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Major Determinants in Resolving Conflicts in Igbo Folktales

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts in works of literature are expected to show the dominance of good deeds over bad ones. In this way, readers are to be abreast of proper behaviour for the guilty must be punished and the righteous should be rewarded. However, this is not always the case in Igbo folktales. In them, there are three determinants that affect resolution of conflicts. The first is the poetic justice which is the generally expected one. Though there are numerous cases where it is applied, sometimes it is tampered with when it comes in contact with wisdom which unfortunately cannot be distinguished from trickery. Therefore, application of wisdom or trickery is the second determinant. The third determinant is when wisdom is in combination with vengeance. Of these three determinants, the only one that does not fail in Igbo folktales is the last mentioned. It is with them that the Igbo curtail the excesses of both Tortoise and other stronger animals. Therefore, of the three determinants that control the resolution of conflicts in Igbo folktales, the most dominant is the merging of vengeance and wisdom in a character.

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Introduction

It is the wish of all and sundry that conflicts no matter when and where they arise are settled in such a way that the guilty party is detected, corrected and punished. In this way, future culprits are dissuaded from doing similar things. This now can augur for peace and progress in the society for anybody who is tempted to misbehave has to think twice because he will surely be detected and punished. This is the ideal situation but the question is: To which extent does the ideal hold in real life? In this real life, one can sometimes see fraudsters parading their ill-gotten wealth while those they duped die out of chill penury and untreated diseases. In this real life, the rich, most often are right when they are involved in cases with the poor. In this real life, one finds disappointments in situations contradicting well-worn beliefs of the people.

Since literature is a reflection of real life, we are not to be surprised when this ugly situation is also depicted in creative works. But sometimes, when one reads works of literature, one finds attempts by writers to rectify such ugly situations as was pointed out earlier. These writers create characters and situations that they use to challenge this social malaise. But as was pointed out, such situations do not always occur but are obtainable from time to time.

This, which is obtainable in written literature is also obtainable in Igbo folktales since these tales: "... are a reflection of the society which has created them. Similarly, all the values which govern the lives of the characters (animals or human beings) in such folktales have their being in the likes and dislikes of the society which tells and hears the tales" (Ikonne 40).

In other words, how the society thinks of a particular situation is what is reflected in the tales. Also, the anomalies earlier pointed out are also reflected in the tales for the imperfect society must automatically breed tales with imperfect resolutions of conflicts. This is part of the realism in

folktales for what is obtainable in the society is accurately portrayed in the tales.

In all, three conditions or considerations have been found to determine how conflicts between characters in Igbo folktales are resolved. The way it is done shows how justice is meted out to the characters of the tales. These three considerations are as follows.

The first is the old expectation of poetic justice which goes along with retributive justice and morality. This is utopic and serves to remind the children that they should be of good moral for an unseen eye is there to record the behaviour of all and sundry for in due time, the good person will get his rewards and the bad, his punishment. The second is the high premium laid on wisdom by the Igbo people. To them, as can be seen in the tales, one who has wisdom can go places and jump over numerous hurdles. In fact, a weak but wise man is stronger than a very strong and foolish man. The third consideration is the combination of wisdom and a desire for vengeance by an injured party. Wherever this occurs, the weak and vengeance-seeking character is always victorious.

It is in view of all these three considerations that the present researchers agree with B. S. C. Nwaozuzu who clearly states that "Kindness and good faith do not often pay dividend in a community where everyone else cheats and bullies. One must therefore be shrewd, double-tongued and ready to compromise when necessary. Such, briefly is the nature of 'Ifo' [folktales]" (2). Such is the social reality which determines the resolutions of conflicts in the tales as we are going to see, starting with poetic justice and its limitation.

Poetic Justice in Igbo Folktale

In literature, as it is in real life, problems must always arise because of conflicting interests. Normally, the settling of such problems has a lot to do with societal demands and interests. In other words, this settling of the cases between the major characters of a work of literature and their antagonists, otherwise known as conflict resolution, tells a lot about the demands of the society.

