

The Inter-Ethnic Folklore: An Appraisal of the Areas of Affinity in the Igbo and Yoruba Customary Lore

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Abstract: Nigeria is a nation comprising different ethnic groups. Each ethnic group is distinct from the other as the people are bounded by a unique belief system. Being bounded by a belief system – tradition and culture, the people live gregariously in a particular place – society. The distinguishing factor of societies is culture. Culture entails the totality of the way of life of a people including the people’s language. As a binding factor of a society, distinguishing each society from the other, it is therefore a popular belief that juxtaposition of two alien cultures heralds conflict. The belief system of any society is understood through parsing of the society’s folklore. Even as culture differs from society to society, the researchers are of the view that certain aspects of folklore of societies overlap. In this paper, therefore, the researchers appraise the customary aspect of folklore with the aim to explore the areas of affinity in the Igbo and Yoruba belief system.

Keywords: Folklore, customary lore, culture, kola-nut, performance.

INTRODUCTION

Folklore according to Uche Nnyagu in *Folklore and Oral Tradition of the Nigerian People*, is a compound word of *folk* and *lore*, coined by an Englishman William Thoms in 1846. He defined folklore as a totality of the way of life of a particular people, unique to them, usually passed via oral tradition. M. H. Abram in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, looks at folklore as the collective name applied to sayings, verbal composition and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by words of mouth and example rather than in written form. One common factor of folklore is the fact that it is preserved in oral form rather than in written form. According to Abrams, “Folklore developed, and continues even now, in communities where few if any people can read or write” (104). Folklore is a binding factor as it unites a people with common belief together. Jane Polley, Vincent L. Perry, David Ratray *et al.*, look at folklore as the entire belief of a people binding the people and which is transmitted via performance and oral tradition rather than in written form. To vivify, they considered opinions of other scholars and they write, “scholars define folklore as the body of traditional customs, beliefs, tales, songs, and the like that are transmitted by word of mouth from one generation of a small society to the next” (6). Jane Polley, Vincent L. Perry, David Ratray *et al.*, further emphasize that folklore is the belief of any given society – folk which includes their tales, myths ballads and many others communally owned and which govern the folk. Folklore encompasses traditions peculiar to a particular group of people and would be alien to another folk. By implication, the belief of a folk may be a taboo to another folk. This is why Pericoma Okoye, in his song stated that fusion of two align traditions connotes disharmony. In the Igbo traditional religion, for instance, the belief in sprinkling the blood of an animal in one’s deity is part of folklore, demonstrating the mode of worship by the Africans and that practice may be abhorred by another folk because it is not their belief.

In a major article published in 1954, William Bascom, an American folklorist, argued that folklore can serve four primary functions in a culture which include:

- * Folklore lets people escape from repressions imposed upon them by society. Eg: tall tales
- * Folklore validates culture, justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them.

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- * Folklore is a pedagogic device which reinforces morals and values and builds wit. Eg: scary stories/moral lessons.

Folklore as an Aspect of Literature

It is a common saying that literature is as old as man himself. This, in the real sense of it, implies that literature has no definite origin and therefore, the belief of many scholars that literature emerged in many parts of the world as a result of colonialism is only profusely contingent upon illusion. According to Nkem Okoh in his *Preface to Oral Literature*, literature exists even in the unlettered society and it had existed in the time immemorial. The origin of human beings in the world has remained a mystery and all over the world, different myths have attempted to determine the origin of man. Different myths have different views about the origin of human. Whether we are to believe the popular belief that human beings evolved from the ape, originating from Africa in the prehistoric era or the Christians' belief of the Garden of Eden saga, the truth remains that human beings exist in every society of the world. To Bernth Lindfors, each group of people in any given geographical area (Society) has peculiar beliefs and traditions that govern them. Such beliefs had existed from the time immemorial. The beliefs had been preserved by the people in their oral tradition and they have continually, via the oral tradition or performance, been transmitted to the younger generations yet unborn. The emphasis is clear, the mode of transmission had never been in the written form but through the oral tradition and performance.

In his *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Chris Baldick describes oral tradition as the passing on from one generation (and/or locality) to another, of songs, chants, proverbs, ballads, folktales and other verbal compositions within and between non-literate cultures; or the accumulated stock of works thus transmitted by words of mouth. The examples given by Baldick and many other works emerging from the oral tradition which constitute the norms and beliefs of a given society constitute part of the folklore of the given society.

Every society has folklore and such had been in existence in the preliterate society; every member of the society is conversant with the norms not minding that the tenets were never documented in written form.

The premise of the above is that every society, even before modern civilization had been united by their culture, norms and beliefs (Folklore). The norms and traditions were communally owned and thus, abiding in every member of the society. By implication, every member of a given society inherited them from the ancestors and then, continued to pass same to the generations yet to be born via oral form. By this means, preliterate societies continue to be united, enjoying gregarious atmosphere made possible by their folklore.

