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Igbo Riddles and the Education of the Igbo Child

By

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Abstract

It is believed that apart from formal education, there are various informal ways through which one could be educated. The concept of education itself entails more than the deliberate processes of school and college training. It includes among others, the indirect effect produced on character and on human faculties. The Igbo riddles (Agwugwa or Gwangwamgwam) constituted one of the informal ways of educating the Igbo child in traditional Igbo society before the advent of formal education in Nigeria.

This paper examines the role Igbo riddles could play in educating the Igbo child. The insight to be gained from the paper is that even in the era of informal education, Igbo riddles, because of their rich content, complement formal education; they have the capacity to imbue the child with such knowledge that cannot be acquired through formal education.

Introduction

For the purpose of this paper, it is necessary to begin our discussion by defining the term 'education', one of the key concepts in the title. **Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English** defines education as "(the results of) teaching or training of mind and character." This 'teaching or the training of mind and character' can take place in many places and forms. This is why Onasanya (1990:1) believes that education is not only the deliberate processes of school and college but also more; it includes indirect and incidental influences. To support his view, Onasanya quotes John Stuart Mill whose definition of what education entails, is more elaborate:

Not only does education include whatever we do for ourselves and whatever is done for us by others for the express purpose of bringing us somewhat nearer to perfection of our nature; it does more: in its largest acceptation, it comprehends even the indirect affects produced in character and on human faculties, by things of which the direct purpose are quite different... (pp. 1-2).

Education then can be said to be a process of moulding or shaping the receiver's behaviour for a better condition either through the rigours of formal school training or the numerous indirect ways available to man. Education, as also explained by Onasanya

is "a strong instrument for social change and a means to conserve, transmit and transform culture".

The Igbo place high premium on the bearing of children. To them, the child is a symbol of continuity of the family line; and "to be childless is the greatest calamity that can befall a woman". (Basden, 1983:68). It is because the child is regarded as the family's hope for the future that special efforts are made in his training. As Uba-Mgbemena (1982:84) rightly points out, Igbo parents "realize that the future of the child depends much on the training the child received at its impressionable age". The child that receives the right training grows up a reasonable person.

Giving a child a proper training is a necessary measure to equip him to independently face and tackle the challenges of life, which his society presents him with. It also makes him know his rights and obligations as a member of his community. In Igbo society, the training of the child is a matter of priority even though the level each child attains in the course of his training may differ according to the parents' or guardians' resources and the child's potentials.

Before the advent of formal education in Nigeria, the Igbo had, and still have, various informal ways of educating their children. In Igbo traditional society, parents make it a point of duty to get their children initiated into the various specialized institutions like the age grades and secret societies. They also encourage them to join play groups in order to identify with their peers. These institutions not only give the child an exposure to the world outside his family but also make him mature emotionally, thereby discouraging his total dependence on, and perpetual attachment to his parents. Play groups engage in activities which help the child to become more aware of his environment, how his society functions and his duties as an individual member of his society. They are, in short, training grounds for the child.

Riddle game is one of the events that feature in the play groups. For instance, in the moonlight play, riddling constitutes one of the activities with which the participants thrill themselves. The riddles, because of their rich content, are like the folktales in providing effective instrument for the training of an Igbo child. This paper is intended to examine the roles Igbo could play in educating the Igbo child.

The Igbo Riddles as an Educative Tool

"Riddles are art form that have long been included in the studies of oral literature" (Ikwubuzo, 1992:52). The Igbo word for riddle is Agwugwa or Gwangwamgwam which literally means 'tell-me tell-me'. Finnegan (1970:442) describes it as 'a concise form of conventionally stereotyped expression' but for our purpose, we find Hugh Jansen's (1968:231) definition of riddle very comprehensive:

Riddle is a question, direct or indirect, complete or incomplete, in tradition form whereby the questioner challenges a listener

to recognise and identify the accuracy, the unity, the truth, in a statement that usually seems implausible or self contradictory, but that is in its own peculiar light always true.

This definition, apart from indicating that riddle is a traditional art form, highlights some devices, which it employs to create confusion on the part of the listener. It is often an 'indirect' and 'incomplete' question which may appear 'implausible' and 'self contradictory'.

Among the Igbo, riddle asking is a game mainly indulged in by children, but it is also enjoyed by adults who occasionally entertain themselves in it. When children are in riddle session, adult can listen or participate. Sometimes, they comment on the riddle questions that are wrongly constructed or correct wrong answers assumed to be right by the children. The nature of the game is aptly described by Ugonna (1988-89:9)

The riddle is a satisfactory literary form, which takes the nature of a contest either between two individuals or two groups of individuals or between one person and many others.

The riddler does not pose question and solve it himself. It takes more than one person to engage in the game. This means that the riddle game is communal and participatory.

The content of the Igbo riddles makes them a viable educative tool. This will be highlighted in our exemplifications as we now discuss the specific riddles that can be of great use in the education of the child.

Riddles as a Mode of Training in Communication

Primarily riddle game is a mode of communication. It is a kind of two-way communication that employs a teller and a respondent. Because of its communicative nature riddle can enhance a child's communicative ability.

Riddles as a Tool for Training the Child in Cognition

One's cognitive horizon can be widened through participation in the riddle game. Generally, Igbo riddles deal with the material world of man. Since they describe nature as a whole, a great deal of knowledge can be acquired when one engages others in riddles. Through the riddle game, one, especially the ^{child} kind, becomes conscious of himself as a being. This is because some Igbo riddles refer to human beings. For instance, in the following riddles, references are made to 'man' and 'girl' metaphorically:

- (1) Q: Gwa m
A: Nnukwu osisi di n'agbataobi
(Q: Tell me
A great tree in the neighbourhood
Man)

- (2) (Q: Gwa m
Osisi toro na mba laa na mba
A: Nwaagbogho
(Q: Tell me
A tree that grew in one town and went to live in another town.
A: Girl

In riddle (1) the child is made to see a man as an important figure in the family as we as well in the community. A girl on the other hand is portrayed in riddle (2) as one who eventually gets married outside her place of birth. In riddles (3) and (4) below, some parts of the human body are referred to in indeophonic words that suggested how each functions:

- (3) Q: Gwa m
Zamzam
A: Anya
Q: Tell me
Zamzam
A: Eye)
4. Q: Gwa m
Wamwam
A: Ukwu
(Q: Tell me
Wamwam
A: Leg)

The child could through riddles, learn the names and features of the various things within his environment and culture. For instance, the first of the following riddles refers to an animal, the second to a fruit and the third to a seed by drawing one's attention to their observable features.

