

## CONTEXTUAL TRANSLATION OF ORAL PERFORMANCE: TRANSLATION OF SELECT IGBO FOLKLORES

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### **Abstract**

The need to retain the originality of oral performance during and after translation cannot be over emphasized. African oral literature scholars are faced with the burdening challenge of how to translate these rich and numerous oral performances without missing the link. In addition, it has been observed that these folklores are almost going into extinct. Therefore, rich scholarly contributions that will serve as a guideline for effective translation of the indigenous oral performance will be studied and adopted for the translation of some select Igbo folklores from Igbo language to English language. However, the research will pose secondarily, as a medium for documentation of some of the folklores for reference purpose. The research made use of qualitative research methodology. It is highly recommended that more translations of indigenous oral performances such as folklore should be encouraged because it will serve as a means of documentation since these folklores are almost going extinct.

**Keywords:** Oral performance, Contextual, Folklore, Translation, Traditional African

### **Introduction**

Oral performance can be defined as a contextual material transferred from one generation to another generation through word of mouth. Information in traditional African community was verbally transmitted via speech or song and as such can take the form of folklore, storytelling or song. Through the medium of storytelling, a society can transmit history, literature, law and other pertinent information they hold sacred across generations orally without a writing system.

According to Juliana Okoh, "Oral traditions are conceived as the corpus of the unwritten Nigerian art. This embodies history, myths, legends, folktales, praise poetry, proverbs, riddle, music, song, traditional practices and rituals"(2).

William P. Murphy state that oral performances can be used by people to express their ideas, beliefs, values and negotiate through their net of social relationships. He defines oral literature as  
a form of communication which use words in speech in a highly stylized artistic way.  
The distinction between the artistic use of words and ordinary or scientific usage is not always a clear-cut. The starting point of demarcation, of course, is the conceptualization of linguistic forms by the members of a culture (114).

The above assertion is simply stating that each oral performance should be a familiar action/event or an accepted practice of a given society making them not to be alien to the performance thereby, placing them in a position to assimilate the information.

Context can be seen as a set of circumstance or facts that surround a particular event or situation – the group of conditions that exist where and when something happens. Or it can be seen as the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs.

Translation according to the Merriam Webster, "it is an act, process or instance of translating: such as rendering a text or oral information from one language into another"(1)

Having noted the definitions to the keynote words, in an attempt to make a definition, contextual translation of oral performance is the process of transferring a message of the first audience to a second audience for the purpose of communication consciously paying attention to the basic in order not to lose the essence of the message during the process while using a medium different from the original.

The emphasis here is that if a translated work loses its primary message, the efficacy of such performance may be lost for good. The point of taking the form of another medium is pointing out to the fact that oral performance of course is a process of verbal communication and after undergoing the translation process, the oral performance may then take the form of a written medium, it could take the form of song medium. The transfer of the message of the first audience is identifying the people at which the oral performance emanated from – the custodians of the performance while the second audiences are those in which the message is extended to either for communication purpose or entertainment purpose but either of the reason, precautions should be taken not to miss the link. Amadi posits that “... a distortion in translation is capable of resulting to communication breakdown, discontinuities of meaningful relationships and possible foreclosure to the appreciation and preservation of universal human experiences and cultural values.(25) ”

### **Contextual Translation of Oral Performance**

Neglecting the fact that there are challenges encountered during translation by scholars is not the right attitude to adopt as translation of African oral performance is almost becoming nagging. Obiechina has equally observed this challenge among other African writers. Bronislaw Malinowski who is recognized as the father of modern ethnography acknowledges the importance of text in translation of oral performance and further informs that the text will have no life if it is removed from its context. This is yet another emphasis on the challenges of translation as the translator needs to pay close attention to the underlying factors that surround the situation of a performance in which he is translating. And of course, during the process of oral performance, the overall story will be enhanced and the character of the story will be appropriated but in all, there should be a ding-dong sound in the ears of the translator not to overdo it.

