

Motifs in Selected Women Folktales of Oku People of Cameroon

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Abstract

This study examines motifs in selected women folktales of Oku people of Cameroon. The main objectives of the study are to find out the different motifs in some selected women tales of Oku people of Cameroon and to see if the identified motifs are related to the motifs of Igbo folktales. The study adopts the theory of narratology as its theoretical framework. The data used for the study of Cameroonian tales were collected from *Wonder tales of Oku (Cameroon) and the aesthetics of storytelling* by Mbuda Frida Mekan. The data used for the study

of the Igbo folktales were gathered from two collections of Igbo folktales *Omalinze* a book of Igbo folktales collected by C.N Ugochukwu, T. Meniru and P. Oguine and *Okamgba* by John Iroaganachi. After the analysis, it was observed that Cameroonian tales and that of the Igbo have related motifs. It was also observed that they have related structure for instance in the two stories, one who disobeys, suffers the punishment of such disobedience. The study therefore concludes by supporting Vladimir Propp's assertion that all African folktales have related structure and adds that they also share related motifs.

Introduction

Human beings as social animals love to interact and interacting involves the sharing of information between people. Interactions between people can take place in so many ways as it has so many forms. Some of them are conversing, educating, singing folk songs as well as storytelling. Storytelling as a matter of fact is as old as man. Man has always sought for ways to entertain himself and telling stories has effectively served that purpose.

Folktales are a primal part of stories. Folktales are essentially the rural oral forms which include legends, proverbs, music, jokes and stories that belong to a particular culture or social group. Ugwuoke, (1) Akangwa has rightly noted, "Folktales in whatever form it comes has as its core aim, life in functionality. (22) Folktales are important because they do not only serve as a means of pleasure and entertainment; they serve didactic purpose to the people in the society especially the young. William Bascom in his essay, "four functions of folklore" highlights four essential functions that folklore carries out which are similar to that of folktales. First, it lets people escape from regressions imposed upon them by

the society. It also validates culture; it also serves the purpose of being a tool for teaching morals as well as exerting social pressure and control amongst others.

Motif can be defined as an important idea or concept that is recurrent in a work of arts and craft that seeks to pass meaning across. While motif in art concerns itself with repeated structural design on any piece to achieve aesthetic purposes, motif in literature is used to show, and emphasize on certain ideas and concepts that help in the development of the theme. This is the distinction between themes and motif. The latter helps in the actualization of the former, while a theme is a dominant idea, motifs are basic thematic subsets that aid the understanding of the message in a story. More often than not, a motif does this by duplicating itself for the purpose of emphasis. From the above, we can deduce that themes can stand as motifs but not all motifs can stand as themes because the latter is embedded in the former and might not suffice on certain occasions as it is a smaller subset.

The motivation for this study is hinged on comparative analysis. Vladimir Propp in his work, *The Morphology of the Folktales* put forward the thirty one narrative units that comprised many of the Russian folktales he studied. We have observed that a vast majority of Igbo folktales such as *Obaraedo*, *Eruru*, and a host of others across other cultures align to Propp's proposition. It is on this note that this research intends to examine Cameroonian folktales and find out if they also bear similarities with the Igbo folktales as it has to do with motifs. The Igbo versions of the stories will not be written for want of space but will be referred to in the analysis. This study was also undertaken to debunk the European scholars' assertion that African oral forms are not literature.

Review of Related Literature

Empirical Studies

This section reviews related works on folktales. Amali (1986) carried out research on the *impact of storytelling practice among Gbagyi people of Nigeria*. He observed that folktales are employed for interpreting and analysing their cultural values, as well as playing the function of promoting and instilling moral discipline among the youths for the purpose of building moral uprightness and standard.

Ikeokwu, (2000) carried out a study on *Functionalism and the pedagogy of Igbo folktales*. The study discovers that folktale is an art form that sets out the manifest not only language creativity of a people, but also people's mores, values and norms. It maintains that the folktale is pedagogical and that it is the moral lessons in a folktale that makes it pedagogical: It further defines functional literature as literature that is of the society and by the society and for the society that emanates it. He concluded the findings by suggesting the inclusion of folktale in our school curriculum as a way of achieving social commitment in the overall socio-political education of the growing child. This study is pedagogical in nature while the present study is hinged on comparing motifs in Cameroonians and Igbo folktales.

