

EXPLORING NIGERIAN CULTURE THROUGH THE LENS OF IGBO LITERATURE

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Abstract

It seems that the concept, culture, involves the entire being of a people. It is also safe to say that Igbo culture is the total makeup of the Igbo people. Literature on the other hand involves re/creating what have been, what is being and what may be. It stems from the innermost part of a creative mind. The Igbo culture on the other hand is not getting the attention and exposure it deserves perhaps due to limited resources for sponsored cultural events and expositions hence writers of literary work try to express the Igbo culture through their works. This paper therefore intends to draw attention to importance of incorporating Igbo culture in literary works to give it the attention it deserves. Furthermore, it also intends to project Igbo literary works to gain greater attention and also educate young writers on the need to project Igbo culture to a more robust audience. It also intends to inspire and motivate younger writers, scholars and students to join the call to project Igbo culture through literatures.

Introduction

Scholars have tried to give a definition of the concept, culture, but it seems it's inexhaustible. There have been explanations on what culture should be and what it should not be. None of them have been totally wrong nor right, rather; the fact remains that culture is broader than it seems. Some say it is a way of life known particularly to a particular population. Others see it as laid down norms and/or rules of governance. These rules mould a generation. They either make or mar them. These rules can also be modified to fit a present situation or generation. That is to say that culture grows. Hudson (1967) opines that '...a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members'. To Hudson, culture requires one to acquire as much rules as possible to be able to survive in a given environment, even if it means one dropping one's personal beliefs. Nwadike in Umeasiegbu (ed) (2008) sees culture as:

An all-embracing word, encompassing a given way of the life of a people, their language, their technology, their religion, their system of marriage and agriculture, their beliefs, their aspirations and expectations, their likes and dislikes, their humours, their cuisines and distances, their triumphs and failures, their fears and hopes, their worldview, in fact, their everything.

Hence, Nwadike believed that culture is a people's life. It cannot be separated from man. Muogbo (20023) agrees that culture is an institutionalised norm of a particular people. It includes people's way of life, attitudes, behaviours, food technology and organisational know-how, philosophy etc. The culture of a people is their beliefs. Their dos and don'ts. Their 'sacreds'. Their norms. It is whatever that keeps them strong and 'alive'. It is everything that what keeps them united. This is so because; some people loose their lives when they deviate from following the culture of their people. It is handed down from one generation to another. This way, it is preserved and at the same time revitalized as a result of the fact that in most cases, as culture is being passed down orally, some parts of it may be forgotten. Furthermore, Okafor and Akpamgbo (2020) add

Even though folktale is handed down through generations and rendered orally, it does not loose its lesson (s) rather it may loose some parts of its story. This is mainly because, once it is told, the hearer carries it in his/her memory pending, when he/her sees an opportunity to render same folktale.

In most cases, new words may be used as long as it does not change the original idea. This is typical of the Igbo folktale. Some Igbo folktales contain new words as a result of loss of the original words which happened maybe because the original words were forgotten or simply because they were replaced by newer words to allow the younger generations understand it better. While doing this, the narrator ensures the message of the tale is not misunderstood thereby passing the wrong message. This is very important because every Igbo folktale has an intended message or idea it wants to teach the listener. Interestingly, the Igbo folktale is believed to have been passed down from one generation to the other, orally. Hence, its ownership is not known neither does anyone know how it began. Its unknown origin is part of its uniqueness and part of the beauty of the Igbo culture, in that sense. One would wonder how such a 'cooked up story' could be held in such high esteem. The truth remains that an average Igbo native would make a meaning out of the most useless item around. However, the 'cooked up' stories have been used, since time immemorial to instil good behaviour and teach the customs of the land to the younger generation. Culture is therefore a people's life.