Hence, when the resolutions of conflicts are looked into, one can see societal requirements. Where the settlement is not done to vindicate the innocent or punish the guilty, readers of such works may feel that the work has not achieved something worthwhile. This is how it is both in Western literature and sometimes in Igbo folktales for the expectations of all men are the same. It is no wonder that Philip Sidney has it that:

For indeed poetry [and all other genres of literature] ever sets virtue so out in her best colours, making Fortune her well-waiting handmaid, that one must needs be enamoured of her. And of the contrary part, if evil men come to the stage, they ever go out as the tragedy writer [Euripides] answered to one that disliked the show of such persons, so manacled as the little animate folks to follow them (487).

In this way, these works of literature teach that people have to be of good disposition and avoid evil since there is a reward for whatever one does. Even when the repercussions delay in coming, they must surely come. It is no wonder then that creators of these works sound like religious preachers thereby using their works to appeal to the humane side of their readers or listeners. It is either that God or the gods will punish the evil doer or that they will reward the downtrodden.

The foregoing is the genesis of the coinage, poetic justice which in summary is the result of settling cases between the protagonist and his antagonist for each to be rewarded according to his behaviour. According to the online version of the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, this poetic justice which was coined by Thomas Rymer in his *The Tragedies of the Last Age Consider'd* means "...the morally reassuring allocation of and unhappy fates to the virtuous and the vicious characters respectively, usually at the end of a narrative or dramatic work". Of a simpler statement but having the same meaning is the online version of the *American Heritage Dictionary* which defines it as "the rewarding of virtue and the punishment of vice often in an especially appropriate or ironic manner."

This last dictionary gives an illustration with a known thief going to jail for a crime he did not commit. In other words, in one way or the other, the guilty must suffer and will never go unpunished. That accounts for the known thief going to jail when he is not guilty of a particular crime because his current woe is a fitting retribution of his earlier crimes. It is not in being guilty during his later interaction with another character that the plot is resolved to favour his antagonist. This conflict resolution goes beyond that for it sees to the upliftment of the downtrodden who is just in his actions, to the healing of the innocent sick person and to the normalization of strained relationships when a just person is involved. Whatever it is that is highlighted must be resolved in such a way as to portray a mighty and dominating power at work. Therefore, it is in this way that we have to view Plato's stand that: "... this must be our notion of the just man that even when he is in poverty or sickness or any other seeming misfortune, all things will in the end work together for good to him in life and death for the gods have a care of any one whose desire is to become just and to be like God, as far as man can attain the divine likeness, by the pursuit of virtue" (437)?

In other words, the belief is that whatever one does will affect one in the future. The implication is that everybody is expected to behave well because of the desire for future good rewards. This, in the main is how works of literature are supposed to inspire readers and hearers for them to behave well.

That was how such sentences like the one uttered by Miss Prism in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* came into being. According to her: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means" (186).

In oral literature, who has not heard of the statement that "They lived happily ever after" that originated in a nearly frustrated marriage arrangement between a prince and an orphan – the orphan's woes having come from her stepmother? The foregoing consideration is the ideal in the world of literature and the desires of people. But to which extent does the ideal occur in literature and in the real life of people? This then leads us to the exploration that follows in view of what is obtainable in Igbo folktales.

In these tales, poetic justice is maintained so as to inspire the children who are the chief recipients of the tales, into doing good deeds. The importance of this can be seen when we consider that at that age, people hardly forget what they are taught. In this way, the future stability of the society is assured. This idea accords well with the biblical injunction that says, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverb 22:6).

In support of this pervasive usage of poetic justice in Igbo folktales is Uchenna D. Uwakwe who has it that: "... to maintain a balance in the affairs of the society, which is also implicit in literature, poetic justice is present in all these folktales, depending on the thematic focus of each of them. At the end of the tales, the cheating trickster is punished while the inventive one is rewarded" (2).

