YOUTH AND CHILDREN IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: AN ORAL LITERARY ANALYSIS OF OGBALU'S *MBEDIOGU*

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Abstract
The emergence of written African literature from the colonial experience has created a gap for divergent literary views and this necessitates that scholars should address many of these issues, especially those bordering on youth and children. On the one hand is the problem of proper delineation between youth and children; on the other is the problem of the best medium of contact/communication to reach this class of people, while the question of literature, its nature, functions and meaning is on the extreme. This paper delves into these problems, using the oral literary approach, to analyze the selected text of F.C. Ogbalu's *Mbediogu*. Published in Igbo language in 2006 as a collection of folktales, the study examines the divide between the youth and children audience as well as the best type of literary writing to reach this class of people and concludes that the whole stories in Ogbalu's *Mbediogu* are intended to educate and inform the Igbo children and entire audience on the age long morals and wisdom of Igbo race.

Keywords: *Mbediogu,* Youth and Children's Literature, Igbo folktales, African Literature.

Introduction

Youth and children stand at a very strategic position in the study of any literature. For some unidentified reason, scholars in the past seemed to have neglected or ignored this category of people in their writings. The reason may not be farfetched; most writers in the past emerged from the adult classes of the society, their protagonist(s) often stood to reflect their adult authors, while their theme centred on the adult concerns. The emergence of youth and children's literature in Africa came as a result of the European colonizers who besieged Africa at the dawn of the 19th century. Their writings paid little or no attention to African culture and tradition, as their interest was in creating in their reader's mind attitudes of the European culture. Quoting Obiechina, Osayimwense Osa (1988), while writing on ''The New Nigerian Youth Literature'', states that:

> Although British literature remains as the text in literature classes, Nigerian popular literature has been developing since the late 1940s. Soon after the end of the Second World War, popular pamphleteering began to develop in Nigeria. Within a few years it was a flourishing phenomenon in the West African Literary Scene (!988, p.10).

The history of youth literature in Africa could be traced to the emergence of Onitsha market literature. Onitsha market literature (as a term) being a kind of pamphlet literature, was coined by Donatus Nwoga who documented the background and nature of this literature in an article ''Onitsha Market Literature'' published in *Transition iv*. (1965). (Emenyonu, 1991, p. 27). Onitsha Market literature developed out of the circulation of cheap foreign novelettes, especially of Indian and American origins in the 1940s. Marked by their ''simplicity of language and flashy romantic pictures of glamorous women being kissed by men on the covers'' (Emenyonu, 1991, p. 27), it attracted quite a reading audience, especially the teenagers (who not only bought and read them, but circulated these to their friends). The theme of love, marriage and sex, peculiar to Onitsha market literature is also extended to African youth literature. Largely believed to have started by

Cyprian Ekwensi's publication of *When Love Whispers* in 1947, others followed, like Ogali A. Ogali's *Veronica My Daughter*, E.U. Anya's *She died on the Bloom of Youth* and Thomas Igu's *Alice in the Romance of Destiny*, among others.

"Youth" and "Children" in African Literature

One controversial problem that has emanated from the study of youth literature, is on if the same literature applies to both children and youth. In other words, are children youth or are youth children? If no, at what point does these two separate? Can the book used for youth be also used for children? Do both groups share similar experiences and needs? These and many other questions face the scholar of this field of literature. But at this stage, the researcher is of the view that there is a big divide between children and youth, even though they share close affiliation as youth succeed childhood. On a broader scope, drawing a border line between youth and children's literature needs some definitions. Youth is a period of life between childhood and adulthood. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, youth is "the time of life when a person is young, especially the time before a child becomes an adult" (2005, p. 1713). The same dictionary defines childhood as "the period of somebody's life when they are a child" (p. 245).

