Igbo Oral Literature (Chapter 24)

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GROUNDWORK OF IGBO HISTORY

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IGBO ORAL LITERATURE

Chukwuma Azuonye

1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss the features of the main forms of Igbo oral literature chiefly from the point of view of their historiographic significance. In doing this, the reservations held by some scholars about the reconstruction of history from oral literary sources will, of necessity, be kept in view. While oral literature, including the most fantastic forms, tends in general to reflect historical realities, it can also offer a medley of distortions and even outright fabrications, especially in epochs of expansion in which hegemonic, imperial or revolutionary considerations may call for mass mobilization along the lines of an elitist or populist ideology. An attempt will be made in the course of this survey, to pin-point possible areas of such distortions and fabrications.

2. The Forms of Igbo Oral Literature

Igbo oral literature comprises a large variety of genres which exist in the three conventional literary forms: prose, verse and drama.¹ The prose forms include historical narratives (akuko ala), fictional narratives (akuko ifo) and “artistic speech” or oratory (ckwu oka). The verse forms range from simple folksongs (eqwu a na-ekwe ekwe or egwu-okwukwe) to various forms of ritual verse (okwu nru), and what is decidedly the most artistic form of Igbo verse, namely melic poetry (abu), including the lyrical, the invocative, the didactic and the narrative or epic. Igbo drama operates within a theatrical tradition which includes such forms as drammatic festivals (emume), drammatic rites of passage (echichi and abamaba), drammatic dances (eqwu a na-agba agba), masquerade plays (mmawu), folk comedies (aniga) and various categories of improvised oral drama. In addition to these, there are a number of other rhetorical or gnomic genres which cannot be neatly placed within the frame of any of the three conventional literary forms. These include proverbs and related forms of similitude (ilu), riddles and related forms (Agwugwa), tongue-twisters (okwu-ntuhi), jests and anecdote (soromchia) and games and plays (oro), forms which are, perhaps, best described as miniature forms of oral literature, since they are independent literary forms of small dimension which partake of the features
of prose, verse and drama depending on their performance contexts and function.

It is, of course, rather difficult to maintain a water-tight categorization of genres in any synchronic examination of the oral literature of any people. Nor can we, in a diachronic survey, establish a fool-proof pattern of evolution. However, a thematic approach, within the framework of oral historiography, reveals one basic concern of Igbo oral literature, namely, the close interdependence of man and the earth or land (ala) in his perennial quest for survival. This basic concern is summed up in the Igbo term for historical narratives - akuko-ala (literally, stories of the earth or land).

However, a major paradox emerges in any critical examination of the content of akuko-ala vis-a-vis the content of other genres of Igbo oral literature. We find, in general, that akuko-ala and related genres, such as oratory (okwu-oka) and the epic (abu-akuko-dike), which purport to be historical in content are the least reliable as sources of historical data; but, in purely imaginative literature such as akuko-ifo (fictional narratives), the miniature forms (proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters and jokes), and in various types of folk-songs and dramatic performances, which do not make any claims to historicity, we come across motifs and patterns which seem to provide solid and unbiased clues to the realities of unwritten Igbo history.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, professional historians and others who are interested in the reconstruction of unwritten Igbo history from Igbo oral literature are invited to go beyond the myths and legends which have come down to us as traditional history and pay closer attention to those works of imaginative literature in our oral traditions - tales, songs, proverbs, riddles, jokes and plays - which, in their dynamic and unconscious mimesis, mirror the realities of the Igbo world, past and present.

3. Igbo Historical Narratives: Myth, Legend and Reality

Igbo historical narratives, akuko-ala, are essentially a body of traditional stories which seek to define man's relationship with his natural environment both at the most elemental level and at the most sublime and philosophical levels. These stories are concerned with ala in all its possible senses: as a geological or geographical reality (the physical earth); as a piece of land occupied by a group with a community of interests (the fatherland, motherland, homeland or nativeland); as an economic property (farm land, residential estate, etc.); as the eternal mystical bond that subsists between man and the earth - the earth from which we spring, draw our sustenance and to which we must return at death - a bond manifested in the
deification of Ala (the Mother Earth or Earth Goddess) and in the sanctity with which custom or omenaala (that which obtains in the land) is held throughout the Igbo world. Akuko ala, then, comprises more than a body of tales about the land or the earth. It is, largely speaking, a body of traditions of the order of myths and legends which, on the one hand, articulate in poetic language certain fundamental communal attitudes and beliefs about the nature of reality and, on the other hand, project the leaders or heroes of the land as the embodiments of the people’s capacity and will to survive in the face of formidable odds.