- (5) Q: Gwa m
Ihe abughi anu elu abughi anu ala
A: Usu
(Q: Tell me
What is neither an air animal nor a land animal
(6) A: Bat)
Q: Gwa m
Agbogho kuuru nmiri jee n'elu
A: Akubekee
(Q: Tell me

- A: A damsel that takes water and goes up
(Coconut)
- (7) Q: Gwa m
Ihe muru umu tee ha niile nte anya oji
- A: Agwa
- Q: Tell me
What painted the eyes of all its children black
- A: Beans)

The people's occupation and implements can also form the subject of some Igbo riddles. Riddles (8) and (9) which indicate farming as the Igbo people's occupation highlight a farm grain and farm tool.

- (8) Q: Gwa m
Ihe gaje ubi gbara oto
Ma lotawa mara akwa
- A: Oka
- (Q: Tell me
What goes to the farm nakes
But returns clad.
- A: Corn)
- (9) Q: Gwa m
Ihe ji ikpere gazuo ubi nna gi onu
- A: Ogu
- (Q: Tell me
What walks round your father's farm on its knees
- A: Hoe).

Igbo riddles can also refer to other natural phenomena that are universally observed and shared. Riddles (10), for instance, refers to the moon by describing it metaphorically as a 'slice of yam that feeds the whole world':

- (10) Q: Gwa m
Otu ibe ji zuru uwa onu
- A: Onwa
- (Q: Tell me
A slice of yam that feeds the whole world
- A: Moon).

The above riddle is based on the moon's physical appearance and the fact that it is a phenomenon whose illumination of the earth is enjoyed universally.

highlighted in the content of Igbo riddles. Every Igbo riddle, whether it refers to human beings, animals, plants or any other thing in the universe has what it reveals or expresses about the Igbo perception of that subject. In other words, the Igbo can through their riddles pictures reality, the universe, life and existence.

Riddles as a Tool for the Child's Intellectual Development

Igbo riddles can be a tool for the child's intellectual development. Man is essentially a rational being. He has always concerned himself with reason and has, as Jansen (1968:232) put it, "always proudly considered the power to reason a most precious talent, if not a distinction and justification for a sense of his own superiority".

Every Igbo riddle requires a high level of thinking to unravel, as many of them are couched in veiled language or mere onomatopoeic sounds. Let us take as an example the following riddle:

- (11) Q: Gwa m
Dum! Yom!
- (Q: Tell me
Dum! Yom!)

It is only one who is able to think deeply that can, taking cognisance of the ideophonic quality of the riddle-question, decipher that it is referring to:

Ogbe akwu na Mkpuru ya
(A bunch of palm fruit and its fruits)

When an over-ripe bunch of palm fruit is cut, it drops on the ground with an accompanying sound, dum! while its fruits scatter producing the sound, yom! Since the riddle in this context requires an interpretation of this sort before the meaning (answer) can be grasped, it is required of the child to associate the sound with concrete object. It can, therefore, be asserted that the riddle contest, in the words of Makouta-Mbouko (1973:19), "develops the [child's] memory, imagination, thought process and judgement by associating signs with ideas, ideas with signs, ideas with ideas and signs with signs".

The riddle is a test of a person's wit or intellectual ability since a question to which a correct answer is expected to be given is intentionally disguised to confuse or frustrate the respondent. This is why Abraham and Dundes (1972:130) see riddles as:

Questions that are framed with the purposes of confusing or testing the wits of those who do not know the answer as well as testing the cognitive ability of those who know the answer (Underlined, our emphasis).

The riddles cited above can be used to test how keen one is in observing what is happening around him in his environment.

We indicated earlier that man considers the power to reason "a distinction and justification for a sense of his own superiority." For the child, the riddle game affords him an opportunity to demonstrate his intellectual ability and superiority over others. This demonstration of intellectual ability and superiority over others consists in the child's ability to recognise, identify or unravel the truth that is shrouded in ambiguity, of competition or contest. It should be pointed out, however, that not only does the game afford one an opportunity to satisfy this drive, that is, exercise his reason; it also provides a forum for him to witness reasoning being exercised by others.

The competitive nature of Igbo riddles entails the observance of some time lag for every riddle question. Even though no specific time limit is usually imposed on the respondent, he is expected to answer a question as quickly as possible, for according to Chukwuma (1974:27), "the repetition in the name 'Gwamgwamgwam' denotes some urgency 'tell-me-tell-me quickly'".

Since one is required to go into some deep thinking in order to arrive at the answer within the shortest possible time that may be allowed for the question, Igbo riddles help a great deal in training the child in quick thinking. This fact is realized by Finnegan (1970:442) when she notes that the riddles play an educational role "by training children in quick thinking, in intellectual skill, and in classification". Just as the riddle enhances the child's communicative ability, it sharpens his mental agility.

Riddles as Instrument of Socializing the Child

Apart from their education role, Igbo riddles have sociological value. The riddle game is an instrument of socialization. In Igboland, it is normally staged in the evening when people gather together to relax. But the moonlight play usually provides a suitable occasion when a riddle contest is staged. As a socializing agent, it encourages children from the neighbourhood to gather together in an open arena. The children usually constitute themselves into two groups and commence a riddle contest, each side struggling to emerge the winner. The contest may be between two individuals while the other members of the audience listen, cheer and applaud the person who demonstrates superior mental ability over his opponent.

When children from different families converge for a riddle session during the moonlight, they may decide to make it an inter-family competition whereby they group themselves according to the families they come from. Where so organised, the challenge is normally between two families at a time. Each side strives to outwit its opponent and credits itself with the number of answers it has correctly given. "People laugh at one another's answer and the competition to solve the riddle itself creates a cordial atmosphere" (Olatunji, 1984:182). At the end of the competition, the total number of

answers correctly given by each side may be announced by an umpire who might have been appointed to direct or moderate the contest. The winner side asserts its superior knowledge, congratulates itself for the honour it has collectively brought to its family. The loser side normally accepts its defeat with the spirit of sportmanship but not without a boastful promise to revenge should they meet another day. The participants then disperse and retire to their homes amidst jubilation, clapping and singing of some conquest songs.