Performances, generally, are meant to educate, entertain and inform. Each literary work has a goal in which it wants to attain, the audience it wants to reach out to etc. Likewise does contextual translation have its own goal, audience and objective. Therefore, translation if done adequately has the ability to reveal close parallels in human thought in different cultures and languages and as well achieve universal understanding of arts and life. Obiechina has pointed out that one of the problems of African literature has been how the African writer can “render cultural effects, ideas, thoughts, feelings and sensibilities from the vernacular culture into English.(30)” Hence, the need to find a balance between the contexts of language during translation of African literature imaginatively without doing harm to the original meaning of the message is highly recommended. In order to effectively translate efficiently, the translator should take into cognizance the following;

1. Setting
2. Time
3. First Hand Observation
4. Language

1. Setting. The sociological setting of the performance that is being translated should be taken into consideration if the translator aims at achieving an effective and efficient work. Remember that we noted Malinowski’s premonition that a text will be dead when removed from its context. Therefore, for a translator to carry his new or second audience along he has to create the exact setting in which the oral performance took place. If we analyze closely, we will observe that in every social setting, each culture has an adopted symbolism – something when seen immediately sends a message to the people, these types of details should not be overlooked by the translator for effective representation. The translator however, should take note of all the culturally obtainable settings such as properties, costumes, leadership style etc. in order to help the imaginative mind of the second audience. Isidore posits that;

... although there is clearly room for cooperation between the two disciplines in the study of theoretical performance, an aestheticist model is not exactly the same thing as a sociological model. When a literary scholar investigating an oral narrative event, he should of course explore the social circumstances as an aid to context in sight ...(7).

During translation, the sociological and religious rites of the given community should be respected and should not be treated casually. Maybe a translator may in an attempt to generate

laughter may decide to make a young female to wear a sacred mask of a given community, to others that do not have the right information on the mask may laugh but to those that hold the mask sacred may not find it funny.

2. Time. The appropriation of time of the given folktale is a pertinent factor to be taken into consideration during course of translation. Just like the emphasis on setting, for proper information assimilation, the translator needs to take into consideration the time factor. Malinowski states as recorded by Isidore that; "... the performance ... has to be placed in its proper time setting – the hour of the day, and the season with the background..." (4)
3. First Hand Observation. One's interpretation to the things he/she experienced cannot be compared with the interpretation of what he/she was told about. Malinowski unlike Frazer believes that live experience of the performance being translated will be of great help to the translator as it will place the translator in a position to make categorical statements. Malinowski buttresses his point as interpreted by Isidore; "... that only first-hand experience of a society and careful study of the various forms and aspects of its cultural life would qualify us to make categorical statements about any one aspect of its cognitive system." (112)
4. Language. Language is an important factor to consider during translation of oral performance. It can be linked to firsthand experience factor. Language during interpretation can convey various information but it all depends on the situation or the atmosphere in which such language is utilized. Thus, this highlights that a careful study of the situation of performance is also pertinent during translation in order to understand the language used and its context. Therefore, an in-depth study of the people's language from which the story emanated from is highly advised thus, pointing towards a careful study of the mother-tongue because the mother-tongue has been seen to be important and central to the encapsulation and expression of human thoughts and ideas because it can be used as a means of validation of social identity and existential essence. Okolie states;

The role of the mother tongue as the embodiment of a people's culture, creative genius and identity can hardly be over-emphasized. It is not only the repository of cultural heritage, intrinsic, and philosophic leanings of a society, it is also essentially a means of expressing a people's "being-in-the-world", a total perception of the universe with its real or imagined forces as well as their relationship with them. (10)

In this regard, language during translation has faced unavoidable challenges, Isidore recorded the contribution of Ben-Amos who observed the abandonment of cultural reality in striving to formulate theoretical analytical systems in order to meet up with our zeal for scientific methodology. The researcher and Ben-Amos are not stating that the scientific method is not important but in the process of meeting up with the scientific standard, conscious stance should be made not to juxtapose information.

