

## Humour and Tragedy in Conversation: A Critical Analysis of an Ụkwụani Folktale

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### Abstract

This paper examined the rubrics and nuances of oral narratives, paying close attention to the narrative devices, phonaesthetics resources, form and structure which enliven a folktale during a performance. The study made use of both primary and secondary sources of data. A folktale titled “Nwa Ogbei Obodo” from an Ụkwụani community in Delta State constitutes the primary data. The paper explored those features which give the tale the surrealistic world of fantasy typical of many tales like magic, dream motif, supernatural elements, the trickster, etc. It also explored paralinguistic elements like ideophones, hyperbole, repetition, songs, etc. all of which, in the hands of a talented artist, are artfully manipulated as narrative devices. Michael Carroll’s *The Trickster as Selfish-Buffer and Culture Hero*, Isidore Okpewho’s *African Oral Literature: Background, Character, and Continuity* and Ademola Dasylyva’s seminal work; *Classificatory Paradigms in African Oral Narrative* set the theoretical frameworks for the taxonomic and structural analysis of the selected tale. The study revealed that the folktale is a rescue tale imbued with a healthy interplay between tragedy and humour which excites the audience. The paper concluded that the folktale crystallises the nature of human fate and destiny just as it showed that Ụkwụani society distastes some of the structures in society that unwittingly provide fertile grounds for hatred, jealousy, cruelty, selfishness and greed.

**Keywords:** humour, tragedy, rescue tale, phantasmagoria, trickster, selfish-buffer, Ụkwụani

## Introduction

In *Weaving the Tale: An Introduction to the Performance of Oral Literature*, AneneBoyle made a valuable contribution to the field of oral literature in terms of the systemic method of collecting oral texts. Aside from the valuable notes on the elements of performance of oral literature and the challenges of collecting oral materials, the book contains an impressive collection of folktales recorded in an Ụkwụanị community in Delta State in Nigeria. The folktales were performed by raconteurs who show remarkable skill and knowledge of their lore, oral traditions and history. Anene-Boyle reveals that one of the storytellers is a professional artist who gets paid for many of his performances.

Ụkwụanị is one of the minor ethnic groups in Nigeria. Some scholars grouped Ụkwụanị under the Benue Congo family of languages (Osakwe 2005), while some others grouped it under the Igboid languages (Williamson and Blench 2000). Omenogor reveals that Ụkwụanị people “share boundaries with the Isoko, the Urhobo, the Ika, the Igbo and the Ijaw people” (1). Omenogor further reveals that Ụkwụanị is spoken: “as a mother tongue in Orogun, Delta state as well as in Ndoni, River state” (2). The Ụkwụanị of Delta is predominantly located in the Ndokwa area in Delta State.

The tale entitled “Nwa Ogbei Obodo” which constitutes the primary data for this study is taken from the Ụkwụanị community in Delta State. The folktales were collected during a performance and it is clear from the artistic embellishments and ecstatic participation of the audience that many of the storytellers who performed the tales are great raconteurs. The tale is inhabited by humans, tortoises, pythons, rats, kites, and cats as dramatic personae. The tale

mirrors humans' capacity for cruelty, wickedness and greed while the animal characters naturally endowed with a savage taste for cruelty showing surprising acts of companionship, compassion, solidarity and loyalty. This sort of reversal created aesthetic parallelism which enhanced the entertainment value of the tale. Thus, in this paper, we will examine the narrative pattern, the narrative devices deployed by the artist and the characters which populated the world of the tale.

### **The Synopsis of the Tale**

One day, the oba (king) of Idu village bans impoverished and childless couples from his kingdom believing that they were a terrible omen to his empire. Among the victims is a couple, very poor and childless. They find a cemetery and decide to make it their new home. They are blessed with a child thereafter, whom they name 'Nwa Ogbei Obodo', which means "son of the poor". As a result of extreme poverty, the baby is fed on white chalk. One day, the father goes to a section of the cemetery to harvest some plantain, but he dies when the leaves strike him. A few months after, the mother goes to find food for herself and her child. She dies as well and the boy becomes an orphan.

