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**The Sequence of Igbo Folktale as a Revelation of the Igbo Philosophy of Life**

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**BY**

**Eze Eucharía ANENECHUKWU, Ph.D**  
**Department of Linguistics & Communication Studies**  
**University of Port Harcourt**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Folktale, a form of folklore, a verbal art is a traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture encompassing all knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, assumptions, feeling and beliefs of a particular race transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth. This unique cultural practice encoded in speech form is used to communicate meaning to the younger generation. Unfortunately, this genre is undergoing stage of transition due to the influence of the western culture, thus causing a neglect of the ethos therein. It is on this basis that this study sets to establish the relevance of folktale in unraveling the philosophy of the life of the Igbos, a race resident in South-East Nigeria. To realize this objective, a descriptive survey research design which uses random sampling technique is used. To this end, two tales namely Ojaadili and Omalinze are selected for the analysis. The study also draws insight from the structural analytic approach of Vladimir Proop in the analysis of the tales. The results of the study reveal that the Igbo's do not believe in folding their arms and waiting for manna to fall from heaven. Hence, they are highly industrious, insatiable in their quest for wealth, lavishes encomiums to whom that deserves it and above all sees the constant need for the restoration of dignity of man, hence their common adage "Ezi aha ka ego (good name is better than wealth)". The study recommends among other things the teaching of indigenous literature and culture in schools as this offers a practical acquaintance with the indigenous language and culture and as well helps to unravel the richness and beauty of our cultural heritage.*

**KEYWORDS: Igbo Folktale and Igbo Philosophy of Life**

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**Introduction**

Literary inspiration among the Igbos dates far back from time immemorial. Local enquiries will confirm that they have been telling tales, singing songs, repeating proverbs and posing riddles ever since God created them. Prior to the establishment of schools and book learning, all communications and instructions were carried on orally. In the evenings and on ceremonial and festive occasions, people gather together and tell stories, sing songs and pose riddles, all of which aim at nourishing the intellect with the knowledge of culture. Today, such occasions are rare as a result of civilization. These days, people have been participating and listening with every enthusiasm to these literary genres taking place in the electronic and print media without talking note of their structural pattern. Even those who may have taken notice of the universality of the characterization and conversational technique in folktales may not have bothered much about how it could be accounted for.

In Igbo folktale, a lot of themes manifest in many ways and through human and non-human actors. The non-human actors are ordinarily endowed with quasi human characteristics to

which their own salient traits are akin. Thus, shyness and cunning are personified in the tortoise; nobility and bravery in the lion, timidity and innocence in the lamb. These themes are fully realized pictures of characters which are created by means of words in folktale. The number of themes that are manifest in Igbo folktale are so many and sometime so mutually contradictory that it may not be valuable to survey all of them. This work will limit itself to the survey of such themes as contest/competition for life as exemplified in *Ojaadili* and the theme of lack, precisely lack of a son as will be seen in *Omalinze* (Emenanjo: 1992). The folktales under study will be analyzed following the functions of the dramatic personae, according Propp (1968). These functions of the dramatic personae are certain highly stylized and recurrent types of action which regularly occur in fixed (generally predictable) patterns which are fulfilled by specific characters in a wide variety of situations and settings. They are seen as not only the building blocks of the fairy tales but are also limited in number and appear in fairly logical, often natural and predictable pattern. Through the exploration of this model, this paper will, to a great extent establish the fact that the sequence of Igbo Folktale really depicts the traditional way of life of the Igbo race.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Orientation

### Theoretical Framework

This study draws insight from the structural analytic approach of Vladimir Propp (1968). The term structuralism was first coined by Tichkner (1917), a renowned psychologist. Structuralism is a theory in which all elements of human culture, including literature, are thought to be part of a system of signs. Straus (1968) believes that the keystone to structuralism is linguistics. By analyzing folktales and myths passed down through primitive tribes, Straus believed he could gain a concrete insight of how such literary culture could have developed.

According to Eagleton (1999), structuralism represents an attempts to rethink everything in terms of linguistics. The structural approach is the idea that culture and society are developed through individual building blocks. Still looking at structuralism in relation to literature, a Russian, Vladimir Propp applies structuralism to Russian folktales and finds out that there are thirty-one models of Russian folktales which is termed Functions of the Dramatic Personae. He finds out that the stages are in sequence and that such sequence occurs in an orderly manner. He states that like a dictionary, any stage which does not come as and when due in its sequence will remain missing in the whole folktale.