### **Contextual Translation of Some Select Igbo Folklores**

#### **ỤSỤ NA ỤMỤ ANUMANU**

Otu ubochi, ogu dara n'etiti umu anumanu, ogu ahu dara n'etiti anu ndi bi n'elu na anu ndi bi n'ala. Ogu ahu siri ike nke ukwu.

Emesia, anu ndi bi n'ala amanite wee meriwe anu ndi bi n'elu. Mgbe usu huru nke a, o hapuru anu ndi otu ya bi n'elu ma gbakwuru anu ndi bi n'ala. Mgbeuzu ole na ole gasiri, anu ndi nke bi n'elu malite kwara meriwe anu ndinke bi n'ala. Usu agbahapukwa anu ndi nke bi n'ala ma gbahachikwuru anu ndi bi n'elu.

Mgbe onwa iri na otu gasiri, umu anumanu nile ndi a gbakotara onu ma kpee udo n'etiti ha. Mgbe ogu ahu biri, usu were gahachikwuru anu elu ndi otu ya ma ha ekweghi kwa anabataya. O gawkuru anu ndi bi n'ala, ndi nke ahu were chuo ya okpa elu ala. O bu ya kpatara usu abughi anu enu nke o ji abu anu ala wee ruotaa.

Umunne m, ihemmuta di n'akuko a were buru na anyi nile ga-na enwe ndidi n'ihe nile anyi na-eme etu o sina di. Uwa a na eme kwa nu ntuhari umunne m, yabuna o tee aka odinjo, o ga-emesia di mma. Enweghi otu ochichirii siri gbaa n'abali ka ohapu inye chi ohere ka o boo.

#### **The Bat and The Animals**

Sometime ago, there was a fight between the animals that live on land and those that fly in the air and it was a very serious fight. After a while the animals that live on land started having victory over the animals that fly in the air. When the bat saw this, he left the animals that fly in the air and joined forces with the animals that live on ground. Few weeks later, the animals that fly in the started having victory over the animals that live on land Bat, immediately left the air animals to join forces with the flying animals.

10 months later, both animals that do not fly and those that fly by air came together and resolved their issues and made peace with one another. Bat then went back to the animals that fly in the air but they refused to accept him back and he turned and went back to the animals that live on land but they gave him a very hot chase out of the group. So this is why the Bat is neither a bird that flies in the air nor bird that lives on ground.

Moral lesson

We should be patient in everything we do and we should learn that no condition is permanent as change is a constant thing in life.

### **MBE NA ỤMỤ ANỤMANỤ**

Onwere otu mgbe a kpọrọ ụmụ anụmanụ nile oriri na elu igwe. Mgbe ha malitere yabụ njem, mbe gwara ụmụ anụmanụ ndị ọzọ na onye ọbụla ga-aza otu aha, ka ha nwee aha dị iche iche, mbe gwara ha na aha nke ya bụ Unudum.

Mgbe ụmụ anụmanụ nile ruru na elu igwe, e butere ha ihe oriri dị iche iche ma mmanya dị iche iche. Tupu ha riwe ihe ndị ahụ mbe juru sị, olee ndị nwe ihe ndị a nile? Ha wee za ya sị, ọ bụ Unudum, mbe we gwa ụmụ anụmanụ ndị ọzọ na ọbụ nanị ya nwe ihe oriri na mmanya nile ahụ e butere ha.

Mgbe mbe mere nke a ụmụ anụmanụ ndị ahụ were iwe hapụ mbe na elu igwe we laghachi azụ na ụwa. Mbe enweghị ike ịrịda ala maka na ụmụ anụmanụ buru ya were ga na elu igwe ekweghị ebughachi ya. Mbe leturu anya n'ala we kpọ nwunye ya bụ Anum, sị ya buputere ya ahijia na ihe ndị dị nlo ka ọ were daa na elu ya. Anum aghọtaghị ihe di ya mbe kwuru, ọ buputara okwute na osisi na ihe ndị siri ike. Mbe si na elu mapu we da na ihe ndị ahụ azụ ya we kurisie.

A kpọtara ududo ka ọ nyachie azụ mbe. Mgbe ududo mesiri nke a azụ mbe nweziri nkeji nkeji. Ya mere mbe jiri nwe nkeji nkeji na-azụ.