Broadly speaking, youth literature is a body of creative or aesthetic writing in which teenagers and young adults feature, mostly as protagonists. The interest and characteristics of these teenagers and young adults are so much capitalized on or emphasized in their literature, while children's literature, focuses more on the stages of childhood, their interests, characteristics and the way they see the world and relate with issues.

The uniqueness of children's literature is essentially distinguished from the particular audience that this literature addresses. Children's literature is limited by the experience and understanding of children. They lack certain emotional and psychological responses like sex, love and marriage which excite the youth. Children also lack the feeling of nostalgia which adults

and young adults possess, because children are yet to develop/create their memories.

Creating Cultural and Political Awareness in African Children's Literature

Phillip Nkwocha (1972) in his paper, "Publishing for Children" states that, "book publishing like every other arm of the mass media is both cultural and political" (p. 39). Unfortunately, African publishers are deficient and so handicapped in many modern scientific and technological machines, which are exclusively in the hands of foreign publishers. Foreign publishers, therefore, dominate and control the cultural and political formation of character of children. This should be of serious concern for African writers and publishers.

The term children's literature can stand for a general study of the psychology of children and their books. This study extends to the study of both the formative years and the personality of children – how they conceive issues, their growth and developmental stages, what interests them and what aids their learning. The background of African children in this case, is not the same as that of English children; hence African children's literature can be distinguished from the English children's literature based on the cultural milieu, ethics, mores, settings and medium of narration. According to Sunday Francis Okoh:

> Many writers and scholars of children's literature have stressed the importance of oral tradition to children's literature Chinua Achebe in his clarion call to save the African child from what he termed 'the beautifully packed poison' imported into the continent in form of children's story books has advised African writers for children to exploit the infinite treasury of African oral tradition. (2010, p. 175)

As African scholars continue researching for the best ways to develop African children's literature, it is expedient to state the peculiarities of children's books from those of adults. Obviously, the attention of children is needed in any book meant for their

consumption; they also need to be educated and informed while being entertained. The entertainment aspect connotes that children's books should serve as playthings or "toys". African culture has many different variations, as their entertainment methods differ from one country to the other. Before the advent of European colonialism, oral literature was the most common medium of literary expression cum entertainment in Africa. Even though most scholars exploited this oral tradition to embellish their writings, the Ghana concept of *ananse* "spider" story, for instance, is in total variation from the Nigerian-Igbo concept of *mbe* "tortoise" or Yoruba *ajakpa* which is the same as "tortoise".

The publication of African children's fiction came into existence after the advent of colonialism, approximately in the 20th century. The limitations of these publications were in conformity with the source of publications which came from Europe. These foreign scholars and educationists imported such works as abridged and simplified versions of European adult literature like Rider Hagard's *King Solomon's Mines*, Robert L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* into Africa for children's consumption, but such simplification and adornment of abridged texts, failed to transform them into children's texts. Even though some abridged and simplified versions of English texts contained lavish drawings and graphic illustrations, they failed to meet the demands of African children. For instance, they lacked cultural relevance to African children. According to Nkwocha:

> A three year-old child looking through a children's picture book would like to identify himself (herself), his (her) sisters, brothers and even playmates in the book. He (She) would like to point to the pictures and relate them to his (her) environment and experience, but might reject the book if he (she) only finds 'white' children with straight hair, playing in environments that are completely strange to him (her). At times, the experience might lead the child to a total rejection

> of the book as a play material and he (she) ceases to learn. (1972, p. 40)

From the foregoing, it is therefore obvious that African children's literature is a specialized area of study and needs highly qualified hands to write and teach African children. Unfortunately, Africans are losing ground on this field, as both parents and teachers are busy with other socio-economic needs and expectations. Where there are willing writers, the high cost of producing children's literature faces African writers and poses a big challenge to them. To make children read, there is need for both graphic design and colour in their books.

