Folklore in Achebe's Novels

JOHN WILLIAM JOHNSON

The majority of secondary literature dealing with the forms of folklore employed by Chinua Achebe in his novels has concentrated on the proverb and the folktale. A deeper investigation into the pages of his novels, however, has revealed many other forms. This essay will attempt to isolate, describe, and give a few representative examples of these forms. Indeed, Achebe's literary use of folklore appears to have a subtle and powerful function, which will be outlined at the end of the essay.

Achebe states in his foreword to *A Selection of African Prose: Traditional Oral Texts* (ed. W. H. Whiteley; Oxford University Press, 1964) that he considers oratory one of the most important contexts for prosaic verbal art in Africa. Employing Achebe's own philosophy in his works, his characters make extensive use of oratorical embellishments, like the following one, in order to make their arguments more powerful:

> There is one word he said which entered my ear more than everything else — not only entered but built a house there. *(MOP: 119, i.e. A Man of the People, Doubleday, 1966)*

Oratory is also embellished by proverbs and this genre appears to be Achebe's favorite. There are 186 occurrences of 131 proverbs in his four novels. He quotes the following proverb most often (five times):

> Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life. *(TFA: 182; also in TFA-19; AOG-23, 155-56, 232) (TFA: 19, 182, i.e. Things Fall Apart, Heinemann, 1958; AOG: 23, 155, 232, i.e. Arrow of God, Doubleday, 1969)*
Achebe also uses several Wellerisms, which are specialized proverbs incorporating a quote from some character.

Eneke the bird was asked why he was always on the wing and he replied: "Men have learnt to shoot without missing their mark and I have learnt to fly without perching on a twig." (TFA: 183)

Closely aligned to oratory are "salutation names" (AOG:236), a form of Igbo praise-name. This is only one form of naming system so important to almost every African society. Achebe also employs other praise-names (both panegyric and pejorative) and nicknames, all of which have their special context and function in society. The traditional naming of children is exemplified in Ekwefi's desperate attempts to keep her children alive through the names she gives them. Nine die before one daughter, Ezinma, survives. Through this naming system she hoped to deal with, indeed to break, the cycle of the ogbanje child, which finally decided to live in the person of Ezinma. Some of her children were named: Onwumbiko, "Death, I implore You;" Ozoemena, "May It Not Happen Again;" and in final desperation, Onwuma, "Death May Please Himself." (TFA: 70)

Alluding to folktales is still another important device in oratory, and one in which a symbolic and often indirect criticism can be made of someone's behavior. But there are other contexts for the folktale such as the entertainment and, to a lesser degree, the education of children. Achebe employs several kinds of complete, albeit reconstructed, folktales as well as the often-quoted allusions. The most common kind of tale he uses is the fable, or didactic animal tale (TFA:28, 48, 68, 76, 127; AOG:16, 55, 142, 202, 208, 251, 261; MOP: 140; NLE: 18, 61, 87, 152, i.e. No Longer At Ease, Fawcett Pub., 1969). The Igbo trickster is the tortoise and four tales are quoted about him (TFA: 87, 90; NLE: 153; AOG: 204). Achebe also quotes three single-motif tales about human beings (TFA: 63; AOG: 29; MOP:118), a märchen (AOG:214), an endless chain tale (AOG:73), an anecdote (MOP:12), and two jocular tales (TFA:34; MOP:45).

Achebe's novels are rich in their references to Igbo legendry.
strates how widely a text may diffuse or how universally a given situation can act upon the human condition.

It's like the story of the girl who was given a form to fill in. She put down her name and her age. But when it came to sex, she wrote: "Twice a week." (NLE:116)

Two forms of legendry are employed by Achebe very often indeed, rumors and memorats. Rumors include the interesting story of how the old man's wife, who was very close to her husband in life, closely followed him in death (TFA:61). Achebe also mentions that there was a poem about their love in their youth. Rumor is often represented by the simplest of narratives, such as the following: It was even said they hanged one man who killed a missionary. (TFA:142)

One interesting description of how a rumor can exist in variant forms is the story of why the policeman lost his position.