Nwaozuzu (2006) carried a study in folktales. This study tried to study the image of children's innocence and credulity in Igbo folktales. The findings of the study revealed that: the widespread of human tendency to teach, entertain and satirise by indirect means seems to be at the root of the evolution of folktales. It maintains that the Igbo folktale is used to educate both the young and the aged. It further avers that Igbo folktales contain folk's skeptical views about life which are based on

their observation of people's behaviour in the society. It concluded by saying that Igbo folktale directs members of the society on the right action to take in case of emergency and that it provide them a common line of action. The area of divergence in the present study is that this is based on narratology while the former was based on functionalism.

Nwaozuzu (2007) explored *the image of women in Igbo folktales*. The study adopted the expository research design. The study revealed that Igbo women in Ibo folktales are either a villain or victim. It also found out that folktales serve as window through which social norms and values are minored. It maintains that Igbo people's folktales are woven around their world view, experiences, expectations and achievements.

Amali (2014) carried out study on *Functions of folktales as a process of educating children in the 21st century: A case study of Idoma folktales*. The study analyzed the various folktale types in Idoma land, the meanings and the functions derivable from the tales. The study revealed that folktales are an integral part of traditional African society therefore form part of the educational tools in the training process of the child in the traditional settings, and can also be applied in modern educational processes.

Ugwuoke (2018) studies Igbo pacification tales as evidenced in *MbediogunaNza na Obu*. Her specific objective is to study pacification in those tales. She adopts psychoanalytic theory and contextualism as theoretical frameworks. Her findings show that Igbo pacification tales are ready tools for conflict resolution at home, school and the society at large. The study identifies dialogue visitation, violence/force, love folksongs, patience, self respect and self control as features of pacification that could be used to restore peace.

Theoretical framework

Narratology: This bears some resemblance with the structuralist theory where the form that works take is emphasized.

Narratology, in literary theory, the study of narrative structure. Narratology looks at what narratives have in common and what makes one different from another.(Encyclopedia Britannica)

Like structuralism, narratology seeks to identify similar arrangements or motifs inherent in oral forms. It emphasizes that a narrative can be seen in different forms. It is also important to note that this approach is similar not just to structuralism but also the historical-geographical approach used in earlier studies. The foundations of narratology were laid in Vladimir Propp's popular book, *Morphology of the Folktale* which he wrote after extensive analysis on Russian folktales.

In this work, Propp conceived narrative forms to consist of a specific and predictable form, and an invariant number of 'functions'. (Akpobaro, 480) He also gave the thirty one functions applicable to fairy tales in the book. Adherents also believe that the minimal unit of a narrative is not the characters but the events inherent in such narratives. (Akpobaro, 479-480) Another major contributor to this theory was Roland Barthes. In his essay, *Introduction a la analyse structurale des recit*, he tries to address the problems concerning the logic of the narrative form. He addresses issues such as the problem of the narrative syntagm, the minimal unit of narrative forms, the status of narrative action and characters and the relationship between meaning and mimesis.

Narrative Composition: This theory is also closely related with the narratology theory. However, it also concerns itself with the formulation of narrative pieces for study and analytical purposes.

Summary of the Literature Review

We observe that literary scholars such as Amali (1986), Ikeokwu (2000), Nwaozuzu (2006), Nwaozuzu (2007), Ugwuoke (2018) and others have made attempts at the study of folktales but their studies were limited to Igbo folktales, Idoma and Igala. None of them to the best of the researchers' knowledge has made an attempt at the study of motifs in relation to women folktales of Cameroon. That is the gap that this study is set to fill.

Textual Analysis

In this subsection, we are going to identify some of the motifs inherent in the folktales of Oku women of Cameroon using four of such tales namely:

Story 1: The girl and the melon seed

Story 2: The tortoise and the Fon's daughters

Story 3: Nene and the Iysaah

Story 4: Meiyang the man eater

As has been discussed in the introduction, motifs are simply said to be recurrent themes. Based on this, the following are some of the motifs in the women folktales of the Oku people of Cameroon.