Themes in African Children's Literature

Research has shown that major themes in African children's literature are rooted in local life stories, adventure stories and historical fiction. Themes extend to folktales, mythology, fables, songs, plays and legends. According to Okoh,

> Contemporary fiction writing for children in Nigeria can be grouped into two categories: realistic stories, those that are close to real life situation, and those that are based on the oral tradition of her people. In both categories (there is) the heavy influence of oral tradition in form of contents; moral messages and themes; and narrative techniques. (2010, p. 176) (emphasis mine).

It is on this basis that the researchers embark on oral-literary analysis of *Mbediogu*. F. C. Ogbalu's *Mbediogu* is a selection of Igbo folktales, edited and annotated to promote Igbo language and literature. Published in 2006 by the University Publishing Company Onitsha, the text is made up of twenty-five stories, each revolving around the wisdom and follies of the tortoise. When the Igbo talk of the tortoise in their folktales, they mean a human being, even though the image of this creature is portrayed in form of the actual tortoise (a reptile with a hard round shell that lives on land and moves very slowly, sometimes hiding its head and legs inside the shell). The young ghost talks of the smell of man on page 63 of *Mbediogu* when, in actual fact, he meant the tortoise,

Mbekwu wee nodu n'otu akuku ulo na-echere ihe ozo o ga- eme. Ngwangwa, otu nwa okorobia mmoo wee febata n'ime ulo si, "Ewoo! Ewoo! Anuru m isi mmadu n'ulo a. [Ogbalu:63]

The tortoise sat at one side of the corridor, thinking on what next to do. Quickly, a young spirit of the dead flew into the house and said,

"Ewoo! Ewoo! I perceive the smell of man in this house. [Ogbalu: 63]

The text *Mbediogu* opens with the folksong:

Ole anu na-eme n'uzo o? kpalanuma Which animal is knocking on the door o - *kpalanuma*

O bu Mbe na-eme n'uzo o?- kpalanuma… It's the tortoise knocking on the door o– *kpalanuma*

O bu Mbe na-eme n'uzo-o?-Kpalanuma ".(3) It's the tortoise knocking on the door – *kpalanuma*

This song calls the attention of the reader to the succeeding stories and prepares the mind of the reader to appreciate the tales about the 'great tortoise'. The author makes it clear in his introduction that the stories are meant for both the children and their elders.

One of the themes in the book *Mbediogu* is that of **Moral Lesson**. Virtually, every Igbo folktale ends with one moral lesson or the other. In the preface to the book, the reader is introduced to the mystery behind the tortoise and the turtle. Both reptiles were said to be born of the same mother but with different gifts. While the turtle (in the book named *Samadiko*) is gifted with traditional wisdom of medicine, the tortoise is gifted with the cunning abilities. The story goes that while the turtle is able to defeat the 'dead' spirits (*umummoo*), the tortoise fell victim of them and would have been feasted upon if not for the intervention of his

brother, the turtle. The preface makes the reader understand why the turtle lives in the water as a result of his meddling with charms. It refers to tortoise as the 'king of tricks', 'the wise one' and the 'son of land dove' to depict the capabilities of the tortoise.

In reverence of the wisdom of the tortoise, the first tale in *Mbediogu* is on a contest of wisdom between the tortoise (*Mbe*) and God (*Chukwu*). It so happened that on one occasion, the tortoise visited *Chukwu* in His palace as custom demanded. *Chukwu* entered the house and brought out a stone and offered to tortoise as a welcome gift, for tortoise to break, in place of the usual Igbo kolanut. Tortoise, being surprised, thought deep over this matter. After reflecting, he went outside and prepared a head pad (*aju*) which he presented to God on his return, asking *Chukwu* to "use the pad to carry the earth." God expressed surprise and asked tortoise the possibility of human being able to carry the earth? Tortoise in reply shouted back, asking *Chukwu* the possibility of a human being breaking the stone; is the stone kolanut? *Chukwu* looked up and told tortoise that He would send him on an errand on his way back from his mission. Tortoise agreed, left and went on his journey.