However, the researchers do not agree with all that is contained in the above citation as they are going to show later. But concerning the poetic justice's pervasive influence in certain types of tales, one can see that it is heedlessly applied even at the cost of extensive usage of deus ex machina. An illustration can be seen with "The tortoise and the coconut" (Onwu 7). The tale relates the activities of Tortoise during one season of scarcity of water. In order to survive, all the animals have to travel far and wide searching for water. Only Tortoise fails to go out. Rather than carrying his empty container like other animals, he resorts to digging holes along the footpath which those who went to look for water will come back. Any animal that comes back falls into the hole thereby breaking his water pot. The little water that remains in the potsherd is there for Tortoise who, unfortunately has no container of his own. Because of this lack, he begs coconut tree to lend him some empty containers into which he pours the stolen water. After toiling to fill these containers, coconut tree tricks him and carries all the containers heavenwards. The aetiological summary gives this phenomenon as "... how the coconut got the water that it contains" (10).

From this story, one can see that children are being thought to face their problems squarely and not to resort to cheating. Rather than cheat, they should work hard because whatever they get through cheating will at the end be taken out of their grip.

Let it be noted here that whatever idea is muted in tales is also highlighted in the sayings of the people. As an illustration of this last idea of a cheat being cheated, the people have it that "*Okuko agwotalu n'ogwu na-eso Agwu ala* -The fowl that is gained through fetish practice goes home with the *Agwu* spirit". In this way, children are enjoined to avoid duplicity of all types because the gain is finally lost. For this to be clearly stated, an ordinary coconut tree is then personified, thereby emphasizing that an unseen power is behind the scene, controlling the affairs of men.

This usage of personification is very rampant so as to highlight the particular message being projected. In actuality, it is not only when a case is being settled between two antagonists that it is put into use. Wherever there is an anomaly, everything will be put into use so as to get a stable outcome that can be used in teaching the children. That accounts for what happens in E. Nolue Emenanjo's edited book *Omalinze: A Book of Igbo Folk-tales*. In this book, a maltreated orphan wants to follow other nubile girls to the village market known as Eke Oloma. They shall be dancing for the prince who is looking for a wife. The girl to be selected is one who excels in dancing (34).

A lot of obstacles are before this orphan. First, nobody can buy for her the apparel and other things needed for the dance. Second, when she indicates her desire to go for the dance, the other girls not only shunned her, they abuse her physically pointing out her low social status. Yet, that does not dissuade her but unfortunately, these their actions force her to be late thereby exposing her to encountering some fairies who nearly kill her. But due to her song with which she explains her predicament, one of the fairies supplies her with pomade, ear rings and ankle bands. Another spirit that appears in the form of an old woman, who she meets next, takes away these and furnishes her with better materials. She arrives to be the cynosure of all the eyes at the market place – most especially those of the prince who selects her as his future wife. Therefore, for this distant replication of the Western Cinderella to get even with her adversaries, she has to be helped by spirits, and contrary to expectation, her beauty out dazzles that of the other girls for her to emerge as the champion.

In this way, the folktale is on the side of the downtrodden who has nothing to recommend them. This is one of the considerations that determine who wins in any conflict. In this case, the orphan has dance garb which is better than that of any girl in that arena. Her dancing ability far excels that of any other girl. It is no wonder that the prince finds her as the best marriage material. She now moves from disgrace to being a choice queen.

Furthermore, a critical look at Igbo folktales can easily reveal that the characters are classified into two. It is either that the character is big or he is small; rich or poor; wise or foolish, etc. Normally, the smaller ones are imbued with more wisdom than the bigger ones who often are very idiotic. It is at this point that the Igbo show their preference of wit over other considerations. Therefore, it is at this point that sometimes, certain considerations are made to take supremacy over poetic justice thereby affecting the result of the conflict resolution. This is where we look at Tortoise as the major trickster in the Igbo folktale arsenal.

The Puny Nature of Poetic Justice in the Face of Wisdom

The Igbo are people who value wisdom and from their tales, one can easily garner that wisdom is antithetical to bulkiness. Therefore, all the regular wise characters in their tales have nothing to do with huge body structure. Among such wise characters are Tortoise, Sunbird and Ram, (who happens to be the youngest of foolish Sheep's children). Normally, the last two characters appear to curtail the excesses of both Tortoise and other bigger and stronger animals. Therefore, when settling disputes between these tricksters and other animals, the Igbo see to it that the wise ones most often win--most especially when the last two are involved.

