Igbo Stories and Storytelling

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/chukwuma_azuonye/73/
Chukwuma Azuonye discusses various forms of ákúkó-àlà (stories of the land) and ákúkó-ífo (stories of the imagination). He concludes with examples of storytelling as communal theater.

Introduction
The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria have one of the most thematically and stylistically varied traditions of storytelling in Africa. Little wonder that storytellers of Igbo origin dominate the modern African literary scene. Among these are such pioneering and world acclaimed novelists as Chinua Achebe, Cyprain Ekwensi, John Munonye, and Elechi Amadi. Igbo culture has also produced outstanding women writers, notably Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta. In several interviews as well as in the many stories-within-the-story told in their works, these writers have again and again paid tribute to generations of little-known orators, historians, and raconteurs whose wish-fulfillment fantasies, gossips, dreams, visions, lies, projections, eyewitness accounts, memoirs, and recreations of historical reality have passed into common currency both as humor and as myths to live by.

As in everything in Igbo culture, stories are paradoxical structures of the imagination that flourish both as open communicative events and as coded messages. As open communicative events, they are called ákúkó and form part of everyday discourse. Thus, in some parts of the Igbo world, the word ụbụbọ is used to refer to both stories and ordinary conversation. As coded messages, they are called ilú, a term that also applies to proverbs, exempla, parables, allegories, and other forms of similitude, including some categories of riddles and even such analogical figures of speech as metaphor and simile.

But whatever may be their specific forms, manifestations or contexts, stories in Igbo culture fall into two broad categories, namely ákúkó-àlà (stories of the land) and ákúkó-ífo (stories of the imagination). Ákúkó-àlà comprise stories that are told as true accounts of past events. These are commonly viewed as men’s stories because they deal with questions pertaining to land (àlà ) in all senses of the word, questions that are traditionally regarded as falling within the men’s domain in the delicate pattern of division of roles and responsibilities that exists in Igbo culture. Ákúkó-ífo stories are told as imaginative recreations of reality, the main purpose of that is the reaffirmation of the mores and values which govern social relationships. These stories are commonly seen as women’s stories because they are bound up with nurturing responsibilities that traditionally fall within the women’s domain.

On the face of it, the dichotomy between ákúkó-ífo and ákúkó-àlà might appear to indicate a simple distinction between “history” and “fiction” on the one hand and between a narrative genre of a higher order and one of a lower order on the other hand. But this, in reality, does not appear to be the case. What seems indicated rather is the paradoxical tension between patriarchy and matriarchy in Igbo culture. Igbo culture appears, on the surface, to be patriarchal: men control rulership, succession, and inheritance exclusively. But when one looks closely, evidence of dual organization with a balanced devolution of certain important social and ritual responsibilities to women appears rather clear. Men control the land, but the land is womanhood and motherhood deified; its nurturing feminity is symbolized and idolized in the figure of the earth-goddess Álà, the
supreme guardian and controller of the pattern of relationships that holds people together as members of a living community. Thus, while ákúkó-àlà comprises stories that refer to the visible economic and political parameters related to men's control of the land, ákúkó-ìfọ comprises stories that refer to the invisible moral and ethical bases of human coexistence on the land.

