Comparative Appraisal of Igbo and Bekwarra Animal Stories and Aesop's Fables

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Abstract
This study is a comparative analysis of animal stories of Igbo and Bekwarra cultures in Nigeria, alongside Aesop's fables from ancient Greece. The research explores the thematic similarities between these three storytelling traditions, examining the use of animals as characters, morals, lessons, and cultural values. The study aims to: ascertain whether Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories are qualify for fables as Aesop's; identify common themes and motifs in Igbo, Bekwarra, and Aesop's animal stories; compare the moral lessons and teachings conveyed through these stories; and evaluate the role of storytelling in preserving cultural heritage and values. By investigating these animal stories, this research sheds light on the shared human experiences and cultural exchange across continents, highlighting the importance of storytelling in shaping our understanding of the world and our place within it. The study concludes that: since Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories possess the general or common characteristics and core elements of fables, they are qualify for fables and the Ibo and Bekwarra animal stories share common themes and motifs with Aesop's fables.

Keywords*: Igbo, Bekwarra, Aesop's Fables, animal stories, oral literature, cultural heritage and storytelling.*

Introduction

Fables characterise the literature of every given people of the world. This essay briefly compares Aesop's [Aesopian] fables and Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories in order to determine whether or not Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories qualify as fables on the basis of three points of comparison, being three characteristics of fables. The Igbo of South-Eastern and the Bekwarra of South-Southern Nigeria share some cultural traits in common. Amidst reasonable differences, such traits evidently obtain in their marriage, burial, widowhood, religious, and festival cultures, among others. There are also similarities in worldviews, linguistic configurations, oral literature, oral tradition and knowledge, and so on. Their similarities are manifestations of cultural similarities among African cultures and cultural universals among global cultures, which constitute cultural universalism (see Prah, 2009; Robert, Besong & Dibie, 2016). Historical and geographical factors and social contact also account for some of the similarities.

Given the foregoing, this study sees the necessity to appraise an aspect of the oral literature of these two Nigerian cultures - Bekwarra and Igbo. Basically, oral literature comprises folktale, myth and legendary. Fables (animal stories) make up an aspect of the oral literature of every culture or people. They fall under the folktale category of oral literature (Robert, 2016; Robert & Anura 2018). Fables have various characteristics. These include generalised meaning, reflecting people's experiences/actions based on their worldview, revelation of higher spiritual powers and reminding people of larger truths, not being necessarily based on real life experiences, having talking animals, moral on the implication of making wrong decision, practical and hard-hearted messages, the prevalence of force and cunning, and taking advantage of the weak.

Every fable usually has three main elements: orientation (moral), complicating action (conflict or primary events), and resolution along with evaluation. They largely employ humour, irony, metaphor, simile, repetition, imagery and symbolism, and inverted sentences. Going by these elements and the above mentioned characteristics, this study argues that Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories are fables, just as Aesop's fables are. Also, since they follow the traditional or general structure and characteristics of fables, they undoubtedly qualify for fables. Any counter consideration of them as being otherwise is subjective and Eurocentric. The conclusion of the study shall be drawn from the foregoing premises. Sustaining its central argument in the course of the analysis to be made herein, the study shall submit that every fable shares some core characteristics with other fables across the globe. Therefore, since Igbo and Bekwarra fables share three core characteristics of fables with the Aesop's fables, among others, they are indeed full-fledged fables in the same vein with Aesop's fables.

A Brief History of Fable

Fable is derived from the Latin word *fabula*, meaning story or tale that teaches a moral lesson, often using animals (Welsh, 2014, p. 1). The use of [man-made talking] animals to represent humans in creative works for various purposes is called Anthropomorhism (Kollias, 2015, p. 96). It is observed that this act of representing animals with human characteristics and speech dates back to ancient Sumer and Egypt (Welsh, 2014, p. 1). For a good number of scholars, there are similarities between this ancient tradition and Aesop's fables (Dalley, 1991; Kollias, 2015). In particular, two of Aesop's fables have been traced back to a much older collection of Sumerian proverbs of before the 7th century BC (Gordon, 1958; Dalley, 1991).