He had been a police corporal who had served two years in jail for corruptly receiving ten shillings from a lorry driver. That was the official version, anyhow. The man's own story was that he had been framed because he had stood up against his white boss in pre-Independence days. I believe there was a third version which put the blame on enemies from another tribe. (MOP:117)

Memorats, or personal experience stories, are illustrated in several places. Obika's story of his encounter with the spirit (AOG:8) is one example which brings to mind one of Achebe's short stories, "Uncle Ben's Choice."

Although poetic forms are probably much more serious and prolific types of African verbal art, Achebe does not spend much time quoting or alluding to them. Nevertheless, some mention is made of quite a variety, amongst which are praise-poems (both panegyric and pejorative), children's rhymes, religious poems, dirges, lullabies, work songs, war chants, popular songs, and several unspecified genres. One unique poem, recorded in paragraph form, is a dirge composed entirely of proverb quotations (AOG:257).

Curses, prayers, and blessings are evidenced in Achebe's novels. Many greeting scenes, with the breaking of kola nut, are accompanied by prayers to the ancestors. Okonkwo places a curse on Nwoye when the latter leaves home, but we only learn about this in the succeeding novel (NLE:130).

Verbal folklore, then, permeates Achebe's novels. Gestural forms of traditional behavior, like the breaking of kolanut just mentioned, are equally prolific. Traditional greetings amongst the Igbo, for example, are accompanied by a host of other gestures. Upon entering a friend's obi one is seated on a goat skin mat or stool (both personal belongings) or on an earthen stool. Next, one is given a piece of chalk with which to draw one's personal emblem on the floor and with which to paint either one's toe or face. Kolanut is then served, followed by palmwine.


Perhaps the largest category of gestures is associated with religion and related activities based on belief systems. Picking fruit from the sacred Udala Tree, for instance, is tabu and is accompanied by intricate purification rites for those who violate the tabu (AOG:224). In another case, an Igbo woman "... circled her head with her right hand and cast the evil towards the shop" of a merchant who tried to take advantage of a blind beggar (MOP:81). Several sacrifices are described, including human sacrifice (TFA:8), the daily sacrifice to one's ancestors (TFA:36), and the yearly sacrifice to the earth goddess (TFA:16). Mutilation of the deceased ogbanje child is yet another traditional gesture (TFA:71, 167).

Another set of gestures is alluded to but not described, those of the dance (TFA:43, 43, 55; MOP:1). One gesture associated with dancers is traditional and apparently widespread in Africa, for it was described to me in Somalia, although I have not personally observed it. Good dancers are often rewarded by their admirers who stick paper money to their perspiring foreheads (AOG:131; MOP:15).

Oath-taking, which combines verbal and gestural folklore, like the greeting ceremonies mentioned above, appears in three places. A suspicious medicine man is made "... to take kolanut from the palm of a dead man and to swear he had no hand in the death." (AOG:225). And the wounded candidate "... tried instantly to seal the oath by touching [his] lips and point-
ing to the sky with [his] swearing finger . . . " (MOP:137).
Again, "he showed the tip of his tongue to the sky to confirm the oath" (MOP:14).

Two traditional gestures, one a tabu, concern titled elders, who are forbidden to climb palm trees for wine tapping (TFA: 63). In another place, titled elders keep out unwanted sightseers from an important conference by placing their iron staffs outside a compound with their red caps on the tops of these staffs (AOG:235).

Many miscellaneous gestures can also be found in Achebe’s novels, e.g., the traditional and proper manner for a woman to sit, with her legs stretched out in front of her (TFA:45). (This gesture is also traditional in Somalia and is probably very widespread throughout Africa.) In another place, gestural and material folklore combine when Okonkwo drinks palmwine from the skull of his first war victim (TFA:10).

Material folklore also plays an extensive role in Achebe’s works. The architecture of a compound (TFA:13) and its obi, or main hut, barn, and outer walls (TFA:49, 50) and shrine hut (TFA:13, 14) are fully described. Ulu, Ezeulu’s god, has a sacred shrine (AOG:239, 240), and a roadside shrine also appears (AOG:181, 182).