There are occasions, too, when children can engage in riddle during the daytime to entertain themselves. During their leisure time at school or on the way to and from the stream, children are free to exchange riddles for solution. As they exchange the riddles while to and from the stream, they may not feel the boredom which the distance may impose on them. Essentially the riddle game provides entertainment for children and adults alike. In the words of Finnegan (1970:441), 'conventionally, riddle-telling is a social pastime for amusement pure and simple.' People interact with one another, laugh with one another, especially when a contestant is dazed with a very tough riddle which he is not able to answer correctly. The prevailing atmosphere in all these riddle occasions highlighted above can afford one an opportunity to accomplish one's drive for social satisfaction; and in this lies the socializing impact of the riddle game on Igbo society.

Riddles as an Agency for Inculturating the Child

The Igbo riddles like proverbs, folktales, myths and legends embody the cultural traits and world-view of the Igbo. As an informal agency of education, the riddle game, like other activities of the moonlight play which Ugonna (1989:16) writes about,

introduces the children to the various cultural traits of their society and inculcates in them the cultural values of the Igbo. It gives them access to 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.

By participating in riddle exercise the child can be instilled with knowledge of certain cultural themes that have bearing on the beliefs, practices, norms and values of his people. The Igbo riddle can elicit various themes like those of etiquette, morals, marriage, religion, etc. all of which can be used in giving the child a cultural orientation.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the vital role riddles can play in the education of the Igbo child. It identified the riddle game as one of the various ways of educating the Igbo child and highlights the specific areas of knowledge the riddles instil into the child. All these, no doubt, reveals the effectiveness of the riddles as an instrument of educating the Igbo child.

Today, the influence of modernity is, undoubtedly, threatening our traditional foundation, thus making us lose grip on our cultural values. Listening to the radio, watching television programmes, indulging in indoor games such as chess, scrabble, ludo, etc., which are characteristic of modern day life now occupy our evenings and consequently have replaced moonlight games and folk narratives which provided recreation and pastime in Igbo traditional society.

Luckily, however, in the literature curricula of the Junior Secondary School, riddles are part of Igbo oral literature. But unfortunately, the same negative attitude of some Nigerians towards their indigenous languages which has over the years stagnated the development of those languages and their literatures again constitutes a stumbling block in the realisation of the objective of including riddles as part of oral literature in secondary school syllabus. One area this attitude is manifest is in the current WAEC syllabus where literature in Nigerian language is no longer compulsory. This issue of optional status of Igbo literature and literature in other Nigerian languages in our school system is indeed very disturbing as it poses a serious threat to the survival of African literature (oral or written).

It is true that in many schools in the rural areas, the study of Igbo literature is not completely abandoned, as is the case with schools in urban centres but the result is not encouraging. The effort of many T.V and Radio stations, particularly in the South East, in bringing in riddles as quiz items in Igbo cultural programme is very commendable but needs to be improved upon.

In order to ensure greater appreciation of the value of Igbo riddles, and exploit them further as educative resource for the training of the child, certain steps need to be taken to encourage their use. First, the WAEC (or NECO) policy that makes Igbo literature an optional subject should be revised and the subject made compulsory. Also, the teaching of riddles and other forms of Igbo oral literature should be taken more seriously. This is because the riddles have the capacity to not only give the child some aesthetic pleasure and recreational satisfaction but also imbue him with a vast knowledge of the cultural themes embodied in the riddles.

To make the teaching of riddles at school more effective and to stimulate a greater interest in their usage by the students, the teacher can organise occasional riddle contests akin to the one staged in the traditional environment when children gather together for a session of riddle game. It can be made to be part of the general classroom games. It can also be made to constitute part of inter-school quiz competition, which have hitherto excluded Igbo subject.

So far, Science, Introductory Technology, English and other selected subjects taught in English language dominate children's Radio and T.V. programmes. The quiz programme

conducted on these subjects can be expanded to include Igbo riddles as quiz items because of their useful role in sharpening the child's mental agility. Private and government-owned Radio and T.V. stations in our urban cities should create or expand, where it is already in place, entertaining Igbo programmes where Igbo riddles can be accommodated. This can be given a slot in their literary corner. We are therefore, advocating that these media houses include in their children's time literary programmes in Nigerian languages.

Igbo parents also have a role to play in complementing the efforts of Igbo teachers and media houses by encouraging children to show interest in Igbo subject at school. Parents who are in the habit of discouraging their children from speaking their native language should change their attitude. This attitude is common with parents who live in urban centres where English is used more often as a means of communication. If a child is not taught and encouraged to speak his language, how could he appreciate the literary value of that language? That a child is taught to speak his/her mother tongue would not make such a child not to be competent in English language and other subjects.

We are by no means advocating that the modern facilities now available for the child's education should not be exploited to his advantage. However, it is our candid opinion that even in the present dispensation-this era of greater emphasis on science and technology- riddles are still a viable instrument for the education of the child.

The educational value of Igbo riddles should not be overlooked with the flimsy reason that we have embraced formal education. The riddles, as we have stressed earlier, have the potentials of complementing the formal education of western orientation. In fact, the riddles have the capacity to imbue the child with such knowledge that cannot be acquired through formal education.

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THE MYTH OF *IYI UNE* AND OBIKE'S CREATIVE INPUTS IN *EKE UNE*

1. INTRODUCTION

When Emmanuel Obike in the preface to his poetic work, *Eke Une* appealed to the planners of Igbo studies to accept his work and most importantly include it as examination text at a level higher than school certificate, little did he know that today his epic poem would attract many a scholar's research interest at the tertiary education level.

