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THE IGBO FOLKTALE:
PERFORMANCE CONDITIONS AND INTERNAL
CHARACTERISTICS

J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada

The varying Igbo dialectal terminologies for the folktale are a proof of how popular story-telling has been among the people: *ifo, ife, iro, akuko ufe/ufere, akuko ifo, inu, ilu, ihwe, ihwo*, etc. Apart from its entertainment value, the folktale in Igbo culture serves as an educational and didactic mode for bringing up children. There is no doubt, however, that the Igbo folktale tradition is on the wane, what with the influence of modernization. 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 institutions as the school and the popular media. But in spite of the prevailing social change in Igboland, the folktale is still popular in villages, and even in urban areas where "the past, painfully aware of its weakening hold on the living but reluctant none the less 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 an adjustment of means and goals."¹ In spite of modernity, most elderly Igbo would combine the use of proverbs and folktales while making a speech before young audiences to whom these verbal forms are puzzling. Although the tales in such speech contexts serve anecdotal purposes, sometimes even proverbial, their sources point to the folk narrative tradition.

This paper attempts, first, to establish the conditions for the performance of the Igbo tale, and second, its internal character, which make it easily recognizable as an Igbo literary art. Performance as a concept in folktale is often used interchangeably with behavior and conduct because of its interrelation with the latter two concepts. However, Dell Hymes has sought to show their distinctness and their links as situational concepts. He has described as behavior anything or everything that happens in a performative context. Conduct is presented as behavior which keeps to social norms while performance is the cultural behavior for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience.² Richard Bauman has given 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."³ For the purposes of this paper, 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 the fact that "without relating the oral text to the context it becomes a lifeless file of words."⁴

A related issue to performance is adjudgement. In other words, who are those qualified to criticize the performance of an Igbo tale? What Stanley Macebuh says about the criticism of old African art would also apply to the aesthetic assessment of the Igbo folktale:

... 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.⁵

Although the audience of an Igbo folktale session is usually made up of children, the tellers can be adults or children just as aesthetic verdicts can be delivered by anybody who is sufficiently confident of his/her knowledge of performance criteria. This makes performance riskier since any violation of the order and balance in a folktale narration invites an interruption from the audience, the ages of the listeners notwithstanding.

I

The Igbo folktale session usually starts after twilight, never before. It also does not come before dinner, since it is meant for relaxation on top of its educational function. Moreover, because the people are mostly farmers, folktale [performance] comes after every other domestic chore has been carried out. The night too adds its own aura to the realization of a typical folktale plot. Abarry, writing on story-telling among the Gas of Ghana, says night-time 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."⁶

Among the Igbo it is acultural to narrate folktales during daytime. To discourage this, only orphans are authorized by tradition to tell and listen to folktales in the day. One suspects that this is to forestall license and laziness, as some children, rather than perform their domestic tasks or even work for their parents on farms, may engage in swapping tales. We need to point out that in practice specific Igbo market nights are sanctioned for story-telling. This is a further way of reducing instances of idleness and unmerited relaxation. In parts of Imo-Igbo, the *Orie* market night is the night set aside for tale-telling. Two traditional events gave rise to the choice of *Orie* market night for

this purpose. The first is that by tradition the *Orie* day was usually the day on which a wife/wives and their children were duty bound to work for the husband, the owner of the household. This was especially true in polygamous families. The husband, on the other hand, was supposed to feast his household after the day's work on his farms. Secondly, the *Orie* day was, and still is, a day in most Imo-Igbo communities on which the *umunna* (kinsmen) gather to drink *mmi Orie* (*Orie* drink) or *awuruawu mmi* (collective drink). On *Orie* day every member of the community—man and woman alike—whose palm tree was being tapped was supposed to surrender all the palmwine of that day to the kinsmen. This was the background to the choice of *Orie* day for folktale performance. In other words, not only would the owner of the household be in a good mood, but also his wives and children, having worked on his farms, every adult member of the family would have taken some hornfulls of palm wine at the *mmi Orie* gathering and would, therefore, be very relaxed to tell tales if they wanted to do so.