### Empirical Study

Scholars have over the years carried out frantic researches on the issues concerning folktales in different traditions. Levi-Strauss's (1963) studies the paradigmatic analysis of French folktales. He bases his analysis on what he calls binary oppositions. He tries to identify oppositional paradigm in the world found in myth. He examined such organizations like high versus low, night versus day, land versus sea etc. If these organizations occur anywhere in a narrative, he extrapolates them and records them in his binary oppositions. He also isolates similarities and classifies them as bundles of relations in which case, all issues of killing, all kinds of lack of material needs (food, child, parents, wisdom, social status) for instance, belong to one bundle. In doing this, he establishes a structure and relates the structure to the behavioural pattern of the society in which the narration occurs.

Jonathan Culler (1975) in his structuralist poetics applies the French structuralist approach which combines paradigmatic and syntagmatic analysis in accounting for language. He uses language to account for patterns of thought, motivation and conduct. He discovers among other things that man does not just do anything without applying his thinking and that the whole thing man does must have structure; without structure, there will be no life.

Chukwukere (1986) also studies the relationship between the folktale and the moral upbringing of Children. She asserts that good moral upbringing of children should be achieved through teaching the children traditional values and concepts through folktale narration. She suggests that certain tales be narrated to youngsters to inculcate in them certain cultural beliefs, explain the myth surrounding the existence of certain phenomena and warn them on the dangers of neglecting certain moral values.

### **Description of Characters**

#### **Functions of the Dramatis Personae**

Functions are usually described in some source as *dramatis personae* or participants in the drama of narratives. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale. They are the foundation stones, the basic building blocks of narratives. They are the performers of different functions or roles that take place in any narrative. They are defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action Propp (1968:21). Some of them are in form of animals, human beings, spirit, Climate, etc. These actions performed by the actors convey pictures of reality in form of characters.

A tale usually begins with some sort of *initial situation*. The initial situation is a formulaic device that gives the background of what the actors did. It gives information about the prevailing situation that provoke the story, a situation that generates the action. In the initial situation of a tale, the future hero is introduced by mere mention of his name and/or indication of his personality.

Folktales more often than not start with *absentation* of a member of the family who, on leaving the house gives order to others behind. Absentation may also be in form of death of a parent who may have predicted his transition and leaves some pieces of information behind. This is usually followed by an *interdiction*; that is an instruction, a warning to the people left behind. This interdiction is most often addressed to the hero who usually *violates* the injunction. At this juncture the *villain*, an enemy tries to come in a bid to get the hero violate the instruction(s) previously given. His success in getting information about the hidden object- *delivery* with either force or through supernatural means gives him room to attempt in deceiving his victims-*trickery* and the victim's submission to the deception—*complicity* brings the *villain* who causes harm or injury to the victim.

Some tales begin with *lack*. The object being lacked may have been caused by external forces or may be self-imposed through the actors greed or jealousy. For instance, lack of parents, wealth, particular sex of child etc. An attempt to perpetuate lack soon introduces *mediation*. Through the function of mediation, the solution of the lack is identified. The discovery of a misfortune induces the hero to think out what action to take so as to find solution to his problem-*beginning counteraction*. The hero now sets off to the land where he thinks he can find solution to his

problem-*departure*. At this juncture, *the first function of the donor* comes in where the hero is told the condition for setting him out of his problem. The *donor* always denotes a helper, in this case, a help is rendered to the hero to enable him accomplish a task or solve a puzzle. Generally, the donor works for the improvement of the faithful protagonist to prevent him from making a mistake. Through the help of the donor, the protagonist is able to accomplish his task-*the hero's reaction*.

In order to compensate the hero for faithfully carrying out the task given to him, an aid to the solution of his problem is given to him-*provision/receipt of magical agent*. The donor warns the hero against any impending mistake that may come his way- *struggle*. These are situations where through an open combat, the hero is wounded-*branding*. Through struggling and branding, *victory* is got. The reception/provision of a magical agents leads to the *liquidation of lack*. *Return* usually manifest in tales taking place in the land of the spirits, sometimes involving human beings. This is usually a bid to help the human being out of a danger. This function is always seen manifesting in the climax of many Igbo romances, especially at the peak of a battle between the spirit and the hero, often the hero returning from an adventure in the land of the spirits where he has gone to wrestle or obtain a magical object.

In most tales involving an adventure in the land of the spirits. *Rescue* is always made possible by the hero placing obstacles on the path of his pursuers-*pursuit* or by changing into objects which makes him unrecognizable or by means of rapid transformation into various objects. The function, *unfounded claim*, comes to play where two persons enter into combat to win a battle in which the person that did not succeed claims to have won. In this scenario, a *difficult task* will be set to unravel the truth. At the success of the difficult task set, a *resolution* is made. This automatically leads to the *recognition* of the hero and the *exposure* of the false claimant.