He starts to cry which attracts the attention of an old woman who adopts him. With time, the boy grows into a fine lad. The old woman goes to the market one day and buys a python for the boy who had asked for plantain chips (*Ipekere*). The boy is disappointed and cries incessantly. On another occasion, the woman returns from the market and gives the boy a baby kite instead of the pudding that he asked for. The baby cries more than the first time. Again, on another occasion, the woman buys the boy two small rats instead of bread. The boy cries non-stop. Yet on another occasion, the woman buys two giant rats for him instead of

pudding. The boy cries and says, “You are always bringing me things I cannot eat, in spite of my choices” (Anene-Boyle 68). It is only on the fifth occasion that the woman purchases the long-awaited pudding. Nevertheless, she tells the boy that that was the last market she would go to. One day, the woman calls the boy and tells him to take care of himself and the animals and feed from the food she piled up in the store. A few days later, the woman dies. The boy is then left to fend for himself and the animals.

The child and his animal companions eventually run out of food and find themselves in trouble. The young man, by this time an adult, begins to starve while caring for his animals. One day, the python orders him to dig a deep pit. The child obeys with hesitation and anxiety. The python crawls into the pit and releases what looked like an egg. He then instructs the boy: “you see this, keep it well. Whenever you desire anything, lift it to the sky and ask. I am through with the duty for which your mother bought me” (AneneBoyle 69). The python then dies satisfied that his task has been accomplished.

When the pains of starvation become excruciating, the boy seizes the egg-like object and does as instructed. Several unique meals emerge right away, and he devours them all while also feeding his other remaining animal buddies. Life starts to get better. He also gives the egg-like object instructions to instantaneously give him a lovely home and human companions, which it did. His miserable home is transformed into a magnificent palace with armed servants, advisors, and guards.

Tortoise (known as Okpala-Osa in Ukwuani) visits his palm plantation farm one day to inspect it. After claiming one of the palm trees, he is surprised to see a gorgeous mansion in the distance. He decides to visit the occupant. When he arrives, the guards are prepared to

execute him, but Nwa Ogbei Obodo who claims that the tortoise is a distant relative saves him. The tortoise is amused and receives numerous gifts. The tortoise goes right to the king upon his return to his hometown of Idu to show him his lovely presents and to share his story. Nwa Ogbei Obodo's wealth enrages the king who conspires to discover its source. He then sends some delegates to pay homage to the owner of the mansion.

As the delegation from the king arrives at Nwa Ogbei Obodo's mansion, the guards wanted to shoot them, but the youngster again gives the order to let them into the palace. He lavishly entertains them and showers them with expensive gifts. In response, they compelled him to sip from the palm wine they brought, but he objects. He eventually gives in to pressure, drinks the wine and loses control of himself. He reveals the source of his wealth and instructs them to take it away. The magical object is taken to the king of Idu by the treacherous delegates. The king seizes the item and begins to utilise it right away. But as soon as the delegates leave the Nwa Ogbei Obodo's mansion with the magical object, his wealth vanishes, and he reverts to his previous deplorable condition. He starts to be hungry and falls into extreme poverty. Then the infant kite goes to the palace of Idu to recover the magical object and delivers it to Nwa Ogbei Obodo and after announcing that he has completed the task for which he had been bought, it dies. This circle of recusing the magical object and dying thereafter is repeated throughout the tale until all of the animals purchased by the old woman die. The rats are the last to recover the magical object, and they also died after fulfilling their assignment.

Again, the tortoise goes to his farm under a heavy pretence of checking his palm trees and again sees the beautiful palace and decides to go on a visit as usual. But when he gets to the

gate, “one of his legs was cut off and his face tattooed. He was told to go back and let his people know what had befallen him” (Anene-Boyle 72). On arriving at Idu, the tortoise induces the king to send representatives to receive his presents from Nwa

Ogbei Obodo claiming that he had an accident on the way back from Nwa Ogbei Obdod.

The king dispatches his delegates, but when they arrived at the house, they are murdered. To inform the king of what had happened to the others, one severely wounded delegate is left.

The King sends two more delegates and they meet the same fate.

The king finally modifies his strategy. He challenges Nwa Ogbei Obodo to a moneysprinkling competition to determine who is wealthier. The challenge is accepted by Nwa Ogbei Obodo. On the appointed day, Nwa Ogbei Obodo arrives well prepared. The king dispatches strong men to bring out all of his enormous sacks of cash, which he sprays into the air hubristically to the pleasure of his subjects who began scurrying for the money. After an enormous rain of money, the king instructs Nwa Ogbei Obodo to have his turn.