Content, Contexts, and Performance of Ákúkó-Àlà

It seem clear that there are at least four distinct categories of stories that come within the term ákúkó-àlà. First, we have stories pertaining to àlà (land, earth, or soil) in its purely geographic or geologic sense; stories about the planet Earth, its hills, valleys, rivers, forests, and everything living and nonliving found on it. These are essentially creation or origin stories. It would appear, however, that there is no all-comprising Igbo story of creation, like the biblical or the Dogon creation stories. There are allusions to a time “when the heavens were the playground of squirrels” (mgbé ìlà bì àlà ósà), a time when the earth was so soft that the chameleon learned to walk slowly and cautiously so as not to sink into the porous earth, a time when “there was only one lizard on earth” (mgbé ngwére di ótù), or a time when the whole earth was so covered with water (the great flood) that the hornbill (Òkpókó) was forced to bury his dead mother inside his own head. Beyond these scattered universal motifs, Igbo tales about creation and the origins of things are local and circumscribed. Each community sees itself as the center of the world and spins yarns about phenomena in such a way as to suggest that everything has been called into being in the service of its own people. Thus hills, rivers, and forests appear, move, and disappear as blessing or punishment for the actions of members of the community. The motif of the river that changed its course leaving a deep, dry valley is one common topographic motif. Usually, the river (a deity) decides to flow away (through another village) because it is frequently abused, neglected, or denied its due sacrifice by the people. The story has been told of practically all the major rivers of Igboland—Imo, Ìràsì, Ìdemílì, etc. Other cycles of stories about creation and the origins of things refer to the origins of night and day, the origins of the seasons, the origins of the four-day Igbo market week (Èké, Òríè, Ìfọ, and Nkwó), the origins of the rays of the sun, the origins of the full and half moon, the origins of death, and so forth.

Àlà in an Economic and Political Sense

The second and third categories of ákúkó-àlà are concerned with àlà, both in the circumscribed economic sense as capital (farmland, residential estate, and such) and in the wider political sense as a settled community with territorial integrity (fatherland, motherland, country or nation). In both of these senses, àlà refers to any piece of land that individuals or groups of people claim as their own and in which they have a vested interest to protect, expand, and if possible pass on as a legacy to their descendants. What we have here are two universal categories of legends—ancestral and heroic.

One of the main cycles of Igbo ancestral legends presents superhuman ancestors. Thus, among the Nri of the central Igbo area where an ancient civilization dating to circa 1000 was excavated in the 1960s, the supreme god, Chúkúwú, is said to have sent the great culture hero Èri and his wife Namuku from heaven, the sky. Another common motif is that of a race of supernatural giant or dwarf ancestors who have left their indelible footprints on rock, like Ònọjá nwà Òbòli among the Northern Igbo of Nsukka. In other legends, the founding fathers or mothers are represented as autochthonous—meaning, as having sprung from the earth; grown out of the soil, rocks, or grains of sand; issued mysteriously from a lake, pond, sea, river, or the stream that waters the land; or else materialized from thin air or in wind or storm. The ancestress of Nnobi, on the Idémílì River, among the Northern Igbo of Anambra State, is a typical example of the autochthonous founder believed to have sprung from the river (Amadiume, 1987). Other autochthonous founders are represented as having grown out of plant, tree, or vegetable matter.

A third group of ancestors and ancestresses are represented as heroic immigrants from one or the other of the four cardinal points or from a great kingdom, emporium, or civilization. Commonly, Ìdú, or the ancient kingdom of Benin, is mentioned as the original homeland, as it is in the ancestral legend of the Oni (Onitsha) Igbo on the Lower Niger. But in some cases, it is asserted that Igbo is a corruption of “Hebrew,” suggesting migration from ancient Palestine. We find this motif in the ancestral legend of the warlike Cross River Igbo of Ohafia, who also claim Benin origins in some of their epics. In a few other cases, Igbo ancestral legends refer to helpful animals, some of whom appear as the real or foster parents of the
great founders. Such animals now have an honored position in the people's religious rituals as totems. Occasionally, the founders of the land may be represented as exiles or refugees from a neighboring group (in the Aro case, the Ibibio and the Ekoi) or as a settled class of migrant laborers or professionals. But this occurs only when it is deemed strategically valuable for upholding a people's self-respect and vested interests, as in the origin legends of the Cross River Aro of Arochukwu, who championed the 17th- and 18th-century slave trade through their infamous oracle of Chukwu. Rarely does any group go so far as to ascribe to its forebears the status of captives, hostages, or slaves. In practice, every effort is made to conceal such a background no matter how blatantly it is proclaimed by rival communities. The telling of stories of the land emerges as a powerful instrument in communal self-assertion and in intercommunal rivalry.

