," the hated wife among the seven wives has a male child while the others have daughters, usually undervalued in Igbo culture. In other words, the man has seven children from seven wives. Clearly, the numbers two, three, four, and seven hold particular meaning in these tales; indeed, Igbo tales cannot be fully understood without some account taken of the significance of these numbers.

Finally, we should consider thematic and contentual pattern in our examination of the internal character of the Igbo folktale tradition. The stories focus primarily on the origin of the Igbo people, the explanation of some particular phenomenon (also referred to as "Why" or etiological stories), or the comical tricks perpetrated by the ubiquitous tortoise. Other interests of the Igbo tales include prowess and intelligence contests and tasks, what William Bascom identifies as "dilemma tales," and didactic themes (1972:143). These are about the neatest way one can at the moment classify the thematic preoccupations of the Igbo folktale. As noted earlier, the stories are generally told in order to epitomize a moral lesson, yet some of them are not primarily didactic. And of course, a child telling an obviously didactic tale may instead emphasize the song or the sheer poetry of the tale since he or she may not yet be equipped to stress the moral dimensions of the narrated text. A related issue to the motifs of Igbo tales is their function or purpose in the society. Thus, the Igbo folk narrative tradition serves to stretch children's imagination, to cultivate their intelligence, to enhance their artistic expressiveness, as well as to put them in a simulated moral condition which calls for a moral decision. But most importantly, the Igbo folktale-telling tradition seeks to maintain some form of balance and harmony between individual desires and social norms and mores. These are realized in the use of contrast, satire, proverbiality, imagery, and music.

The folktale in Igbo culture enjoys a popularity among the people, not only because of its artistic fantasy, but also because of its ritual nature, the discipline it demands from its narrators, its creative and imaginative content, and its educative potentials. No doubt it is one Igbo artistic form which has been affected by the shift in the Igbo socialization paradigm, yet it remains a highly valued artistic genre. Therefore, a venture into a discussion of its performance conditions and an analysis of its internal character are useful means for further understanding the Igbo folktale. This study is a realization of the fact that since the folktale tradition is as old as the society itself, there must have percolated through time certain principles

and features which underlie its application, and without which performance may be regarded as inauthentic. Moreover, a study of the performance conditions and internal character of a folktale tradition is certainly crucial in establishing its poetics as an artistic form. In the case of the Igbo folktale heritage, its poetics would call for a knowledge of the dynamic patterns of the Igbo and African experience as well as an appreciation of those unwritten imperatives which have over time governed folktale creation or assessment in the culture.

Notes

1 On the other hand, I have argued elsewhere that folktales used for proverbial ends in speech or conversational contexts should be regarded as proverbs even for nonce occasions. This is how the Igbo regarded such tales. See chapter two of my Ph.D. thesis, *The Igbo Proverb: Communication and Creativity in Traditional Art* (University of Ibadan, 1990).

2 The Igbo have a four-day week corresponding to their four market days, *Eke*, *Orie* (*Oye*), *Afo*, and *Nkwọ*.

3 The stories referred to in this paper are drawn from personal recollections and published collections of Igbo tales: John Iroaganachi 1973; Romanus Egudu 1973; F.C. Ogbalu 1973; Anya Iwe 1976; E.N. Emenanjo 1977; F.C. Ogbalu 1975.

4 The notion of duality / dualism as an important Igbo philosophic construct has been discussed by a number of works: A.G. Leonard 1968, especially Section III, "The Dualism of the Natives"; Chieka Ifemesia 1979; Chinua Achebe 1975; and D.I. Nwoga 1984.

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