The youngster produces the magical object and commands a deluge of cash to fall from the sky. The entire town is engulfed in a frenzy. The people fight for the money that covers everywhere for hours. After several hours, the king is compelled to join his subjects in picking money from the ground: “As if in trance, the oba exclaimed, “is this money?” and joined the rest of the scrambling crowd of his citizens on all four, (protracted laughter) for the raining money” (Anene-Boyle 73). In the end, the king offers Nwa Ogbe Obodo two-thirds of his kingdom to stop the rain of money. As a result, the

youngster receives a sizable portion of Idu. He then transforms his part of the town into a megacity using his mysterious egg-shaped contraption.

## **The Form and Structure of the Tale**

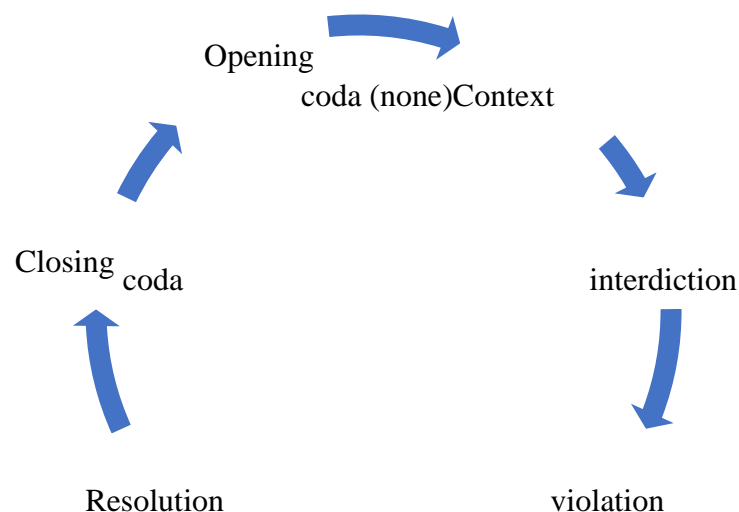
The tale can be classified as a rescue tale in which a person, as Okpewho observes, “gets into some difficulties or another and animals attempt some kind of rescue” (15). However, it also features some elements of a fairy tale which combine supernatural elements and magical powers, just as it has some elements of a fable because it features animals alongside human characters. Akintunde notes that a “fable could be a dilemma tale of a trickster tale and it may have human or animal characters. It might also perform some moral functions, though this need not be its primary focus” (79). The rescue operations which preserve the life of Nwa Ogbei Obodo and his wealth are performed by the animals purchased by the old woman while the ‘human’ guards produced by the magic object preserved his life against any form of harm. However, if the Aarne-

Thompson typology is applied, this tale would be categorised under the tales of magic.

Structurally, the tale does not start with the rhapsodic opening (opening coda) or the formulaic call and response common to most African folktales which usually set a convivial atmosphere that captures the attention of its audience. Instead, it goes straight into establishing the setting of the tale: an empire with a cruel king on the throne of Idu. The locales of the tale involve the palace, the cemetery, a bereaved household and a phantasmagoric mansion produced by the magical object. Many of these locales impacted the tale tremendously. The cemetery, for instance, helps create a surrealistic and magical

atmosphere which set folktales apart from the real world. Intriguingly, the first death happens at the cemetery where Nwa Ogbei Obodo's parents reside after they are sent out of Idu. Then the locale moves to an old woman's house in which the orphaned child is raised. The mode is allegorical; the locale propagates the cohabitation of humans and animals. A dangerous animal like a python is humanised and domesticated to ensure the survival of the boy. The other settings like the phantasmagoric house provided by the magical object and the palace of the king of Idu all impacted the tale in the area of plot development. These contextual factors enable the audience to follow the performance enthusiastically.

The tale has a circular plot. The interdiction occurs when the king decides to banish childless couples from his kingdom believing that they are a source of ill luck. This circumstance sets the stage for the hardship and anguish which characterise the life of Nwa Ogbei Obodo's parents; to survive, they must live in a cemetery, the land of the dead. The interdiction also sows the seed of destruction that eventually brings the king down to his knees.







Violation follows the king's conspiracy to seize the magical object from Nwa Ogbei Obodod. The delegates sent to achieve the king's purpose show great capacity for callosity even after being lavishly entertained and gifted with precious and costly items. Thus, the plot of the tale moves in a circular form with pockets of repetitive occurrences. This sort of repetition is structural; it is meant to enhance the narrative sequence in which each animal plays its part in the life of Nwa Ogbei Obodo, thus achieving a balance between the values of the human characters and those of the animal characters. The purchase of dangerous animals for the child who asks for pudding/bread/plantain chips tended to illustrate the biblical proverb; can a child ask for bread and be given a stone? However, neither the youngster nor the audience realised that the old woman is merely weaponising the boy against the horrendous obstacles and terrific challenges that he is to face later. This element of surprise sustained the suspense and enhanced the sequence of the plot.