Having identified the time of the day when stories are meant to be told, it is important to note that although story-telling sessions among the Igbo can take place all year round, in practice this can only happen in the dry season. Even within the dry season, it is often on moon-lit nights that stories can be told. The dry season is a more pleasurable time for two reasons: first, the *ime* is more auspicious and the ground tidier to sit on; second, the burdens of farm work are virtually over for the year so that the light work on the farm can still ensure a light-heartedness as night draws near. Otherwise, a typical farm-day is a tiring day, after which parents tend to go to sleep early. Moreover, real farm work takes place during the rainy season. Again when the beauty of the moon-lit night is threatened by clouds and rainfall, the compound or village ground may be so wet as to make a gathering of children impossible. However, night-tales are not told when a person dies in the kin group or, indeed, within the entire village.

II

The beginning and closure of Igbo tales⁷ are easily recognizable since they have their stock phrases. The narrator begins by drawing the attention of the children-audience with such formulaic utterances as:

Narrator: *Umuaka, o nwere akuko m ga akoro unu*
(Children, I have a tale to tell you)

Audience: *Kooro anyi ka obi di anyi mma/kooro 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, he/she will not address the largely children-audience as "*umuaka*" (children). He/she will often say "*umunne m na umunna m*" (my brothers and sisters). When the folktale session is part of the whole program of a typical moon-light play, including "*igba oro*" (hide-and-seek game), folktale-telling can be preceded by riddling, proverb contests or *iko onu* (exchange of verbal insults). Sometimes the proverb segment of the call-and-response pattern between the narrator and the audience comes before the formulaic introductory called *mgbusu ufere*:

- 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 nti ma o geghi* (You tell the ear and it does not listen)
- Audience: *E bere isi, e bere nti* (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 nuo chaa ngwo* (You finish a tree's palmwine)
- Audience: *A kpoo ya okpororo* (You call the tree an empty log)
- Narrator: *E liwe uzo liwe ehi* (Tether a road and a cow)
- Audience: *Ma toro uzo ghara ehi* (I'll take the road and forget about the cow)
- Narrator: *A gbara aka na-azo 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 can fit into the above paradigm, but in such proverbs, apart from their use for claiming audience, their call-and-response structure 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 job well, and is adjudged as such. The essence of the proverb-telling session—as different from the proverb contest—is an opportunity for the narrator to test his popularity. If the narrator is not wanted, his proverbs may not be responded to. This happens especially when two narrators are simultaneously seeking the attention of a single audience; the narrator whose call-proverbs are being responded to is the desired narrator. The other narrator may wait for his/her turn or may never be heard. It should be noted that this treatment is often meant for child-narrators, not for the adult-narrator who at any rate is usually specially invited or sought [after] to narrate tales, and is not supposed to be exposed to such ridicule or competition. There are three reasons why an intending narrator may be discouraged by the audience: first, he/she is not popular among members of the peer group; second, his/her stories are known to be usually dull and uninteresting; and third, it is suspected that he/she 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:	<i>O ruru otu mgbe</i> (There was a time)
Audience:	<i>Otu mgbe e ruo</i> (A time there was)

E. N. Emenanjo, in his introductory comment in *Omalinze*, says this part of the story-telling among the Aniocha-Igbo may be introduced by the narrator respectfully requesting his audience to give him "nzu" (a native chalk):

Narrator:	<i>Nyenu m nzu</i> (Give me nzu)
Audience	<i>Igwoa, o lea</i> (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 story-teller may now go straight to the tale.