The Aesopian fable - The Gnat and the Bull - is similar to the older Sumerian proverb - The Gnat and the Elephant and The Eagle and the Fox - is similar to the older Sumerian - The Eagle and the Serpent - (Gordon, 1958; Thomas, 1881). According to Thomas (1881, p. 6), the oldest fable on record, which we know to have been thus practically applied, is that of The Trees and the Bramble, as found in Holy Writ. Lobban (2002) offers a fairly detailed history of Aesop's fables, which reflects the narrations offered by scholars such as those above (Thomas, 1881; Gordon, 1958; Dalley, 1991; Kollias, 2015).

A Brief on Aesop's Origin and Fables

Aesop (c. 620-560 BC) is reported to be a Greek slave who lived in Greece about 600 BC (Thomas, 1881, p. 3). Herodotus, a Greek historian, has claimed that Aesop was a slave, first owned by Xanthus on the Isle of Samos and later by Iadmon who gave him freedom because he was such a skilful story-teller (Herodotus, Waterfield & Dewald, 1998). Over 600 animal fables are credited to Aesop (Burkert, 1992, p. 121), many of which have been retold, reproduced and/or republished as ancient morality tales and modern adapted versions of his fables. Aesop is reported to have travelled to Asia Minor and while there, his wit and

intelligence earned him the position of an Adviser to King Croesus, who sent him on a diplomatic tour to Greece (Thomas, 1881; Gordon, 1958; Burkert, 1992; Herodotus, Waterfield & Dewald, 1998; Lobban, 2002). It is also reported that at Corinth, Aesop recited,The Frogs who Desired a King, and Better No Rule than Cruel Rule the moral (Thomas, 1881, p. 3). Similarly, Herodotus, Waterfield and Dewald (1998) have reported that the people of Delphi took offence with Aesop's fables and threw him from a cliff. It is observed that Aesop was from Africa, as the Greek name *Aisopos* was only a version of *Aethiop* or Ethiopian, which means burnt-faced people'. That many of the animals in his fables were of African rather than Greek origin is another proof of his African origin. His fables were African apes, lions, elephants, crocodiles, jackals, monkeys, asps, scorpions (Lobban, 2002). Therefore, considering the consistent animal characters and names between Nubian and Aesopian moral fables, Lobban (2002) concludes that Aesop was of African origin and Ethiopian/Nubian ancestry. Drawing inference from the foregoing history of Aesop's African origin and Lobban's (2002) submission, we argue that Aesop's fables are African, just as Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories are also African fables. The animals used in Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories are of African origin and environment.

Functions of Fables across Cultures

Fables, folktales involving the use of animals to tell symbolic stories about good and evil in society, are meant to teach and uphold morals, values, good, virtues, norms, customs, traditions, beliefs, and positive ways of life in contrast to the opposites of all these and more. As aspects of oral literature, fables, as folktales, play the functions of literature in general. These include education, information, instruction, entertainment, cultural transmission, preservation, depiction and promotion of identities, guidance and counselling, didactic (teaching moral lessons), encouragement, persuasion and dissuasion, criticism, correction and judgement, (Chesaina 1994; Akijobi, 2001; Epuchie and Amaechi, 2009; Ogbalu, 2011; Onu & Emeka-Nwobia, 2016; Onuko and Ezuko, 2012; Ibeh, 2016; Madu, 2016; Nkoli & Okoye, 2016; Robert, 2016; Ojo & Ayo, 2018; Robert & Anura, 2018; Nnadi, 2020). In addition, Ojo and Ayo (2018) demonstrate that oral literature, fables and other folktales inclusive, could serve as a viable means of several phases of development in Nigeria and even beyond.

Apart from fables, other examples of folktales include songs, dance, narratives, proverbs, riddles, stories, etc. (Chesaina 1994; Robert, 2016; Robert & Anura, 2018). The educational values of Igbo folktales, inclusive of animal stories, have been affirmed by different scholars as means of educating children and inculcating morals into them (Nnadi, 2020; Ibeh, 2016; Nkoli & Okoye, 2016; Onuko and Ezuko, 2012; Ogbalu, 2011; Epuchie and Amaechi, 2009; Akijobi, 2001; Uba-Mgbemena, 1982). Akijobi (2001) and Epuchie and Amaechi (2009), among others, regret the contemporary lukewarm attitude and the negligence most contemporary Igbo show towards folktales among the Igbo, as such erstwhile so much cherished stories are considered senseless, meaningless, untrue and archaic.