**Contested Space**

In the third category of akúkó-àlà, we have stories about contested space—about the successive generations of men and women on whose shoulders lie the burden of ensuring the power and survival of the land. We may call these actors “heroes,” but in many respects the English term “hero” is inadequate to convey the full range of the meaning of the word, dikè (master of strength, or better still master or controller of forces) that the Igbo actually use to characterize this special breed of people. Whereas the English term is invariably used to describe a person who applies his extraordinary physical, moral, spiritual, and intellectual capabilities toward some positive end, the Igbo idea of dikè includes the opposite—the villain—a person of equally extraordinary capabilities whose actions are more destructive than constructive (for a comprehensive survey of this phenomenon, see Azuonye and Nwoga, forthcoming). Thus, in the end, the corpus of Igbo stories pertaining to the dikè are essentially stories about superhuman actors, be they heroes or villains. Beyond the archetypal man of action (the warrior), such superhuman beings are celebrated in a wide variety of other domains—wrestling, hunting, farming, householding, communal leadership, medicine, and oratory. In each case, the hero or villain is identified as di (master or controller of) or ọkà (one who excels in his particular domain). Thus, for example, we have the following types: di-ji (master of yams), di-mgbà (master of wrestling), di-ntà (master of the hunt); di-égbè (master of the gun), or ọkà-ókwù (one who excels in the use of words), etc. In his celebrated novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe paints a picture of a great man of action, Okonkwo, who typifies the Igbo idea of dikè in the domains of wrestling, warfaring, farming, and householding, both their heroic and villainous aspects.

**Laws of the Land**

In the fourth major category of akúkó-àlà, we have stories about the customs of the land, which for the Igbo are known as “the laws of the land” (Ômènààlà)—the unerring sacred rules of conduct ordained and superintended by the supreme mother that nurtures all creation, the earth-goddess Àlà. These stories incorporate references to the origins of communal beliefs, totems, taboos, customs, and institutions. In this sense, stories of the land are true myths, that is, myths as social charter that embody the ideals and espirit de corps of a living community.

How far these stories have grown out of memoirs and eyewitness accounts is rather difficult to ascertain. Quite often, narrators of akúkó-àlà cite their fathers or elders as authorities for the stories they tell about their people and their land. But a little inquiry will confirm Carl von Sydow’s model that argues that in the oral tradition folk memories of events decompose over time into memorates or formulaic patterns closer to but somewhat different from the actual event. The memorates themselves will further decompose over time into fabulates or formulaic patterns that are far removed from the truth and that include several universal fictional elements. Humorous tales or jokes, widely known today as sôrômchià (laugh-with-me), seem to be part of the memorate-fabulate continuum. Thus, it seems appropriate to include them in any discussion of stories of the land. In essence, they hold a mirror up to significant events and happenings at transitional moments between one historical epoch to another, for example, the transition from a traditional, nontechnological social order to a modern, technological one. Laughable errors arise from inability to adapt to change. In a popular joke, an illiterate wife of a western-educated man learns that she must address visitors, as appropriate, with the following phrases: “Welcome, sirs,” “Please have a seat,” “What would you like to drink?” and “Good-bye.” But when the visitors arrive in her husband’s absence, she
meets them at the door and repeats all four phrases parrotwise, much to their baffled amusement. In more traditional jokes, other forms of ironic discrepancies in behavior or morality are depicted. Thus, in a shaggy-dog type, Mbe (Tortoise), arrested for theft, pleads with his embarrassed children: "It's all your fault: I taught you not to steal but did any of you bother to teach me not to steal too?"