Fantastic: Fantastic according to the Oxford Dictionary of literary terms is a mode of fiction in which the impossible and the possible are confounded so as to leave the reader (and often the narrator and/or central character) with no consistent explanation for the story's strange event.

Story 1: The girl and he melon seed: This has the same structure and motif as the Igbo tale *Nnunu na-ekwu okwu* in *Omalinze* pages 160-161.

- (i) Pumpkins running off the basket in which they were put after harvest and attaching themselves to their stems. It has never been heard in history or even biology that inanimate objects move. The melon is an inanimate object which does not have legs and hands with which to move but in the folktales of Oku women that was very possible and therefore fantastic.
- (ii) The parts of the bird being cooked in the pot being able to sing. The Bible tells us that all living things including birds sing to the glory of God. Once an animal is dead, life and all life associated activities end. Even as complicated as the human life is, once they die, all activities come to an end not to talk of a bird that its only means of communication or expression is the song. This therefore makes the fact that a bird that has been killed and is being cooked in the pot sings, fantastic.
- (iii) A man passing a life puppy as stool. In science, we are taught that all things injected through the mouth undergo series of digestive processes after which the body absorbs the much needed for its maintenance while the rest is ejected through the anus as waste product-faeces. It has never happened and is not likely to happen that man stools out living things through the anus except it is worm. For a human being therefore to pass out a living puppy as stool is practically and scientifically impossible and this makes it fantastic.

- (iv) The death of a first game bringing about the death of all other games queued behind it. In the traditional African setting, hunting is a viable business and that is why so many people have undertaken it as a profession. The hunters and all games in the forest are “enemies”. This is because the hunter goes after the games to kill them and make money or eat. In the bush also, animals live and move in different directions. This possibly is because there are different species of animals in the forest. Even when there are many animals of the same species living in the bush, they do not walk about the forest on a queue. Let us even assume that all animals walk about the forest in a queue, the killing of the first one will immediately scare the rest and they will disperse in the bid to save their lives. But Oku women of Cameroon folktales tells us that the killing of the first and usually smallest animal will automatically cause the death of every other animal in that queue whether they are shot at or not. This is another fantastic element in the story.

Other fantastic incidents that took place in the story are the puppy’s ability to live in water not being a sea animal and the cocoyam and melon sauce’s ability to bring the puppy from under the water to the surface of the water.

Story 2: The tortoise and the Fon’s daughters: It has the same structure and motif as the story in *Omalinze* pages 89-93 titled *Atuta m nwa Iliiko*.

Having established the fact that the fantastic has to do with the unrealistic, unbelievable and the imaginable, the incident that took place in the story where an animal will get up and meet a human being to ask for her daughter’s hand in

marriage is fantastic. This is because animals do not marry and cannot talk let alone going to bid for a wife in the land of the human.

Story 3: Nene and the Iysaah: This tale has the same motif and structure with the Igbo tale titled *Etu Mbe si luta nwunye* in *Omalinze* pages 196-198.

- (i) The ability of a corpse to turn into hawks and sparrows. In real life situations, once somebody dies, decomposition will set in. This is why those who are not buried immediately are deposited in the morgue. This is also the reason why the Muslims bury their dead within twenty four to forty eight hours of death. But in the story of the Oku women of Cameroon, a corpse after being touched turned into hawks and sparrows.
- (ii) The women's folktales also has it that a man who has been cut into pieces and boiled ready to be eaten was able to come back to life simply because a pregnant woman tasted the foam pouring from the pot where it is being cooked. This is an abnormally in the real life situation.
- (iii) Other fantastic incidents that took place in two have to do with bone. In this story, we were told that a bone was singing on the tree. We were also told how the same bone got stuck in someone's forehead and was signing. The same bone which was stuck on somebody's forehead was being transferred from one person/thing to another.

Story 4: Menyang the Man-eater: This tale can be compared to the Igbo tale titled *Agadinwanyị na umunne abụọ* in *Okamgba* pages 27-32.

In this story we identify some fantastic incidents. The first is the fact that a human being eats up a human being. This is not ideal in real life situations. Though in some parts of the world today, some people are still being accused of eating human beings, it is not done openly, it is kept very secret if at all it happens. But this was not the case in the story. The man eater indulges in that as a profession.