This will lead to the recovery of all the lost glories-*transfiguration*. A happy reunion- *wedding* and finally a *punishment* to the false claimant.

From the actions performed by the characters so far described, it is observed that functions of the dramatis personae in Igbo folktale follow a fixed progressive sequential pattern in its narration. No omitted function can ever reoccur again in the sequence except on tales with more than one move.

### Assigning Functions to the Characters in the Tales

The two tales used in the analysis of this work are *Ojaadili* and *Qmalinze*.

#### TALE NO. 1- *OJAADILI*

A certain young man *Ojaadili* existed in a certain town and was known throughout the region as the strongest and unbeatable of all the wrestlers around - *initial situation*. He went out with his bosom friend to a wrestling match-*absentation*. As his fame spread, his step-mother connived with his bosom friend to discover the secret of his strength – *reconnaissance*. His step-mother seduced him to reveal the secret of his strength and she succeeded. His step-mother invited his friend and they used razor blade to cut out his whistle “*oja*” which was the secret of his strength and hid it-*villainy*. He lost his whistle which was where his strength lies and by which he is given the name *Ojaadili*. (meaning the whistle must be there before he wins any battle).

After one native week, another match was scheduled. Having lost his strength and personal guide, he refused participating in the match. His friend who had connived with his step-mother to get hold of his secret strength persuaded him to participate in the match-*trickery*. *Ojaadili* submitted to his friend's deception to join in the wrestling match without his "Oja" (strength)-*complicity*. In the morning of the wrestling day, he left for the match –*departure*. Meanwhile his dog who knows the secret of his master and the kind of challenge he was going to face without his whistle was busy looking for the hidden whistle. On seeing the kind of crowd that came to watch the match, he suspected that his personal god, whom he has been warned not to fight and whom he has been avoiding to fight with must be there, –*first function of the donor*. In order to avoid the shame of being defeated, he participated in the wrestle –*hero's reaction*. However, when he ignorantly wanted to resume the match with his god, his dog who loves him so much and who has been busy searching for the whistle, got the whistle and rushed to the scene with it, singing and warning *Ojaadili* not to fight his opponent for he is his personal god-*provision/receipt of magical agent*. He heard the song and warning from his dog and desisted from fighting his personal god –*guidance*. Hence, he was not only delivered from the wrath of wrestling with his personal god but also led to the whereabouts of his strength and guide, through the help of his dog-*victory*. His strength and guide was discovered at last-*lack liquidated*.

### TALE NO. 2-*QMALINZE*

The king of a certain town had many wives. He hated one of the wives and so built a house for her near a place of sacrifice outside his compound-*initial situation*. None of the king's wives could bear him a male child-*lack*. The king went to the Arochukwu (the seer of the chukwu oracle) to find out why he could not have a male child-*departure*. The oracle of chukwu, divining his problem, told him that he cannot have a male child because his father had expropriated the land and properties from certain poor men. These, the oracle said, must be restored to the men before he could have a son. After this, a 'dibia' would be sent to him to prepare a charm called "Ofiri" which, on the distribution of the charm to his wives, will make the wives to become pregnant and bear him male children. This assignment if will delivered will enable him obtain what he lacked-*first function of the donor*. The "dibia" from the Arochukwu prepared "ofiri" for the king and directed him to secure and distribute the fruit of Ojukwu mmuo palm among all his wives. This, the king did, omitting the hated wife. The king's chief wife on getting her own share of the palm nuts, ate the sound ones and threw away the rotten ones. A lizard picked up one of the rotten nuts thrown away by the king's chief wife and carried it to the hated wife who, like the other wives, ate-*provision/reception of the magical agent*.

On eating the Ojukwu mmuo palm fruit, all the king's wives, including the hated one got pregnant. The king's servant was assigned the duty of monitoring the delivery of these women and the sex of the baby each of them were to deliver. This he did in the company of the king's dog. The king's servant who already knew the kind of hatred the king had for this hated wife of his master least expected that she will bear a male child. On the day of delivery, all the king's wives bear females (who were instantly put to death as ordered by the king), while the hated wife bear the only male-*lack liquidated*. On seeing the baby boy delivered by the hated wife, the king's servant pushed the baby boy and his mother into the river and they were carried away by the wave-*pursuit*. Meanwhile he reported to the king that none of the wives delivered the baby boy.

The hated wife and her son were rescued by an old woman washing breadfruit by the river bank –*rescue*. She left her son in the care of the old woman, and returned quietly to her isolated home, in the garbage heap, unrecognized as the mother of the Kings only son-*unrecognized arrival*.