Humor is of course one of the most powerful ingredients of lively speech events in everyday social life. Described as ịkpà ụbụbọ (the weaving or gathering of discourse), every conversational act is conceived as involving a certain degree of creative effort. Not surprisingly, Chinua Achebe (1964) ranks what he calls "serious conversation" with "oratory" (ókwu-nta) as belonging to the highest order of artistic use of language among the Igbo. Apart from elaborate exchange of greetings and salutations by colorful titles or praise-names, even casual conversations involve the exchange of witticisms, the garnishing of discourse with similitude (ịhú, including proverbs, fables, exempla and related rhetorical devices), the creation and application of condensed stories-within-the-story to reinforce arguments, and a whole range of other rhetorical features, all of which are most ably reproduced in the dialogues of Achebe's own novels. Oratory, then, is the primary medium for the transmission of ịkụkọ-ala. Among its primary contexts are funerals, judicial or arbitration gatherings, public disputation, marriage ceremonies, and private family meetings in which the orator, as ókwu-nla (master of words) or ọnụ-nta-ekwụrụhọ (mouth-that-speaks-for-all) must offer condolences, pass judgement, inspire or arouse passions, negotiate bride prices with in-laws, or offer advice through homilies to the young by invoking and manipulating words and allusions to relevant aspects of the stories of the land.

Apart from oratory and its rhetorical constituents (proverbs and other forms of ịhú), the Igbo folk epic and other forms of traditional verse and traditional drama (dances, masked plays, folk festivals, and ceremonial rituals) constitute formal and theatrical contexts for the transmission of ịkụkọ-ala.

Ordinarily, stories of the land survive in capsular and memorable forms in the very names of every autonomous local community and its constituent village groups and villages. The great majority of such names are genealogical and in-

variably include references to the putative ancestor or ancestors of the people, for example, Umuduru (children or offspring of Duru), Umuchukwu (children or offspring of Chukwu), Ndezuzuogu (people of Izuogu), and so forth. A subclass of such names is devoted to invoking totemic animal-ancestors or helpers, for example, Nookwa or Ana-Okwa (land of Okwa, the Bushfowl), Nnewi or Ana-Ewu (land of Ewi, the Hare), and Loodu or Ala Odu (land of Odu, the Bushrat). Others are ethnonyms, identifying the group as distinct from others by reason of one or more social, economic, or cultural attributes, for example, Isu-Ikwu-Ato (Isusu, or mutual benefit group, of three matriclans); Aru-Chukwu (Spear of Chukwu, meaning weapons or agents of the supreme god, Chukwu), and so forth. A host of other names are geographic and refer to location in one of the four cardinal points, topography (hill or valley), soil type (clay or gravel people), and the like, for example, Ukwu-Oba (Oba Hill), Ukwu-Eke (Eke Hill), Nde-Agbo (People of the valley), Ihiala (People of the slope), Ota-Nchara (Place of gravel), Ota-Nzu (Place of chalk), Ilhite or Ibitte (Located on the left), Ikenga (Located on the right), Etiti (Center), Uzo-Agba (Gravel road), and Aba (Farm settlement).

Content, Contexts, and Performance of Ịkụkọ-Ifọ
As in the case of ịkụkọ-ala, the key to a proper appreciation of the content, contexts, and distinctive performance features of ịkụkọ-Ifọ is the key word, ifọ. The etymology of ifọ is rather obscure. But its semantic range includes fiction, relaxation, night entertainment, storytelling, flights of fancy, imaginative fantasy, and the like. In some Igbo communities, the term ọtu (lies) is used to stress the fabulous elements in the story. Sometimes, as in the Anambra River basin, this term is used side by side with another term, ita (historical romance), which includes the people's highly elaborate, poetic-dramatic epic narratives (see "The Igbo Folk Epic"). But generally speaking, ifọ seems to denote a special gathering of the family circle beside a fire or under the moonlight for storytelling events—a mixed program that includes the singing of songs with choric refrains (nursery rhymes), the telling of riddles, proverb-quoting competitions and other forms of verbal dueling such as tongue-twisting. In the following, Emenanjo (1978, ix–x) gives us a compendious description of a typical ifọ:
Story-telling was one of the principal avenues for informal education and entertainment in the traditional Igbo society. Folk-tales were usually told in the evenings after the days’ chores, or on the way to or from streams to fetch water, or the bush-farm to collect firewood or farm produce. In a typical evening the children usually congregated at agreed points, usually in the village square when there was moonlight or in the houses of women or children who were more favorable to or liked by children, and, of course, had an inexhaustible store of interesting and varied folk-tales and the ability to tell these in the most spectacular manner. Often elders, more usually women than men, and older children, more usually female than male, stayed around either to organize the little children or to correct an erring teller. Thus while the presence of these older people might be felt it is never obtrusive.

