

LITERATURE AS A PORTRAYER OF THE BELIEFS AND TRADITIONS OF THE IGBO PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

Every literary work has something to portray. In most cases, they showcase the beliefs and traditions of the community or society in which the writer lives. Literature is the creative work done which exposes the experience and conception of the person about the life in a society where he or she lives. Literature represents the culture, tradition and belief of a people. Belief is the set of principles or doctrines seen or accepted by an individual or a group, as true. Tradition is the transmission or handing down customs or beliefs from generation to generation. This work reviews some of the Igbo beliefs and traditions. It attempts to showcase some of the Igbo beliefs and traditions as depicted in *O Chupuru onwe ya n'ugbo* and *Ullumma*. The work seeks to project some of the beliefs and traditions of the Igbo people to the outside world. Though not every tradition and belief were revealed, because the text *Ullumma*, exposed little of the Igbo beliefs and traditions. It is therefore hoped that this work will help in no small measure, exhibit literature as a portrayer of the beliefs and traditions of the Igbo people.

INTRODUCTION

Literature has been variously defined by scholars but for the purpose of this work, we will take literature to mean that literary work which represents the culture, beliefs and traditions of a people living together in a community or society. This is why it is said that writers do not write in a vacuum. They write about people living in their various environments and the way they live and do their things.

Literature has the power to create, impact and exhibit the lives of people in the society. The numerous functions of literature both as a subject of study in schools and what people read at their leisure for entertainment, show that literature particularly literature in Nigerian language, has the capacity to throw a new and positive light in people's line of thought and actions.

Most creative and literary artists focus the settings and themes of their works on a particular subject matter. Ifeka and Ofomata are no exceptions in their texts. They focused the themes and settings of their books *O Chupuru Onwe ya n'Ugbo* and *Ullumma* respectively on some of the Igbo beliefs and traditions.

Igbo literature is mostly embedded in the beliefs and traditions of the Igbo people, and it is one of the means by which the Igbo people transmit showcase and express their beliefs and traditions. Any Igbo literature therefore, that is devoid of beliefs and traditions of the Igbo people are like a floating boat without anchor. A society's traditions and beliefs manifest in

their day to day activities, including their actions, speeches and writings. The writer Ifeka and Ofomata in their works *O Chupuru Onwe ya n'Ugbo* and *Ullumma* respectively, x-ray some of the Igbo beliefs and traditions through their literary languages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature is a body of written work. The name has been traditionally applied to those imaginative works of poetry and prose distinguished by the intentions of their authors and the perceived aesthetic excellence of their execution (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015). It involves writing about the way of life of a group of people knitted together because of their shared values. Literary work may be classified according to a variety of systems including language, national origin, historical period, genre and subject matter. Igbo works of literature involve such subject matters as their beliefs and traditions explicated in various genres. The traditional Igbo society is stocked with many cherished norms and values.

According to Mishnah (1982; 86), "Tradition is the handing down of information, beliefs and customs by words of mouth or by example from one generation to another within the society." This is what is portrayed in most Igbo works of literature. Nduka (2014) says that in works of literature, there are shown beliefs and traditional practices which the people hold to a very high esteem not only as a mark of identity, but that which forms a tie that binds them together. He goes on to say that although traditions vary with different communities, there are still some practices which are common with all the Igbo communities.

Aristotle (1957) in his work notes, that literature embodies the quality of providing instructions and the life of a particular nation or race to the outside societies. This is shown in the works of Igbo writers to be true because the folktales and other types of literary works are designed and told in such a way that they teach morals, expose peoples' follies and extol the praise worthy actions of others. Egudu (1979) says that literary works are not only seen as modes of expression but involves the way and manner in which the beliefs are portrayed, and handed down from generation to generation. Duvignand (1972) in his own contribution sees the beliefs and traditions of the people not just as reflections; rather a projection of the peoples' aspiration for the future. So, traditions and beliefs of the people contained in their literary works are a way of handing down their ways of life to the future generation. It is a way of presenting the culture of the people to the world.

Contributing to the importance of literature as portraying the beliefs and traditions of a people, Caudwel (1977: 145) says, 'The task of literature is keeping the collective imagination of a society alive such that its members will be able to channel their energies to communal social construction.' In a nutshell, literature does not only reflect, it affects the beliefs and traditions of a people. These beliefs and traditions are contained in the two works we use for illustration in this study. The texts of study contain the beliefs and traditions of the Igbo people and this study portray them as they are observed in Igbo ways of life.