Published in 1977¹ by the University Publishing Company, Onitsha, *Eke Une* remains till date the only epic poem in the corpus of *abu ederede* Igbo. It is a poetic work which due, perhaps, to its uniqueness has attracted the attention of a number of scholars whose focus on the work ranges from the desire to probe into the background of its conception as a poem (Nnabuihe, 1990; 1999) to attempts to highlight its taxonomy, its central theme, its myth or give a more plausible interpretation and meaning of the poem (Ugonna, 1982; Okebalama, 1986; Ikwubuzo, 1998; Nnabuihe 1999; 2004(a), 2004(b)).

According to Ugonna (1982), *Eke Une* is not "an original Igbo Ballad" as erroneously described by the author, Emmanuel Obike but "indeed an inspiring epic poem which has contributed immensely to the growth of *abu ederede*. Nnabuihe's (2004 (a) and (b)) later publications reveal though that the error of describing *Eke Une* as 'ballad' was committed by Nsofor and Ogbalu who edited the work and not the author himself who was convinced that it is an Igbo epic, hence the incongruous sub-title of 'Igbo ballad' and 'epic poem' which the work bears on its cover page and in the preface respectively.

Ugonna also asserted that the poem "explores an intricate myth – the symbolic relationship in Igbo mythology between the boa, the rainbow and the river goddess, *mọmịwọta*, and that its central story is the tragic love affair between Ulku, a human hero and Mami, a water goddess who along with her father make an unrealistic demand on Ulku to give his sister, *Ojiugo* to *Eke Une* in exchange for her (Mami). This impossible demand leads to the epic battle in the narrative.

Okebalama's (1986) observation – which we agree with – is that the love affair between Ulku and Mami 'is not all that is contained in the epic'. Even the myth identified by Ugonna is not only the mythical element in

the work. Nnabuihe (1999) examines the motifs in the poem that could qualify *Eke Une* to be classified as both traditional poetry and modern poetry but concludes that it is more appropriate to adjudge the work as a modern Igbo epic which is embellished with traditional motifs. He also comments on the myth of the *Une* and the allegorical elements of the poem.

As if he does not want to leave any aspect of the poem untouched, Nnabuihe in two additional published articles (Nnabuihe, 2004 (a); 2004 (b)) casts further critical glance at *Eke Une*, examining the poet's language use and portrayal of the hero attributes in some of the characters found in the epic poem.

Ikwubuzo's (1998) study on myth in Written Igbo Literature identified the myth in *Eke Une*. *Eke Une* has indeed attracted a wide range of interest and will no doubt continue to engage the attention of scholars who would like to analyze the work from other perspectives. This present paper takes a further look at the poem with the aim of appraising the poet's exploitation of his local myth in his creative work, and how through his creative inputs he has gone beyond the ambit of his traditional background – his traditional myth – to create a "new myth" and even explore a number of themes to address some issues that are features of contemporary society.

The paper presents the traditional base of the work, that is, the myth itself, and how this myth provides thematic source material for the poet. It proceeds to appraise the poet's creative inputs from which we have identified some of the themes of the poem discussed here.

2. The Myth Of *Iyi Une* & Obike's Creative Inputs In *Eke Une*

The reptile, Crocodile, is a deity in Isieke Ibeku² to whom the origin, the appearance and disappearance of *Iyi Une* (*Une* Lake) is attributed. As the aetiological myth goes orally among the people of Isieke Ibeku, beneath the *Une* Lake inhabits a deity, personified by a crocodile, which in their local dialect is called an *Qbammiri*. It is this creature that 'vomits' the water when it emerges from its burrow, *onuoba*, and swallows up the same when it is due to retire to its burrow.

As the water is 'vomited', its level rises above all the surrounding trees and overflows its bank, spreading to different parts of Isieke villages. And whenever the crocodile returns to its abode, the site of the Lake becomes desiccated following the "swallowing" up of the Lake by the retiring crocodile. The mysterious appearance and disappearance of the water make the people regard the lake as sacred and worship its god. It is

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said that many years ago, the forefathers of Isieke Ibeku, in a covenant with the deity, hemmed the Lake in with sacred *Nturuṣka* trees. The Lake appears and disappears till today. Let us now examine how this local myth is utilized in Obike's poetic work.

3. The Myth of *Iyi Une* as Thematic Source Material for Obike

According to Ikwubuzo (1998:87), "a people's culture colours and shapes their literary creation. There is a correlation between literature and the cultural environment in which it is created and used. A people's mythological tradition is part of the culture that influences their literature." Not only does culture provide the material or background on which society's literature draws, it, according to the Herskovitses (1958:70), sets or defines for the artist "the limit within which he may juxtapose certain themes or call on certain characters to enact stated roles." In *Eke Une*, we notice Obike's incorporation of the element of the appearing and disappearing of the Lake water as related in the oral myth. The deity, *Éke*, is portrayed as having 'vomited' the Lake water in the remote past:

Eke na-ehi egwurugwu
Nke na-agboputakwa daimon n'abali,
Chi ndi ala ma (sic) Isieke,
O bu gi mere ka mkpekere akpakoro
Ghaa baghara vughuru
N'ugwu Ameke.
Ee, n'afọ tingbam ka i chere onu,
Osimiri na akpakoro
Ewee ribido nne, ribido nna,
Wee ribido Umuahia nke m.

(*Éke* that forms the rainbow
Which also vomits diamond at night,
The god of my people Isieke,
It is you who caused the fossils
To fill everywhere
On Ameke hill.
Yes, long long time ago, you opened (your) mouth,
Then ocean and fossils
Submerged mother, submerged father,
And then submerged my own Umuahia).

In the following excerpt, we notice where the deity retires, carrying along with it the Lake water (indicating the disappearance of the Lake water). This leads to re-emergence of dry land where the birds come to pick up food and hunters set trap:

Ugbu a agu ila mba
Aguola Eke Une na Ada ya Nwaanyi,
Ila mba a bu iga ozuzu ike
Nke ha na-aga kwa afọ
Site n'idaba n'okukoro a na-akpo
Onuoba ma o bu isi une
Onuoba anaghi ata ngwangwa;
O bukwá site na ya ka
Eke puru isi n'Une baa
N'osimiri ozo di n'ime ala,
....

Eke Une anyara ada ya n'olu
Wee lara azu were odu
Dakpuo n'onuoba,
O wee seputa olu ya sahee onu
Ma lee mmiri Une na-ezeba:
Kpim, kpim, kpim,
N'ala afọ eke ka ha na-aba.
....