### **The Tortoise and the Other Animals**

Long time ago in a faraway land, all the animals were invited for a feast in heaven. On their way to the feast, the Tortoise suggested to the other animals that they all should choose a name for themselves; all the animals accepted the suggestion and all took various names. When it got to the turn of the Tortoise he told them that his name is 'Unudum' (meaning all of you).

When they got to heaven, the animals were served with different kinds of food and choice wines. When their hosts were about to leave the Tortoise asked them who they brought the food for? One of the host replied 'the food is for 'Unudum' (i.e. all of you)'. On hearing this, the Tortoise told the other animals that the food is for him only and all the animals left the food for him and he ate all the food and drank all the wine that were served.

All the other animals left the Tortoise in heaven in anger and went back to earth. Tortoise did not have any means of coming down back to earth because the animals that helped him up to heaven have left

him. Then, the Tortoise looked down and called out to his wife 'Anum' to bring out all the soft items they have in their home such as mattress, cloths etc to land on but his wife did not understand what he said and went and brought the opposite of what the Tortoise had instructed her to bring such as cutlass, firewood, pots etc. the Tortoise then jumped down from heaven and landed on the harsh things the wife had gathered and the shell on his back broke into pieces.

The spider was called upon to glue back the broken shells of the Tortoise but his back was never the same.

Moral lesson

Greed is not good and this is the reason the Tortoise's back has lines.

## NTIKPO

Otu mgbe n'ala a na-akpo Umụ Ikwo e nwere otu nwanyị mụtara umụ abụọ, otu nwoke na otu nwanyị. Aha nwa nwanyị ahu bụ Nneka ma aha nke nwoke bụ Ntịkpo. Nneka tọrọ Ntịkpo. Otu ubochi nne ha chorọ ipụ apụ gwa ha nọrọ n'ụlọ. Nneka nọọ n'ụlọ ma Ntịkpo kachiri ntị pụọ n'ụlọ gaa n'opkuru osisi ụdaraka ka ọ hōrọ ụdara rachaa. Otu nwanyị amosu putara buru ya laa be ya.

Mgbe mama ha batara Nneka gwara ya ihe mere. Mama ha dara n'ala bee akwa wee si na ọ buru na nwanne gi Ntịkpo mere ihe m kwuru nwanyị amosu ahụ agaghị e buru ya laa.

Onye nwere ntị ya nuru.

### NTIKPO (STUBBORNNESS)

Sometime ago, in a village known as Umụikwo, there lived a woman who had two children, one boy and one girl. The name of the girl is Nneka and the name of the boy is Ntịkpo (stubborn or disobedient). One day, their mother wanted to go out and instructed Nneka and Ntịkpo not to go outside the house for any reason until she comes back. Nneka stayed in the house but Ntịkpo left the house to go plug 'Udara' fruits. While he was plugging the fruits, a wicked female witch came and carried him off to her house. When their mother came back, Nneka told her what happened and she fell down and carried bitterly lamenting that if Ntịkpo had done what she instructed the wicked witch would not have carried him away.

#### Moral lesson

- He that has ear should hear. Being stubborn is not good.

#### Challenges Encountered During the Translation of the Select Igbo Folklores

During the translation of the select folktales, the translator came across words that are better left in their indigenous forms. Such words include;

- "Unudum" The name tortoise took for himself in the tortoise story.
- "Ntịkpo" The name of the stubborn child in the story of disobedience.
- "Nneka" The name of Ntịkpo's sister.
- "Umụikwo" A name of a village in the disobedience child story.

It will be observed that if an attempt is made in translating the indigenous names, the meaning of the name may be lost in the process or after the translation, the name will no longer be a one word name but a sentence thereby, losing its original effect on the story.