It follows from the above that four main categories of Igbo historical narratives may be distinguished, namely; stories of the origins of the land (i.e., the fatherland, etc.); stories of the heroes of the land; stories of the customs of the land; and stories of the origins of the earth seen from the perspective of the occupants of a particular piece of land. The first two categories belong to the order of legend\(^2\), while the third and the fourth belong to the order of myth. It is however noteworthy that there can be no clear-cut dichotomy between myth and legend in any oral tradition, for the two streams of tradition are constantly flowing into one another in the course of the dynamic processes of oral transmission.

The two categories of legend in the corpus of the Igbo akuko ala are universal and share more or less the same features with their kind elsewhere. These are ancestral legends\(^3\) and heroic legends. It seems to me that the most the historian can find in these two categories of akuko ala are suggestive names and patterns rather than verifiable facts of Igbo history. But even in such names and patterns, it is important to distinguish the archetypal from the typical, for, as we shall see presently, a considerable proportion of the names and patterns which we find in Igbo legends belong more to worldwide archetypal patterns than to the typical conditions of the Igbo world.

### 3.1 Ancestral Legends

Every autonomous community in Igboland as well as each of its primary, secondary or tertiary segments, has its own ancestral legend - the legend of the migration of its founding fathers from an original homeland to its present habitation. Generally, place-names encapsulate, in telegraphic form, the essence of these legends. The formula (Umu/Ndi, etc. + Name of Ancestor) denotes a community descended from the named ancestor. In some cases, the focus is not on the ancestor but on the geographical realia of the settlement. Thus, we have names referring to the four cardinal points
- Ugwu (upper side, or north), acbo/ndida (lower side, south), ivite, ihitte, ishite, or ifite (left side or west) and ikenga (right side or east). Other geographical realia like hills, valleys, rivers or streams, etc., feature in a number of names. But, ultimately, every single reference to any phenomenon in Igbo place-names has something to do with ancestral heroes. However, it is not always that geomythological investigations will yield ancestral legends unaffected by group chauvinism. The motif of ancestral giants or dwarfs believed to have been so powerful that, in their Herculean labours, they dented the rocks with their indelible foot-prints turn up everywhere. Heavy rock formations of inexplicable grandeur are attributed to the activity of such great ancestral heroes. In some cases, the courses of rivers are said to have been redirected for the benefit of the land by the special breed of men regarded as ancestors by the people that recount the legends of the inimitable grandeur of their beneficent actions.

Other legends glorify the wisdom of the founding fathers, employing the same basic motifs. In many cases, we are faced with simply fake etymologies, or what Lach-Szyrma describes as "the selective process of folk memory." The ancestral legend of the Ngwa is probably based on such fake etymology. According to this legend, the Ngwa are the descendants of one of two groups who hastily (ngwa ngwa) crossed the Imo River in flood to win the promised land, while the Ohuhu are the descendants of the tardier group who lose the prize while busy roasting yams. Clearly, the essence of this legend is to project the self-esteem of the Ngwa at the expense of their rival Ohuhu community. No historian can properly evaluate a tale of this type without reference to either the Aarne-Thompson Index of tale-types or the Thompson motif-index, for the tale falls into a universal narrative pattern employed in widely separated cultures to more or less the same effect.

