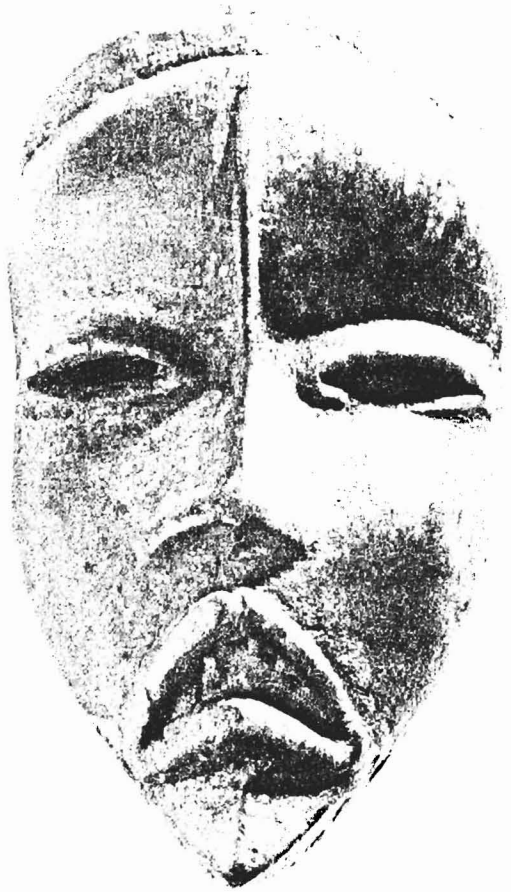


The African masks and figures illustrating these articles are not related specifically to the Ibo culture of Chinua Achebe's work. These unique forms of carving and representation are from various tribes in West Africa, e.g. the Bambara, Dogon, Baule, and others. G. W. Sannes, in *African Primitives,* from which these pictures are reprinted, provides an excellent introduction to the "function and form" of masks and figures in Africa.

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 Pubs., 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.

In all he alludes to, or fully reconstructs, thirty. Several concern the origin, and in two instances the destruction, of villages and gods (*TFA*:49, 126; *AOG*:16, 54, 143, 151, 239). Three legends concern the *egwugwu*, or ancestral spirits (*TFA*:16, 111; *AOG*: 225). Since the market is such an important part of Igbo society, it is not surprising that several market legends are also mentioned (*TFA*:11, 103; *AOG*:21). Two of these are actually variants of the same type, recited in different villages.

One jocular legend Achebe uses surprised me very much, as I had heard a variant of it from a neighbor in Abilene, Texas, in about 1958. It is worth quoting here, for it either demon-

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 goatskin 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. Achebe describes all these gestures in intricate detail (*TFA*:5, 67, 84, 85, 115; *NLE*:14; *AOG*:23, 59, 69, 108, 110, 235).

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, 45, 53; *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*:13).

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-

tem of *osu* outcasts is described more fully in *Things Fall Apart* (p. 143).

The belief in *juju* 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 him of the tabu in running over a duck (*NLE*:22).

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

A Man of the People. By including her feelings about sex, Achebe clearly demonstrates how belief patterns are part of the world view of all peoples, including the so-called "civilized nations."

Turning to another sphere of traditional behavior, number patterns have long intrigued the folklorist. Indeed their consistency is easier to record than their meaning. Victor Uchendu has noted in *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965) that 4-patterns are the most important for the Igbo. But if we can trust Achebe's material, three other patterns also appear to be quite significiant: 3-, 7-, and 9-patterns. The following lists will illustrate the permeating influence of these numbers in his novels.

3-patterns

1. The old woman summons her husband three times (*TFA*:61).
2. A woman who has three male children in a row is honored by her husband by having a goat slain for her (*TFA*:71).
3. In the tales about the snake-lizard, the mother and later the lizard himself end up with only three baskets of vegetables (*TFA*:76).
4. Initiations into the *ozo* society occur once in three years (*TFA*:165).
5. "Then he presented three kolanuts to the meeting" (*NLE*:14).
6. In the folktale Nwoye tells, there are three palmkernels that fly into the bush with hidden sheep in them (*NLE*:61).
7. "Nine pence talk and three pence food" (*MOP*:33, 46).
8. " . . . his goats produce threes and his hens hatch nines" (*AOG*:9).
9. "A big *ugene* sounded three times from Ulu's shrine" (*AOG*:80).
10. "Akuebue brought out the big cow's horn from his bag and hit it thrice on the ground" (*AOG*:110).
11. If an ill man survives three market weeks, one knows the spirits have released him (*AOG*:127).

4-patterns

1. Four hundred men and cats in the praise poem (*TFA*:46).
2. There are four titles in the clan (*TFA*:111).
3. The inhabitants of Mbanta expected the Christians living in the Evil Forest to be dead within four days, i.e., one market week (*TFA*:136).
4. There are four days in one market week.
5. "Okika sprang to his feet and saluted his clansmen four times" (*TFA*:182).
6. In the origin legend of the first coming of Ulu, there were four obstacles put in his path on each of four days (*AOG*:81)

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).

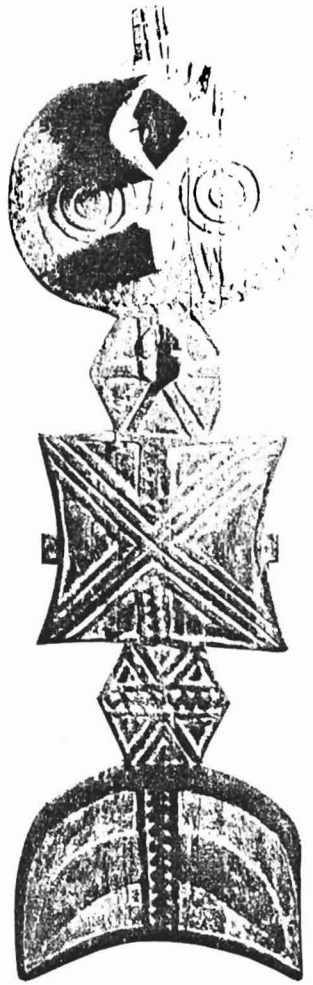
7-patterns

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*:53).
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).

3. The man in the *egwugwu* trial claimed that his sister had lived with her cruel husband for nine years (*TFA*:83).
4. "We are giving you our daughter today. She will be a good wife to you. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town" (*TFA*:106).
5. "Then turning to Obika, he said: 'I have done as you asked me to do. Your wife will bear you nine sons' " (*AOG*:135).
6. In the hunter's funeral, the cannon was fired nine times (*AOG*: 254).
7. Nine pence talk and three pence food (*MOP*:33, 46).
8. " . . . his goats produce threes and his hens hatch nines" (*AOG*:9).



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 *Mgba Agbagho* (*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, 136, 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," (*Nigeria 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.