

UDEZULUIGBO

A Festschrift in Honour of
SAM UZOCHUKWU



When the idea of honouring Prof. Sam Uzochukwu with a Festschrift was conceived, it was seen as worthwhile and deserving for a man of his academic status. Both expected and unexpected obstacles were encountered. These, however, did not dampen the spirit of the former colleagues and students of Uzochukwu who wanted to see the worthy proposal become a reality.

The magnitude of positive responses that followed the call for papers further inspired those behind the initiative and spurred them to work towards the realisation of their dream. Today it is a dream come true as this book is a product of that effort to honour a man whose contributions in his chosen field of Igbo Literature have positively impacted on the growth and development of Igbo studies in general.

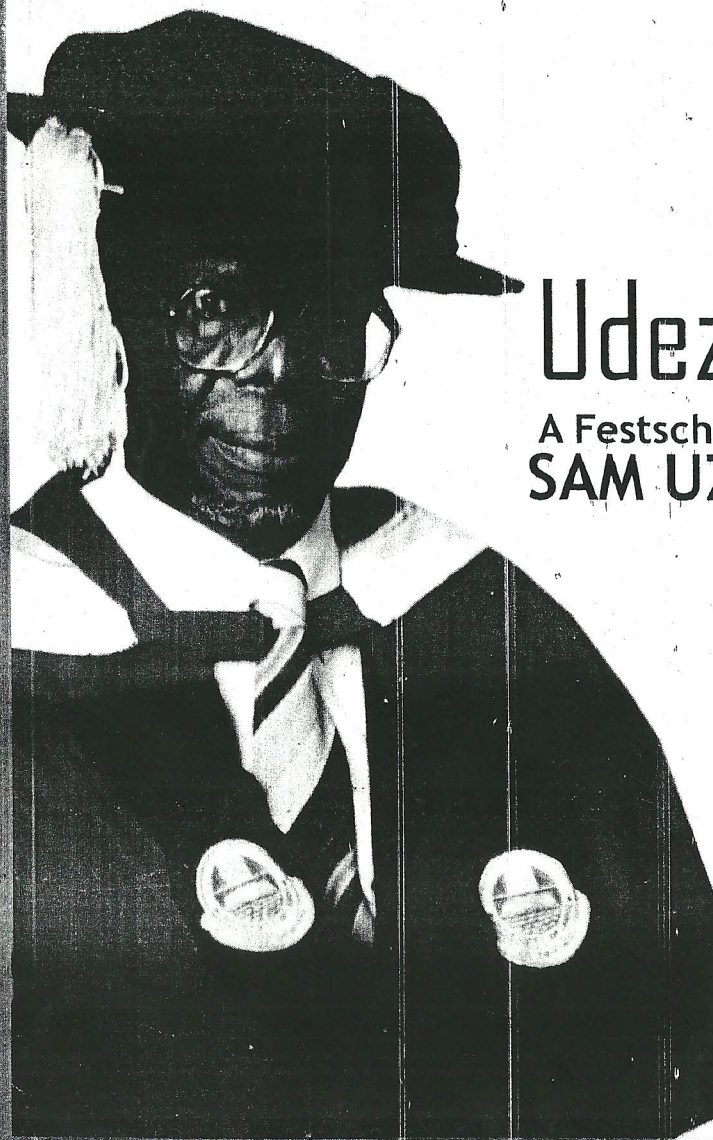
Prof. Uzochukwu's person and contributions have been widely recognized as evidenced by the influx of papers in diverse areas of Literature, Linguistics, Language, Culture and History received from different institutions of learning. The Papers made insightful contribution of the various subjects and issues discussed, thereby contributing in widening the frontiers of Igbo Studies, which Prof. Uzochukwu stands for. It is hoped that the public will find the volume very relevant.



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Igbo Oral Literature and the Igbo Youths Today: What Literary Legacy for Posterity?