However, Osu (2021) believed that a people's culture is a kind of mirror through which their degree of civilization is assessed. The keyword in Osu's definition is 'Civilization'. This means that a people's culture is expected to be changing and/ or adapting to time. That is, dropping parts of the culture which may no longer be relevant and/ or replacing them with a modified version of that part to ensure that her people do not lag behind modernity. This, if it happens, may be dangerous for the people because they refused to modify their culture and to an extent, they may appear as unserious people. Thiong'o (1999) adds;

Culture is a product of a people's history... a specific history of which culture is simultaneously a product, reflection and a measure, a continuous working out of the contradictions within a given society and between that society and others with which it is in contact.

Thiong'o believed that as time passes by, culture changes. This is so because culture is not static. Its people move from place to place thereby picking up practices that may be profitable to their existence, although, not forgetting their origin. Towing this line, Said (2010) believed thus; 'cultures is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought'. This is to say that no matter how long a people move around and change some aspects of their culture, the fact remains that the core aspects of their culture remains. Said, moving further, sees culture as all those practices, like the arts of description, communication and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms and that often exists in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aim is pleasure. These scholars in their explanations believe that culture belongs to the people who practice it. It is everything about their past, present and probably, their future because as long as the people exist and move from place to place it is certain that some of the aspects of this culture will change and/ or be replaced. Therefore, this paper treated culture not only through a traditional lens but also through the lens of what a people adopted as their way of life.

Literature on the other hand can be seen as all write-ups borne out of creativity, laced with figurative elements for the purpose of inspiring, educating and entertaining. However, one may regard every readable write-up including newspaper, textbooks, court proceedings, etc as literature but for the purpose of this paper, we shall limit literature to Creative Writings. Literature involves dealing with the culture of a people in a creative way, to teach, entertain and /or educate. One may wonder, 'why dealing with culture? It is so because every literary work captures the culture of the people it represents. For example, Igbo literature would capture the Igbo culture, Hausa literature captures the Hausa, Yoruba literature captures the Yorubas, etc, and this includes their language and ways of life. This is very important in literature because literature is the mirror with which a people is seen and to a larger extent, the author too.

Aldous (1963) explains literature as a world of total human experience, public and subjective, individual and cultural. To Aldous literature is culture because culture is about the 'total human experience' of a particular population, Supporting this belief Ezikeojiaku in Emenanjo (ed.) (2001) says "Literature does not exist in a vacuum; It is an imaginative work of art embodying ideas significant to the culture that produces it'. Again, Ezikeojiaku believed that literature captures the culture of the people it represents. Literary works, which are the major concerns of this paper, although borne out of creative thoughts, may be a reflection of a life experience, an eye-witness accounts, a mere imaginative creation or a piece intended to draw attention to a vice. Literary artistes usually use satirical works to pass messages across to their audience. Mberede (2010:28) while outlining the uses of literature, pointed out thus;

Literature is used for the spreading of information and creating political awareness to a wider majority of the nation. These were achieved through the articulation of the people's experience, and strengthening their aspirations and expectations in didactic novels, poems, plays and satirical writings.

In this light, it can be seen that literature does not only educate, inspire and entertain, rather, while doing these, it also makes known part of the government that needs attention of the public drawn to, usually a vice. Mberede goes further to reiterate that literature has in the past and even of late continued to use political satire as a method of advancing political arguments in order to initiate a change in a particular area of national concern. Okafor (2024) supported this by adding that to expose and reawaken the spirit of the citizens to rise up to the challenge of taking back their country, literary writers make use of satire in their works. Literature, in this context is entirely a creative affair; borne totally out of creativity yet connects with the audience. Okafor and Nwokoye (2022) summarised this by saying that '...agumagu...dị ka ihe mmadụ cheputara dee maọbụ guọ jji kpaa obi ańurị, kpalie mmụọ ọgụ maọbụ ogee ma kuzie ezi agwa ...(Literature is something that is borne out of one's imagination, written or spoken, for the purpose of entertaining, inspiring the reader or listener as well teach good morals...). This simply means that literature goes beyond just writing for the sake of writing. Moving further, Okafor (2024) adds;

Literature is wholly a creative enterprise. A process that takes one beyond sub consciousness; both writers and readers. At the end, the reader ends up seeing the world through the eyes of the writer. If otherwise, the reader ends up criticising the work of the writer thereby creating another creative piece for another reader to read and criticise. Like that, literature inspires thereby creating a chain of creativity.