The problem of fake etymology or "the selective process of folk memory" may be discerned in ancestral legends spun by successive generations of Igbo groups to rationalize the forgotten meanings of some segments of the names of their settlements. This is particularly the case in legends associated with place-names containing such widely-occurring matrices as Isu (e.g., Isu-ikwuato, Isu-ochi, Isu-Njaba, Isu-okpu, Isu-ofia, etc.), Nsu (Nsu-ka, Nsu-gbe, Nsu-de, Nsu-kwa, Nsu-lu, Nsu, etc.), Aba (Aba Ngwa, Aba Nkili, Aba Omege, Aba-tete, etc.), Onicha (Onicha Mmiri, Onicha Ugbona, Onicha Mbase, etc.), Owere or Owele (Owere, Owale Ezunaka, Ezi-owelle, Owere-Nkwo-Oji, etc.). It is probably impossible to reconcile the numerous conflicting legends which these items can generate, no matter what oral historiographical model we may apply. Nowhere
else is the use of "cross bearings" to sift reality from folklore more pertinent than in dealing with ancestral legends of this class. We need to go into comparative linguistics to come to grips with the meanings of our place-names and legends. isu, for example, may well be unrelated to any of the meanings assigned to it by ancestral legend. It may well refer to a people whose original association, based on the traditional mutual benefit trust system (isusu), with one another, cognate with the Yoruba Esusu, was purely economic. Perhaps, also cognate with a Yoruba concept, with relations possibly dating way back into proto-Kwa, beyond 6,000 years ago, is aba, a matrix found in Yoruba place-names, meaning "settlement or farm settlement". It may well be that the Aba group of communities were originally a Kwa-type of farm-settlement which have blossomed over the years into larger settled communities whose original cognominal meaning has been forgotten. Similar etymological inquiries may help release the realities from the legendary accretions from similar place-name matrices.

In the end, whatever may be our attitudes to the Igbo ancestral legend, a point worth bearing in mind in admitting them into any historiographic enterprise is that they are essentially mythical projections of communal self-esteem created to foster group solidarity, confidence and survivalist instincts. A morphological approach will reveal the same basic pattern containing the following archetypal elements: a glorious original homeland, hardworking/outstanding founding fathers, persecution, prophecy of imminent destruction of the group, surreptitious exodus, divine guidance, sojourn in one or more locations which become kindred groups, dropout of some members of the group who found other settlements, despondence, persecution, encounter with autochthonous elements, displacement of autochthones, settlement in a place which becomes the head of the clan; dispersal to outlying areas... Not all Igbo ancestral legends will contain all these motifs in the same order, but they will generally be found to be informed by the pattern. This is not only true of ancestral legends of small autonomous communities but of those of larger hegemonies such as the Nri and the Aro and of some more recent legends, apparently patterned on such as the Yoruba Oduduwa, in which a common Igbo origin is imagined.9

Before proceeding to the second category of the Igbo legend, we must conclude our discussion of the ancestral legend by summing up its basic features and historiographic relevance. Firstly, although they present distorted images of reality, Igbo ancestral legends are a phenomenon of great historiographic value, revealing patterns of understanding of the Igbo experience. They highlight the diversity of Igbo-origins - the migration of the
people from the four cardinal points and from a wide variety of neighbouring
ethnic nations. The absence of a unifying legend not only reinforces this
diversity of origins, but also gives credence to the possibility of an inner
autochthonous core in which the immigrants appear to have got fused. This
typical pattern seems clear enough, though the details have been fitted into
a wider, universal, basically fictional archetype. Our second conclusion is
that a great deal of fakelore has crept into the ancestral legend. This has
continued to dog the historicity of ancestral stories. Today, the ancestral
legend has become part of the popular arsenal of intercommunal disputes,
such as land cases and chieftaincy contests. Conflicting accounts, fabri-
cated and published by disputants on the pages of our newspapers, are an
attestation of the kind of milieu in which most of what has come down to us as
‘history’ may have come into being.