LITERATURE AS A PORTRAYER OF IGBO PEOPLES' BELIEFS AND TRADITIONS

As already mentioned above, Igbo beliefs and their traditions go hand in hand. They complement each other. Literature mostly presents the beliefs and traditions of the people through what Onwudiwe (1999) calls 'Local Colour'. Since 'belief' is a set of principles or doctrines seen or accepted by an individual or a group as true, and tradition is the

transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, literature, therefore serves mostly as the imitation of life. It gives, tells and exposes the accepted principles of a particular society and also shows those custom or beliefs that are transmitted from generation to generation. This it does, through the way the authors of various literary works who are artistically gifted, organize them in drama, poetry or fiction in order to achieve their purposes.

The authors of different ethnic groups bring out the beliefs and traditions of their various societies by letting people know that they really exist. For example, the author from a particular society writes and exposes the beliefs and traditions of his society thereby making people from other societies have insight to what their beliefs and traditions look like. We are going to have an insight into the beliefs and traditions of Igbo culture using the work of Ifeka (2012) and Ofomata (2009) for illustrations.

Ifeka's *Ọ Chupuru Onwe Ya N'Ugbọ*, as a Portrayer of Igbo Beliefs and Traditions.

Ọ Chupuru Onwe Ya N'Ugbọ, is one of the Igbo literary texts that portray the beliefs and traditions of the Igbo people. It is a literature text used as an instrument to showcase the beliefs and traditions of the Igbo people as evidenced in their various day to day activities. Here under are some of the Igbo beliefs and traditions contained in the text.

Belief in Ọgbanje (some call it Ọgbanuke): The novel showed that the Igbos believe in Ọgbanje. Ọgbanje is the term the Igbo use to refer to a child who is born and then he dies in infancy, enters the mother's womb and is born again. The Igbo believes that such a child is wicked. Ọgbanje is believed to be an evil spirit that would deliberately plague a family with misfortune. Ọgbanje children are known as 'children who come and go'. They come into the world with the sole aim of breaking the heart of their parents by dying prematurely. They do not come to stay. They are children who keep being born to the same parents over and over again but end up not living long but die only to come back again to do it again.

This belief was portrayed on p. 47 of this text. In the text, the character Ujunwa is believed to be an ọgbanje. This belief stems from the fact that she could not yield money when Ebu secret cult members killed her (Ujunwa) for money making rituals. The cultists later confessed that their ritual was not accepted and that the expected wealth did not come. They believed it was so, because Ujunwa was an ọgbanje. Those who are ọgbanje have other characteristics like having dreams relating to rivers, streams, pythons, tigers, lions, crocodiles and masquerades. If they ever live to adulthood, they do not like to get married but, if they do, they have difficult pregnancies and most often die trying to give births to babies.

Payment of Bride Price: This is called 'Imeego Nwaanyi' in Igbo land. It is the money paid to seal a marriage contract in Igbo land, after which a woman is considered to be the wife of the man who came to seek her hand in marriage. This is seen on pp. 28, 29, 30 and 31 of the study text. Ubadimma paid the sum of five thousand naira as Adannaya's bride price. After paying this bride price, Adannaya became Ubadimma's wife according to Igbo custom and tradition.

Igbo Belief in Reincarnation: The Igbo believe in reincarnation 'Ilo Uwa'. The Igbo believe that dead people reincarnate into families that they were part of, while alive. Reincarnation, 'Ilo Uwa' is one of the Igbo's believe that has been a guide which controlled the ethical and moral behaviours of the Igbo of old. It gave the Igbo the inspiration to do well thereby reaping the fruit of their good deeds when they must have died. Before a relative dies, it is said that the relatives that would soon die sometimes give clues of whom they will reincarnate into. Once a child is born, he or she is believed to give signs of who he or she reincarnates from. This can be seen or observed through the child's behaviour, physical traits

and statements as he grows. A diviner can help in detecting who the child has reincarnated from.

This is seen on p. 25 of this text. There, it is believed that Ananti's (the Chief Character) dead mother reincarnated into his daughter; Adannaya. This is because of some features noticed in the baby, Adannaya which was there in her grandmother, Ananti's mother. Ifeka showcases this trait thus:

"... ụbọchị a mụrụ Adanna ka ọhanaeneze hụrụ eze Ananti nihiina n'uche ya, nne ya bịara ụwa. Ọ kwenyere na ọ bụ nne ya bụ Nwaanyimma bịara ụwa na be ya".

(...the day Adanna was born, people saw Ananti smile because, in his mind he knew his mother Nwanyimma has reincarnated in his house.

The Igbo People's Belief that Certain Name should not be called at Night: In the text under study, the Igbo belief that certain things should not be called by their real names at night for the fear that if they are called they will appear is shown. The study text shows that, the main reason for not calling scorpions and snakes at night, is because they might visit the place where their names are mentioned respectively to sting and bite the people who called their names. This is portrayed on p. 19. Here, a mention is made that the name eke (python) or scorpion which should not be mentioned in the night for fear of them appearing and respectively biting or stinging the person who called their names. Again, children are also advised not to whistle in the night to avoid bringing evil spirits into their homes.