As Madu (2016) explains, among the Igbo, it is said that *alə na-awa madu mbe* (Earth demands tortoise from a person). This expresses folkloric and mythical implications, the value of the tortoise among the Igbo people and the symbolic uses of this animal. Like the dung-beetle (*ádà*), tortoise (*mbekwu)* is rare to find. These animals are not commonly found or got. One symbolic use of tortoise is its use for cleansing rituals for an excommunicated fornicator in the traditional Igbo setting. The Bekwarra use it for various traditional medicine and spiritual rites of delivering a person from serious attack or possession by evil spirits. Both Bekwarra and Igbo believe that any charm made with the tortoise is very hard to, if not impossible, to spoil or destroy by anyone else. Among the Igbo, for example, the *dibia*s tie the *ẹkpərị/ẹkpə ọgwụ*

(charms) to the tortoise's body and send it off on an errand to an enemy. The shell of the tortoise is of great value to the *dibias* (Madu, 2016; Nkoli & Okoye, 2016).

Some Examples of Igbo and Bekwarra Fables

In several Igbo animal stories, the tortoise (mbe) is presented as master trickster, The tiger "agu" often referred to as the king of the animals; chameleon (ogwumagala) as the doctor; etc. (Ibeh, 2016; Madu, 2016; Ikwubuzo, 2008). Various stories are told about tortoise among the Igbo and the Bekwarra. These people portray the tortoise as an ingrate, "an Oliver Twist", a cunning animal, a betrayal and charlatan, and so on. The Igbo fable of the "Tortoise and Cricket" and the "Tortoise, Bat and Sheep" are two ample examples of tortoise's demonstration of ingratitude, betrayal and being cunning. The Igbo fable of "Tortoise, Bat and Sheep" tells of how tortoise proves himself the most cunning animal. The tortoise assembled all animals and declared that no other animal could win him in the game of cunning. Sheep showed up as one who could win the tortoise in the game. Then, tortoise set a day and asked the sheep to accompany him to a feast. While going, he asked sheep to take along a plate and a cup.

Reaching a particular spot, the tortoise asked the sheep to drop the plate there. At another spot, he asked sheep to drop the cup. The sheep did. At the feast, when food was being shared, the tortoise asked the sheep to go and get that plate dropped on the way. Upon return, the sheep discovered that the tortoise had finished the food shared to them. The same thing happened when wine was being shared. Upon realising that sheep was hungry, tortoise fed him up with water until his stomach bulged out. Tortoise blocked sheep's anus with palm kernel. On reaching home, sheep's children rejoice that their father fed well at the feast he attended. While entering his hut, one of sheep's children saw and removed the palm kernel, and the water gushed out. The sheep fell and died. Tortoise tells the story of victory in the game of cunning with sheep.

Convinced, the tortoise put forward the challenge again and bat came out. While going to and at the feast, tortoise told the bat what he had told sheep. Bat flew to the spots and returned before tortoise could sit. The tortoise got angry and told the bat that since he needed the food and the drink that much, he should just eat and drink the food and the wine. Bat did. Tortoise did not eat anything and was very hungry. Bat fed him with water and blocked his anus wit palm kernel, preventing the water from gushing out. On reaching home, what happened to sheep happened to tortoise and bat gathered other animals and told them the story. Then, they declared him the winner.

The Igbo story "Tortoise and Cricket" narrates what happened between cricket and tortoise at a burial ceremony. Tortoise assembled all the animals to ask each of them how they would cry when they loss their parents. Goat, sheep and cow cried out with their usual onomatopoeic sounds. Tortoise shunned and made fond of them. Then, cricket gave him the kind of cry he wanted viz: *Chee-Chee, chee-chee* (twice) … *Ndebeleke; Ne nya jeko onwu … Ndebeleke; Otu nya n'ukwu tu nya n'ukwu … Ndebeleke; Otunya n'ukwu n'oruegde … Ndebeleke* (i.e. I am going for a burial … *Ndebeleke*; It may hit my leg or my waist … *Ndebeleke*; If it hits my waist, it will begin to vibrate …Ndebeleke). Tortoise was impressed and thereby invited cricket to attend a burial with him. On that D-day, he hid cricket in his bag and asked him, as the approach the burial ground to cry. Cricket was crying, while tortoise was busy robbing saliva on his face and pretending to be the one crying (Madu, 2016).