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Introduction:

Oral literature is a living and dynamic art which has survived successive generations. In traditional Igbo society, for instance, the performance of oral literature permeates the social, religious, cultural, political or informal occasions. In the past, youths played active role in the performance and transmission of oral literature. In a typical communal traditional drama, for instance, the youths constituted active players or actors in the enactment of various dramatic activities – chanting, dancing, acrobatic displaying, story-telling, spell-binding, etc. The vigour, vitality and vibrancy, which they brought to bear in their performance always aroused and thrilled the audience a great deal. There are a lot of skills and talents, which the youths possess, that cannot be displayed by the aged in oral arts. Youths are, therefore, valuable instrument in the performance and transmission of the community's oral literature. Today, in contemporary Nigeria, oral literature has been affected by a number of factors. There is the factor of the influence of literacy and urbanization, which encourage rural-urban drift and consequently cause urban dwellers to abandon some aspects of their cultural tradition. There has also been, in addition to the verbal, such other means of transmission as writing, print, radio, television, tape recorder, video, computer, etc. These and other forms of modern influences on our traditional life threaten the sustainability, continuity and preservation of the oral mode of our literary tradition.

The enabling environment, the motivation for the youths' involvement in the performance of oral literature no longer exists as it used to be. The youths' role in ensuring the sustainability and continuity of the Igbo oral arts seems to be no longer recognized; or shall we say that it has been over-looked by contemporary Igbo society? It is obvious that today, as trappings of modernity make significant impact on the life of the people, the level of interest shown in oral literature, especially by our youths vis-à-vis what obtained in the past, is fast diminishing. Unless something is done to revamp the declining interest, nothing may survive as oral literature for posterity, or at most it may only be extant in memory but not performed.

This paper looks at the state of Igbo oral literature today against the backdrop of the negative attitude of the youths to it, and the danger such attitude could pose to the continuity and survival of this oral art. The paper is in five parts: Part one is the introduction, which states the problem that motivates the writing of this paper. Part two evaluates in brief, the importance of oral literature and the role it played in the lives of the youths in traditional Igbo society in the past. Part three examines the factors, which threaten the survival of oral literature in contemporary Nigerian society. Part four looks at the question of what literary legacy, as it were, is to be bequeathed to posterity, given the observed negative attitude of the youths to oral literature today. Part five, the concluding part, recommends steps that can be taken to remedy the situation.

The Youths: Operational Definition

Uzochukwu (2001:453) noted the discrepancies and inconsistencies observed in individuals' and establishments' definitions of the age range of persons to be regarded as the youths. While some put it at six to thirty (as seen in the National Youth Policy of Nigeria, 1983) or twelve plus to thirty (as in the

same National Youth Policy of Nigeria, 1989 edition), others put it at between fifteen and forty (Mabogunje, 1998; Nnabuihe, 2001).

The youths in the context of and for the purpose of this paper refer to persons who have attained primary school age up to thirty-five years. We acknowledge the fact that some within this age range are still regarded as children.

The Role of Oral Literature in Youths Development in the Past

One of the variant definitions of oral literature as highlighted by Akporobaro (2001:37) is that it is

the totality of verbal expressive forms and beliefs evolved in tribal societies for social entertainment and for the ordering of society and passed orally from one generation to another.

As it is indicated in this definition, oral literature, apart from its primary function of entertainment, is equally evolved for the 'ordering of society'. Oral literature can be an instrument of social control, of expressing, enhancing and codifying societal beliefs or values.

The relevance of oral literature can be seen in the various roles it plays in human society. Folklore, of which oral literature is a part, is, as rightly pointed out by Nnabuihe (2001:479), a catalyst our progenitors used to inculcate good sense of values into the children to have them mentally equipped and to develop their own moral values needed to guide their future living.

It is also true as Nnabuihe further points out that [in the past], "early absorption of folkloric values helped to sanitize all human relationships within the society because it guided the characteristic behaviour of people" (p. 478).

In every society, the people's culture – beliefs, ideas, institutions and their philosophy – is reflected in their folktales, legends, myths, proverbs, folksongs, riddles and other forms of folklore (Ikwubuzo, 1990:76). The case is not different in Igbo society where these various forms of oral literature embody the people's cultural traits and worldview. Acknowledging the role of all the genres of oral literature in this regard and focusing on Igbo folktales in particular, Uba-Mgbemena (1982:53) writes:

Ifo tales constitute a repository of knowledge. They serve as the bearer of Igbo folk music, folk customs, beliefs, morality, medicine, idea of the universe, of the supernatural, heroism, propriety, desirability and beauty.