This shows the many ways Literature influences writers and the readers of creative works. Literature carries on its own a chain reaction that can only entertain, teach and inspire so that it does not become a mere document.

The Nigerian Culture in Literature

The type of hardship the Nigerian government puts its people through has made them adopt such punishments as part of their lives; such scenario is often referred to, in greater part of Nigeria, as suffering and smiling, because its people are used to hardship. So far, it has been established that culture and literature are interwoven. They cannot be taken away from each other. Literature is deeply rooted in culture. This is typical of Igbo oral Literature which is mainly made up of chants, incantations, ceremonies, poetry and so on.

Nigerian culture cannot be easily exhausted. This is because Nigeria does not have a single culture neither does it have a single literature. This is attributed to its vast ethnic groups which include but not limited to Igbo Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio, Urhobo etc. Discussing the various cultural practices and literature of these ethnic groups may take longer than expected. However, this paper shall limit its discussion to some Igbo cultural practices and Nigeria political culture in Igbo literature. To do so, the novel *Adaeze* by Inno Nwadike and the poem 'Politiksi', culled from *Ije Uwa* by N. Okediadi shall be used for analysis.

This paper therefore, shall limit its discussions to three cultural practices of the Igbos as exemplified in selected Igbo literary work. The practices to be discussed are farming, trading and most importantly, language. They shall further be discussed briefly.

Farming

Naturally, various communities in Igbo land do not just go to their farms and start tilling the land, rather, they usher in the farming season with one form of celebration or another to thank the gods responsible for crop production for a successful farming season. They do this usually before eating a new yam in a new farming season. This is fondly called the new yam festival or Ifejioku. One would ask why the special reservation for yam? This is so because yam is regarded as the head of every food eaten by the Igbos. As a matter of fact, whoever has the largest yam barn in Igbo land is regarded as a wealthy man- hence he is called 'diji', which means, a famous yam farmer. This title earns the bearer respect to some extent. However, there are other types of food the Igbos have in their farm lands. Some of the foods are cocoyam, cassava, vegetables, 'akidi', maize and they sometimes engage in animal rearing. This can also be regarded as farming. Although most animals are not necessarily reared in the farm. However, the Igbos may take their sheep and/or goat to the farm field to feed on grass. They may also rear their birds in an empty farmland.

As earlier mentioned, Igbo literary writers for instance, try to bring some of these cultural practices into their works. A good example of such exhibition is *Adaeze*. A novel by Inno Nwadike. *Adaeze* x-rays the life of an average Nigerian hardworking woman in a patriarchal society. It is a story about a certain husband and wife, Uchechukwu and Uzumma. Uchechukwu is a drunkard who prefers squandering his salary on other women and drinking to bringing it home to build his family. To him, nobody trained him to become what he was therefore his children should not expect him to train them. Uchechukwu and his wife have three children, two boys and a girl named *Adaeze*. The author described *Adaeze* as a very brilliant girl yet her father refused sending her to school. When it became clear to Uzumma, Uchechukwu's wife, that her husband would not listen to her pleas to send their daughter to school, she consulted her sisters-in-law to help her beg her husband. In the Igbo tradition and custom, sisters-in-law are regarded as peacemakers at both their birth families and their husbands homes. Moving further, Nwoye, Okafor and Akpamgbo (2021: 121) add thus;

Umuada play important roles in the marriage of their relatives especially in their traditional marriages. In many cases, they act as middle persons, steering the assumed good guys from their husband's community to get married to the good girls in their land of birth. They also play some advisory roles to the Eze of their community especially when they observe that the Eze is not handling his civic duties to his subjects as he should. Umuada often embark on some physical developmental projects. Most times, they go to the extent of erecting physical structures in their birth places some of which yield money for them. In as much as there are rude ones amongst them, most of them are still very understanding individuals.