Ma mgbe Une tasiri
Onuoba tasikwara,
E wee hu nkwo nta di otutu
Ka ha na-erughari n'ebe
Ahihia ndu na-eto,
Na-achọ iburu awo
....

Ugbu a ala akoro une,
N'ebe a ahihia ndu di,
Aghowo ebe ikwa onya;
Lee na ya a tusara ogbo
Bu ihe ntuta ndu na nkwoṣta,
Wee liekwara ha okukpam na eso
Nke na-eme ka aka ju umu okorobia;

(Now the desire for retirement
 Has been expressed by Eke *Ùnè* and 'his' daughter;
 This retirement means going for a rest
 Which they proceed on yearly
 By falling into a hole that is called *Qba's* burrow or the
 source of *Ùnè*
 The source of *Ùnè* does not dry up quickly;
 It is also from there that
Eke is able to enter, through *Ùnè*
 To another ocean beneath the ground,

Eke *Ùnè* hangs his daughter on its neck
 And with backward movement
 Falls into the Crocodile's burrow with its tail,
 He stretches his neck, opens his mouth
 And behold the *Ùnè* water flowing:
Kpim, kpim, kpim,
 Down the *Eke's* belly as they go in

But as *Ùnè* dries up
 And the Crocodile's burrow also dries up,
 Many hawks are seen,
 Hovering over the green plants,
 Trying to catch toads

Now the dry land of *Ùnè*,
 This place that had green leaves,
 Has become a scene for setting traps;
 See, in it cotton are spread
 Which are traps for doves and hawks,
 An iron trap and glue are also spread for them
 Which make the young men's hands to be full of catches).

As can be seen from the above excerpt, the poet recreates the incidence of the disappearance of the lake. The deity is portrayed as having swallowed up the lake water after retiring into its burrow. After this retraction, there is a period of dryness on the bed of the Lake and green grass sprout on it.

According to the myth, it is believed that whenever the Lake re-surfaces, it is the deity that vomits it. In the following excerpt, the deity is again portrayed as 'vomiting' the water:

Mgbe anyanwu na-ada
 N'elu ahia ndu ahia
 Eke wee malite igbo agboq"
 "Koho, koho ghoo ghoo!"
 mmiri Une we si ya n'onu na-aputa;
 n'echi ya une agbajue
 wee na-ebugharaikwa ndi na
 n'ugbo ogwe osisi.

(When the sun is setting
 On top of the green leaves
Eke starts to vomit:
 "Koho koho ghoo ghoo!"
Une water starts pouring out from his mouth:
 The next day *Une* gets filled up
 And keeps the people
 In the canoe afloat).

Apart from the animal deity, other elements found in the poem that could be associated with the oral myth are the *Nturukpa* trees, which are very predominant at the site of the lake, and Isieke Ibeku, the locality which commonly features in the poem.

4. The Poet's Creative Inputs

Outside the elements that are incorporated into *Eke Une* from the oral myth, virtually every other conception of the myth – its themes, characterizations, symbolism and narrative technique – is definitely the creation of the poet. This is done to the point that the story Obike narrates in his poem could hardly be identified with the story as related above. To a large extent, he introduces innovations. There is, for instance, the substitution of the deity's original name *Qba* (Crocodile) with *Éké* (Boa). The choice of this character, we think is to make it fit into the activities ascribed to it in the myth.

Following his innovations and new introductions, the following mythical elements are also discernible: the mythical battles involving the deity and his daughter, a hunter, the people of Isieke Ibeku, and a young lad, Ulku; the invincibility of the deities (god and goddess), the hero, the

rainbow and the myth that a river goddess, mamiwota, could endow someone with some powers and wealth.

Besides, the hunter's heroic exploit, the activities of the birds and the hunters on the dry bed of the Lake, and the idea of the deity having a daughter, are all the poet's creative additions because these elements are not features of the original tale. Even the dramatization of the creature's downward drift into the ground is the poet's innovation. And lastly but not the least, the incidence of love affair between Ulku the human hero, and Mami, the water goddess and the daughter of the deity, is also the poet's creation.

Through his creative ingenuity, the poet is able to fashion out a 'new myth', one which is distinct from the short narrative of mythological belief extant in the consciousness of the people of Isieke Ibeku. His attempt at a more elaborate construction of the context culminated in the creation of a single extended narrative unparalleled in Igbo poetry. The observation made of Soyinka by Irele (1982: 96) can be aptly applied to Obike:

The personal elaboration of elements drawn from tradition into a new pattern of meanings attest to a desire on the writer's part to give originality to his work as well as a more important artistic preoccupation.

With the 'new myth' Obike created, he addresses a number of topical issues by exploring a number of themes that can be elicited from the work. Let's examine some of these themes

i. *The Themes of Conflict and Reconciliation, and the Invincibility of the Deity*

The removal of a diamond that belongs to the deity, *Éké*, by a hunter from Isieke Ibeku precipitates a battle between the river deity and the people of Isieke Ibeku. As the hunter makes away with the diamond, the boa in *Ùnè* notices and pursues him. There is commotion as the boa begins to swallow the people. Babies' screaming rends the air and the people plead for leniency. The conflict is shown in the following incident:

Mgbe Eke nke nọ na mmiri
Hụrụ mụtụ mụtụ,
O wee zikpere chụba ya.
I gebe ntị,
Kata kata na-ada.

I lebe anya.
Ị hụ ka ọ na-elo
Ndi ime obodo si n'ura teta.
Ugbu a, akwa
Na-azụ n'elu na-azụ n'ala si:
"Eke na-eyi ọkụ daimon;
Ọ bughị anyị; ọ bughị anyị,
Haa m o! Haa m o!"

(When the boa which is in the Lake
Notices the movement,
He then pursues him.
If you listen,
Commotion is perceived.
If you watch,
You see him swallowing
The people that wake from sleep.
Now, the screaming of children
Fill the air saying:
"A diamond-laying boa
We are not the ones; we are not the ones.
Leave me oh! Leave me oh!")