The Igbo People's Belief in the Existence of Ancestors: The Igbo people believe that their ancestors, who have already died in real life, are alive in the land of the spirits. Such dead relatives the Igbo believe always watch and guard their living relatives. The living shows appreciation to their ancestors and pray to them so that the living has a good future through the watch and interventions of their ancestors. This is seen on p. 39, where it is believed by the people of Ụmụọpịa that 'Anị' their god and their ancestors who have died, and their spirits living in the ancestral world do discuss the progress of the living. The Igbo people call their ancestors, "Ndiichie". This belief is shown thus:

"Anị na ndi nna nna ochie (maọbụ ndiiche) nwuru anwu na-akparita maka ọdịmma ndi nọ ndu dika Ụmụọpịa siri kwenye".

(‘Anị’ and the spirits of the dead ancestors do discuss the welfare of the living as the people of Ụmụọpịa believes).

The Igbo Belief in Prophecy: Prophecy is in truth and reality, an emanation sent forth by Divine Being through the medium of the active intellect in the first instance to man's rational faculty, and then to his imaginative faculty (Israel, 2013). Prophecy involves a process in which one or more messages allegedly told to a prophet are then told to other people. Such messages typically involve inspiration, interpretation, or revelation of event to come.

The Igbo people call prophecy 'Ibu amuma'. They believe so much in the fact that anything that will happen, must have been revealed to someone. This is the reason why they seek the prophecy of fortune tellers when the need arises. This is seen on p. 56, where Uzondu (Ananti's disowned son) got a prophecy that his father (Ananti), will eventually die, after confessing his evil deeds in his household and in Ụmụọpịa community.

Enquiry before Marriage (Igba Njụ / Igba Ajuju): The Igbo people call this 'Ijụ asę tupu alụwa di na nwunye'. Igbo people do not jump into marriage without clear knowledge of whom they are marrying or the family they are marrying into or going to marry from. They ask about background, behaviour, sickness in the family, longevity, type of death and so on that exist in such families.

This, the writer exhibits on p. 26 where Ubadimma asked about Adannaya before marrying her. He went to her school, her kindred which were Uruowele and her church where she worships and got good result about her credibility, before proceeding to marry her. It is important to point out here that enquiries can also be made about the man who wants to marry a girl to know about him and his family as well.

Ọzọ Title Ceremony: Ọzọ title taking has been an important part of Igbo culture. It is one of the oldest and highest social institutions in Igbo land. It is a prestigious traditional Igbo title. The Igbo people are mostly known for this ọzọ title. They respect it so much and have rules guiding it. The ọzọ titled men are easily distinguished by their dressings and the way they are being respected in the society. The ọzọ titled man plays an important role in the maintenance of law and order in the society. They are seen as men of proven integrity.

Ọzọ title taking is a very expensive project. That is why it is only those who are wealthy that can take it. Such is shown in the text under study. This appeared on pp. 25 and 36, how Maazi Ikwuka performed his ọzọ title ceremony. He spent a lot of money to belong to this prestigious institution.

Blessing and Praying with Kola Nut in Igbo Land: The ceremonies involving kola nut is a cultural heritage of the Igbo which civilization cannot erase. The Igbo men offer kola nut to their visitors to show acceptance and welcome. The kola nut is also used by the Igbo to offer prayers to their gods and to ask for favour from God, from their ancestors, and even from their fellow men. The use of kola nut as mentioned above is seen on p. 11 of the text when Maazi Okoye blessed and prayed with the kola nut given to him in his friend's house (Ananti). The Igbo people call this act 'Igọ Ojị'. The kola nut content is not conceptualized ordinarily by the Igbo man. It plays a large part in shaping man's view, particularly; emphasis is placed on the number of halves of a kola nut. It must have more than two cotyledons. The number signifies a particular thing in Igbo cosmology.

Covenant between Two or more Persons: The concept of 'Igba ndụ' means to bond life. 'Igba' stands for bond or tie while 'ndụ' means life. So Igba ndụ is a covenant between individuals or groups. In the Igbo culture there is 'Igba ndụ'. When an Igbo man wants something involving him and another person or group to be kept secret, he goes into covenant with the person or group involved. Here, oath of secrecy is taken. Covenant may come in different ways. It may be blood covenant where the two parties make incisions on their bodies for drawing blood. They each deep lobes of kola nut in the others blood and eat the kola nut. At times it goes with some incarnations. This is particularly done by lovers so as to avoid disappointing each other.