Uzumma knew this culture and decided to use it to her own advantage. The sisters-in law honoured her invitation and after listening to her case, persuaded their brother to reconsider but he refused citing the unpopular belief that

training girl child is a waste of money, time and resources. However, the ladies assured Uzumma of their total support should she decide to train her child singlehandedly. To this Okafor and Nwoye (2022:105) 'O ga-agbagwoju anya ma a si na nwaanyi luru di, norokwa na be di ya na-azu nwa ya maobu umu ya naani ya n'enwetaghị enyemaka n'aka di ya' (It will be confusing when it is said that a married woman, in her husband's home, is raising her kids alone without getting any help from her husband). As confusing as this may sound, this is the fate of millions of women especially in Africa, and this is a trend that has come to stay. The author said that Uzumma had already decided that she was going to train her child with or without her husband's help. In the author's words;

Ha suru ya nkume n'obi
ka o ziga Adaeze uloakwukwo
kwe ya nkwa na ha aghaghị inyere ya aka
Mana tupu oge a niile, Uzumma eburula n'uche ihe o ga-eme kama
o choro ka a ghara ita ya uta n'ikpeazu na
ya bu oleliri di.

(They encouraged her to send Adaeze to school, promised her that they will not fail to support her. But before all these times Uzumma had already decided on what to do, but did not want to be blamed at last that she is one who belittles her husband).

This is typical of most Igbo hard working women. They are all determined but would rather wait for the inspiration to act. This is the reason, in most part of the Igbo communities; women of all ages can be seen trading on different items to fend for their families. They are not the type to sit around and wait for their men to fend for them. This can also be the reason most Igbo widows survive even with eight or more children. In the light of this, Okafor (2022:10) adds;

N'otutu ezinaulo taa, o bu nwaanyi no n'ezinaulo ahụ na-akpata ihe ezinaulo ya na-eri. ufodu umu nwaanyi na-eme otu a n'ih na di ha anaghị akpatara ezinaulo ya ihe ha ga-eri ebe ufodu bu n'ih na di ha anwuola. ufodu n'ime ha ka di ha di ndu, na-ewetakwa ihe ezinaulo ya na-eri mana n'ih na o na-agu ya aguu inwe nke ya, o bilie, choo ihe o ga na-arụ wee na-akpata ego. A gagharia n'ime ahia di n'otutu obodo taa, a ga-ahu umu nwaanyi yi akwa mkpe ha noro n'odu ahia ha, na-ere ahia. (In some families today, it is the women in those families that feed the family. Some women do this because their husbands do not provide for their families while some are because their husband died. Some of them still have their husbands with them and he provides but they hunger to have their own money, they rise up, and begin to look for how to start earning money. Today, widows are seen in their bereavement clothing, selling their wares in different markets).

This explains further the length women can go in fending for themselves and their loved ones. Women and their children are like Siemens twins that cannot be separated. Okafor (2020) summarizes the life of a woman thus;

For instance, a young girl gets married to a very industrious young man. Takes six years to bear three children, dedicates her life to raising these children. These include the sleeplessness associated with pregnancy, labor pains, bleeding and eventual delivery. Then comes the raising of the children. All these happen only to the young girl who becomes a doctor, a nurse, a stylist, watch night, a teacher, a prayer warrior, a cook, a lawyer, handy man, laundry man and more, overnight. The young man never experiences any of these, he is the young man that goes out every morning and comes back in the evening...

Women do not need any handbook to learn how to raise or rear their offspring rather they follow their hearts and listen to their instincts and then with experience, they perfect the act of raising another human. Okafor (2020) adds

Generally, in raising kids, mothers are always at the fore. They do a better chunk of the job. This act goes back to time immemorial and often the reason some kids are heard saying 'I grew up with my grandmother'. It would be right to say that women have childrearing in their DNAs.