The elders of the community offer pacifying sacrifice and make a covenant with *Éké Ùnè* urging 'him' to keep off their territory. The community blames and mocks the hunter but takes measures to protect the diamond which is now the source of light and joy to the entire community. But *Éké Ùnè* does not honour the covenant. The hilarity that attends the community's possession of the diamond is short-lived as *Éké* re-launches attack on the people, sending them to their heels. The battle rages on and *Éké Ùnè* defies all repulsive moves by the people of Isieke, and remains irresistible.

Fagged out by the battle, the people make another pacifying sacrifice. But to their surprise, *Éké* devours not only the sacrificial ram but also the presenter as shown in the following excerpt:

Ike mgba na ọgụ agwula ha;
Ndi Isieke Ibeku;
Ha ewee buru ebule n'isi,
Gaa n'une ichuru eke ahụ
Aja udo;

Isi wee buo ha.
Eke seputara isi ojqo ya
Ma lee, o kpurula ife ncha;
Ma ebule ma aka na-enye ebule!

(Tired of wrestling and fighting
The people of Isieke Ibeku
Carry a ram on their head
Proceed to *Une* to perform to the boa
A sacrifice of peace;
They become elated
Eke extends his ugly head
Behold, he swallows everything:
Both the ram and the hand that presents the ram!)

Having been completely overwhelmed, the people hastily invite France to offer them military assistance. They are asked to bring their plane to bomb *Eke* but with a promise that their victory over *Eke* is to be reciprocated with a gift of diamond. The decision and action of the people are conveyed in the following report:

Umụ nna m,
Mgbe ihe a tury ha n'ony,
Weere oso kpokue France
Ha rioro ha ka ha weta ugbolu
Ka e were bombua eke ahụ
Ha kpebikwara na ndi French
Na ndi Isieke ga-eme
Gbanwere gbanwere:
"Ugbu tugburu eke na-ehi egwurugwu
ya rie oriuna dajmon!"

(My kinsmen,
When this overwhelmed them,
Quickly decided to invite France
And begged them to bring aircraft
To bomb the boa
They also decided that the French
And the people of Isieke
Would make an exchange deal:

"The plane that kills the rainbow-causing boa
Let it have the diamond light!")

The bombardments and other measures by the French fighter to suppress *Eke* are met with stiff resistance. *Eke* causes wreckage of two planes to assert his invincibility. But peace is restored only when the last plane returns the stolen diamond to *Eke Une* deity. The fight ends. *Eke* and the people reconcile as the following excerpt indicates:

Udo udo ka o wetara
Bu ugbolu ikpeazu!
Si n'ime une welite isi lee
Oku dajmon na-erudata;
....
"Eke nwe ulo, sahee onu uto ama gi.
Were ma kwachiekwa,
Kwee anyi ka anyi turo gi ume!"
Okwu agwu, ogu ebie
Eke na mmadu agbaala oriko.

(Peace, peace, is what it brought
The last plane!
From *Une*, raise your head and see
The diamond-light coming down;

....
"*Eke* the landlord, open your entrance door
Receive and then shut,
Allow us to breathe!"
It is all over, the war ends)

The clause "allow us to breathe" is an expression of surrender. It highlights the intensity of the conflict and the suspense generated by it as the people fight to suppress the deity, which remains indefatigable and invincible till the end.

In another incident, when the love affair of the sea goddess, Mami, and the human hero, Ulku, comes to an end as a result of some disagreement, Mami and *Eke Une*, her father launch an attack on Ulku and his sister. The attack ushers in another protracted clash, which, like the preceding one, is havoc-ridden and greatly felt by the entire community. All the instruments and agents of war used against the deities

could not subdue them. The clash continues until 'father and daughter' (the deities) make their final retraction into the lake

Nnabuihe (1999) has discussed the symbolism of this war motif in *Eke Une*. He attempts to interpret some of the episodes in this epic as allegories of the events of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. In other words, the nature of the conflict, the kind of weapon used and the military assistance solicited suggest that Obike uses the myth as a metaphor with which he highlights the socio-political and economic conditions in the Nigerian society during the civil war.

We also view the war motif in the incidents highlighted above as the poet's artistic device to demonstrate the myth of invincibility and irresistible power of the deities. The struggle in which the god of *Une* is involved and the inability of the people to subdue it are the poet's dramatization of the belief in the invincibility and irresistible power of the deities.

In the myth of deities across cultures, the mythical figures are usually portrayed as invincible and irresistible. In Greek and Hebrew traditions, the gods or God are/is often given the portrait of invincibility, and man has always failed in his attempt to resist their power.

In Igbo thought also, it is strongly held that nobody can resist the power of the deities which are also believed to be invincible. The depiction of the gods as being engaged in wars is a common motif in some world mythologies. Those of Greeks, Romans, Hebrew, Yoruba among others, are examples. In the wars, the gods either fight with men or fellow gods. The clash of the titans in Greek mythology involves the gods.

We could say that one of the artistic objectives achieved by the poet in the use of the deity motif drawn from Igbo myth is to affirm the universal notion that gods are more powerful than mortals. This awareness can instill in the readers, some fears and make them not to see the Igbo deities as being weak and inept. The poet's attitude in the manner he has utilized this mythical phenomenon is that of restatement of its validity.

ii. The Theme of Suppression, Appropriation and Foolishness

The second mythical battle, which involves Eke Une and other animals, also projects a theme of conflict but of a different dimension. Unlike the conflict of the first battle, this appears to be a commentary on human struggles and conflicts that are generated by the drive for survival and acquisition of material things.

The incident highlights on the one hand, the desire of the strong to suppress the weak as manifested in Eke's attack on the deer (Okpo). Eke Une attacks and kills the deer when the former is on hunting exercise:

Ọ hula anụ mpi agriga
Ọ bu ọkpọ mpi agadaga
Ọ bukpọọ ya anya
Ọ bukpọọ!
Ọgu adaa!

Chai! Lekwaa eke
Agwoola Okpo aju
Kiririm! Piam!
O setia, ozu adoro

('He' has seen a horned animal
It is a large-horned deer
He has blinded it with spit
He releases blinding spit
War ensues

Chai, see eke
Has subdued the deer
Kiririm! Piam!