After tortoise's journey, he found his way back to *Chukwu* and saluted Him. God gave some money to tortoise, and asked him to purchase palm wine for Him. The instruction was that the wine should not be stored in a pot or in any container; that tortoise should not pass through the forest or road while delivering the drink; he should neither come in the morning nor at noon nor at night; the drink should not be full or be half full.

Tortoise took the money and went home. On getting home, he thought over the matter and resolved on what to do. He purchased wine, poured it into the mortar. In the middle of the night, tortoise drags the wine in the mortar through the hole and walked boldly into *Chukwu*'s presence and says: *Chukwu Ukpabi*, I have purchased that wine and brought it before you. *Chukwu* asked him: "Did I not ask you not to come in the morning?" Tortoise retorted, "Is it now morning? Is it now noon?" *Chukwu* asked him

again: "Did I not ask you not to come through the forest, or through the road while delivering the drink?" Tortoise replied: "Did I come through the forest or through the road? Is it not through the culvert hole that I brought in the wine? After engaging in other feats with *Chukwu*, tortoise emerged victorious, making him champion of all wise beings.

The second story on "*Mbe na Ngwere*" (i.e. tortoise and lizard) teaches the moral or principle of revenge (tit for tat) as a wise type of judgement. Out of scarcity and hunger, the lizard cut the rope with which the tortoise was conveying the bag of salt he purchased for his people's use back home and the judges decided the matter in favour of the lizard. Being annoyed for what he felt was an injustice, Mr. Tortoise waited until one good day, when he sighted Mr. Lizard taking cover in a shallow hole to shelter himself from rainfall. He cleverly cut off the tail of Lizard, as a means of settling old scores. The moral in this story is to abstain from greed and unjust method of acquiring wealth.

The third story in the text that reflects the wisdom of tortoise, is that of the tortoise and the snail. Here, folly and the mistake made by Tortoise by claiming a murder act, which he actually committed, but pushed to snail, his friend. The snail, being assisted by the witch doctor, deceived the tortoise to believing and accepting that the gifts of clothing, in which he was clothed, were given to him as a compensation or award from the king for killing his rebellious and detested wife. On hearing this, Tortoise rushed to the king and owned up his murder act, which made the king severely punish Tortoise and giving his daughter's hand in marriage to snail.

Another story on tortoise and pig is a very educative one, as the motif is to teach the reader the lessons that anger is not good, and that Pig's habit of nosing about in the mud is as a result of the exhibition of anger, which he irrationally exhibited when he threw away Tortoise's cooking utensil when he (Pig) came to recover the debt owed him by Tortoise.

Proponents of Igbo folktales uphold that the oral literature largely influenced most written textbooks in Igbo society. In Ogbalu's *Mbediogu* for instance, the reader sees certain new ideas springing up in the way the Igbo thinkers and opinion molders saw and interpreted their world views. One example of such views is the story on craftiness and tricking of others to achieve a laudable objective. There is this story on "Marrying a Wife with a Grain of Corn", in which Tortoise, popularly known as the super trickster, arrives a town where entertainment is the order of the day and is recognized and revered for his tricks. The king of the land challenged him to carry out an assignment for him, since he wants to stay in the land. To overcome the austerity ravaging then the land, Tortoise is asked to marry a beautiful wife for the king with one grain of corn within seven days or else suffer starvation if he fails or be made rich if he succeeds.

Tortoise mustered courage and embarked on a journey. He arrived at a man's house while it was getting dark and pleaded that he should be allowed to pass the night there. The host sympathized with him and after obliging him, Tortoise brought out a seed of corn, showed it to his host and informed him that when planted, the seed could yield seeds that will fill seven baskets. He purposefully dropped the seed outside, claiming that the evening sun will shine upon it. The host's fowl naturally picked and swallowed the maize. Tortoise raised a serious alarm over this and was later compensated by the host by giving Tortoise that fowl that swallowed his maize, the consensus was that when the fowl passed out its excrement, the corn will be in the stool and Tortoise will recover his lost item. After this, Tortoise travelled to another town the next day, on arriving there, he pleaded with another man to host him for the night, which he claimed was interfering with his journey. Accepting Tortoise as a guest, the landlord took his fowl away from him and kept it inside the place where goats and sheep are reared. Tortoise rose up in the middle of the night and killed his fowl and went back to his bed to sleep. Early at dawn, he went to the manger to discover that his fowl is dead and quickly raised a