But in their winning, one can see elements of dishonesty but no matter what it takes, winning is winning. This is also the view of Emmanuel N. Obiechina who puts it that:

The stock-characters include the Trickster who is often something of a rogue. He manages to extricate himself from intriguing and sometimes dangerous situations by a display of mental agility. He is often associated with the forces of disorder within society – he breaks laws, tramples on customary usages and subverts established social conventions, relying on the nimbleness of his wit to get him off from difficulties (153).

In this way, we can see that it is only by the application of higher cranial ability that Tortoise wins both Hippopotamus and Elephant in a tug of war game. The tale is from *Tortoise – the Fantastic Winner* (Ogbalu 31). But is he actually the winner? The answer is left to the reader for while each of the two competitors thinks that Tortoise is pulling him, the two strong animals are actually pulling against each other. When they decide to come and concede victory to Tortoise, each finds to his amazement that Tortoise was pulling both of them at the same time – not knowing that they were pulling against each other. They do not know that when Tortoise saw them coming, he cut the rope, and started holding each of the two ends with both hands. In this way, the story's conclusion is "Each therefore conceded the victory to the tortoise" (Ogbalu 31).

A question may be asked: Why is it that many parts of the Igbo nation choose some of these animals as symbols (or even totems) of their people and none has so far chosen the tortoise to symbolize their wisdom if the people value wisdom over raw strength? An illustration can be made with the Ngwa people who see great power in the gait of the elephant. Their ancient war cry during the days of inter-town wars is generally known. Till today, that war cry is:

Nzogbu, Nzogbu	Trample to death, trample to death
Enyi mba enyi	Elephantine town, elephant
Nzogbu	Trample to death
Enyimba enyi	Elephantine town, elephant
Zogbue Nwoke	Trample men to death
Enyimba enyi	Elephantine town, elephant
Zogbue Nwanyi	Trample women to death
Enyi mba enyi	Elephantine town, elephant

Again, in Awuda quarter of Nnobi town which is in Idemili South Local Government Area of Anambra State, the people have a river at their boundary with another town. They refer to themselves as Akum-obi-na-mmili [Hippopotamus-that-lives-in-water]. For emphatic purpose, they clearly painted on the front side of their civic center which is located at Ekeoge Square, the image of the sea animal. These people pride themselves as being invincible in every area of life just like the hippopotamus. There are other illustrations but to the best knowledge of the researchers, no town or village has used the tortoise as their symbol. If that is the case, why then do we say that the Igbo value wisdom above raw strength to the extent that sometimes they disregard the rule of poetic justice?

The simple answer can be found in the sayings of the people which is that "*Nkita nile na-eri nsi ma nke richara bulu ya n'onu, obu nkita ahu ka ndi mmadu na-akpo ori nsi* – All dogs eat excrements but only the one that fails to clean its mouth after eating that people call excrement-eater". In other words, the people know how to hide their failings while at the same time making use of the attributes of the animal. They would not like to be very overt in their administration of the animals behaviour in their tales. This is more so when we consider

that: “The trickster is often associated with the forces of disorder because he breaks laws and customs and subverts established authority. He is cunning, intelligent, greedy, selfish and vicious. He succeeds through his mental agility and deception” (Mbundu 129).

In fact, Tortoise has only his wisdom admired by the people. Behind him are numerous other qualities which the people do not like and which their culture abhors, and if allowed, will destroy the entire culture of the people. This can account for the reason why he is sometimes caught and exposed, and at other times is allowed to trample on socially accepted norms; at the resolution of such conflicts, he is allowed to escape without being punished.

Again, emphasizing Tortoise’s negative character is Nkem Okoh who has it that: “No character or figure in the tales is better equipped than tortoise for illustrating the irrationality, viciousness, vindictiveness and meanness of man. To the audience, tortoise thus symbolizes the negative, innermost and darkest side of some of its members, even of humanity in general” (32).

Therefore, generally, the Igbo cannot openly admire the animal’s attribute. But individually, among them are human tricksters who cheat others of their money. Such people come home for a flamboyant display of their ill-gotten wealth. Funny enough, some of those who hate the means of acquiring such wealth go to them to drink and solicit for help.