Theoretical Framework

The researchers consider New Historicism as the most appropriate theory for the work. According to M. H. Abrams, New Historicism is a movement in literary criticism that began in the 1980s. American scholar, Stephen Greenblatt is credited the father of new historicism, an approach to literary criticism that mandated the interpretation of literature in terms of the milieu from which it emerged. New historicism focuses on the political and social situation of the time. In other words, the emphasis of this theory is to understand intellectual history through literature and literature through its cultural context. This research focuses on the areas of overlap between and among certain folk beliefs of the Igbo and Yoruba. New historicism is an offshoot of cultural studies. New Historicism as a literary theory, is interested in the relationship between a literary work and the society represented by the author. M. H. Abrams further emphasizes that "New Historicism, since 1980s, has been the accepted name for a mode of literary study that its proponents oppose the formalism and they attribute both to the New Criticism and to the critical deconstruction that follows it. In place of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, new historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meanings, its effects, and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations (190). Affirming that New Historicism is interested in how a work of art represents the culture of a society, Ann B. Dobie in *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* writes that the new historicists do not claim to have the "truth" about a text or historical event: rather, they assert that the truth, if such a thing could even exist, would be narratologically and culturally contingent (178).

Customary Lore

According to Ames, K. and Schlereth, T in *Material Culture: a Research Guide*, customary lore emphasizes an aspect of ethnography of a society, performed rather than being like the material lore, being tangible object. Uche Nnyagu believes that customary lore is the belief system of a society, practiced and performed. The fact that it is performed entails that it involves action. The performance could be a single gesture or that comprising a social group participating in customary activities. Customary lore involving single gesture is exemplified when a man, in his house, prays with a kola nut as a means of communing with his *chi* in line with the Igbo custom. On the other hand, material lore is tangible – that which can be touched

In their "Material Lore as an Appendage of Folklore: the Kolanut Example", Uche Nnyagu and Adaoma Igwedibia maintain that material lore is the aspect of the folklore that can be touched. To them, "Kolanut is a material culture hence

it can be seen and touched” (58). As a tangible object, kolanut is an example of material lore. However, the occasion that calls for its presence is a customary lore. In Igbo land, different occasions necessitate the breaking of the kola nut. When an elder, in an occasion prays with kola nut, he makes reference to the occasion which is the customary lore.

In the customary lore involving a group of individuals, the group features as a performer and their traditional actions or behaviours involve using particular techniques such as clustering together for the purpose of performance on issues relating to traditional beliefs. It is further exemplified when people from a social group are collectively involved in the performance of customary lore. In Igbo of Nigeria, for example, rituals of the new yam festival, traditional marriage ceremonies, folk dances and initiation rites are collectively performed.

Most basically, Folklore is performed. To understand the three aspects of folklore described above, we need to understand that performance is frequently tied to verbal and customary lore while context is used in discussions of material lore. In folktales, as example of verbal lore, the raconteur performs as he verbalizes the words of the tales. In traditional marriage rite, an example of customary lore, the father of the bride performs certain rites like breaking the kola nut and he verbalizes as he does so. The kola nut denotes material culture and the performance associated with the occasion of the blessing of the kola nut is the verbal lore while the occasion itself is customary lore. This consolidates the fact that the three aspects of folklore are inter-dependable; one cannot take effect without the other.

Taboos/Abominations in Igbo: An X-Ray of Achebe's Things Fall Apart

Every society has what they abhor. Achebe demonstrates this fact in his ethnographic fiction, *Things Fall Apart*. In Igbo, suicide is seen as a taboo. Taboos are those things prohibited by the custom which are seen as aberration by the people. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe uses the character Okonkwo to illustrate what and what are seen as taboos in Igbo and how such taboo are frowned at in Igbo culture. In the novel, Okonkwo commits taboo when he beats his wife in the week of peace. According to the tradition of each society, the people aspire to live in line with the tradition and prescriptions of the land so that the anger of gods of the land is not aggravated. One is said to have committed a taboo when such a person has done something abhorred by the people and seen as an act against the gods of the land. A taboo is simply seen as a ban on something as it concerns what the culture of the society or religion perceives as evil and not allowed. This means that taboos are prohibited by religion and customs of the society. The people of the society try as much as they could to avoid the taboos because not doing so entails provoking the gods of the land and the consequence follows. In many societies in Nigeria, it is a taboo for a brother and a sister to have sexual intercourse. In many parts of Igbo land, people from the same kindred do not have sex. As well, they cannot marry. It is a double taboo or rather, an abomination for a brother to impregnate his own sister. Abomination denotes a thing or act that is loathed and seen as evil. It is deep, vile, vicious or terrible. It is an abomination to deliberately take away life of a kinsman or to commit suicide. Those are taboo. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's Okonkwo is said to have committed an abomination when he took away his life. As powerful as Okonkwo is, his corpse is treated with contempt rather than being given a befitting burial as a hero. Having committed suicide which is an abomination in Igbo society, his fame is immediately thrown into the pit. As Achebe puts it, “In a small opening in the compound, the District Commissioner sees Okonkwo dangling from a tree. He has committed suicide. Obierika asks them to help them take down the body. Since it is an abomination for a man to take his own life, his corpse is now considered evil and only strangers may touch it. Achebe's portrayal of the believe of the fictional Umuofia is simply an X-ray of the typical Igbo belief. It is a taboo in the entire Igbo society for a person to take away his life. In a typical Igbo society, the corpse of a person who committed suicide is not buried but is thrown into the evil forest.