As he rightly noted, prior to the embracing of the Western way of life which muffled our indigenous African way of life, ifo tales were among the chief means of moulding the character of the Igbo child" (p.55). It is not ifo alone that played this kind of role. Igbo riddles (Agwugwa or Gwamgwamgwam) were also used not only as a tool of entertaining but also of educating and moulding the character of the child. Certain cultural themes are embedded in the content of Igbo riddles. Let us use some Igbo riddles to illustrate our point here.

A child can through his participation in riddle game imbibe some cultural norms and values of his society, which are conveyed in the riddles. For instance, 'greeting' which is one of the cultural traits of the Igbo can be a theme of an Igbo riddle. Showing of respect is greatly valued among the Igbo. It promotes interpersonal relationship and harmonious coexistence. Teaching the

child how to greet especially, his elders and seniors is one of the early forms of orientation every parent gives his or her child. The moment a child begins to talk, he is taught among other things, how to greet his parents, his elders in the home and visitors. This importance the Igbo attach to greeting is reflected in the following riddle:

1. Q: Gwa m, ihe na-aga n'ihu be eze
Ma o keleghi eze
A: Idemmiri zoro ezo
Q: Tell me, what passes through the king's house
But it does not greet the king.
A: Flood.)

Courtesy demands that when one passes through the king's palace (and indeed anybody's house) he pays homage to him. The idea that greeting is valued among the Igbo is the message concealed in the above riddle. Flood flows past the front of people's houses (the king's palace inclusive) whenever it rains. Since it is expected of human beings to greet the king or anybody in whose house they find themselves, it is a non-human being like the flood that could pass through a king's house without greeting him.

As the child learns and recites this kind of riddle in subsequent riddle games, he indirectly learns that he should not behave like the 'flood' whose action in this context symbolizes disloyalty and disrespect for whom respect is due. Through this, the culture of greeting elders is inculcated in the child.

Through Igbo riddles also an upcoming youth could be made aware of his moral obligations. A young man is expected to maintain a high moral standard in his relationship with his sisters. Among the Igbo as in other African cultures, incest is an abomination. It is so frowned at that its occurrence does not go

unpunished. Offenders are usually subjected to open castigation and mortification, and are made to perform some sacrifice in order to appease Ala deity who has been desecrated.

There is a taboo against marriage between man and woman who are related by blood. Therefore, even though a young Igboman may be surrounded by his unmarried sisters, he still goes out in search of a wife to marry. This marriage culture of the Igbo is the theme of the following riddles:

2. Q: Gwa m, Azu bi n' etiti mmiri na-achọ mmiri o ga-anụ
A: Nwoke nwere otutu umunne nwaanyi ma puo iro icho onye o ga-alu
Q: Tell me, a fish that lives in water but searches for drinking water.
A: A man who has many sisters but goes out in search of a wife to marry.)
3. Q: Gwa m, Ugiri adighi ada n'ukwu ugiri
A: Nwanne adighi alu nwanne ya
Q: Tell me, Mango (fruit) that does not fall under mango tree
A: A man does not marry his sister.)

These kinds of riddles (2 and 3) acquaint the young man with the moral philosophy of the Igbo as it concerns brother-sister relationship and marriage. The child or young man or woman who is asked this riddle is made to understand that it is not the culture of the Igbo for one to marry whoever is related to one by blood.

Indeed, the value of the Igbo riddles, as an educative and socializing tool cannot be over-emphasized. This is why Ugonna (1989) cited by Ikwubuzo (2001:9) believes that Igbo riddle introduces the children to various cultural traits of their society and inculcates in them the cultural values of the Igbo. It gives them access to the store of knowledge and the accumulated

wisdom of their ancestors and this access is gained not through the drill and drudgery of formal education but the thrill and hilarity of entertaining.