Àkúko-ìfọ comprises four categories of stories: stories set in the animal world, stories set in the human world, stories set in the supernatural or spirit world (cosmological stories, didactic or moralizing stories), and formulaic stories.

At the center of the stories set in the animal world is the trickster hero, Mbe (Tortoise). Thus the Igbo often say, Ilu agha Mbe (there is no story without the tortoise), and in some parts of Igboland, animal stories are simply called nnambesi (great father mbe the tortoise said). The central theme of these stories is the triumph of the mind over brute force. Mbe (Tortoise) epitomizes the survival of the fittest in a dark world of hunting and gathering, in which the big and the strong are constantly bent on edging out the weak and the small and seizing a lion’s share of everything. Mbe is the archetypal representative of the small and weak who is able to survive in such a world through mental agility. In encounters with big and strong animals like the leopard, the lion, and the elephant, Mbe always comes out the winner. But there are limitations to the positive evaluation the folk are prepared to accord intellectual agility. Does it go to the head of the hero? Does it make him selfish and overbearing? Such an excess is subjected to the same kind of punishment as is brute force. Mbe the trickster turns out to be as much a villain as he is a hero. In one story, he goes about collecting all the wisdom in the world in a calabash in order to keep it all to himself. But in the denouement he dies shamefully in an act of supreme folly. Even with the calabash of wisdom hanging around his neck, he lets himself fall headlong from a tall palm tree in order to crush a wasp perched on his head.

In many respects, these stories set in the animal world may be viewed as allegories of history. The animals appear as thinly disguised representations of various types of people in a wide variety of social, cultural, and historical roles and situations. Such representations even go far back into prehistoric realities and evoke memories of evolutionary patterns or life in more primitive times of hunting and gathering. These stories reflect some significant moments in the transitions to a more heroic (albeit savage) order, to the struggle for the establishment of a social charter, the rule of law and civilized values, and the triumph of mind over brute force.

Stories set in the human world assume the existence of a settled, civilized social order but one troubled by the perennial human foibles of greed, envy, rivalry, oppression, and intolerance. Its heroes are socially disadvantaged but virtuous actors who survive through the goodness of their hearts or by dint of poetic justice. In the family circle, co-wife rivalry often results in the triumph of the hated wife: she bears the king’s or her husband’s much-cherished only son or is blessed with riches when her son or daughter returns alive from the river of thunder and lightning to which she is invariably sent by a jealous co-wife bent on her destruction. The oppressed orphan is rescued and made wealthy by a dead relative, usually his or her own mother. The wise and obedient younger sibling survives when the foolish and the disobedient perish. A beautiful girl who rejects all human suitors ends up marrying a monster dressed in borrowed human parts and rich apparel. In the larger community—the great kingdom—a cruel and sadistic king is overthrown and humiliated by a low-born popular hero. Usually the wicked and the vicious must undergo a journey during which they must show a change of heart, suffer catharsis, or perish.

Stories set in the supernatural world invariably involve encounters between the living and the denizens of the spirit world, who are represented as monsters with social organizations similar to those of humans but with quaint personal attributes and manners. Usually, the spirits speak through the nose in guttural tones, are addicted to human flesh and the cocoyam, may possess several heads or half-bodies or evince other forms...
of deformity, are expert wrestlers, and live around in fires, either underground, in a dark forest, or in a vaguely defined land of spirits that lies across seven seas and seven deserts, separated from the human world by a deep gully. Descriptions of these spirits show clearly that they are seen not merely as ghosts of the dead but as beings of a different but vaguely humanoid species. Rather like the aliens of modern science fiction, they at times seem to betray memories of prehistoric humanoid peoples who may have coexisted for a while with modern human types before their final disappearance.