The boy grew up to a strong and handsome lad and was named *Qmalinze* by his foster mother. He soon discovered that he is a royal foundling and desired reunion with his real parents-*lack*. The king's dog which was present when he was born and cast away recognized and visited him regularly. On such visits he sings a lament song to the dog making known his inner desire-*mediation*. The boy's complaint was overheard by a wine tapper who reported same to the king and the king decided to look for him-*beginning counteraction*. The king was led to the whereabouts of the object of his search by the tapper. They hidded at a corner near the foster mother's house on arrival to the quarter and he heard the boy's lament himself-*guidance*. The king approach the foster mother of his only son, appeased her and reclaimed his only son. He imprisoned the servant who reported to him that no male child has been born and richly rewarded the foster mother-*lack liquadated*. The old woman withheld the information about the mother of the prince and asked the king to find out himself-*unidentified element*.

A day was set apart for the prince to identify his real mother as each of the loved wives claimed to be the mother of the boy. A task was set by the king to unravel the truth. Each wife was to cook her best dish. The one of whose dish attracted the boy will be recognized as his mother-*difficult task*. On the appointed day, *Qmalinze* guided by a flutist, identified the hated wife as his mother by eating her food appreciatively in her isolated hut-*solution*.

The favorite wives were exposed as false claimants-*recognition*. The hated wife was raised from the garbage heap and given a new appearance. She was washed and dressed up in new and expensive clothes-*transfiguration*. The marriage between the king and the hated wife was at last consummated. Henceforth, she become the most favoured wife and mistress of the royal household-*wedding*.

### Discussion of findings

Folktale can be seen or viewed as the mirror of the society. It tends to mirror the way of life of the society in which it is told. A close examination of some of these functions in tales analyzed will show that each is essentially a type of socially standardized action; a habit, a custom or a mode of living. Thus, each depicts a kind of daily social life and traditional rites of passage. In the tales analyzed, the different functions that are seen recurring naturally and logically are being performed by different personages irrespective of sex or age.

The Igbos are naturally known for their independent mode of living and hard work. They usually do not rely entirely on their fellow human beings for sustenance. This is the more reason why they are often found in every corner of the world, no matter how unpleasant life may seem there, provided that they meet up with their means of livelihood. They *absent* themselves in search of better living or for future welfare. Hence, *Ojaadilj*, the famous wrestler leaves the comfort of his home in order to participate in the wrestling match through which he earns his living. In *Qmalinze*, the King left his palace to a faraway land to seek for means of unraveling the cause of his misfortune and to seek for a lasting solution. All these forms of absention portray the Igbos as sojourners, people who make exuberant use of their youthful days. It portrays the Igbo culture as having no room for a lazy man, hence the adage “*Nkụ Onye Kpara n'okochi ka o na-anyo*”

*n'udu mmiri; onye ruo o rie; onye ngana kpuo ute aguu ekpughe pu ya etc.* All these proverbs synonymously mean that one reaps what one sows. In order to get themselves accommodated in any part of the world they find themselves, there has to be a strict observance of the laws of the land. This is expressed through the function *interdiction*.

Naturally, things never move on smoothly without any obstruction whatsoever otherwise we will no more be seen operating in the real world full of confrontations. The Igbo man can never believe that he has become satisfied with the acquisition of wealth. It is this insatiable nature of theirs that lures them into *violation* of stipulated rules and regulations guiding the land. They have the propensity of probing into the unknown, hence the inquisitive instinct in them. They are risk takers and risks cannot be taken without the violation of stipulated laws. In fact, the function violation in all its ramifications signifies the strong head disposition of Igbo man in his quest for wealth.

Functions like *reconnaissance, delivery, trickery, complicity* and *villainy* centre on the numerous antagonistic forces imposed by the enemy in our journey of life to make life look realistic while functions like *mediation, beginning counter action, departure, first function of the donor, the hero's reaction, provision/receipt of magical agent, guidance, struggle, branding and victory* show the various efforts made by the individuals to survive these forces. An average Igbo man must ensure he gets to the root of his problem and gets it solved at all cost. At worst, the entire extended family will be involved, hence the practice of the extended family system and their belief in the adage which says that when men come together to reason, something meaningful must come out of it. A replica of Igbo adage which says "A gbokoo mamiri onu, ogbooo ufufu".