Another fantastic in the story is the ability of the man eater to vomit those he had eaten back to life. In real life, this is practically impossible.

Motif 2: Greed

In very simple terms, greed can be defined as the selfish desire to have more of something. In the women folktales of Oku people, some characters in the stories exhibited the greedy attitude. The following are examples.

In story 1, a girl who was given melon seeds for planting by her sick mother refused planting them and was frying and eating the melon seeds. In the same story too, the girl who never planted any melon seed went to harvest the ones planted by the bird without permission.

In story 2, we see a manifestation of greed when a father insists that whenever his daughter dies, she must be buried with her husband alive.

In story 3, Nene put up an attitude of greed. Her brother caught a bird and gave her to help him roast. He instructed her that if the bird is not only after roasting, she should eat it otherwise she should keep it for him. After roasting, the bird was oily and the girl decided to taste it by eating one of the legs. From there she took the second leg and on and on, she finished the whole oily bird.

In story 4, Meiyang was greedy by keeping her own rats safe and eating her brothers rats while she helped them count. Her greedy attitude also manifested when she ate up people that she requested to be sent to her to help morn her.

Motif 3 Wit

Oku women folktales feature wit. This in simple terms is the ability of one to think deeply and fast and do funny things to solve a problem. Some of the featured wits in the folktales are as follows:

Story 2 is full of wit. The boy's ability to get something bigger all the time with a smaller thing from people is a display of wit

In story 4, a man thought of the best way to choose a husband for his daughters and came up with an idea that it is only the man who can call all of them by name that will be the husband. On the other hand, the tortoise who wanted to become the husband by all means came up with the idea of the bearded axe which he put along the road where the girls follows to the stream. All these are wit.

When it was found out that both the tortoise and the monkey are qualified, the father of the children also thought of another measure to choose out of the two and this informed the peppery sauce. Tortoise on the other hand thought of a quick way to relieve himself of the pepper by saying *nfshuu nfshuu* while he pretended to be telling a story.

In **story 1**, when the elder brother insisted that his younger one must produce that same puppy he collected from him and not any other one, the younger brother quickly thought of the pounded cocoyam and melon sauce. He went and poured it in the river and that brought the puppy to the water surface.

Motif 4, Disobedience

Disobedience can simply be seen as going against the established or given rules and regulations. Female folktales of Oku feature cases of disobedience.

In **story 1**, the girl's refusal to plant the melon seeds as instructed by her sick mother is an act of disobedience. She decided to fry and eat the melon seeds instead of planting them. In the same story two, the hunter's refusal to obey the dog's instruction of shooting the first and smallest animal first in order to have all others dead is also gross disobedience and this landed him into problems.

In **story 2**, the tortoise cunningly disobeyed the rule of not saying *nfshuu nfshuu* while eating by pretending to tell them a story.

In story 3, the pregnant woman disobeyed the rule of letting the first whitish foam that will come out to pour. When the foam started pouring, the woman tasted it because she could not resist the look. That made the boiling man to come back to life and killed her and continued her work. In the same story, a boy was given bones to throw away with the instruction of not eating it. The boy outrightly disobeyed this instruction, ate the bone and the bone stuck to his forehead and started singing.

In story 4, Meiyang disobeyed his father by taking his last brother hunting. This singular disobedience led her into more killings which ended her life by being killed too and chopped into pieces.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that first; there are diverse motifs inherent in the folktales examined; motifs such as fantasy/the fantastic, greed, wit and disobedience. All these were discovered in Oku women folktales. We were also able to find out that some motifs are present in more than one tale; that

is a particular motif could be present in more than one story. Furthermore, we also discovered that there are similarities between Igbo folktales and Cameroonian folktales for example, punishment for disobedience. Also the two tales have proven to resemble in structure and motif hence validating Vladimir Propp's assertion that there is a relationship between folktales all over the world.

Conclusion

We hereby conclude that the Oku women folktales of Cameroon are similar to Igbo folktales even though they are from different geographical and cultural backgrounds. We also arrive at the conclusion that Propp's assertion on the similarity of folktales is true and add that apart from the similarity in structure they are also similar in motifs. This study also supports that all African oral forms are Literature unlike what the Europeans believe.

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