Conflict is introduced with the seizing of the magical object by the king. Each time a benign character goes out to help Nwa Ogbei, he/she perishes after, illustrating the maxim that good people do not live long. Each of these characters' deaths advances the story. Realising that he is left alone without the animals that keep recovering his magical object whenever the king tricks him with the alluring palm wine, Nwa Obgei Obodo takes charge of the situation by shedding his benefaction, beginning with the tortoise, the harbinger of the menace suffered by Nwa Ogbei Obodo.

The story involves surprising twists; the king transfers a greater part of his kingdom to Nwa Ogbei Obodo, thus making him king while he is reduced to a mere head of a small section of the town. The greatest act of retributive justice in the story occurs when the king joins the commoners in a scramble for money provided by Nwa Ogbei Obodo while crawling on all fours. The employment of this tool by the narrator could not have been more appropriate.

Resolution covers the hubristic spray of money to humiliate Nwa Ogbei Obodo. The king who initiates the concept to outsmart Nwa Ogbei Obodo moneywise ends up picking money from the ground on all fours like his subjects. Besides, Nwa Ogbei Obodo regains a larger portion of the land of his birth and becomes a renowned king while the king is disgraced. This way, he avenges the injustice that the king metes out to his late parents.

Contrary to the opening of the tale, the end of the tale employs the formulaic phrase for ending folktales (closing coda) which underscores the oral nature of the tale:

I have gone and I have also returned welcome.  
(Anene-Boyle 73)

This closing coda is similar to several others in African folktales. However, Yoruba folktales have a different closing coda that generates humour and drama:

Idi alo mi ree gbangbalaka;  
Idi alo mi ree gbangbalaka;  
Bi n ba puro, kagogo enu mi ma ro; Bi n ko ba  
puro, kagogo enu mi o ro leemeta.  
O di po...po...po!  
(This summarises my tale;

This aptly captures my tale;  
If I lie, may my mouth fail to make a whistle;  
But if my tale is real, may mouth make three resounding whistles.  
Po! Po!! Po!!!) (Babalola and Onanuga 162- 63).

This is highly hilarious and the humour embedded in this closing coda is essential because it is meant to leave the audience with pleasant memory of the tale.

The dominant motifs in this tale are cruelty, greed and covetousness. In many instances, the cruelty suffered by Nwa Ogbei Obodo is fuelled by the king's greed. In the first place, the king excommunicates childless couples from his kingdom on a whimsical assumption that they bring bad luck to his empire. Thus, the poverty, hardship and misery which characterise the early life of Nwa Ogbei Obodo are orchestrated by the treacherous king who continues on the same path even after the boy grows into an adult. Even after several attempts at seizing the magical object of wealth from Nwa Ogbei Obodo and the several gifts given to the king through the delegates, the king's greed grows from strength to strength until he meets his doom.

### **The Characters in the Tale**

Folktales offer a hilarious blend of animals and human characters peacefully cohabiting with mutual respect and cooperation. Although domestic animals cohabit with humans, however, aside from dogs, tortoises, hares or spiders, the sorts of animals that populate most tales are wild animals; they are usually out of the range of the animals that humans can keep as pets. Patrick profoundly captures this:

The world of folktales is a world of fun and amusement. It is a hilarious world where animals possess human attributes while retaining some of their own ... animal characters are metaphoric projections of human beings. It is a complex blend of animalism and humanism or humanistic-animalism. It is a weird world where animals can talk, read, wear clothes, marry and yet eat grasses. (71)

Both human and animal characters are always placed in highly unrealistic and surrealistic situations in a phantasmagoric world in which their willpower is tested under grievous danger and dreadful challenges. Animal characters occasionally take centre stage in tales instead of human characters. For instance, in a tale, an animal could be the king while some human characters are his loyal servants.