Sometimes the tale text may begin with a proverb or proverbs, as the case may be. These proverbs are not meant to be responded to but are tied more neatly to the motif of 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 tale. 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 oltu 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 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 setting which is common to 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 gra aga*" (in times past); "*n'oge gboo gboo*" (in the dim past); "*otu ubochi*" (one day), etc. 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 immemoriality of the story-events to be narrated, a story's time-setting could be ascribed to "*mgbe uwa ka di ohuru*" (when the world was still new); "*mgbe ezi di n'ukwu ukwa*" (when breadfruit trees dotted the entire earth); "*mgbe uwa di n'anyu isi*" (when the world was still in darkness). Two impressions are encouraged by such a timing mode: the first is that there is a difference between the world of the time of action and our world; and secondly, that the moral of the story is time-tested. These together help to heighten a tale's credibility in spite of its level of realism.

The "place of action," on the other hand, is often weird and distant from the human terrain. Where the place suggests a human habitation, this 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), "*n'ala di anya*" (in a distant land). The eerie places in a typical Igbo folktale include the land of spirits (*ala ndi mmuo*) or of animals (*ala umuanumanu*), or simply "far, far land." There are in Igbo tales cases of identifiable locales, but this 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 recurrent of the identifiable places is Idu, whose ruler, called *oba*, would, together [with the land], 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 up an avenue for further inquiries as to any connection between the Igbo and the Edo in terms of consanguinity, trade, and technological co-operation 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 killed within his area of authority were meant to be 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, being 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 now not very clear whether "*Chukwu*" refers to the supreme God as people had always interpreted it to be 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! About the reference of Chukwu in Igbo tales 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.⁸ There are two instances in the "*Mbe na Chukwu*" folktale that Mbe referred to Chukwu as "*Chukwu Ukpabi*," which suggests some connection with *Ibini Ukpabi*.

A large corpus of Igbo stories is punctuated with songs. Ifionu suggests "*akuko na ifo*" for such tale types since "*akuko*" is stories and "*ifo*" is folk songs "bearing their own stories without any prose setting."⁹ 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 them of songs."¹⁰ It is therefore a misrepresentation of the Igbo folktale tradition if collectors, out of a feeling for their own convenience, drop the songs in the stories, when Igbo aesthetic judgement tends to regard stories that bear songs within them as the superior tales.

The songs in fact constitute the entertainment, the poetic component of Igbo tales. It should be noted that tales with songs that can be shared between a narrator and the audience are more desirable than those that are only sung by the narrator. 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 could determine the audience's desire to

hear the narration (referred to earlier). The audience might know a tale in advance, that is in terms of whether or not it bears songs, or it could guess that from the musical instruments brought to the narration arena by an intending narrator. Such instruments include *ekwe* (slit wooden drum), *ubo* (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. This enhances the beauty of the story and makes it more memorable. Furthermore, the songs ensure a rapport between the story-teller and his audience, and this is kept up right 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."¹¹ It is Finnegan, in particular, who 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 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.¹²

Songs enable the narrator to achieve this rapport in the middle, especially in the middle of long tales. Longer tales without songs tend to be boring except when they are imbued with a sustaining dramatic effect. Although most of the songs constitute an integral aspect of the tales bearing them, they serve more as interactional, recreational and diversionary devices than as techniques for advancing the content of the tales. This is because there are some of these songs which on their own bear no immediate meaning or meanings to the action of the story. Oftentimes 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/Auru tenji-tenjilo OwelAwurutenji-tenjilo.*" In Egudu's "Working for the Tiger," in his *A Calabash of Wisdom* (1973), the equivalent of "*Ndi Oru Nna m Agu*," the refrain of the song is "*kiri bamba kiri.*" In "*Osa na Umuanunanu*" the refrain of the song it bears is "*kwa ngele ngele gelereel/Kwangele.*" A popular folksong refrain as "*ajambele*" is now an Igbo neologism for meaningless gibber 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 anatara!
kpoo! kpoo! kpoo!
Anatara kporogidi kporokporo anatara!