3.2. Heroic Legends

Turning now to the heroic legends, we find an archetypal pattern of
motifs into which the lives and careers of the champions of various Igbo
communities have been fitted. The pattern is an oicotype of the universal
hero-pattern described for Indo-European heroes by von Hahn, Otto Rank,
Raglan, de Vries, Dundes and Bowra.10 Elsewhere, I have distilled from an
analysis of over a hundred heroic tales in the oral literature collection of the
Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Nigeria,
Nsukka, the basic motifemes of such archetypal life-pattern for the Igbo
hero:

The hero:

(1) is a superhuman personage; (2) His ancestry or parent-
age is usually remarkable or extraordinary; (3) His career in
the womb is generally unusual; he may spend a much
shorter time than natural or linger in the womb well beyond
the natural period of gestation, ranging from one year to 39
years; (4) His advent is prophesied and is accompanied by
omens; (5) His childhood is threatened but he is often spirited
away to an unknown place; (6) He grows up a child-prodigy
and (7) is pre-eminent among his peers; (8) He displays an
exaggerated sense of his own worth; (9) This exaggerated
sense of his worth manifests itself in his tragic love of danger;
(10) He generally overwhelms the enemies of his people by
the display of inborn or acquired supernatural powers; (11)
But his actions are generally directed to a concrete cause which is usually of great benefit to his people; (12) In the course of his labours he often undertakes an expedition to another world or worlds; (13) and, everywhere, he meets great dangers single-handed; (14) He usually returns with a great prize; and (15) His return is publicly acclaimed; (16) He marries a remarkable and specially-selected wife and becomes the forbear of a great lineage; (17) He established a new social order, usually of justice after a tyrannical rule; (18) He makes a mysterious transition to another world on the conclusion of his mission; but (19) he usually leaves a mark as a sign of his heroic presence.11

The motifs and the overall pattern are the same in many Igbo heroic legends but the names in each case are different, and everywhere people recount these tales as if they are gospel truth. They are in fact gospel truth in the sense that each community pays tribute to the name of the hero with whom it identifies some great accomplishments in its history. The task before historiography is to sift the pattern from the particularities and to arrive at suggestive elements which must be corroborated with relevant cross-bearings from other sources.

The true dilemma in the use of heroic legends as historical source lies in the fact that the same pattern of heroic life is all too easily projected onto living and contemporary heroes such as the young Zik and other nationalist heroes, in their struggle against the white man. The Nigerian crisis of 1966 and the subsequent Civil War produced their own magical heroes in Ironsi, Nzeogwu, Archibong and others, whose lives in their accounts partake of the traits and incidents of the archetypal hero-pattern. If accounts of such well-known contemporary heroes can be subjected to so much mythic embellishment how much more the lives of the local heroes of the unknown past!

The problem with folk legends is that they very easily become assimilated into traditional religious practices as articles of faith around which important rituals revolve. Once the fiction becomes so ritualized, it becomes difficult to reach back again to the facts. There is thus no way in which we can verify the authenticity of traditions enacted in various festivals of the coming of the ancestors. Was there a King Nwakpuda of Ameke Ibeku who faced a moving train single-handed, or are we faced with a local manifestation of quixotic courage of a universal type? Is the ritualized belief in Onicha
(Onitsha) links with Edo (Benin) based on a folk fabrication or on reality? The unwritten archives of folk memory are ever so reluctant to yield their secrets. And, unlike our contemporary archives where official secrets are released to the public every thirty years or so, with the passage of time, the secrets of oral tradition sink into oblivion, leaving only the archetypes which belong to all humanity.

But, looking beneath the veneer, we can discern a pattern of reality in the Igbo legend. It would appear that there has always been an autochthonous core of ancient homo sapiens in what is now the Igbo culture area. The Ugwuele-Uturu discoveries suggest the existence of such a hominid settlement dating back to 50,000 B.C. This autochthonous core is probably part of the primeval stream of people to which the term Igbo (from the root -gbọ, "antiquity") belongs. Traditions from this core are those which claim autochthony, for there is no memory of migration from elsewhere. Subsequent Igbo history is that of immigration into and emigration from the core of the Igbo area as well as of internal migrations within Igboland. These patterns are abundantly evident in Ancestral and Heroic legends. Furthermore, Igbo heroic legends are the products of a pan-Igbo heroic age - or heroic ages - following the series of incursions into the settlement of the portions of the land claimed by various groups of migrants. The legends of the heroic age reveal various patterns of resistance in the defence of the land - hunting heroes contended with wild animals and, out of their experiences, a large body of hunting legends have come down to us; head-hunting heroes transferred the techniques of heroic hunting to the defence of the land against the alien interloper or rival claimant; the war hero was almost indistinguishable from the head-hunter, but he operated in full-scale wars which were brought to a sudden close by the British conquest of Igboland after a most remarkable resistance. The last corpus of heroic tales comes from this period. In latter-day phases, the archetype came to be projected onto other champions - from politicians to intellectuals and successful businessmen.