The Factors that Threaten the Survival of Oral Literature in Contemporary Nigeria

1. Urbanization/Rural Urban Drift

It is true as Uzochukwu (2001:454) stated that "the get-rich-quick syndrome coupled with lack of basic amenities in the rural communities has caused the rural youths to migrate in droves to the urban centers." But it is not always the 'get rich-quick syndrome' or 'lack of basic amenities' that drive the rural youths to drift to urban centers. There is no doubt that there are better opportunities and prospects for individual development in the urban centers. So, the youths do have genuine reasons to migrate to the cities. No parent would even like to have his young men and women roam the rural community where there are little or no opportunities for them.

Some of the youths leave home after their secondary education either to further their education or undergo a period of apprenticeship in some vocations. Some serve the well-established traders from their villages and get settled afterwards. This category of youths constituted a greater percentage of the rural population and during their stay at home, was actively involved in the enactment and performance of various forms of oral literature. Some of them after a long stay in the urban centers lose touch with oral performances – story-telling, singing, chanting, masquerading, etc. Back home many rural communities now enjoy some social amenities that used to be the exclusive preserve of urban centers. Rural electrification has, for instance, helped to create jobs for welders, barbers,

hairdressers and those engaged in other forms of vocations in the rural communities. So, many a youth who stay back at home are busy and engaged in one thing or the other that they rarely indulge in pastime. The consequence is that today, certain aspects of our traditional festivals and their accompanying dramatic displays that used to be performed by able-bodied young men have been abandoned for children and old people at home.

Traders, civil servants and government officials who live in the cities raise their children in the cities. Such children have their education in the cities even up to university level and come out to settle also in the cities to work. Their parents seldom took some of them, as children, home. A number of such parents do not speak Igbo language to their children. And yet you find among them those who go home to their rural communities and throw expensive parties to take chieftaincy titles. They adopt names like 'Akuruofo 1 of Igwenga', 'Nwadiala 1 of Ndi Igbo', 'Ochiriozofo 1 of Ndiorumbele', and regularly adorn themselves in traditional regalia that reflect their social status at social, cultural or political gatherings. But back in the cities, they have children that have completely lost their Igbo identity. The only thing that perhaps still associates them with the Igbo is that they bear Igbo names, and that is where an Igbo name like 'Okorie' for instance, is still retained and has not become 'Korie' to deface its Igbo coloration. When parents, perhaps, take such Oyibo-Igbo children home once in every five years, they become foreigners in their own native land. When confronted with practical situations where their knowledge of their mother tongue is required, the stark reality of their handicap in the use of the language dawns on them. A number of them in this category do not know their culture not to talk of its folklore. At the university, some of them who find themselves compelled either by a department like English to take Igbo as an elective course, or by their inability to secure admission into their original choice,

offer Igbo as the next option, you discover that you are dealing with foreigners who simply bear Igbo names.

2. Abandonment of Our Culture in Preference to Foreign Ways of Life:

Uba-Mgbemena (1982:55) again reminisces about what obtained in Igbo society in the past in the following excerpt:

It used to be the practice for parents and seniors when at leisure, to gather children in open spaces in the home during moonlight nights, and in the family obi on rainy days to tell them interesting ifo tales. When mothers went to the market and fathers to the farm, nurses used to gather children to tell them ravishing tortoise stories. At the introduction of formal education at school, primary schoolteachers used to gather children under tree shades to tell them different kinds of ifo tales. These are geared to teaching the Igbo child what to do and what to avoid, what to appreciate and what to disdain. They are also intended for entertainment and for proper mental and psychological development.

Regrettably, this informal (and sometimes formal) means of education, as we highlighted in our illustration of the use of Igbo riddles in part two of this paper and in what Uba-Mgbemena recalls about folktales, has been abandoned. The values expressible in our oral literature and the character - moulding effects it produced on children and the youths alike, no longer count. Thus, there is a sense in what Nnabuihe (2001:478) decries that:

present crop of the Nigerian youths suffers deprivation. One of the deprivations, and clearly the worst of them all, is a lack of folkloric

upbringing. The omission of folklore education in the early lives of our children is grave.

He mentions that some of the consequences of the abandonment of this folkloric orientation are that the present day youths "dream wild, act wild, live wild" and sometimes 'take to violence because their value vault is bankrupt.'

The consequences are indeed grave. But the youths' apathy or insensibility to the relevance of oral literature cannot be wholly blamed on them. To a large extent, parents are to blame because they shirk their responsibilities to their children. The society too shares the blame. We now live in a society that seems to have abandoned its traditional values and hurriedly embraced foreign culture- foreign food, dress, films, religion, languages and so on.