Textual Analysis of Taboo in Yoruba Culture

In Yoruba, taboo is a serious thing. As literature is seen as a mirror of the society, the audience read and decode works of art written by the Yorubas especially those centering on their ethnography. Writers of literature are inspired by what happens in their societies. So, a good work of art should not just entertain the reader, but as Laurence Perrine discloses, such works should as well, educate the reader on the societal norms. For instance, Yoruba writers in their works of art, made it obvious that abomination is seriously frowned at in Yoruba culture. On the birth of Odewale, in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, *ifa* (divination) reveals him to be ill-fated, destined to kill his father and marry his own mother. This is an abomination in Yoruba culture and it is an abomination in Yoruba for one to have illicit affair with his siblings or parents. This act is seriously abhorred in most societies in Nigeria. In Yoruba tradition, at birth, the fate of the child is to be ascertained so that ill destined children would not be allowed to stay. On the birth of Odewale, King Adetuse takes him to *ifa* priest to ascertain his fate. Divination reveals that Odewale is ill-fated, destined to kill the father and marry the mother. This is an abomination of highest order in Yoruba and Igbo. In order to forestall the abomination, Odewale is given out to be killed. He is wrapped in white clothes symbolizing death and taken to a forest far Kutuje. Ogundele finds the baby and saves it. Odewale himself, understands that it is an abomination to kill one's parents and it is a taboo to have a carnal knowledge of one's relative. He becomes aware of his fate and believing that the man he lives with is actually his father and the wife, his mother, Odewale decides to run away as not to commit the taboo. But the more he runs away, the more he gets entangled. He eventually grows up to have the fate fulfilled by killing his father, King Adetusa. As the right to primogeniture is respected in the society, Odewale inherited the former Queen, Ojuola, King Adetuse's wife as a wife.

Realizing soon that she has married her own son and had children with him, Queen Ojuola stabs herself to death. This is a taboo not meant to be seen, so Odewale uses the same knife to pluck off his own eyes. Though *The Gods Are Not to Blame* is an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Ola Rotimi has so wonderfully 'indigenised' it, making the play a good illustration of the Yoruba ethnography. Ridwan Adedeji in his "Critical Analysis of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, states that "The play is a brilliant adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, given a Yoruba setting and internalized into cosmos. The play, also replete with proverbs, is a rich demonstration of undiluted culture and beliefs of the Yoruba people before the advent of Europeans and Arabians.

Suicide in Igbo and Yoruba Culture

In Igbo and Yoruba, suicide is frowned at and seen as a taboo. In his "Text to Context: an Interpretation of Suicide in Selected Plays of Soyinka, Rotimi and Ogunyemi" a PhD thesis, Tertsea Joseph Ikyoive affirms that suicide is a global phenomenon. He however aims to focus on suicide in Yoruba culture, thus, he quotes Iliffe (2005) as saying that suicide in traditional Yoruba culture, is an expression of protest and resistance, which is not particular to 'super-individuals'; rather it is a way to discredit one's oppressor, and to liberate oneself from from torture (29). This is a global fact. Ordinarily, no one, under normal circumstance, would commit suicide. One commits suicide to end afflictions and avert shame. But how the tradition views suicide is the issue. Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* commits suicide when he realises that he is fighting for the tradition of Umuofia, all alone as his kinsmen had all been won by the white man. He had vowed never to be associated with anything weakling and to avert the shame of defeat by the white man, he commits suicide. Ola Rotimi in the same vein, opts for suicide to avert the shame of the taboo he has committed as well as to end the afflictions of the taboo. In the two cultures, bodies of those who committed suicide are treated with contempt.