Legend appears to have been succeeded by myth in the evolution of Igbo oral literature. Once a portion of land had been claimed, it became necessary not only to guard its geographical frontiers, but also to create safe walls of unageing intellect around it. The third and fourth categories of akuko ala - local myths and creation myths - appear to be the products of this phase.
3.3 Local Myths

Local myths are those tales within the corpus of akuko ala which refer to the origins of various aspects of onenaala (customs and institutions). They include, for example, stories of the origins of local gods and goddesses, stories of the origins of local food crops, domestic animals and agricultural practices, stories of the origins of the days of the four-day Igbo market-week, stories of the origins of the totems and taboos of a locality, and stories of the origins of local rituals, festivals, dances and various types of masquerades. Indeed, there are as many local myths as there are customs and institutions in every autonomous community in Igboland.

A careful analysis of these myths will show that they are essentially ideological fictions created to sustain group solidarity and exclusivity. The motif of the helpful animal, usually a bird or rodent which saves the community from the formidable enemy in hot pursuit by covering up the foot-prints of the fleeing ancestral heroes, turn up frequently in many totemic myths as the rationale for the sanctity with which the community holds a particular animal. In another body of common myths, a community’s claim to the exclusive use of a stream or piece of land on its boundary with another community is often couched in the motif of a sacred covenant between the stream of land and the “chosen” community. Any breach of this covenant by the excluded community is believed to result in instant death. Many of the stories of the origins of local gods and goddesses belong to universal patterns of Euhemerist traditions of deified heroes. Eri, in the Nri tradition, and Ononwa Oboli, in Northern Igbo traditions, are examples of such deified heroes. Their apotheosis is part of the social expedience of maintaining group solidarity by referring the survival of the group to the actions of a deity come down as man.

It is however, not surprising that the universally-acclaimed supreme being in all Igbo mythologies is Ala (the Earth Goddess) - the deified personification of the eternal relationship between man and the earth from which he springs, draws his sustenance and to which he must return at death. The absence of any myth about the origins of earth-worship and ancestor-veneration clearly points to the fact that they most probably constitute the fundamental and natural religion of the Igbo, and this is reinforced by the constant reference of everything else of significance in their tradition to the sanctions of Ala and the ancestral spirits. The divinities about which there are myths seem clearly to be latter-day creations of groups seeking political or other kinds of control through spiritual colonialism. The rise of the sky gods, chief among which is Chukwu, is most probably the most promi-
rent of these latter-day apostasies. I have elsewhere attempted a diamorphosis of the possible phases of the evolution of the idea of Chukwu in the Igbo religion as manifested in folktales. My general conclusions in that survey will probably apply equally to all Igbo myths. Igbo mythology does not reveal a monolithic Igbo world-view but a wide diversity of world-views arising from the disparate experiences of the various autonomous communities that make up the Igbo world.

3.4 Creation Myths

There is no pan-Igbo creation myth. The Ndi Ichie Akwa Mythology of I.N.C. Nwosu, seems to be a personal mythology. Each Igbo community has created its own myths about the origins of the features of its natural environment from its own ethnocentric perspective. The popularity of certain mythical tale-types, however, seems to be indicative of diffusionism in cases where a particular rationalization appears to be convenient. A case in point is the myth of "the River that ran away" because of a misunderstanding about the precise type of male and female sacrifice demanded by it. Our field-work shows that this mythical tale-type occurs everywhere in Igboland as an explanation for the existence of any large gully through which it is believed a large river once flowed. The story has been told about Imo, Urasi, Igwu, and every other river in every village through which a river or even a stream flows.