In our homes, our pastime that used to be spent in story-telling – stories about tortoise (mbe)'s tricks and exploits, about the leopard (agu)'s strength, or the sheep (aturu)'s wisdom and leopard's foolishness, about a child who forgets his flute in the farm and in disobedience goes to the farmland when it is late to fetch his flute and meets multi-headed spirits who abduct him etc – have in many homes, especially in the urban centres, been replaced by watching of foreign cartoon films like Cinderella, Lion king, Tom and Jerry and others, on video and CD players. So, while Cinderella, Antz, Tom and Jerry and the likes are household names to many of our children in the cities, the famous dramatis personae of Igbo folktales like Mbe, Agu, Aturu, Enyi, Ewi, Nkita, Apia, etc have become almost strange to the Igbo children when they are mentioned. Yet the imported cartoon films contain nothing but European, American and Asian fairy and animal tales, the parallels of which abound in Igbo traditional tales. The themes of hardwork, obedience, humility, morality, the consequence of disobedience and all that, which

are embodied in Igbo traditional prose narratives are very relevant to children's upbringing but unfortunately, parents, these days "deny their children indigenous cultural values by making them part of westernization, eroding old tradition of folklore.... The result is that the Nigerian youths today lack discipline because they lack proper upbringing" (Nnabuihe, 2001:485).

3. Government's Emphasis On Science and Technology

Scientific and technological advancement is undoubtedly good for any developing nation. But it appears that in recent years, government has laid undue emphasis on science and technology as if the arts do not deserve to be encouraged. This posture has a way of affecting people's appreciation of the value of the arts.

Law, Engineering, Computer Science, Medicine and other science courses are good and recommended but the value of literature should be reiterated as Prof. Alaba did in his very recent inaugural lecture, "Appreciating the Use of Literature: A Yoruba Example". Alaba (2002:5) wrote while identifying with the views of Plakhanov and Belinsky that

...art can promote consciousness no less than science. Here science and art are equally indispensable and neither science can replace art nor art replace science. But art can develop man's knowledge only by passing judgement on the phenomena of life.

4. Students' Negative Attitude to Igbo Studies:

Encouraged by parents' total negligence of the role of oral literature in children's education, by government's emphasis on the relevance of certain subjects or disciplines, and by the little value which society places on indigenous products and materials, over ninety-five percentage of our youths would not opt to study

Igbo or any other Nigerian language in the university. This rejection is even given a stronger force in the secondary school where the policy of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) on Nigerian languages and literatures is not favourably disposed to the recommendations of the National Policy on Education regarding Nigerian languages and the Nigerian child. I have elsewhere¹ commented on the optional status of Igbo literature in WAEC syllabus – a stance that I see as “a great sabotage against Igbo studies.”

In the view of a good number of students in our higher institutions of learning, anybody who is studying Igbo as a course has missed the way. It is not prestigious; it is funny, if not degrading, to say that someone is studying Igbo in the university.

A student who has just been admitted to study Linguistics/Igbo in my department at the University of Lagos saw me one morning and said, “Good Morning, Sir.” She quickly retracted and said, “Ah! Mazi, Ndewo” and burst into laughter. When I demanded to know why she was laughing, she said, “It is so unusual.” For this student, it is ‘unusual’ to greet in Igbo language.

Another student who came to my office for screening started crying and scolding me for masterminding her admission into my department to read Linguistics/Igbo. May be, for this student, since the admission list which contained her name was found on my table, I was the cause of her “misfortune” to have anything to do with Igbo studies. The few students who enroll for the course do it in the hope that after one year they will change to ‘better’ courses. These and many other instances, which I cannot cite here, are eloquent testimonies of the prevailing negative attitudes of our youths to Igbo studies. This lack of interest in the course often leads to poor academic performance in the course.

What Literary Legacy do we Bequeath to Posterity?

Given the present attitudes to oral literature, which we have highlighted in the preceding parts of this paper, some fundamental questions have become crucial here.