The people were so touched by Tortoise's cry that they crowned him their king, and later offered him food and wine. He enjoyed all alone and threw in bones to the cricket hidden in the bag. Angered by his actions, cricket crept out of the bag and consulted a medicine man for revenge against tortoise. The medicine man punished tortoise by getting him stuck to the ground. He cried and begged the people to go to the medicine man and find out what was wrong with him. Upon reaching there, cricket narrated what happened and why he had asked the medicine man to punish the tortoise. They felt sorry, pleaded with cricket to forgive and release him from the spell for them. He did. When tortoise was confronted, he denied ever seeing cricket. Then, at once, the people immediately descended on cricket and killed him for daring to lie against their king (Madu, 2016).

More so, the Bekwarra animal story of Oko/Odurugbo (or, Oko versus Odurugbo) presents wild birds as talking animals. During a meeting, Odurugbo foolishly succumbed to other birds' plot against Oko, "his" brother, and they got "him" killed. Oko's meat is shared among all the birds present and its head given to the brother, Odurugbo. Despite offering "his" brother, Odurugbo could not eat "his" brother's meat. Shortly afterwards, as "he" tried to join a bird or one group of birds or the other for company, interaction and chat, "he" was always driven away or "they" all ran away from "him". Odurugbo is told, "Please go; you have killed your only brother without minding "his" companionship to you. Don't come close to us and finally sell us out to others to kill us too. Go and look for or meet your brother." From then onward, Odurugbo kept looking for Oko, "his" brother, flying from one point or place to another, crying and calling "Oko, Oko, Oko, Oko!!!!" As Odurgbo searches for Oko, "he" cries out tears on the leaves where "he" perches. Odurugbo is said to perpetually show regret and remorse for betraying his only brother, Oko, but all to no avail. Even without further explanation or analysis, it could be understood from the Bekwarra's Oko-Odurugbo animal story above that Bekwarra animal stories are fables, likewise Igbo's animal stories.

Qualifying Igbo and Bekwarra Animal Stories for Fables

From time immemorial, fables of various cultures, Western and non-Western alike, as obtained in Western literature, involve animal stories (Chadwick, 1994, p. 71). By this reality, it is understood that Igbo and Bekwarra fables are characterised by the use of animals to tell stories, particularly using talking animals. Madu (2016) notes that in African traditional societies, folktale as well as other forms of oral literature plays the role entertaining and instructing the audience. Besides, it serves as the repository of a society's identity, indigenous belief systems and traditions. Recall that we have noted that fables are an aspect of folktale, and folktale is an aspect of oral literature. One of the characteristics of fables is that majority of fables use talking animals. These animals are often used to symbolise negative human traits.

Therefore, Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories qualify for fables. It should be recalled that Aesop's fables are African and involve African animals. Thus, since Bekwarra and Igbo animal stories are likewise, they are undoubtedly fables in equal regards with Aesop's fables. In other words, given the foregoing, Bekwarra and Igbo animal stories qualify for fables because the stories contain realities and messages that teach morals and ways of life and represent human characteristics, just as Aesop's fables and others. Even though the way the animals are used and the stories may differ, one simple truth or reality is that Aesop's fables and others use animals likewise to teach morals and ways of life and represent human characteristics. By this reality, Bekwarra and Igbo animal stories qualify for fables, since they do what Aesop's fables and other fables do.

Also, Bekwarra and Igbo animal stories qualify for fables because they have generalised meaning, a common characteristic of all fables. Although Aesop's fables are intrinsically and originally African in content, nature and animal use, they depict Greek as well as European worldview, literature, morals, beliefs and other ways of life and their peculiar represents human characteristics. In the same vein, Bekwarra and Igbo animal stories depict and represent those of Africa. Sepie (2017, p. 1) observers that countless indigenous and traditional worldviews, which tell of different realities, are sometimes recorded in ethnographies, or as 'myths' and 'stories'. This observation speaks volume about Bekwarra and Igbo indigenous fables; after all, all cultures have fables. But some people have the mentality that unpopular or small cultures should have theirs regarded merely as animal stories, not fables. This study rejects that thinking.