The function, *villain*, features very well in Igbo folktales. The Igbo have so many expressions that depict their feelings about their enemy. There is a saying *mgborogwu ndu gbachie uzo onye iro egbujie ya, agaghi m atu onye iro m ahia, oga-ahapu ndu zuror m onwu, Onye iro mmadu ajaghi ya mma*, etc. In *Ojaadili*, for instance, when his step mother discovered that his whistle which he ties always on his neck is the secret of his strength, she invited his bosom friend and they used a sharp razor blade to cut it. He then lost his strength and was exposed to danger before his enemies. In most folktales, the function of the enemy is always projected and because of the awareness of the enemy, the Igbos are quite apprehensive of every person. They suspect every individual and this may be the reason why they find it difficult to enter into a co-operative enterprise with anybody.

The function, *lack*, helps to explain fully some of the Igbo expressions about their insatiable wants of life hence, "*uwa ezu oke*", "*uwa bu nke onye*" meaning that man's desires are boundless and that man can never be satisfied in life. It is simply impossible for one to acquire all that he desires and it is this that leads to explorations and inventions. In *Omalinze*, the king lacks a male child despite all his wealth. This led to his moving to a faraway land in order to find that which he lacked. The idea and fear of the unknown always lead them to the diviners for the revelation of the cause of the problems they are having and how to get it solved. They also believe in the existence of the spirit being, both the ones that guard the individual being and those that live in the spirit world. Without that which he lacked, he would not have gone out to seek the intervention of the god. Thus, life is not worth living if man does not lack anything.

The function, *exposure*, in all its ramifications, indicates that truth must always prevail. In *Ojaadili*, the missing of his friend and stepmother on the discovery of his lost whistle highly

exposed them as his villains. Also in *Qmalinze*, the king's favourite wives were exposed as false claimants on the recognition of the hated wife by the son as the mother. This fulfills the Igbo Philosophy about truth – *Eziokwu na-agba ka onwa, Eziokwu bu ndu, A naghi ekpuchi afọ ime aka* etc. *Punishment* usually manifests as a resultant effect of exposure. In *Qmalinze*, the king imprisoned his servant who pushed the hated wife and her son into the river and reported back to him that no male child had been born. Hence the Igbo belief in the adage “*Ometarra buru, Isi Kote ebu o gbaa ya*” etc.

*Difficult task* and its consequences portray the Igbos as people who are endowed with special wisdom. Usually, whenever they are faced with difficulty, they don't remain adamant. They usually embrace it with joy because they believe that their ability to solve it attests to their manhood, hence their common saying “*mberede nyiri dike, mana mbere ka e ji mara dike*” meaning that difficulty is the test of manhood. Thus, the king faced with the problem of who owns his only son among his many wives, sets a task instead of assigning the child to one of them on assumption. This function is usually geared towards the *discovery* and *solution* of a very serious and delicate issue.

The tales equally reveal names and naming system in Igbo land. It has been in the Igbo cultural life that the names given to their offspring manifest its meaning in the life of that person given the name. They even ascertain from their ancestors the names to be given to their new born babies. Generally, the cultural theme highlighted in the study reveal that the Igbo believed that there is life beyond this physical realm. Every reasonable Igbo man makes candid effort to attain that life. This aspiration therefore makes them to become conscious of their pattern of life thus, their high regard for the supreme deity.

Finally, there is a particular motifeme that features in some of the folktales but was not identified by propp. This motifeme may be assigned the function, *compensation* or *gratification*. This function is recognized through the many ways the king in *Qmalinze* rewarded the old woman who rescued and took care of his hated wife and her son. This equally portrays the Igbo as people who cherish and lavish gratification to whom that deserves it, hence, the adage *oru di mma nwere ugwo oru dim ma, aka nri kwoo aka ekpe, aka ekpe akwoo aka nri, ihe dim mma na anya gbara akwukwo*” etc. They always like to show appreciation to every good deed done to them.

The compensation may be in form of material or praise in which a praise name suitable for the deed is showered on the doer. A typical Igbo man usually prefer praise names to other material aspects of compensation hence their believe in the adage “*Ezi aha ka oia ocha na oia edo* (good name is better than silver and gold). For instance, if an Igbo man builds blocks of classroom in a school for the purpose of community development, he will prefer his name being written boldly on the blocks for everlasting commemoration than being showered with other material gifts.

### **Conclusion/Recommendation**

In this work, a critical examination of the structure of the Igbo folktale has been made following propp's structuralist approach. The different functions constituting the fundamental components of the folktales understudy has been described. This enabled the reader to understand what exactly each of the functions is all about. It is interesting to have observed through the implications of the functions that the Igbos are highly industrious, appreciative, insatiable in their



quest for wealth and republican in nature. The study recommends, among other things, the teaching of our indigenous literature and culture in schools as this offers a practical acquaintance with the indigenous language and culture and as well helps to unravel the richness and beauty of our cultural heritage.

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