A man’s traditional personal belongings include his goatskin mat. Every adult male also has a goatskin bag (TFA:58, 105), which holds his snuff-bottle, drinking horn (for palm-wine), drinking gourd (for water), snuff spoon, and horse-tail flyswish (AOG:193). Carved wooden stools, often borne by the man’s firstborn son (TFA:105), are also part of his personal belongings.

Body adornment is elaborate for women, including body painting with chalk and cam wood (TFA:34; NLE:120, 121) and various coiffure styles (TFA:64, 92; AOG:130, 131).

Titled elders and their wives have special markings, such as caps, as well as an eagle feather for the cap and a bronze or beaded band worn on the ankle (AOG:18; TFA:18).

We have seen that in some places oral, gestural and material folklore can combine in the same traditional behavior. The area of belief and belief systems can indeed employ all these forms of folklore together, examples of which are found throughout Achebe’s novels.

Achebe’s largest category under belief systems concerns religion and related subjects, and the artifacts used with religion are very significant. Symbols of one’s personal god and ancestors (TFA:118) are included, as are masks (AOG:42, 227; TFA:81, 82; MOP:80), amulets and charms (AOG:226; TFA:169), the sacred bullroarer (TFA:169), the ancestral staff (TFA:120), and a statue (okposi) to ward off the convulsions of a sick child (AOG:6). The tragic love affair between Obi and his osu lover make up a major part of No Longer at Ease. The religious sys-
The belief in jujum medicines which protect, assist, and destroy is found throughout all the novels (TFA:11; MOP:7, 9, 26, 56, 73). The oracle is mentioned in several places (TFA:12, 15, 44, 51, 125, 126; AOG:7) as is the belief in reincarnation (NLE:56) and spirit possession (AOG:150, 220; TFA:42, 43). The cosmic belief in a personal god or chi is very widespread (TFA:16, 139), and the belief in the divinity of the royal python is mentioned in several places (TFA:144, 147; AOG:49).

The city is not immune to belief systems, and Obi is shocked to see a taxi driver deliberately run over (sacrifice?) a dog for good luck. The driver then goes on to warn the following lists

Verbal tabu is based on belief and is worth mentioning here. Children must not whistle after dark for fear of attracting evil spirits. Nor is a snake ever called by its name after dark (TFA:9). When summoned, Ekwefi answers allusively: "Is it me?" rather than "Here I am," for fear that the caller may be an evil spirit (TFA:37, 38).

Beliefs concerning the white man are not omitted from Achebe's novels. At one time, the white man was thought to have no toes (TFA:67; AOG:22), to wear glasses in order to see and talk to evil spirits (TFA:136), and to come from a land where the sun never shines (AOG:21).

A host of other minor terets are also mentioned. The dregs of palm-wine are supposed to increase a man's sexual powers (TFA:19). The twitching of a lower eyelid means one is going to cry while the twitching of a top one means one will see something (TFA:37). Children are denied eggs, because it is believed that this food will tempt them to steal (TFA:69). If a spider crosses the ceiling above a reclining child, bad dreams will follow (NLE:129). Note that some of these beliefs are widespread amongst children and are not taken seriously by adults, who often use them for didactic purposes.

And finally, justice would not be done to Achebe's genius without mentioning the beliefs about the meaning of sexual intercourse held by Obili's American (married) girl friend in
7. "First he brought four small yams, then four pieces of white chalk . . ." ([AOG:134]).
8. "She untied a bunch of cowries from a corner of her cloth and gave them to him. He counted them carefully on the ground . . . in groups of six. There were four groups and he nodded his head" ([AOG:134]).