Uzumma, knowing it was time to work, swung into action to raise money for the task ahead. She began to engage in money yielding ventures, first of which was farming. Nwadike (1979) says i baa n'ugbo akpu ya, i gaghị ama ebe I siri banye (if you enter her cassava farm, you will not know the exit and the entrance. Yam, Cocoyam,...maize and vegetables are always abundant). One can imagine the amount of money she would make after selling her farm produce. Farming has been a dignified part of Africans (Nigerians) for a long time and they have constantly used it to help themselves out in times of difficulties. To support this, Nsolibe and Okafor (2021) add;

Africans (Igbo) are predominantly farmers and they make money from the proceeds from their farm work. One cannot provide all his requirements by himself. As a farmer, there are

products from the farm that you use and some that you take to market to sell and the money realized should be used to provide the things that you cannot get from the farm but you need. This summarizes the reason Africans and indeed Nigerians(Igbos) engage in Farming. It is a life saver in time of serious wants.

Trading

This is the next culture to be discussed, trading. This is the act of buying and selling to making profit. It has always been in the culture of the Igbos to trade. This is why they created the culture of apprenticeship. A situation where one goes to learn a particular type of trade or business over a period of time after which one is settled with a certain amount of money to start one's own business. The Igbo apprenticeship model and programme is the brain behind the existing and consistent operations of small scale businesses across Igbo land (Idemobi, Okafor, Dike et.al 2024). This has been known to be a very successful trend over the years as it has produced uncountable billionaires in Igbo land. This trend is however, not limited to men only, it involves women too. Uzumma also engaged in trading to fend for her family since her husband was not ready to take up his responsibility as the head of the family. Again, since the responsibility of training her daughter in school is obviously going to be her sole responsibility, she needed no one to tell her it was time to engage in things that would fetch her more money. Nwadike (1979:2) says;

'n'izụ ahja Uzumma so na ndi na-agba ahja Ugwu, cbe o na-aga ebute agwa, egusi, ayabasi na azu mangala n'akpa n'akpa... o nakwa eghe akara na kprofukpofu. Ubochị uka obula, 9 na-eghe akara a na-akpo akara choochị... (In trading, Uzumma was among those who travel to the North, where she goes to buy beans, melon seeds, onions and mangala fish in bags... she also fries bean balls and puff-puff. Every Sunday, she fries bean-balls that's called church bean-balls).

This shows how committed Uzumma is in fending for her family regardless of the fact that her husband earns good money. Rather than sit and cry, she engaged in several types of trading to fend for her family. This culture of the Igbos will not fade out anytime soon because it is saving them globally. Uzumma single handedly trained her daughter and in the end she became rich.

Language.

The core of a people's culture is their language. It is what identifies them among many. It also defines a people. Language is the major unifying factor in any given society because it keeps a people together for a long time. Language in literature defines that literature to a large extent. That is to say that language, in literature brings a people closer to their culture and/or nature. This is why authors may choose to write in Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba language etc hence the cliché,

Literature, Yoruba literature and Hausa literature. This simply means literature written or done in these languages. Some scholars have argued that language should not be a defining factor in literature. To this end they are of the opinion that any literature written or done for instance, about the Igbo people or Igbo culture, regardless of the ethnicity of the author, should be regarded as Igbo literature.

This group of scholars would regard Things Fall Apart as Igbo Literature. Some factions also projected that only literature done in Igbo language should be regarded as Igbo literature. No wonder Ezikeojiaku (2007) submitted thus '...embodying ideas significant to the culture that produces it'. In this view, it is very difficult to separate literature from language because literature portrays the culture of the people it represents, Igbo culture, hausa culture, Yoruba culture etc and the best way to do that is through the use of the language of the culture it projects. The selected text for this chapter *Adaeze*, can thus be regarded as core Igbo literature because first of all it is written in Igbo language and it portrays most of the major cultural practices of the Igbos.