4. Historical Tradition In Igbo Oratory and Poetry

The fictionalization of communal experiences in the legendary and mythical forms in which we find them may be due to the operation of the folk imagination, but their transmission and ritualised permanency are possible due mainly to the efforts of generations of orators and poets. The historian who must have recourse to Igbo oral tradition as evidence should be most wary when dealing with data contained in traditional oratory and poetry of the free-text form, especially epic poetry.

The Igbo orator in his role as onu-na-ekwuru-oha (spokesman of the people) epitomises in his art, okwu oka (artistic speech), the dynamic use of historical tradition as an instrument for intergroup warfare. In oratory, historical accounts turn into ritualized double-talk subject to change, according to circumstances, in a high and moving tension. Even nuptial oratory, for all its comic asides and ribaldry, remains faithful to the mythic projection of lineage pride. The bride's and the bride-groom's families must present ennobling images of their families. Private homilies are informed by the same
self-projection. But this mythopoeic enterprise assumes disquieting splendour in public orations: judicial, political and funerary. Today, the church sermon is becoming assimilated into the maelstrom of traditional Igbo rhetoric and oratory and may, in future, become an instrument for sectarian battles. An unwary historian who, in the course of field interviews, falls in with a sweet-talking orator may come out with a load of magnificent but misleading folklore about the community being investigated. The result, if analysed uncritically, may give rise to the kind of romanticization evident in some historical reconstructions from oral tradition.

Epic and related categories of free-text forms of Igbo oral poetry (abu) constitute another source of folk idealization of historical reality. Epic does not set out to present historical fact but the drama of particular heroes against the background of historical events. What is presented is not the biography of the champions of the community but symbolic representations of the communal will to survive against great odds. This is as true of the historical epics of the kind recorded in Ohafia,\(^\text{13}\) in which realistic actions are presented, as in the romantic epics of the kind recorded in Anambra, in which heroes operate in the realms of fantasy pitched against superhuman monsters with the aid of magic and witch grand-mothers who act as supernatural props.\(^\text{14}\)

The very existence of numerous variants of tales about the same heroes in traditions such as the Ohafia epic traditions clearly points to their unreliability as historical evidence. What seems constant in these tales are the names of the leading heroes, the epithets which define their claim to heroism and the themes which define the heroic essence of their activities.\(^\text{15}\) All else is subject to change depending on narrator, audience, context and time of performance. The particular battles are unimportant. What seems important is the pattern of relationships which the epics define. The situation of endemic warfare between the Cross River Igbo and their Ibibio and Ekoid Bantu neighbours is reflected in many epics such as Nne Mgbaoro and Inyan Olugu.\(^\text{16}\) The pan-Igbo extent of the itinerant head-hunting expeditions of the people is evident in the epic of Ecbele, in which the major battles take place at Okputu in what is now Enugu State. As in other forms of free-text oral poems, the epithets in the epics are verbal fossils packed with historical allusions and the oral historiographer can have a field day decoding the allusions and relating them to events in the hey-day of the Cross River Igbo heroic age. In some of the stylized monologues, we have confirmations of barbaric as well as civilized modes of behaviour: cannibalism, the sale of war captives into slavery for mercenary
reasons, and the mutual civility between warring parties. Aro dealings with the warring clans of the Cross River area turn out to be based, not on mercenarism, but on a kind of symbiotic relationship of mutual exploitation. The Ohafia and their Abam-Edda kith and kin pursued warfare and head-hunting in response to social pressures at home but were prepared to accept reward for expeditions which they otherwise would have undertaken without reward. The Epic of Eji Be Aja, in which the Ohafia rebuff Aro requests for assistance, shows that the Ohafia and other Abam-Edda were "no mercenaries kept and controlled by the Aro", as is often asserted in colonial anthropological studies, but autonomous heroic societies with total freedom of choice in the type of action which they could pursue.