He stretches (it) it drops dead.) (pp.12 - 13)

On the other hand, the incident highlights the desire of some individuals to appropriate the wealth or property that does not belong to them as manifested in the attempt by the short boa to possess the diamond belonging to Eke Une. Such action or ambition that is shown often leads to tragic end as experienced by the short boa eventually:

Lee ka o si n'odu
Na-elokota ihe dum
Ma eke nta ma ihe o kpụ n'onu

Akwa daimon ahụ

Ọ nọ n'akpịrị eke nta ahụ
O wee sahee onu ya loo
N'iwe n'iwe eke nta ahụ
Na ihe o kpụ n'onu

(Watch as he begins from the tail
To swallow everything
Both the small boa and what is in its mouth

...
The diamond

...
It is in the throat of the small boa.
He opens his mouth and swallows
In anger, in anger, the small boa
And what it has in its mouth). (p.13)

Also portrayed in this incident is how a foolish interference and interloping can make someone get killed. The squirrel (Osa)'s interference and provocation of Eke, when 'he' was engrossed in a battle to repossess 'his' diamond from 'his' enemy, is a foolish interloping which seems to depict how some people get themselves involved in adjudicating matters without restraints and clear knowledge of the issue at stake or the prevailing circumstance, and end up losing their lives. The account is given in the following excerpt:

Bia lee nwa qsa na-ebe
Chọ, chọ, chọ, chọkọlọm n'osisi
Q hula ihe a na-azọ
Q biakwara igba ọtịtọ
Nwa qsa wee wusa Eke une n'isi
Wee wusa ya n'odu
O wee wughachi n'elu osisi

...
Nwa qsa abiakwala ọzọ!
Eke eghighasia bewe
Ma nwa qsa wusara ya n'isi
Q takwara ya aru ọzọ
Ya mere Eke Une gburu ya elu
Nke mere ka o gbasa sisiri!

(Come and see a squirrel singing
Chọ, chọ, chọ, chọkọlọm on the tree
It has seen what is being struggled for
It comes for defence
The squirrel darts on Eke's head
Darts also on his tail

And darts back to the tree.

...
The squirrel has come again
Eke un-coils and crows
But the squirrel darts on his head
It bites him again
Eke Une spits venom on it
Which leaves it dead.) (Pp.14-15).

iii. The Theme of Love and Disaffection

Love affair between boys and girls, men and women, is a feature of human life. But the attitude is more pronounced among the youths. A love affair between a human hero and a goddess could only be possible in a mythical world where deities and men are shown to be in active interaction.

Obike introduced the incidence of love affair in the myth of Une Lake. And using the mythic motif of a human hero, Ulku, in a consummation of love with a goddess, Mami, he (the poet) seems to be reflecting on the love life of youths in the society and its concomitant affection and disaffection, agreement and disagreement. Moments of joy and sadness, and of sharing feelings through physical interactions, are also depicted. Marriage proposal which is often the culmination of such affair and the possibility of ending the relationship on a tragic note, are also highlighted.

Mami, a beautiful river goddess and the daughter of a river deity, Eke Une, falls in love with Ulku, a human being and a handsome teenage schoolboy. At first sight, Mami admires the handsome lad greatly and gives him a gift of a magic silver ring which he receives with thanks. The ring has dos and don'ts but provides the magical resource with which Ulku can approach Mami. The dos and don'ts are embodied in the following instructions: That if Ulku wears the ring to Une water and slaps the cotton tree, the parrots and eagles on it will be hypnotized. Then with a climbing rope and a raffia bag, he will climb to fetch eggs but the young birds are not to be touched. When he climbs down, he is to slap the cotton tree again to wake the birds. He is not to forget that it is only with the eggs that he can reach the river queen, Mami. And when bringing the eggs he is to wear his silver ring and come with titillating melodious tune to wake Mami from sleep. He is to visit at midday, or midnight and keep the ring sacred and secure.

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In their next meeting during the occasion of new yam festival in Isieke, Ulku carries out Mami's instructions. Featuring briefly at the scene of the festival, he leaves to collect the eggs from the cotton tree. The next day at midday, he goes to *Une Lake* with the eggs singing melodious ditty. The song attracts Mami who, riding on her father's neck, emerges from the river to meet Ulku. At the end of their interaction, Ulku gives her the eggs with a plea that she has to appear less snaky:

Butukwanu agwo soru
(Be less snaky) (p.23.)

She responds to Ulku's plea with a request that Ulku is to bring her an old sponge of his girl friend:

O riokwara ka o zitere ya
Sapo ochie enyi ya nwaanyi ji asa ahu
Nke ga-eme ka ya adikwala
Agwo agwo, ka o wee meekwa ya
Ka ya ghoo mmadu ... (lines 632 - 636)

(She also requested him to send her
The old sponge his girl friend uses to bath
Which will make her not to be
Snaky and then transform her
To be a human being)

The love affair deepens after Ulku has presented Mami with the sponge with which she transforms into a human being. They have an intimate physical consummation of love marked by music, kissing, hugging and dancing as reported in the following incident:

Lekwaa ha
Ndi na-anq na mmiri alu di
Meturutaanu obi ugboro ugboro
Ma tekwaanu egwu onu (lines 699 - 702)

(Look at them
Who consummate marriage in the river
Kiss yourselves a number of times
And have a joyful dance.)

The occasion is rounded off with exchange of gifts. Ulku gives Mami some eggs while she in return gives Ulku a carton of naira.

Following the failure of Ulku, at their third meeting, to bring his lover, Mami, some eggs, disaffection develops. This makes Eke and Mami decide to go for the eggs themselves. In the process, they incur the wrath of the birds which attack and inflict wounds on them. The attack is stopped by the timely intervention of Ulku (lines 775 - 820). The episode precipitates a battle which impact is felt not only by Eke, Mami, and Ulku but also by the entire community.

The love affair between Ulku and Mami continues to thrive after this incident until Ulku's formal proposal to marry Mami. Ulku yields as demanded by Mami, to be tested by Eke Une in order to determine his fitness (Lines 993 - 1034). Surprised to see Ulku prove his mettle by going through the tests undaunted, Mami then presents the demand that Ulku exchanges her with his sister, Ojiugo. The demand is the final condition on which the possibility of the proposed marriage depends. As would be expected, Ulku rejects the condition and refuses to surrender to Mami the magic ring she had earlier given to him as a token of love. With the disagreement, the love affair comes to a tragic end as the former lover, Mami, threatens to deal with Ulku if he refuses to accede to her demands.