Covenant may be as a form of conflict resolution. This is to avoid mistrust, destruction and ensure peace and security of lives and properties of the people involved. In covenant making, there are witnesses like humans, deities and/or chief priests. One of such covenant is shown on p. 45 of this prose fiction, Ananti had a covenant with the Ebu secret cult. The Ebu secret cult members had a covenant with Anati in order to make him believe that he should never reveal anything they had in common to an outsider or/a non-member.

Rite of Passage: Rite of passage is the ceremony in Igbo land performed for young girl who has attained marriageable age. Some parts of the Igbo land call this 'Ipuebe' while some other parts call it 'Irumgbede'. This 'Ipuebe' is a ceremony often performed by a girl who is up to the age of marriage to show that she has passed from childhood to womanhood. This ceremony is a signal to the men in that society that such a girl is now ripe for marriage. When this is done, men may start approaching her for her hand in marriage. This tradition is seen on p. 13 of this text. Its existence in Umuopia is only mentioned but it was not performed. In Ugonnaya's case, she refused to undergo this ceremony as their (Umuopia) tradition requires because she is converted to Christianity. She sees this tradition now as evil.

Firing of Cannon Shots: In Igbo tradition, firing of cannon shots signifies a lot of things. It can be used to announce the death of a significant personality (titled man) to the spirits. It also announces to people in far away communities of the loss. In Igbo society, when parents want to disown their children there is the firing of cannon shots to make it known to the public. This is telling the society that they have nothing with the said children anymore. This is seen on p. 38 of the study text when Maazi Ananti and his friend Maazi Okoye fired cannon shots as a way of disowning their children (Uzondu and Ugonnaya). They did this to make the public aware after the said children disobeyed them and participated in the crusade organized by missionaries in Umuopia.

Ofomata's Ulumma as a Portrayer of Igbo Beliefs and Traditions

Ofomata in his text portrays some of the Igbo beliefs and traditions like we have in Ifeka's text. Although not many of them are portrayed.

Belief in Ogbanje: Ofomata portrays the Igbo belief in Ogbanje as is seen in Ifeka (2012) about Ulumma in his text. Then indicates that the Igbo society believes in Ogbanje. Those who are Ogbanje do not only dream about rivers, pythons, crocodiles, etc, but also are sickly, often hear strange voices, became afraid and disturbed by unknown forces and many other problems. These characteristics are there in Ulumma from the first page of the study to the last. Ulumma is plagued by the above mentioned problems. She was constantly sick and is frightened by unknown voices.

Visits and Enquiries to Soothsayers/Fortune-Tellers: The Igbo believe that if something happens, there must be a reason for it. Therefore, there is the need to inquire from soothsayers or fortune tellers to unravel the mystery. Fortune telling is the practice of predicting information about a person's life. A fortune teller or soothsayer is one who has the spirit of divination. This is usually done especially when there is a misfortune in the family or society. This is shown on pp. 67 and 68 where Ulumma's father went to inquire from Onwuahia about the misfortunes that are befalling his daughter, Ulumma. It is in the cause of his inquiry that Onwuahia the soothsayer told him that his daughter Ulumma is an Ogbanje. (ndi uke). Onwuahia told Ulumma's father that 'ndi uke' were disturbing his daughter.

The Igbo Belief in the Existence of Evil Spirits: Ofomata in his text under study showcases the Igbo belief in the existence of the evil spirits. The Igbo people call it 'ajo mmuo'. They believe that there are the good and the evil spirits that exist on earth. The evil ones do evil things and put fear in people while the good spirits are harmless and even protect people. The belief in the existence of evil spirit is showcased on p. 72. Here Ulumma and her family are praying against evil spirits that have been disturbing and creating fear in her (Ulumma).

The Igbo Belief in Chi Ukwu: The Igbo sees Chi Ukwu as the Supreme Being. They believe that Chi Ukwu is the God that does great things. This belief is shown of the text under study

on p. 90. After the prayers said by the church ministers for God to intervene in Uḷumma's case, Onwūahīa the traditionalist, came to perform ritual for the same purpose. But he was told by Uḷumma's parents that their daughter's problems have been taken care of through prayers. He (Onwūahīa) tried to convince them that he should be allowed to do his work that it was Chi Ukwu that created those prayer warriors as well as herbs and roots used to offer solutions to same problems. Chi Ukwu created those who are making use of the herbs and roots to perform good works as well as the prayer warriors.

CONCLUSION

The authors in their works under study exhibit literature as a portrayer of Igbo traditions and beliefs. They bring to limelight the fact that literature of a people is the totality of those peoples way of life. In the case of the Igbo, we are made to see that they are a people with lots of traditions and beliefs and all of these are portrayed in their ways of life as shown in the two texts under study. The authors have played the role of bringing to the knowledge of the totality of the Igbo and the outside world the traditions and belief of the Igbo and how these traditions and beliefs work in their lives.

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