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 on is the use of transitional expressions such as "*ughua*" (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); "*ozo kwolozo kwasi*" (again or also), etc. Others include the Igbo equivalents of "and," "so," "when," "therefore," "consequently," etc. We must bear in mind that it is in fact in the middle of the tale that a teller may experience embarrassment from members of his/her audience if he/she is violating the narrative flow with inconsequential and illogical side-stepping, 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 total run of the tale. A narrator is bound to answer the question(s) as logically as possible, otherwise the tale might as well end there and then. This is where a private rendition of tales for purposes of practice is necessary for a performer of Igbo folk narratives. The practice could entail a narrator-to-be recounting the tale to himself in order to be sure of its unity, or he could first try it out before his younger brothers and sisters in his immediate family on days when story-telling sessions at the compound or kinship level are not likely to be held. Some children compel their mothers to listen to their tales for critical purposes before they go out with such tales to a larger story-telling 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 descriptive in the form of a summary of the moral of the narrative. In "*Obaraedo*," the narration terminates into "*ihe mmuta*" (what is learnt), which is that 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 thrust of the tale in a sentence or two. In "*Nnunu Na-Ekwu Okwu*" (The Bird that Speaks), the story tells us why human beings do not just eat any bird, and ends this way:

Site oge ahu, ndi mmadu na-akpacharazi anya ha n'iri anu nnunu. O buru na nnunu ekwuo okwu, a mara na a naghi 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 his/her audience:

Narrator:	<i>Chaakpii/Chaakwii/Taakpii/Taakwii/Ootii!</i>
Audience	<i>Wool/Yool/Haal/Oyool/Iyaa!</i>

A well-told tale usually attracts a 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.¹³

A badly-related story would either attract a dignified silence or a sneaking comment such as "This one is not sweet." Among children such a comment 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*. These two—characterization and naming—enhance the symbolic complexity of a tale. Every character in the Igbo tale, whether human, animal, spirit, or plant, behaves like a human being. In the Igbo folktales tradition this is acceptable since realism in this world is highly fluid. Moreover, because of "the old society's pressing sense of the real, the desire to have 'inapprehensible clutched', it would seem logical to suggest that it had human experience as its fundamental frame of

reference."¹⁴ Specific stock characters that recur in Igbo tales are the "dibia" (the medicine man), "oka mgbá" (the champion wrestler), "dinta" or "onye egbe ohia" (the hunter), "eze" (king), "Nwanyí aga" (the barren woman) "Nwanyí eshíkpe/Nwanyí ajadu" (the widow), and the polygynous man. The unforgettable animal characters possessing human characteristics include the tortoise (*Mbe/Mbekwu/Mbediogu/Nnaba/Nna Nnabe*) and his wife, *Alii/Aniga*. Others are the tiger [probably, leopard. Editor's note.] (*Agu*), the antelope (*Ele/Ene*), the elephant (*Enyi*), the duiker (*Mgbada*), the toad (*Awo*), the bird (*Nnunu*), the kite (*Egbe*), the python (*Eke*), and, among the domestic animals, the dog (*Nkita*), the sheep (*Aturu*), and the goat (*Eghu*). These are animal characters but they act, cry, laugh, and talk like human beings. Human beings can also address them directly and they in turn respond as in the folksong, "Nwa Nnunu Nwa Nnunu Nta," in which a human child on a farmland asks a small bird, possibly the wren, what it is doing in a maizefield to which the bird replies, "A no m ebe a aturio oka" (I am pecking maize grains here):

Nwa nnunu nwa nnunu nta
krujanja kurunja
I no ebe ahu a mee gini?
krujanja jurunja
A no m ebe a aturio oka
krujanja jurunja
 (Little bird, so little a bird)
krujanja kurunja
 (What are you doing up there?)
krujanja kurunja
 (I am pecking maize grains here)
krujanja kurunja.