The Igbo have sometimes been represented in the literature as a people with little or no interest in the heavens or the cosmos beyond the earth. But the Igbo akukó-ifó includes a fairly remarkable, albeit scanty, body of cosmological stories that are concerned with the stars, the moon, the sun, and other heavenly bodies. In one such tale, the sun and the moon were once husband and wife. But following a long and bitter quarrel, the sun slashed the moon's head with a machete (creating the half-moon); but before this, the moon had struck the sun's face with a broom, creating the rays that we still see today. Interesting as these stories might be as indications that the Igbo did in fact contemplate the stars and the cosmos beyond the earth, they are rightly regarded not as myths but as didactic or moralizing stories, since what is ultimately emphasized is not so much the etiological element as the morals drawn at the end. Other “why so” or “how come” stories that focus on the characteristic features of animals, plants, and other phenomena are in the same sense better seen as didactic and moralizing tales than as true myths.

Other cycles of stories told as akukó-ifó are formula stories of the order of cumulative tales, catch-tales (stories in which the narrator describes his own death in the end), and other types that are distinguishable by their formal features but which otherwise belong thematically to one or the other of the above major categories.

**Storytelling as Communal Theater**

Igbo storytelling events have been rightly seen as communal theater. The storyteller invariably involves his audience and uses devices and techniques that help to reinforce a sense of drama and participation. First, there is a stylized opening repartee that is designed to transport the audience from the everyday world to the wonderful world of imaginative fancy. This opening repartee begins with a number of set opening formulas and then blossoms into a string of picturesque proverbs to which the audience must respond with appropriate parallels or complements. In one such repartee, we have the following:

Storyteller: *O tií!* (She has come to put . . . !)
Spectators: *Oyo!* (Let it fall . . . !)
Storyteller: *O tií!* (She has come to put . . . !)
Spectators: *Oyo!* (Let it fall . . . !)
Storyteller: If it happens here.
Spectators: We're there.
Storyteller: If it happens there.
Spectators: We're there.
Storyteller: When a dog carries a bag.
Spectators: Feces finish in the bush.
Storyteller: A forest in which a hen's toe is pierced by a thorn.
Spectators: No one can venture into it.
Storyteller: A woman that climbs a tree.
Spectators: A shooting war befits her more.
Storyteller: Once upon a time . . .
Spectators: And a certain time reached . . .

Thereafter, the story begins. The narrator may decide to adopt an eyewitness perspective, presenting the story as part of his own experiences in the course of an adventure through the mythic land of Iduu n’Oba. Iduu, as earlier mentioned, is often associated with the ancient kingdom of Benin, hence the reference to the Oba (King of Benin); but it would appear that in Igbo fabledom—more generally speaking—Iduu refers to the mythical world of fancy in which anything can happen. In stories in which the personal experience of the eyewitness is used, actions and incidents may be presented as one would present a commentary from a grandstand. At the end of the story the storyteller would normally sign off with the phrase, “That is where I reached and then came back,” and the audience would respond: “Welcome.” In other instances, the story, personified, runs and runs and catches the narrator or its main subject matter; and, at the end, it runs and runs off course, leaving the narrator to come back home to the spectators chorus of “Welcome.”

Igbo stories are commonly of the order of chantefables. In the main body of the story, the storyteller uses songs with choric refrains to which the spectators respond in chorus to highlight points of intense emotion. Prophetic warnings by birds and
other helpful figures come through dramatically using song. So too do the griefs, excitement, and joys of the heroes. Apostrophic, amplificatory, topical, complementary, inchoate, onomatopoetic, ideophonic, or lyrical (see “The Meaning of the ‘Meaningless’ Refrain in Igbo Folk Songs and Storytelling Events”) the choric refrains add color, gaiety, somberness, and a wide variety of tones and mood to the drama of the storytelling event.