The Nigerian Political Culture

Another Nigerian culture worthy of learning is the Nigerian Political culture. That is the ills the politicians forced the Nigerian populace to adopt as its culture. The situation is currently so bad that its people would ask questions should they encounter a politician who genuinely would want to do good. Literary writers, try to bring in this awkward culture in their works. They do this objectively to draw the attention of the leaders to the punishment they make the citizen go through while teaching the citizens that they can actually say no to the bad government and take back their country. This could be done through plays, satirical writings or drama etc. One of such is Ije Uwa. In a poem titled 'Naijiria' Okediadi (2003) describes Nigeria as a country with all the Resources needed to develop it but for the corrupt politicians it has remained a dungeon for its own citizens. The author captures its beauties thus:

Naijiria
Obodo mmanụ añu
Mmiri ara ehi na-eru n'ime ya

Akunauba ka Eke ji chọọ gị mma
Ala oma bukwa ugwu nye g!
Naijirja, obodo oma !
Ugegbe Afrika ji ahuụ uzo
Ezi umụ gị Naija na Benueobte
Ekunyela anyj mmii nduoilonk ed
Nigeria
The Land of honey
Milk flows in it
God beautified you with wealth
A good land is, but an honour unto you
Nigeria a good land !
The mirror with which Africa sees
Your good children Niger and Benue
Have given us water of life.

In the above verse, the author extols the beauty of Nigeria. Its abundant natural resources which could have been enough even for the generation to come. The author refers to Nigeria as the 'mirror with which Africa sees'. Africa is a continent. It is bigger than Nigeria, of course it has other countries in it. So, for the author to refer to it as 'a mirror for an entire continent' only means that it is exceptional in all sense. However, regardless of its rich endowments, Nigeria has been subjected to bad policies which in turn turned citizen to slaves in their country. Untold hardship is legitimately a culture for the people. The political promises have almost turned turned to a popular anthem to the people because they already know what the politicians would say, Okediadi still captures the scenario this way;

... Ndị ochichị nchigbu
Unu eteela ala anyi n'ihu
Fonfoju akpa bụ egwu okukụ na egwu ogbugo
Ndi kama o ga-ado n'ite
Ka o doro n'afo
Chei unụ bụ anwunta
Unụ amikpoola umụ mmadụ abara
Ntị unu dizi ka nke awo ñujuru mmiri afo.
Afo unu dizi ka ite mmiri
Onye rie, o ga-erifokwara onye ozo!'etetu
Ndị oke ochicho!
Unu hiwere amuma di iche iche
O bụ nke gini?
I nyere ndị uwa na-atụ n'onu aka
Onye ka o rukwaranu aka?
N'akpa unu ka ha bachara
Ndi ochichị nchigbu ndoonu!
Bad Leaders
You have Smeared Our Faces with Charcoal
Looting is the order of the day
Those who prefer to swallow all
Than allowing others have them
Chei! You are mosouitoes
You have sucked our blood enough
Your ears are like that of a frog
That drank water too much
Your bellies are now like a pot of water
He that has eaten, would he keep for another to eat?
Greedy People
You started many projects
And for what?
To help the needy
Who has access to it then?
They all entered into your pockets
Bad leaders sorry!

The author paints a picture of the sorry state Nigerian leaders have reduced the country to. It is so glaring that even toddlers feel the impact. The author referred to them as 'mosquitos sucking the blood of her citizens'. This connotes the helplessness of the Nigerian citizens as is the case of 'mosquitos' on its victim. The verse also points towards the empty promises of the greedy politicians and / or politicians stating that even the share meant for the poor ends up in their pockets. This appears to be the reality of Nigeria. The author likened them to a frog that drank excess water while their bellies are likened to a pot to show how deeply they have squandered public funds. Unfortunately, it is the new Nigerian culture.

Conclusion

As earlier mentioned, Nigerian culture treated in this paper are not primarily traditional. Rather, it focuses on certain practices that Nigerians are either known for or have had to adopt and navigate on their own. These practices cannot be fully exhausted in a single text as Nigerian culture is dynamic- constantly evolving by discarding certain elements and adopting new ones in their place. Nonetheless, aspects of Igbo culture are discussed as reflected in Igbo Literature. Literary authors are expected to incorporate cultural practices of the people they represent in their works. This approach brings literature closer to its target audience, projects the culture to a wider audience and helps sustain it, as demonstrated in the selected texts. The newly adopted political culture discussed in this paper appears to be a silent disruptor of the people's mindset. No one knows it happening- but it's happening.

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