5. Drama, Mimesis and the Dynamics of Social Change

In Igbo oral poetry and drama, we have a bridge between traditions claiming to be historical and those that are avowedly fictional. The aesthetic elements are emphasized in both poetry and drama and because of this, there is less room for conscious fabrication of the kind found in historical narratives and oratory. A study of allusions, images and structural patterns in dances, festivals, rituals and especially in masquerades (the most artistic form of Igbo traditional theatre) will yield more valuable historical data than a study of local myths, legends, and the testimonies of orators. The head-gears, face-masks and costumes of masquerades reflect the changes in Igbo technology and art as well as the patterns of changing world-view owing to acculturation. The most ancient of masquerades reflect natural phenomena - animals and the world of spirits. Masks representing the human world dramatize the ideal family life and the structures of changing ways of life. The colonial experience and the social types and attitudes arising from that experience come up for satire in a number of masquerade types, and others reflect on the personality-types during different historical periods. In the king of masquerades, ijele, which appears once in a generation or two, we have an animated gallery of the cultural attainments of the community in periods ranging from five to fifty years. Historians should pay more and more attention to such aesthetic forms which in their dynamic mimesis convey a greater sense of reality than in the so-called oral histories.
6. Historical Reality in Igbo Fictional Narratives and the Oral Miniatures

But perhaps the most unbiased reflections of historical reality will be found in akuko ifo - the corpus of tales which are most commonly neglected by historians because they are avowedly fictional. These tales which are set in the world of animals, the world of spirits and the human world, do not make any pretences to historicity, but a critical interpretation of their motifs in relation to other evidence will reveal a lot about the Igbo past, albeit in symbolic and allegorical language.20 The historian who wishes to make the most of the historical content of akuko ifo must be conversant with the methods and tools of comparative folklore and oral literature. He must know the various tale-type and motif-indexes21 as well as the various structuralist models.22 These comparativist tools will enable him eliminate from the start, elements which belong to the international folktale tradition so as to be able to focus on oicotypes - the elements which are truly Igbo. Familiarity with the tools of comparative folklore and oral literature will lead to the crystallization of two complementary approaches - the intrinsic and the extrinsic.

The extrinsic approach will involve the tracing of historical relations on the basis of the comparison of the diffusion of tale-types and motifs.23 This approach will enable the historian confirm patterns of cultural inter-relationship between the Igbo and their immediate and remote neighbours within Africa as well as with the Igbo of the diaspora outside Africa. The presence of Yoruba tale-types in Bahia, Cuba and elsewhere in the Americas and the Caribbean islands has been used to establish patterns of Yoruba cultural presence in the New World.24 Such patterns are yet to be established for the Igbo and in this, the study of tale-types will be most useful.

The intrinsic approach will involve the study and interpretation of oicotypes - tale-types, motifs and other elements which refer to peculiar conditions of the Igbo world. I have elsewhere argued that Propp's morphology can provide a model for such an ethno-historical exploration of Igbo folktales.25 If we take each of the functions or motifemes in as large a collection of Igbo tales as possible and examine their various manifestations, we can learn a lot about the conditions of life in the traditional Igbo world. The historian will of course go beyond ethnography and attempt to understand the wider historical relevance of certain recurrent motifemes especially those associated with certain kinds of actors. The following cases may be considered: The great famine (an allomotif of LACK) and the
trickster hero; The tyrannical king of Iduu and his overthrow by a low-born upstart; childlessness (another allomotif of LACK); divination (an allomotif of PROVISION); the hated wife in a polygamous household; patriarchal dominance as manifested in problems of co-wife rivalry and conflicts arising from the problem of male succession; the changing images of Chukwu. In reflecting on these oicotypal elements, reference may be made to fixed-phrase forms such as proverbs, riddles, songs and liturgical texts which seem to preserve the traditions of the ages in stable and memorable patterns.26

The recurrence of kings and kingship institutions in tales of the animal world as well as in tales of the world of spirits and especially in those set in the kingdom of Iduu is one of the most fascinating motifeme-sequences in the Igbo oral tradition. How do we interpret these motifs? What is Iduu? Is it, as has been suggested, the kingdom of Edo (Benin), or is it just a mythical world of romance? Different sources claim each of these possibilities dogmatically. The possibility that Iduu is just an Igbo story-teller’s idiom for a mythical kingdom, which may apply to Old Benin and other mythical worlds, is suggested by the presence of other Iduus in traditions such as that of the Aguleri in which we hear of Iduu Kamerum, Iduu Mkpulu Oka and other Iduus.27 But perhaps the specific identification of Iduu is not so important as what it symbolizes in the Igbo folk imagination. Iduu is a world of wonders but more so of tyrannical monarchy which must be overthrown by a low-born hero. There is a clear and consistent depreciation of monarchy and an association of monarchical regimes with exploitation. The impression is consistently sustained that monarchy, to the Igbo, is anathema. Is this a result of the experience of monarchy or of the exploitativeness of a monarchical power?