The dramatic presentation of events is enhanced by the use of arrestingly vivid sound images with strings of onomatopoeia and ideophones as their primary vehicles. In the following excerpt, such a string on onomatopoeia and ideophones, combined with repetition, parallelism, appropriate dialogue, and pithy answers to questions from the audience about cultural contexts and magical action, help to give volume, velocity, and sound to the evocation of a wrestling match between the wrestling hero Àkátámikéògù, who is aided by his grandmother and one of his spirit adversaries, Òríé:

Storyteller: (claps) They rose, fiam fiam fiam fiam fiam fiam. . . . They arrived at the boundary between the land of humans and the land of spirits. That is, the boundary . . . Spectator: Is there really such a place called the boundary between the land of humans and the land of spirits? Storyteller: Yes! There is! Spectator: Really? Storyteller: Yes! Eke-nwa-mmuo! It is called Eke-nwa-mmuo. He moved on and on!!! Spectator: I don’t know where they call Eke-nwa-mmuo. Storyteller: Eke-nwa-mmuo. That is where people went when they died mysteriously in those days. So he moved on viaam viaam viaam viaam viaam viaam viaam. . . . Spectator: People used to go there in the olden times? Storyteller: Yes. Spectator: To ask questions? They usually took some pieces of white chalk? Do, remind me how? Another Spectator: Wait, let’s finish with this (story)! Storyteller: Let me get on with my story. So, they journeyed on viaam viaam viaam viaam viaam viaam viaam. . . . When they arrived at the boundary between the land of humans and the land of spirits, she told him it was time. And told him to get ready. She pulled off her human skin. Spectators: Hee! Storyteller: She stretched her hands across, gathered the skin off. . . . Then this one (Àkátámikéògù) came, pulled off his human skin. . . . He pulled off his human skin, stretched his hand across, collected the skin of a spirit and wore it. They moved on. As they moved viaam viaam viaam viaam viaam viaam viaam, who did they encounter first? Òríé! For Òríé was the youngest. . . . Òríé was at a place tending his yam tendrils, at such a time as now. Spectator: Òríé? Was this Òríé market which people go to now? Storyteller: Yes! He is a deity! Spectator: So, Òríé was the youngest? Storyteller: Yes! The youngest. He saw him. For he was a huge man. “Who are those moving forth?” He told Òríé that if he (Àkátámikéògù) caught him . . . that he should stand still there, for both of them would wrestle! He replied, “It is a challenge!” And he told him that if he defeated him, he should carry his household property. But if he defeated him (Óríé), he and his kinsmen would share his meat for food. And he replied, “It is a challenge!” (Clapping his hands). He came out, and they wrestled, girigi girigi girigi! They wrestled, wrestled, and wrestled. The old woman looked around and there was no one in sight. She raised her voice. . . . For she did not pass through the street. She passed through the forest. She raised her voice from the forest and cried: Àkátámikéògù! Unusual man of strength! Àkátámikéògù!
Unusual man of strength!
Stick up to wrestling,
Triumphs in wrestling
Unusual man of strength!
Kpam! Vruuuu! Tua! He landed Òrié on the ground gbiririm! Òrié broke into pieces.
(Chukwukere, 1993, 316-318)

The use of similar histrionic devices are amply evident in the Ogwashi-Uku narratives discussed and amply illustrated by Okpewho (1992). Other histrionic features of the storytelling events include: sharp character counterpoint and parallelism, the reversal of fortunes, situational or dramatic irony, and suspense and pathos.

Conclusion
Summing up the value of stories and storytelling in Igbo culture, the Old Man in the Abazon delegation to the military dictator Sam in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* asserts:

the story ... outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story ... that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbors. (Achebe, 1987, 114)

Igbo stories and storytelling are not only one of the most powerful forms of artistic verbal behavior in Igbo culture, but they are also the very soul of the culture. Stories nourish, strengthen, and validate social norms and vital social relationships. Above all they serve as dynamic instruments for maintaining cultural continuity, especially through their ideological recreations of the past that empower the present.

Further Reading
Azuonye, Chukwuma, and Donatus Nwoga, eds., *The Hero in Igbo Life and Literature*, Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension, forthcoming
Chukwukere, F. Ngozi, *Igbo Folktales About Women: Features and Ideological Implications* (Master’s project report, University of Nigeria), 1993