As we mentioned earlier Eke Une and Mami launched attack on Ulku and his sister, Ojiugo. The attack ushers in another protracted clash which like the preceding one is havoc-ridden and greatly felt by the entire community. The clash continues, until father and daughter make their final retraction into the lake without being defeated, and the battle ends.

As we also observed earlier, this mythical incident is a reflection of love affairs among young people and their attendant affection and disaffection including the possibility of the relationship coming to a deadlock and packing up.

iv. The Theme of Pride and Extravagance

Ulku manifests some of the traits of archetypal Igbo hero - the hero's exaggerated sense of his worth. With the carton of naira, the river goddess gives to Ulku, he goes home and begins to celebrate lavishly. That same day, Ulku throws a party and celebrates with pomp and pageantry, displaying his braggadocio. Ulku is showered with praises and cheers. Everybody is exhilarated. The following excerpt captures the mood:

N'ubochi ahu o siri oriri
Iji zi okomoko ya
Bia lere ka okoro Isieke
Na-etu ya "Opara Ukwu"

...
 Opara qha a bu Ulku
 Bara fuo mmanwu
 Wee puta na-ete egwu
 Bia lere ka o na-awughari
 Na-akpokwa n'ubu
 N'ih na nkwa na-emebi ya isi (lines 718 – 728, pp.25 & 26)

(That day he organized a banquet
 To display his worth
 Come and see, the young men of Isieke
 Acclaim him "Great Son"

...
 Ulku, the community Son
 Went in and emerged in masquerade
 Dancing to music beats,
 Come and see him displaying.
 He is also shrugging his shoulders
 For the music intoxicates him.)

The poet utilizes this incident to expose the materialistic disposition of the wealthy in a materialistic oriented society. Display of wealth through extravagant banquets and exuberant life-style has become a predominant feature of Nigerian society in the recent time. When people 'make it', they go on a spending spree: build expensive houses, organize parties where they commission the houses or take up chieftaincy titles, use the occasion to spray money on people and make promises in wanton profusion. The poet illustrates this habit by the fanfare with which Ulku celebrates his sudden affluence. This exposition is given in the following excerpt:

....
 Na nsotu egwu a
 O kpuru ulo putakwa n'ebube,
 Bia lee ya n'ejiji qhuu
 Lee uwe mwuda uhia ya
 Huru iyagba ola-edo n'olu ya
 Ya na okpu ndi gburu agu!
 N'ezie, o yi "o sere ogu n'onuugbo"

Ndiyom ukwu
 Ndiyom nta
 Biara na-eфе ya akupe n'ihu
 Nke a mere ka o maa aka were
 Ukwu naira iteghete tuoro ha
 Bu ndiyom ndi a,
 Tumadi ndikom ogaranya niile!
 Ha rachara aka dike ya
 Burukwa ya n'ubu, bu Ulku
 Nwa o jee o wetara qha (lines 729-745).

(At the end of the music
 He entered the house and came out glorious
 Come and see him in new attire
 See his flowing crimson robe
 Behold a golden chain on his neck
 With his heroic cap!
 Truly, he is wearing "O sere ogu n'onuugbo"

Big women
 Small women
 Came fanning his face
 This made him take
 Nine bundles of naria and throw to them -
 These women,
 Specially all the rich men!
 They licked his heroic hand
 And lifted him, Ulku, shoulder high
 The fortune bringer son of the community.)

v. The Theme of Praise and Rejection

Also reflected on in Obike's narrative are the society's attitudes and reactions in diverse human situations. There is the tendency of identifying with someone when he has made it in terms of material acquisition, and deserting the same person when he gets into trouble or reduced to penury. People generally cluster round a man of substance, an achiever and eulogize him with all kinds of praise epithets when the goings are good;

but when otherwise, they mock, curse and make all sorts of uncomplimentary remarks about the person. This attitude is evident in the treatment meted out to Ulku. When Ulku became wealthy through the gift by the river goddess, girl friends and other, people praised and cheered him as we have shown above. He is branded such names as "Great son" and 'Community son' as well as 'go-getter'. When the same Ulku caused the birds to invade Isieke and make calamitous impact (during the conflict that broke out between him and his lover) the same people who had praised him not only condemned his action but also mocked him. This attitude is highlighted in the following lines:

....
Ndi Isieke hụrụ wee tie aka n'obi
Ha kochakwara omumụ ojọọ bụ Ulku

(The people of Isieke saw and were grieved
They also mocked the bad son, Ulku.) (lines 911 – 912)

5. Conclusion

We have in this paper noted that traditional myth is the basic ingredient of Obike's narrative poem in *Eke Une*. But we could say that Obike's attitude in the use of this traditional material is not one of mere observation of the mythological tradition. He does not just lift and incorporate the oral form of the myth into his narrative poem. He, as we observed above, brings in a great deal of his own imagination which results in the extension of the story. Through his presentation of the activity of the reptile in 'vomiting' and 'swallowing' up the Lake water periodically, Obike reinforces the traditional myth in which case he has preserved the mythological tradition in his literary work. And the poet's repetition of this myth in his literary work bespeaks his natural participation in the collective unconsciousness of his people – Isieke Ibeku, thus demonstrating that he is a product of the culture that holds the myth collectively. To the readers, it is a depiction of the elements which are of timeless emotional value and appeal to the people.

Apart from highlighting the mythological base of the epic poem and the poet's creative additions culminating in the extension of the story, this paper also identified and discussed some themes in the poem that could be interpreted as realities of human attitudes in society.

NOTES

1. *Eke Une* as a published work does not bear 1977 as its date of publication but an oral interview granted Mr Nnabuihe by the author, Obike revealed that the poem which was originally titled "The Serpent of the Green Lake" as one of the poems in the poet's *The Trial of Apartheid and Survival Psalms* published in 1973 was later developed and translated into Igbo language with the title *Eke Une* and published in 1977.
2. Isieke Ibeku, where *Iyi Une* is, is a community about 3 kilometres away from Umuahia town.

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