Our earlier definition of oral literature indicates that it is something “passed on from one generation to another.” If oral literature is so characterized, what effort is this generation making to pass it on to the next generation? Who is passing it on and to whom? If it is orally transmitted, then man should always be the main agent of such transmission. But man can only transmit what he knows. If parents do not transmit the community’s lore to the youths who will in turn pass it on to the next generation, then the youths will have nothing to pass on and eventually oral literature which is supposed to be, according to Lusweti (1984:1), “a continuous creation of the people at all times and in all places” as well as in all ages, will be a thing of the past.

Again, if the youths are, as variously described, “the trustees of the nation,” “the hope of the future,” “future partners” and “leaders of tomorrow” (Uzochukwu, 2001:453 quoting Ejiogu, 1998:3), it then means that ‘the present’ must equip the youths for ‘the future.’ It must be ensured that all the societal values, norms and virtues that will sustain the future will be transmitted through the youths. The youths must be culturally and politically oriented. This means that the youths from the cradle must be reared to imbibe all the forms of cultural expressions of their society, its oral tradition, history and folklore. The youths must have a good knowledge of their nation’s politics, economy, philosophy and indeed all aspects of national life. A proper and solid foundation, on which they will build ‘the future,’ will be laid in, and by, the present society; otherwise the future may

crumble. But then what folkloric foundation is being laid for them to build on?

And for the present crop of Igbo youths and students who cannot speak, read or write Igbo language, do we create a new standard or modify what we already have in place? Do we carve out a new teaching method or devise a new syllabus in order to accommodate their deficiency?

How many of us, especially those that live in urban centers, are ready to change our attitude and begin to speak to our children in our mother tongue? How many of us these days desire to entertain our children with our folksongs and folktales? Does it not sound funny to talk of folksongs and folktales in the age of computer, Internet and GSM?

What cultural and literary legacies are we bequeathing to posterity? When this generation of Igbo speakers and scholars is gone, when our children replace us and become community and national leaders, what language will they speak as their mother tongue? What traditional tales will they be narrating? The questions raised above seem rhetorical but not all of them are. Some of them indeed call for answers and this, to my mind, is the best time to consider these questions and make recommendations.

While I solicit a consensus opinion or the opinions of others, I make the following recommendations on the issues raised above.

Steps that can be taken to Revive Interest in Igbo Oral Literature

1. Introducing our literary heritage to our children early in life.
2. Making Igbo literature (oral and written) compulsory right from primary schools (both private and public). This should be enforced by government policy that will not be tampered with or abused.
3. Re-packaging of our oral literature to meet the social and aesthetic needs of the present-day society. Myths and legends should be adapted for home video by scriptwriters.
4. Encouraging and sponsoring children's television programmes like the "Tales by Moonlight" relayed on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) network programme, but modify it in such a way that the stories can equally be told in Nigerian languages. Similar programmes on state T.Vs and radios especially in the South East Nigeria should, as a matter of compulsion, be featured in Igbo language.

Those wealthy Nigerians who spend thousands of naira to take chieftaincy titles can be approached to sponsor such programmes. They should not be traditional chieftains who have in their homes children that have no knowledge of their traditional heritage.

5. Developing our indigenous folktales into cartoons designed for children instead of building up a repository of foreign cartoon films for our children in our homes. Nigerian filmmakers can begin to think in this direction. With their rich creative talents exhibited in various film

productions, they can develop cartoon films that are based on our animal tales. They can be made to compete favourably with imported ones.

Persuading our media houses especially the Television, to lay less emphasis on foreign forms of entertainment and incorporate some of our indigenous modes of entertainment in Nigerian languages. The media is said to perpetuate the 'alien system imposed on our youths at early childhood' (Nnabuihe, 2001:485).

Decolonizing the psyche of the elite especially those who are more conscious of westernized lifestyles than the westerners themselves. Our people should stop underrating our indigenous literature, stop regarding our indigenous materials or products as 'primitive', 'unrefined' and 'inferior', and begin to appreciate what is ours.

Igbo parents who live in urban centers should make it a habit to teach their children Igbo by speaking it to them regularly. Besides they should be taking their children home, at least once a year, to know their root. This will afford them the opportunity to witness some of the cultural activities in their towns.

Notes

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