The animals also reason like man. Emenanjo says 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.¹⁵

These animals are, like human beings, victims of such human weaknesses as envy, treachery, distrust, passion, and hatred. However, those that are guilty of evil are adequately punished except the tortoise, the master trickster who is never tracked down or who plays on

the intelligence of both human beings and animals in a majority of the trickster stories. In some stories of different motifs, he may be caught and exposed, yet somehow he manages to pull through and in the end makes fun of the person or animal who attempts to expose him. In most Igbo tales, the tortoise is usually an old, wise man. The Igbo say: "*O nwere mgbe Mbe bu okoro?*" (Is there ever any time that the tortoise is a youth?). The spirits also have a stock portrayal. They are often said to have many heads, always speaking through their noses, have legs which are as tiny as broom-sticks, and mouths right at their backs! 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 behaviour."¹⁶ As for the character of the landscapes of spirits and animals, these resemble those of human habitation. 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 of which the Igbo folk tale is one. 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,"¹⁷ or listener as in the case of oral narratives. 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."¹⁸ In allegorical tales, characters act out their names such as "*Obi oma*" (Kindness), "*Ebere*" (Forgiveness) "*Iwe*" (Anger), "*Ekwo*" (Jealousy) "*Mma*" (Beauty), etc. Characters may bear names which are less abstract, but which nevertheless give away 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), *Akaanu* (Strong-Headedness), etc. Some of these names not only serve to represent characters, they give a signal as to the direction of the story. Some of the characters, particularly the animal characters, bear names which depict the human perception of them. For instance, *Nwaeveleako/Ebiliako/Ebuneako* is the name that describes the intelligent ram. *Nturumosisi/Oturukpokpo* is the mouthy wood-pecker 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/Okili* of the weaverbird family is both noisy and impatient to learn which is why his nest, unlike that of *asha*, another member of the weaverbird household, lacks the artistic touch. *Mgbada oso* (the fleet-footed duiker), *Aturu ilu-ilu* (Sheep, the foolish one), *Egbu o ta*

mbugha (Goat, the cud-chewer), *Ele Ene nwe ngwu-gwa* (Antelope master stylish sprinter), *Ugo nwa oma* (Eagle, the beautiful one), etc., variously characterize these animals from human estimation of their appearance and behavior.

One internal characteristic of the Igbo narrative tradition which enhances the level of its symbology is numbering. The significance of certain numbers in Igbo rituals finds a similar expression in folktales. The most recurrent 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, the childless and the productive, etc. This contrasting is meant to ensure a passion for balance, for order which seems to be an Igbo view of the universe. This has been described as duality or dualism.¹⁹ 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 level of balance which is an unconscious Igbo rationality. 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 Ori/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, as distinct from those with a lesser number of heads, are usually thought to be dastardly and resilient. It is common to hear in Igbo tales a hunter (*dinta*) who has seven hunting dogs and who crosses seven seas, climbs seven hills, and in the end comes home with seven game. The polygynous male characters would often have seven wives whose allegiance the men test from time to time using their self-set criteria. In "*Nwa-ka-Nna*," it is the hated wife out of the seven wives who 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. What these remarks on the significance of numbers in Igbo tales point to is that any semiotic perception of these tales must take these numbers into account because of the rate and regularity of their occurrence.

Finally, a consideration of the internal character of a folktale tradition ought to be able to hint at its thematic and contentual pattern. The stories are either concerned with the origin of the Igbo people, or they explain one phenomenon or the other (also referred to as "why" or aetiological stories), or they are about tricks at the center of which is usually the ubiquitous tortoise. Other interests of the Igbo folktale

include prowess and intelligence contests and tasks, what William Bascom identifies as "dilemma tales," as well as an engagement with didactic or obviously moral themes. These are about the neatest ways in which one can at the moment classify the thematic preoccupation of the Igbo folktale. As we have noted earlier on, the stories are generally told in order to exemplify a moral lesson, yet there are some in which didacticism is not a central issue. And of course, a child telling an obviously didactic tale may instead emphasize the song or the sheer poetry of the tale since he/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.

It is true that we have in classifying the general thematic concerns of the Igbo folk narrative tradition obliquely touched on some of its purposes which include: expanding a child's imagination; cultivating his/her intelligence; enhancing his/her artistic expressiveness as well as putting him/her 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, proverbs, imagery, and music.