Aesop's fables include "The Crow and the Pitcher", "The Tortoise and the Hare" and "The Lion and the Mouse". Fables, such as the Aesop's fables, were gathered together in collections to sustain and use them for educational and moral inculcation purposes. Interestingly, Bekwarra and Igbo have so many educative and didactic fables. Their fables reflect their histories, cultures, literatures, beliefs or religions, worldviews and social lives. Their fables show that that the culture derives traditions and learns qualities from natural elements. Some of the gods are forms of animals with ideal qualities. Also, hundreds of fables were composed in ancient Igbo and Bekwarra societies. The fables of these two Nigerian peoples have a mixed cast of animals and humans, as with Aesop's and most other cultures' fables. As in Indian animal stories, the dialogues in Bekwarra and Igbo fables are often longer than in Aesop's fables. They are also often witty, as the animals try to outwit one another by trickery and deceit. In Indian fables, man is not superior to the animals. The tales are often comical. The fact about Indian fables applies to Bekwarra and Igbo fables.

On a more general note, the Indian fables adhere to the universally known traditions of the fable. Bekwarra and Igbo fables do same. The best examples of the fable in India are the Panchatantra and the Jataka tales. The Jataka Tales are similar to the Panchatantra in that they have a long tradition of being verbally passed from generation to generation (The Panchatantra, 1925). They are moralistic tales written around 300 C.E. in Pali, and later translated into other languages (Ohale, 2020; Perry, 1965). It is found that as far back as 300-500 BC, Indian animal stories (fables) were narrated for educating students, with a special purpose of making them learned within a short period of six months (Kulkarni, 2013, p. 199). The collection of these stories is known as *Panchatantra* (Kulkarni, 2013, p. 199). The collection of such stories by Aesop in European context is what has become known as Aesop's fables. *Panchatantra* is still valuable and used in the modern education in India and American Indian schools (Kulkarni 199). Ryder (1925) in The Panchatantra (1925) has informed that "The Lion and the Rabbit" from the *Panchatantra* teaches that intelligence is power. On one hand, both the Bekwarra and the Igbo have several animal stories about lion and rabbit in different regards and contexts. On the other, they both have their own respective peculiar story about the lion and each of several other small(er) animals, and the rabbit and each of several other big animals.

Again, Kollias (2015, p. 96) expresses and illustrates the synergy between Aesop's fables and other aspects of life. The synergy also applies to Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories and Aesop's and other fables. In other words, the synergy implicitly affirms the nexus and similarities between Igbo and Bekwarra fables (animal stories), on one hand, and between them and Aesop's fables, on the other. In the same vein, Perry (1965) has earlier expressed and illustrated the synergy between Aesop's fables and the fables of other peoples. To us, what basically makes the difference is the fact that while the animal stories of some peoples are christened

fables, those of some other peoples are regarded as animal stories, not fables. Also, as in Aesop's "The Trees and the Bramble," Bekwarra and Igbo have fables that discuss leadership and followership, using animals. In most cases, in cases of leaders' ills against the governed, big and/or tricky animals represent the leaders, while small and non-tricky animals are made to represent the masses in Bekwarra and Igbo animal stories. Size, height, nature and value of certain animals, among others, are distinctive features of such stories. To state concisely in symbolic or literary term, some Bekwarra and Igbo animal stories showcase what George Orwell's *Animal Farm* does. Thus, fables are affirmed to be viable literary means of education, which one can find various ways of using in the learning process. "The tortoise and the hare" is one good example (Kollias, 2015, p. 97).

Conclusion

In all, since Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories possess the general or common characteristics and core elements of fables, they qualify for fables. Any otherwise claim is stereotypical, Eurocentric and of Western superiority tendency perspective. If Igbo and Bekwarra animal stories do not qualify for fables, it means Aesop's and other fables, which are their likes, do not qualify for fables too. Given the fact that Aesop's fables are affirmed to be African animal stories told by Aesop, an African ex-slave in Europe, involving animals found in Africa, it is obvious that Igbo, Bekwarra and Aesop's fables are all African. And, it is quite interesting that these sets of African fables possess and share common similarities. Beyond their common African similarities, they share the core general characteristics and functions of fables. The basic difference is that Aesop's fables combine both African and European features. This is because Aesop's had been Europeanised.

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