Music Idiophones. There is need to capture music idiophones. During the process of contextual translation, the translator among other challenges is faced with the quest on how to translate the musical sounds at which African words express a given situation. Idiophones are sound impressions which

represent certain gestures, mannerisms and attributes and they are not easily conveyable by a particular grammatical category. Helen Chukwuma defines Idiophones as “descriptive sounds which give added dimension and flair to words.” (54). The meaning of Idiophones are represented in the type of verbs, adverb, adjectives and modifiers in which they are used and as such improve the features of storytelling and other traditional oral literary practices. Example, “gbamgbam” (representing a heavy sound) “gidigbamgidigbam” (representing a heavy sound) but it can be more understood by the category in which they were represented. The example used cannot be translated in English and if we insist and try we may produce feeble results. In a situation like this, Isidore recommends;

One is to leave such Idiophones exactly as they are, since English does not normally use the device in the way African language do. The other approach is to find in English an effect as poetically forceful as the Idiophone has in the indigenous text.(8)

Parallel Structure. Isidore states that “parallel structuring of tales helps the narrator to achieve a sense of order and harmony in the large amount of folktale material swimming around in his or her head at any given time.”( 115) Therefore, parallel structuring is a strategic device adopted by the oral artist to bring ideas and images together in harmonious piece thus, the translator is faced with the problem of including parallel structuring during the process of translation and it is a device that cannot be overlooked.

### **Conclusion**

Contextual translation of oral literature stands to play a prominent role in information exchange, communication of meaning and the exchange of human experiences. According to Nnamani;

A distortion in translation is capable of resulting in communication breakdown, discontinuities of meaningful relationship and even possible foreclosure to the appreciation and preservation of universal human experiences and cultural values (2)

Thorough understanding of primary knowledge as well as information on the culture, social and emotional reaction that is targeted in the primary source is pertinent. For effective contextual translation, one must have cultural comprehension. Every story emanated from a particular ethnic group and as such, the story will be influenced by the belief of the group. Total comprehension of the ethnic group of a particular story will serve as an in-depth for the translator to imaginatively describe text in the new language without fear of prejudice. Nnamani states that;

... a text cannot be appreciated in isolation of the culture that begets it and a translator not conversant with the socio-cultural environment and reality that produces text ends up disturbing the realities inhabiting the text...(3)

Retaining the original language is a good option to adopt in some situations. Chinua Achebe bearing in mind some of the complications inherent in translation adopted the style of writing Idioms and proverbs in indigenous language after which he gives an explanation. This portrays that he writes in foreign language but takes precautionary measure not to lose the original message and this is made evident in most of his works like *Things Fall Apart*. An instance, “eziokwubundu”, “truth is life” although direct word equivalents may not always be possible but this strategy is only helpful in cutting down contextual translation problem.

Blackburn in addition, recommends that translation should “transcend cultural, historical and linguistic boundaries.” (212) Therefore, upcoming translators should adhere to the guidelines and footsteps of predecessor for a better translating process. They should also have good knowledge of the culture and history of the primary source language to avoid line by line translation. As Okolie has identified that “restraint in vocabulary, inadequate critical thinking or consciousness... are the tendencies that makes the translator to resort to line or word for word translation”(20)

Finally, there is need to constantly carry out translation of African folktales because this process will serve as a means of documentation and medium of update to most research works.

### **Recommendations**

It is the recommendation of this research that more translations of indigenous folklores should be encouraged because the more it is being translated, it stands the chance of reaching more audience.

Translation of these folklores are means of documenting them as majority of them are passed down orally hence, this will be an intervention exercise to save our cultural rich folklores that is almost going extinct. Analytically looking at these folklores, some of the subject matters that they speak against are topical subject matters that are still relevant for discussion in our present day African society. For example, the subject matter treated in the folklore “Tortoise and the Animals” is greed. Greed is a general subject matter and it is being experienced daily. Narrowing it down to the situation experienced in Niger/Delta region, is a situation of one person or group of select individuals spending the fund provided for all their community members that is supposed to help the people that their farmlands were affected by the oil spillage to cushion the effect of the damages as was treated in one of Esiaba Irobi’s play *Hangmen also Dies*. Greed as a subject is portrayed through the character of Chief Erekosima who spent 3million naira government fund mapped out for the oil spillage victims.

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