IV

In conclusion, we have discussed the performance conditions and the internal characteristics of the Igbo folktale. Since the folktale tradition of any society is as old as the society itself, there must have percolated through time certain principles and features which underlie their 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. In the case of the Igbo folktale heritage, its poetics would call for a knowledge of the pattern of the dynamic normatives of the Igbo and African experience as well as an appreciation of those unwritten imperatives which have over the millenia governed folktale creation or assessment in the culture. This is important because without adherence to these imperatives in a folktale creation or performance, the teller may be censured by his/her audience, and in most cases the very "folktale" may not survive beyond one unpopular performance.

NOTES

¹Isidore Okpewho, *Myth in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 72.

- ²Dell Hymes, "Breakthrough Into Performance," in Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein (eds.), *Folklore Performance and Communication* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 18.
- ³R. Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House, 1977), p. 11.
- ⁴J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, "The Context of Performance and the Oral Literary Text," *Kriteria*, 1, 1, February 1988, p. 59.
- ⁵Stanley Macebuh, "African Aesthetics in Traditional African Art," *Okike*, 5, June 1974, p. 22.
- ⁶Abu Abarry, "Oral Rhetoric and Poetics: Story-telling Among the Gas of Ghana," in S. O. Asein (Ed.), *Comparative Approaches to Modern African Literature* (Ibadan: Department of English, University of Ibadan, 1982), p. 24.
- ⁷The stories I refer to in this paper come from personal recollections and published collections of Igbo tales which include: John Iroaganachi, *Oka Mgba* (Ikeja: Longman, 1973); Romanus Egudu, *The Calabash of Wisdom and Other Igbo Stories* (New York: Nok, 1973); F. C. Ogbalu, *Nza na Obu* (Lagos: Nelson, 1973); Anya Iwe, *Akuko Ifo Ufodu Kwesiri Ka Umu Mmadu Mara* (Abba: African Literature Bureau, 1976); E. N. Emananjo (ed.), *Omalinze: A Book of Igbo Folk-tales* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1977); and F. C. Ogbalu (ed.), *Mbediogu* (Onitsha: University Publishing Co., 1975).
- ⁸D. I. Nwoga, *The Supreme God as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought* (Mbaise: Hawk Press, 1984), p. 43.
- ⁹A. O. Ifionu, "Typology of Igbo Folk-tales," *Anu Magazine*, Issue 3, p. 62.
- ¹⁰Nkem Okoh, "Igbo Tale Collections: The Past, the Present, and the Future," *Kriteria*, 1, 1, February 1988, p. 36.
- ¹¹T. C. Nwosu, "The Structure, Form and Content of Nigerian Folktales," *Nigeria Magazine* 136, 1981, p. 69.
- ¹²Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 385.
- ¹³E. N. Emananjo (ed.), *Omalinze: A Book of Igbo Folk-Tales* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. xiv.
- ¹⁴Isidore Okpewho, "The Aesthetics of Old African Art," *Okike*, 8, July 1975, pp. 43-44.
- ¹⁵E. N. Emananjo, "What is Creative Literature? The Case of Igbo," *Igbo*, 1, March 1982, p. 61.
- ¹⁶Macebuh, *Op. Cit.*, p. 17.
- ¹⁷D. S. Izevgaye, "Naming and Character in African Fiction," *Research in African Literatures*, 12, 2, Summer 1981, p. 166.
- ¹⁸P. A. Noss, "Description in Gbaya Literary Art," in Richard Dorson (ed.), *African Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 79.
- ¹⁹The notion of duality/dualism as an important Igbo philosophic construct has been discussed in a number of works. See, for instance, A. G. Leonard, *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes* (London: Frank Cass, 1968, 1906), especially Section III, "The Dualism of the Natives"; Chieka Ifemesia, *Traditional Humane Living Among the Igbo* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1979); D. I. Nwoga, *Ahijoku Lecture* (Owerri: Ministry of Information, 1984); Chinua Achebe, "Chi in Igbo

Cosmology," in his *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 93-103; and D. I. Nwoga, *The Supreme God as Stranger* (1984), already cited in fn. 8, pp. 33-35.