Dasylya classifies trickster characters in African folktales into three categories: positive hero, negative hero, and anti-hero. The positive hero always tries to solve a problem militating against the well-being of all in their fictive community. In this folktale, the animal characters who help in retrieving the magic object each time it is stolen by the king are the positive heroes. The king who sets the pace for wickedness, greed and self-centeredness is the anti-hero while the negative heroes are the delegates and tortoise. Instead of taking back Nwa Ogbei Obodo to Idu when it becomes clear that he could help the community, he decides to dupe Nwa Ogbei Obodo through his spies. He is a selfish, covetous and wicked king. The king is a round character; he learns his lessons and makes amendments at the end of the tale.

The docile and indiscreet delegates of the king meet destruction too in their blind obedience to the cruel king whose selfish and dangerous intentions should have cautioned

them and they lose their lives. The fate of the only delegate who returns home is dramatic and comically pathetic:

At Nwa Ogbei's gate, he ordered that the guards should kill them as he did not know any of them. So, they killed all but one. Even the one member spared had one of his legs broken, his right hand chopped off and his right eye pierced and given a walking stick to help him get to Idu and relate his experiences (Anene-Boyle 73).

This comic calamity enhances the entertainment value of the tale. It is humorous imagining a treacherous delegate with a broken leg, without one hand and a pierced eye limping backing to Idu with a walking stick. This interplay of humour and tragedy seems extremely effective at this point. The deployment of humour alongside tragedy at this point in the tale generates humour that startles, delights, horrifies, amazes and stimulates the audience who would not empathise with the unfortunate delegate but humiliate him with their laughter. This sort of humour validates the argument of the Superiority theory of humour that "In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbour, if not in his will, at least in his deed" (Bergson 42b). Thus, the delegate deserves what he gets.

Although naïve, Nwa Ogbei Obodo is a benevolent character with a large heart. The name Nwa Ogbei Obodo which means "the son of the poor" symbolises his humble background. He is Christ-like in the way he keeps accommodating the greedy tortoise and the treacherous delegates from the wicked king of Idu where his poor parents were exiled. At a point, one tends to see him as docile and foolish, however, at the end of the tale, we see that he is

merely biding for the right time to strike. Like most folktales, the tale ends with good triumphing over evil.

The tortoise complicates the life of Nwa Ogbei Obodo through his greed and selfishness. He is the first person to discover Nwa Ogbei Obodo's grandeur and glorious mansion which immediately activated his resourcefulness and, knowing that his prankish acts as great collateral can secure his access into the house, he puts his wit into use. Klapp's description of tricksters as "supreme for wit, resourcefulness, nimbleness, elusiveness, deceit, impudence, and sense of humour" (23) describes the tortoise in this tale, however, Carroll's concept of selfish-buffoon best categorises the role of the tortoise. Carroll explains:

Selfish-buffoon – "selfish" because so much of the trickster's activity is oriented toward the gratification of his enormous appetites for food and sex, and "buffoon" because the elaborate deceits that the trickster devises to satisfy these appetites so often backfire and leave the trickster looking incredibly foolish.  
(106)

The tortoise who is a metaphoric projection of some real people in our society exemplifies a selfish-buffoon. Although he is not involved in any sexual activity, it is apparent that many of the dramatic intrigues in the tale are built around his knavish pranks deployed to exploit the generosity of Nwa Ogbei Obodo to satisfy his cravings for food and expensive material things which backfires with terrible consequences. Like all tricksters; the tortoise suffers on the account of its tricks. Patrick captures this brilliantly with the observation that:

Whenever a trickster is enlivened by an inordinate ambition or antisocial behaviour, he overreaches himself often with terrible consequences. Tricksters are sometimes driven by greed, selfishness, mischief and inordinate ambitions which usually result in death, disgrace or deformity.

(77).

The direct consequence of the tortoise's greed is a deformity. He is said to be "visiting Nwa Ogbei as usual but as soon as he arrived at the gate, one of his legs was cut off and his face tattooed. He was told to go back and let his people know what had befallen him" (AneneBoyle 72). Each time he pretends to go for his palm plantation checking business is only to ensure that the beautiful house is still there to satisfy his cravings. One feels no sympathy for him knowing that the unholy delegation from the king is a result of his mischievous and incendiary reports to the King about his adventure in Nwa Ogbei Obodo's house. Radin observes that a trickster "possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites" (xxii). His repeated visits to Nwa Ogbei Obodo's mansion underscore his gluttony and greedy nature, a situation which brings him nothing but destruction in the end.