serious alarm. The dead fowl earned him a goat which he took along to another king and pleaded that the goat should be kept with the seven cattle of the king and that this king should allow him to pass the night in the king's house. As the goat was taken to the manger, the cattle started panicking and scampered all over the place and later with their horns, they hit life out of the goat. On noticing this, Tortoise took an available rope around the place and threatened hanging himself, he claimed that the dead goat was his only treasure that sustained him and that it was very fertile and productive. The king pleaded with Tortoise to forgive him for the accident caused by his unruly cows but Tortoise demanded that a cow be given to him as a compensation. The king obliged and Tortoise continues his journey with great joy; he met some people on his journey who carried a corpse of a baby and were conveying it home. He sympathized and mourned with them and later pleaded that the corpse be given to him in place of the cow he got from the king, pointing out that the corpse would serve no purpose again to them. This request was approved and Tortoise took the corpse.

Quickly, Tortoise dressed the corpse with a neat cloth, placed a cap on the corpse of the baby and continued his journey. He entered the house of a man that has two young ladies and pleaded that he should be allowed to pass the night as he was going to take the child to hospital for treatment in a far country. He promised to continue his journey the next day if his 'good friend' would allow him to pass the night and further expressed hope of a friendly life long relationship between him and his host. To cement his reciprocity, Tortoise promised to prepare a charm for his friend, a charm that would help him to acquire wealth. The man admitted Tortoise and his 'child' with great joy and gave them a place in his house to pass the night. At mid night, Tortoise requested that his 'child' be allowed to sleep in-between the two daughters of his host so as to keep the body warm as there was a serious cold weather. This request was granted and he placed his 'child' in-between the two girls.

Tortoise did not allow the day to break when he rushed into the house where his 'child' was kept and started calling the name of the 'child': 'Oguoma, Oguoma, Oguoma; Titi Titi.' No response came as a corpse does not move. Tortoise woke the man up and cried with great pain to him that his child has died at the hand of his daughters. He wept vehemently to attract the neighbors to his host's house. Spectators witnessed that the 'child' has truly died and the two daughters could not deny that they caused the death of the 'child'. The host continued to express the burden he had and the challenges that encountered him. At last, the people around resolved that the man who hosted Tortoise should hand over one of his daughters to him as a compensation for 'the dead child'. Inwardly, Tortoise was filled with great joy and he selected the most beautiful daughter of his host according to his choice. The young lady was taken to the king that sent Tortoise on his mission. Tortoise narrated his story to the king, how he went on his journey and the challenges he encountered and how he handled them. At the end, the king made Tortoise a wealthy man in his land and gave him land and money.

The lesson from the last story is on exploitation by a crafty man and the exploitations which the weak and foolish vulnerable people encounter. There are still many stories to analyze on the wisdom and exploitations of Tortoise but due to space and time constraint, we limit our analysis to the ones above.

Conclusion

All the stories in Ogbalu's *Mbediogu* are intended to educate and inform the Igbo children and youth, on the age-long morals and wisdom of the Igbo race. They are all folktales and, as such, they made use of oral tradition to exhibit the aesthetics and the unlimited treasures in African culture. The stories agree with our view that poetry, fiction and drama in Africa, are close to real life situations and at the same time contain the heavy influences of oral tradition both in content and narrative technique. The inability of the raconteurs to maintain the European standard of clearly distinguishing children from the youth is as a result of the pre-

literate background of African literature that was then and which younger writers are making efforts to redress.

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