Furthermore, a close study of settling conflicts between Tortoise and his antagonists shows that sometimes he is convicted and at other times, he is let free in an overt culture–contradicting case. An illustration can be cited with “The Painful Reward of Mischief” (Obodoechi 49). In this story, after a hunting expedition, the animals leave the games they killed in the house of Lion but at night, young Tortoise goes and steals the meat. The following day, Lion is killed due to his negligence. In this way, the following animals are killed after they have been found negligent – Sheep, Goat, Pig, Buck and Giant Rat. In all these cases, the meat is stolen by young Tortoise. When it is the turn of Tortoise to guard the proceeds of the hunting expedition, young Tortoise is caught and instead of exposing him to the public for him to pay with his life, he only covers him with a mortar. The aetiological part has it that “Till today, the tortoise carries this mortar-shell on its back wherever it goes” (Obodoechi 51).

In view of the lives he wasted, is covering him with a mortar enough punishment? Even, in some tales, after he has deceived his colleagues into being killed, he is allowed to turn their carcasses into food. Yet, the conflict is resolved in his favour. Or is it not what is in “The Tortoise and the Young Monkey” which is in Ogbalu’s *Tortoise – the Fantastic Winner* (39). In that story, there is a famine in the animal kingdom. For Tortoise to survive, he arms himself with a short sword, rubs a smelly substance on his body and lies down by the side of a footpath. This substance attracts to him swarms of flies. This his state deceives the young son of monkey who goes to enjoy the putrefying mass of meat. When he comes near Tortoise, Tortoise stabs him to death and carries the carcass home. What punishment, is allocated to him for his committing murder? None!

But it is the stand of the Igbo ancestors that “It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female” (Achebe 87). This stand explains Okonkwo’s fleeing to his grandmother’s place for seven years because he committed a female murder. But both young

Tortoise and his father in the above tales wasted a lot of lives through committing “male murders” and if poetic justice is to apply to their cases, they will surely lose their lives. A lot of crimes which ought to see to the death of Tortoise end up with just slight punishments meted out to him or he escapes without being punished at all.

Another illustration can be seen in the numerous tales where he usurps other people’s yam farms or steals yam tubers or seedlings. But it is clear to all traditional Igbo people that “Yam stealing – whether of freshly planted seed or the mature root - was punishable by death” (Basden 148). One needs to read Ogbalu’s “*Mbe na akpa ji – Tortoise and the Bag of Yams*” which is in *Mbediogu* (74). When he sees a misplaced bag of yams, he keeps on taking to his home, the tubers one after the other. At a time, the animal community goes on a hunting expedition. Fearing that the people may discover the bag, he hides near it to terrify them by making them to believe that a spirit is around. In this way, he takes all the tubers. Why such a resolution when the people hold very high everything that concerns yam? Not only that, he sometimes cheats others of their yam farms for him either to go scot-free or be given a slight punishment.

These illustrations are few examples of things which the Igbo hold dear and their forefathers stipulated the types of punishment that help to scare people away from failing them. The reason is that “... the moral order must be maintained so that men can live in peace and have abundant life. The Igbo forebears therefore, constructed a number of controls, the finest of which was to authorize moral character” (Nwaozuzu 7).

But Tortoise who is a thief does not have this moral character. Yet, where he ought to be convicted, so as to accord well with poetic justice, he sometimes escapes or is given slight punishment. Where he escapes is due to his higher intelligence thereby showing the people’s regard for wisdom. In this case, we have cleared Rems Nna Umeasiegbu’s dilemma in his *Words are Sweet: Igbo Stories and Storytelling*. According to him, Tortoise: “... often cheats and deceives his friends and goes free while these suffer as a result of the treachery. The Igbo are meticulous about the punishment of evil doers, and prompt proper redress is given to those who have been wronged. How then can we explain the fact that some evil-doers in the tales go unpunished” (14)?