7-patterns
1. Seven rivers ([TFA:16]).
2. Seven drums ([TFA:42]).
3. Sky holds rain for seven years in the folktale ([TFA:48]).
4. When the locusts come once in a lifetime in the legend, they reappear once every seven years, one visit per year ([TFA:49]).
5. The naming ceremony of a child occurs after seven market weeks ([TFA:70]).
6. In the tale of the snake-lizard, this creature gives his mother seven baskets of vegetables to cook, and later cooks seven basketfuls himself ([TFA:76]).
7. In the egwugwu trial, there are three men in one group and three men and one woman in the other ([TFA:79]).
8. Okonkwo's exile lasts for seven years ([TFA:113]).
9. The Christians are certainly supposed to die in the Evil Forest within seven market weeks ([TFA:137]).
10. "In our folk stories, a man gets into the land of spirits when he has passed seven rivers, seven forests, and seven hills" ([NLE:54]).
11. "The first thing critics tell you about our ministers' official residences is that each has seven bedrooms and seven bathrooms, one for each day of the week" ([MOP:34]).
12. In the folktale, some of the spirits have seven heads, some ten ([AOG:29]).
13. There are six villages in the political unit of Umuaro, but legend has it that there was once one more, whose sons killed the sacred python. The village suffered abandonment because of this crime ([AOG:33]).
14. "No doubt that was why in the first days of Umuaro, Ulu chose to give only one son to his Chief Priest for seven generations ([AOG:143]).
15. When Ezeulu was summoned before Winterbottom, his friends wanted to select six elders to accompany him ([AOG:163]).
16. Puff-adders are supposed to strike only after unlocking seven deadly fangs, one at a time ([AOG:200, 207]).

9-patterns
1. The political unit of which Okonkwo's village is a part is composed of nine villages ([TFA:45]).
2. There are nine egwugwu in Okonkwo's clan, one for each of the nine villages ([TFA:81, 155]).
The relative ease of recording number patterns stands in contrast to the difficulty in recording festivals and rites. In the two hundred years that folklore has been studied formally, perhaps the most neglected form has been the festival, neglected because it is not a single genre but a conglomeration of almost all the genres of folklore. Achebe has not neglected to give us descriptions of some of the festivals of his people.

The New Yam Festival is perhaps the most important Igbo festival of the year and it is mentioned several times (TFA:33, 46; AOG:3, 231, 232). Two more festivals receive detailed accounts: Akwu Nro (AOG:222-230) and the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves (AOG:3, 56, 68, 72, 76-86, 89, 125). Other minor festivals mentioned are the Week of Peace (TFA:26), the Idemili Festival (AOG:43, 44, 221), the annual worship of Earth Goddess (TFA:168), and the festivals of Mgbogbo (AOG:221) and Oso Nwanadi (AOG:222).

At least five rituals or rites are described by Achebe. The most time is spent on marriage, the most important ritual in a woman's life (TFA:66, 100-108, 119, 120; AOG:132, 156, 138). The rite of burial, which occurs in two separate ceremonies, is also rather completely explained (TFA:17, 109-113; AOG:252-258). Amongst the Igbo institutionalized friendship exists, with a rite of sealing this bond of blood-brotherhood (AOG:190). There is also a public trial involving the egwugwu (TFA:79-85), and a cleansing rite whereby Okonkwo's crime against the Earth Goddess is atoned through the destruction of his compound (TFA:113). And finally, the ritual of taking a title is mentioned in several places (TFA:6, 17, 53; AOG:17).

It must be understood, in conclusion, that the multifarious forms of folklore employed by Achebe in his works are not actual forms of folklore in and of themselves. On the contrary, they represent a form of applied folklore called the "literary use of folklore." In most cases the content, and certainly the structure, of any given form has been slightly altered (most drastically through translation). The context is not that of folklore, as the forms appear inside the pages of a novel. Folklore within the simulated context of Achebe's plots, however, gives the reader a dramatic insight into the actual context. But the important deviation between the literary use of folklore and folklore "in the raw," as it were, is in function. Actual forms of folklore have many varied functions, the descriptions of which are beyond the scope of this essay. But Achebe's use of folklore can be viewed as having basically two functions, both of which he recognizes consciously. Indeed he has mentioned them in articles and interviews.

In his article, "The Role of a Writer in a New Nation," (Nigerian Magazine 81, Lagos, 1964), he states:

The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.

A little further on in the same article, Achebe specifically states his dual goal:

A writer who feels the need to right this wrong cannot escape the conclusion that the past needs to be recreated not only for the enlightenment of our detractors but even more for our own education. Because, as I said, the past with all its imperfections never lacked dignity.

Here is Achebe's double-edged sword. And it is my opinion that this sword is sharpened by the literary use of folklore. Above all, Achebe is saying both to his own people and to all foreigners that Igbo society, and by extension all African and human societies in general, is not, nor has ever been, the primitive culture that Western belief systems have declared it to be.