I have posed similar questions about the image of Chukwu in Igbo folktales towards a reconstruction of patterns in the history of Igbo religion.28 The question is: Is it possible that a people can tell such tales as we have in the Igbo corpus in which a so-called supreme God is presented in a ridiculous light as a stupid ogre? What exactly does the Chukwu of the Igbo ifo represent: the Supreme God or a rejection of such an anthropomorphic sky God? My interpretation of the negative images is that of a rejection of one of the various anthropomorphic images of Chukwu — specifically the Aro version — evolved in the 17th and 18th centuries by the Aro slaving oligarchy.

Another point of interest will be found in the position of women in folktales as contrasted with the idealization of the women in myth and heroic legend.29 Again, the historian will need to look closely at the evidence,
contrasting the contrivances of myth and legend and the reflection of reality in the story told for amusement. Issues such as the tension between matriarchy and patriarchy are bound to feature here. Do myths and legends idealizing and mystifying the Igbo womanhood reflect a primeval matriarchal dominance, while in Ifo we have reflections of a male chauvinist patriarchy in which every effort to suppress the ebullient female spirit has been made through subservient or subjugated role-models? Is the predominantly anti-feminist proverb-lore of the Igbo,\(^{30}\) part of this program for the subjugation of the womankind? Are folksongs of women, in which the women themselves mechanically re-affirm the assigned inferior role-models\(^{31}\) a reflection of the triumph of patriarchy or are they a consequence of the imbibement of Anglo-Saxon and Hebrae-Christian ideas of female inferiority? The complexity of the issues call for more analytical rigour in the interpretation of Igbo tales, songs and proverbs.

7. Conclusion

There is no space in an exploratory study such as this to consider more examples. It is however hoped that the key issues have been broached in such a way as to help remodel our oral historiographic strategies. The historian must develop strategies for distinguishing fact from fiction, folklore from fakelore, and the archetypal and the universal from the typical and the local; and he must be aware of the dynamic flux of tradition and innovation and the power of feedback in the restructuring of tradition under the impact of social change.\(^{5}\)
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. Legend is here understood as in Dorson (1972:159) as "a traditional oral narrative regarded as true by its teller and by many members of the society in which it circulates, but containing remarkable or supernatural elements that follow a pattern". By contrast, myth is "laid in ancient or prehistoric times" and deals "with gods or other sacred beings" (see Dorson, Richard, "The Debate over the Trustworthiness of Oral Traditional History", in Folklore: Selected Essays, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1972, p.162.

3. The term 'Ancestral Legend' is here preferred to the more conventional term 'Migration Legend' because it is an approximate English rendering of various Igbo terms for the genre - akuko ndiiche, akuko nna nna, akuko aka, akuko mgbеochie, etc.


5. Ohuhu in this sense is taken to derive from the root -hu- (roasting).


8. The term "Cross-bearings" is used by Peter H. Buck, "The Value of Tradition in Polynesian Research", Journal of the Polynesian Soci-
ety, 30, 1926, p.182, to describe the use of parallel traditions and evidence from botany, nautical science, geography and other sciences to confirm the facts contained in an oral narrative. See also, Dorson, Richard, "The Debate Over the Trustworthiness of Oral Traditional History", p.205.


16. Ibid.


18. Enekwe, Ossie, "Myth Ritual and Drama in Igboland, in Drama and


21. See Notes 6 and 7 above.


27. See Azuonye, Chukwuma, "The Romantic Epic of the Anambra Igbo..."

28. See Azuonye, Chukwuma, "Igbo Folktales and the Evolution of the Idea of Chukwu..."

29. See Azuonye, Chukwuma, "Female Power in the Igbo Epic and Heroic Legend".