The other animal characters on the side of Nwa Ogbei Obodo are commendable. They are the cultural heroes in the tale. Carroll explains that a cultural hero is "a character responsible for introducing those things that enable human society to develop" (115). Initially, Nwa Ogbei Obodo is scared of going close to them, especially the python that emits the magical object but their benevolent nature later endears them not only to Nwa Ogbei Obodo but to the audience as well. The twenty-five giant rats that use kernel shells to sharpen their teeth when they become

blunt as a result of digging the concrete walls of the pit where the magical object is hidden particularly interest the audience because, at that point, all hope of recovering the magical object seems lost.

The king is a despicable and wicked fellow. Incredibly, someone who is supposed to ensure the well-being of his subjects could foment trouble and unleash untold hardship and misery on his subjects. To compound his wicked and callous nature, his avaricious inclination makes his personality irredeemable. In the end, pride reduces him to an ordinary head of a section of the town he used to rule.

### **The Narrative Devices**

The tale is enriched with lots of phonaesthetics resources and narrative devices which enhance the narrative sequence and suspense of the tale. There is a creative interplay between the natural and the supernatural elements in the tale. Akporobaro writes:

One of the commonest and indeed insistent features of the African folktale is the use of highly unusual human situations as the basis of the narrative action. What is meant by “unusual” human situations is what is generally referred to as “fantasy”- that is, the use of certain types of incidents that are highly improbable, unrealistic, and farfetched. (101).

The tale's fantastical and supernatural elements are represented by the magical object and its unusual capacities. The supernatural transformations carried out by the magical object and the supernormal capacities of the animals on the side of Nwa Ogbei Obodo are classic examples of fantasy. The magical object itself functions as a means of narrative suspense. According to



Akporobaro, in oral narratives, some objects can be used for “creating narrative suspense; a means of fluctuating the audience’s emotional response” (103). The members of the audience are always edgy each time Nwa Ogbei Obodo’s magical object is taken by the cruel king. The magical object is also used as a problem-solving tool just as it serves as a narrative device for developing the plot. For instance, the consistent switching of Nwa Ogbei Obodo from extreme poverty to extreme wealth and splendour enables the audience to understand the patient and enduring nature of Nwa Ogbei Obodo, the animals and co-inhabitants.

There is the use of ideophone, a phonaesthetic device which on its own has no meaning. A lot of scholars have worked on the ideophone as a literary device. Kunene defines it as “a recreation of an event in sound” (21). Doke defines it as “a vivid representation of an idea in sound” (118). Okpewho describes it as “a stylistic technique that relies on sound,” he goes further, “it means “ideas-in-sound,” in the sense that from the sound of the word one can get an idea of the nature of the event or object referred to” (92). Mvula explains the usefulness of ideophones in the hands of a gifted storyteller; “The storyteller exploits ...and employs ideophones which vivify his speech, lend him eloquence, complete his thought and help him to create a fresh picture of an event, and to convey contrasting images...” (62). In the tale, ideophones were used during the money contest between the king and Nwa Ogbei Obodo. It is used to highlight the sound of the falling money from the sky to emphasise the amount of money used by the competitors. The narrator says of the money Nwa Ogbei Obodo sprays at the money contest, “It was as if the heavens opened. Money started pouring like rain “kata katakatakate” (Anene-Boyle 73). The ideophones also highlight the power of the magical object when it implores money to rain down from heaven.

Repetition abounds in this tale. The tale thrived on prolonged repetitions; occurring now and then in every incident in the tale. The tale opens with this device: “There was a time in Idu when people lived and lived and lived and during the reign of one Oba...” (Anene-Boyle 67). This is effective because it seems to evoke a distant past that is far out of the memory.

It also evokes sensations and a spirit of adventure in the audience. It is used to enhance the movement of the tale by serving as smooth links between narrative sequences. Okpwho captures the significance of repetition of oral narratives:

It has both an aesthetic and a utilitarian value: in other words, it is a device that not only gives a touch of beauty or attractiveness to a piece of oral expression (whether song or narrative or another kind of statement) but also serves certain practical purposes in the overall organisation of the oral performance. (71).

In this case, repetition embellished the plot as the story keeps going in a circle until its resolution. Okpewho calls this “formulaic use of repetition,” which he argues, “cover the broad pattern on which most if not all of a story is organised.” (77). There is also the conventional repetition of narrative style. For instance, “He ate and ate and ate. He then gave to all the animals and birds he had as companions. They all ate and ate and ran about the house” (Anene-Boyle 69) adds to the elegance and the narrative sequence of the tale.