So far, we have seen that when the tricksters are not involved, deserving punishments are correctly meted out to those who err, thereby portraying the influence of poetic justice. However, this is not always the case when the tricksters are involved. But among them, Tortoise is the worst offender and the major trickster. In resolving conflicts in which he is involved, he is sometimes guided by retributive justice and at other times, he is not because of his wisdom which the people value very much.

The third determinant that influences the resolution of conflicts in Igbo folktales is vindictiveness when it is backed up with wisdom as it is always obtained when any other trickster apart from Tortoise, is involved. When deeply looked at, it can be seen as an extension of poetic justice. But it is carried out by a mortal. In this case, there is no unseen force upholding rectitude in the affairs of mortals. This then forms the last subheading of this enquiry.

When Vindictiveness is Backed with Wisdom

When the other two regular tricksters Sunbird (or Wren) and Ram are considered, one can see that the Igbo do not have any consideration for bulk size as a determinant for the

supremacy of tricksters. Here, Ram is the biggest of the three regular tricksters while Sunbird is the smallest. But both of them individually always defeats Tortoise when they come into conflict, thereby suggesting that in assigning the power of the dominance of brain over raw strength, bulk size as always, does not constitute a major consideration. All that should be known is that the trickster must not be bulky in size.

To help us to pinpoint accurately the combination of vindictiveness and wisdom, let us study "A fight of wits" (67). This is in Umeasiegbu's *The Way We Lived: Ibo Customs and Stories*. In this story, one of the sons of Sheep called Hasa (but who from the introduction of the book and our residual knowledge of folktale characters must be a newly created name for Nwaebunuako since Hasa and even Faye are not Igbo words) follows Tortoise to a feast. From place to place, Tortoise drops the cutlery – plates, drinking horns, spoons, etc – intending to send him out from time to time to collect whichever one of them is to be used. In this way, he is going to use this tactics in debarring him from partaking in the feast-as he earlier did to Hasa's brother, Faye which later caused his death (68).

But unknown to him, Hasa always picks up whatever is dropped. At the heat of the feast, he starts sending Hasa out to collect whichever item that is needed. Hasa simply goes to the backyard where he put those things and collects them. In anger, Tortoise one after the other, rejects the items and the meal that it is meant for. Even when he goes to a woman selling food and books his meal to be given to him at 7.00 pm, Hasa goes and changes the time. That enables him to cheat Tortoise of that also.

While going, Tortoise wants to dodge the services of this stubborn and greedy servant. He has to carry his share of meat in a rectangular basket. That does not stop Hasa from flying into the basket and eating all the meat. "To make up for the loss in weight, he picked little pebbles and added to the bones" (70). At home, he flies and perches on the head of Tortoise's only son. In attacking him, Tortoise murders his son. "Hasa was happy that he had at last avenged his brother's death" (70).

In all, what the activities of these minor tricksters show is that when wisdom merges with a strong desire by an injured party for revenge, the combination can defeat any situation no matter how adverse the situation is. That is why an ordinary ram has been created to fly with wings, and it does not sound irrational for a deus ex machina is never out of place in folktale narration. The only thing needed is the message which is being projected.

In other words, in creating these minor tricksters, the Igbo ancestors in these tales emphasize that retributive justice can still show from time to time when it is backed up with wisdom and a strong desire for revenge. The combination of the two--wisdom and revenge--is a formidable force against brutal force and ordinary wisdom. That is why a small goat is able to kill Lion and his son in "The Lion and the Goatling" which can be found in Joel O. Oruche's *Tales for African Children* (19). The teaching is that anybody who has been deeply wronged can always avenge and defeat his foe if he is armed with wisdom and the desire to revenge.

In conclusion, one can see that Igbo folktales as a form of literature is not too particular about projecting poetic justice. It is not that there are not innumerable examples of it but sometimes it is tampered with when it comes in contact with

the effect of wisdom. However, this wisdom as depicted in the tales is the same as trickery or duplicity.

Again, this trickery is not as dominating as when it is in combination with vindictiveness. Therefore, of the three determinants of conflict resolution in Igbo folktales – poetic justice, wisdom (or trickery) and wisdom when combined with vindictiveness – the unfailing one is the combination of wisdom and vindictiveness.

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