Atonement for Taboos and Abominations in Both Cultures

In their "A Critique of Traditional Igbo and Yoruba Moral Perspectives on Evil," Marcel Ikechukwu Sunday Onyibor and Tayo Raymond Ezekiel Eegunlus are of the opinion that taboos are not taken lightly in the two traditions. According to them, "It is important to note in the Yoruba anthropomorphic worldview that *Esu* is regarded as the gatekeeper and door of access to the gods, whom anyone who desires to achieve anything meaningful must first propitiate so that the favour he/she desires from the gods will be possible and not debarred by *Esu*. He frustrates whoever fails to reckon with him by appeasement and allows him to experience evil, which may be in many forms (66), when taboos and abominations are committed, rituals are performed according to the custom to appease the gods of the land. The people of Kutuje even before the climatic abomination of Odewale, had been suffering a lot of afflictions as a result of the abomination committed in the land when Odewale has murdered the king his father and has married his own mother. The people understand the indispensability of ritual propitiation hence the need to look for *ifa* priests to ascertain the cause of the affliction as well as perform the proper propitiation. During the process, Odewale realizes that he has brought the misfortune upon the people. As a way of atoning, he blindfolds himself and abdicates the throne for unknown destination and Queen Ojuola commits suicide. The gods of the land are atoned thereafter to sanitize the land. In the same vein, Chinua Achebe demonstrates that it is an aberration to kill one's kinsman. As Okonkwo did not intentionally kill the boy, rather, a bullet from his gun inadvertently explodes and kills the boy, (Ogbuefi Ezeudu's son), it is rather a taboo hence, Okonkwo, goes into exile in Mbanta. Also in his *Arrow of God*, Achebe makes it obvious that the Umuaro people forbid the killing of the sacred python and it is a taboo that must be atoned when anyone inadvertently or willingly kills the creature. Oduche, Ezeulu's son, in order to prove his faith for the new religion, incarcerates the sacred python in his box with the aim to get it suffocated to death. Ezeidemili on getting to know about the act, quickly sends his messenger to go and ask Ezeulu how he intends to atone for the perceived taboo committed in his home.

It is an abomination for one to kill somebody by poison or by any other means apart from war. Deliberate spilling of blood of human being is not condoned in society, so killing through poison, abortion, conspiracy or any of such means is an abominable act in almost all parts of the Nigerian society. Anybody who kills another unintentionally, not with poison must, according to the tradition, leave the society immediately and go into exile and stay there for some time (*Igba Oso Ochu* in Igbo). Okonkwo and his family in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* have to leave his house in Umuofia to Mbanta on exile and must be there for not less than seven years to atone for accidentally killing of his clansman.

It is an abomination to commit suicide. In Igbo society, anybody who commits suicide is not buried like in the case of normal death. In some societies, the person would be taken to the evil forest and be thrown into the forest for wild animals to feed on the carcass. In some other places, labourers are hired to dig shallow grave outside the compound where the corpse would be buried by strangers without coffin and no burial ceremony would be given to him or her, rather, certain rituals in line with the custom would be performed so that he would remain permanently in the land of the dead and never to reincarnate. Such people are evil and he or she who takes away his or her life need no reincarnation because he or she is an evil person who does not value life.

It is a taboo in Igbo for a child to die before his father. In such a case, all rights due to him (in case of a first born) would be transferred to his younger brother not minding if he already had married and has children. The Yorubas also frown

at the death of the youth. This, they see also as a taboo. Yoruba is one tribe known for giving the dead due respect. This is decodable from the amount spent by the Yorubas during funerals. However, such lofty burial is not given to the youths. The death of the youth is abhorred and seen as not normal. In that case, there is no second burial for the deceased. The corpse is buried and youths mourn the death. The mourners are given biscuits and mineral if the family so wishes. Ritual cleansing (*Ikpu alu*) as in Igbo, is done to appease the gods of the land and to forestall any re-occurrence.

Among the Yoruba, it is a taboo to kill mating animals. It is the belief of the Yoruba people that certain animals have relationship with human beings and thus, should be treated well. As human beings are accorded the respect of not being disturbed while having sexual intercourse with their rightful partners, animals should as well, not be disturbed when they mate for such is a natural instinct designed by the supernatural partly for the sake of procreation. The Yoruba respect the feelings of animals as compared to that of the humans, so they consider it as a taboo to hurt animals when they mate.

CONCLUSION

The researchers have reviewed certain taboos and abominations of the Igbo and Yoruba with the aim to get the contemporary youths aware of certain things abhorred by their people. Obviously, proliferation of different churches with different doctrines in the societies is believed to be doing the societies more harm than good since the church ministers keep preaching against the traditions and beliefs of the people. With the alien tradition inculcated in them, the people tend to deviate from the norms; they embrace the church doctrines and antagonize everything traditional. This belief portend ills in the societies as the contemporary youths who get brainwashed tend to get the traditions of their society extincted. The researchers believe that researches of this type would act as checks, getting the youths wary of the need to understand what their ancestors prohibited as well as how they propitiated in case of eventualities. Appraising the taboos and abominations of the two societies, the researchers discovered that Igbo and Yoruba share certain belief systems. Areas of affinities in their respective folklore are X-rayed in this article.

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