The circular narration in which each of the animals goes to rescue the magical object from the king is a prolonged repetition which enhanced the narrative sequence of the tale. Prolong repetition, when handled by a skilful and gifted raconteur, thickens the plots of tales. Orlik’s

observation that “repetition is everywhere present, not only to give a story suspense but also to fill it out and afford it a body. This repetition is mostly threefold, though in some countries, because of their religious symbolism, it may be fourfold” (qt in Thompson’s *The Folktale* 456) is truer with this tale.

Direct speech is another aesthetic device utilised in the tale. Folktales are part of oral narratives that come to life through the performative mode. The narrator acts out the parts of each character in the narration, especially where direct speech occurs. The device enables the narrator to convey the habit, mannerisms, and attitudes of any particular character to the audience.

Rhetorical question is another great narrative device that when skillfully deployed by a raconteur during oral performances galvanises the interests of the audience. Although it is minimally used in this tale, it is used at a most effective and instructive point in the tale:

The entire Idu was in disarray as children scrambled for some of the money.

Soon adults joined. As if in trance the Oba exclaimed, “Is this money?” and joined the rest of the scrambling crowd of his citizens on all four... (Anene-

Boyle 73)

It emphasises the stunned expression on the face of the defeated king at the sudden turn of events. The volume of money falling from the sky surpasses his imagination, the function of the device is to draw attention to his shameful decision to join his subject in picking money from the ground.

Songs are narrative devices common to many African folktales. During oral performances, some parts of the oral texts are sung to heighten the intensity of the action-reaction relationship between the performer and the audience. In some rare cases, musical instruments accompany the singing to create sonic reverberations in the audience which is a sure way of retaining their attention and interest. However, songs are missing in this tale.

This is understandable knowing that “it is in fact a common feature of Ukwuani to attend performance sessions where songs are hard to come by or are either consciously improvised by the artist or his audience” (Anene-Boyle 38-9). Thus, it is safe to conclude that songs are not a prominent feature of Ukwuani folktales.

### **The Moralistic functions of the tale**

Folktales are designed to impact moral lessons on the audience, especially children. They are intended to illuminate the moral character of children which would in turn ensure good and well-groomed individuals. The themes of jealousy, love, endurance and patience embedded in this tale are for a didactic purpose. In this tale, the tortoise is seriously deformed because of his mischief and greed. The audience is expected to learn that being greedy and treacherous is dangerous; had it been that the tortoise visits Nwa Ogbei Obodo without going back to strategically report him to the king, he would have remained a loyal friend of Nwa Ogbei Obodo.

Folktales can be used to articulate socio-political messages. For instance, the dramatic intrigues and the painful end of this tale offer meaningful insights into the controversial issue between Nigeria and Cameroon over Bakassi–Peninsula which used to be part of Nigeria. Nigeria abandoned Bakassi-Peninsula to Cameroon only to discover later that the land has a

large deposit of crude oil. They fought to recover it but lost. Folktales can thus be employed as a medium of sensitising the political class as well as raising the social consciousness of the people. Hence, folktales can be used creatively to comment on economic and socio-political situations.

Aside from its moralistic or didactic qualities, the selected tale is also essential because of the humorous aspects which provide pleasure and entertainment for the audience/readers. Oral narrative especially folktales is an essential means of socialisation. The narrator enlivens his oral performance and renders it fascinating to the audience by creatively drawing on relevant but bizarre and extraordinary conditions like the cohabitation of deadly animals like a python with human characters.

## **Conclusion**

Oral narratives in general serve primarily as a vehicle for constructing coherent modes of articulating moral visions. The norms, ethics, values and moral codes upon which most societies are anchored are enshrined in their oral narratives, which is why Bascom observes that folktales are “employed to control, influence, or direct the activities of others” (346). Oral narratives are effective means of sustaining societal values and virtues. Folktales, for instance, are significant means of enriching the social and moral life of the people and ensuring the continuity of their culture and tradition. The moral values embedded in a tale reveal the ideals which the society where such a tale is found holds dear. Thus, looking at the selected tale for this study, it can be deduced that the Ukwuani people distaste institutional elements that unintentionally serve as breeding grounds for prejudice, resentment, cruelty, selfishness, and greed. We close with Barber; “is not so much that folk-tales are didactic and imparting values

of the young... but that the ground and framework of every story is the values of everyday, ordinary human world” (16).

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