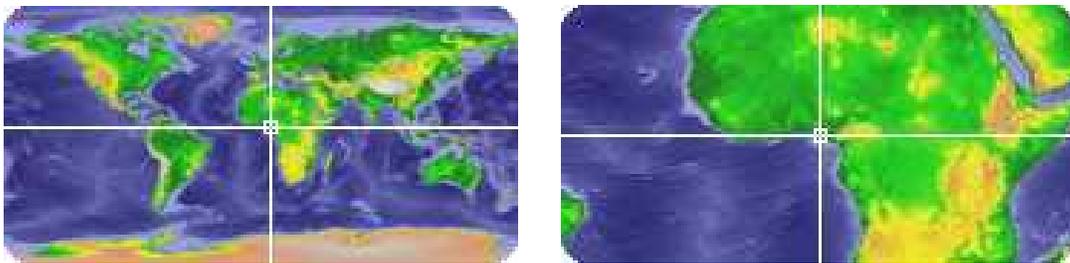




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Folktales as Means of Transmitting Knowledge on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Nigeria: The Adventure of *Akuye* in Iyuku Community of Edo State

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Introduction

Folklores in Nigeria have often been cited as avenues through which information relating to slavery and slave trade activities in the area could be transmitted. The broader role of oral traditions in the transmission of knowledge relating to the trans-Atlantic slave trade among the people of Nigeria, Ghana, and the Republic of Benin has already been acknowledged by Simpson (2004). Folktales as a means of communication fall under what is today referred to as indigenous media. Folktales as patterns of communicating messages in African societies and communities represent one of the most respected, trusted, and acceptable forms of transmitting vital information in Nigeria. This article considers the nature of oral traditions, particularly folklore, with particular reference to the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade dealers in the Iyuku community of Edo State in Nigeria.

On their own, the functions of folktales include the teaching of moral lessons by constituting a kind of “catch-them-young” method through which very important qualities of life are instilled in children (Ogunjimi et al. 2004:76). Folktales introduce cultural practices to children and these accounts point the way to the customs, institutions, mores and beliefs of their community. These oral traditions also inculcate in the young the society’s philosophy, world-

view, cosmology, and powers of rhetoric and repertoire. Folktales provide youth with a sense of community and the knowledge and skills required to handle problems and riddles in life. These oral traditions help people to develop meaningful psychological traits, expose one to concepts of physical phenomena, inculcate a sense of social organization and collective responsibility, and serve as meaningful forms of intellectual engagement and a sense of belonging. Folktales similarly serve to sharpen the intellect and the power of memory of the individual (Ogunjimi et al. 2004:76).

Although the detailed history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is not a dominant feature of the oral traditions of the Iyuku, it nevertheless exists in the memory of the people and is transmitted through the generations as shown in the folktale of *Akuye*. Such a folktale account provides an avenue whereby oral information, no matter how scanty in details, assists in maintaining the knowledge of the legacies of the slave trade in Nigeria.

The adventures of *Akuye*



The Iyuku people of Estakor West of Edo State are very much like other people in rural communities in Nigeria. For every one growing up in this community, the adventures of *Akuye* forms one of the first

stories that is learned, as told by the elders. *Akuye* takes the form of a python snake, and the story conveys that there was a war in Benin kingdom and the princes in the kingdom were at each other's throats, so the kingdom broke into fragments with each one of the princes charting his own map of the kingdom. One of the princes named Uku decided to migrate to the northern part of the kingdom, but not without attracting the wrath of other princes. Uku and his wife were on their way to start a new life but were being pursued by some enemies. Like the Biblical story of the children of Israel who faced the Red Sea, with their enemies behind them Uku and his wife were faced with this mighty river while the enemies were in hot pursuit. Crossing the river became a challenge and going back a dangerous prospect. However, just as Uku was contemplating their next line of action, he saw a big tree trunk on the river and moved quickly to

traverse the swirling waters upon its body. He and his wife were able to obtain safe passage, but on looking back to see if the enemies were closer, Uku saw a movement coming from this huge trunk he and his wife had just floated on. The immense figure moved out of the river; it was then that Uku realized that his saviour was not a trunk but an enormous python snake that presented itself as a crossing vessel for the couple. Uku and his wife knelt down there and then to pay homage to their saviour and promised that when they arrived in the “promised land” they would build a home for the python that rescued them from their enemies.

From this story and many others, a primary theme develops of the goodness of Akuye to the children of Uku, who are now known as Iyuku, meaning “the children of Uku.” Uku made good his promise by building a home for Akuye where sacrifices have since been made on a daily basis by the high priest on behalf of the people who have variously recounted the foundational saga through oral communication in the community.



It is interesting to note that the tale of Akuye the python has been so diffused that almost the same tale exists in Igbo land especially among the people in Arochukwu of Abia state. Researchers have variously assessed the role played by the Igbo people of Arochukwu during the trans-Atlantic slave trade within the region of Nigeria. Some Iyuku words are the same as some Igbo words except for slight difference in pronunciation. For instance, Akpi in Iyuku is Akpi in Igbo and means scorpion. Similarly, corn, which is known as “Oka” in the Iyuku dialect is also known as “Oka” in Igbo. Thus, the existence of the Akuye tale in Aro mythology may suggest a

common experience and cultural heritage related to the impacts of the trans-Atlantic slave trade by the people in those two communities.

The python is generally referred to as “Uwe” meaning “mother.” She is believed by the people to be a mother to all, assisting nursing mothers in the nurturing of their babies in the first three months of life. The python’s presence is thus not considered unusual by the people who believe that it must be revered and worshipped. This belief continues to permeate Iyuku cosmology even today as the relevance of the Akuye’s protection is still felt currently as it was in the days of Uku.

Protective Dispositions of *Akuye* during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

More relevant to the issue of slavery in the area, it is also said that during the varied periods of raids to capture individuals into slavery, Akuye kept vigil over the children of Uku by turning into a huge ant hill covering the length and breadth of the land. This singular act has been accredited in Iyuku oral tradition with the low presence of captives among the indigenes of the area within the overall Nigerian experience of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The arrival of the missionaries in Iyuku has often been said to have met with obvious reluctance in terms of conviction and eventual conversion to the Christian faith in accordance with the aim of the missionaries. The indigenes never wanted to abandon the promise made to Akuye by their forefather Uku. With time, however, they started to convert to the new religion. A particular man, Ikouda, was so zealous in his embrace of the Christian faith that he started castigating the people for their belief in the power of Akuye. Iyuku oral tradition has it that he continuously derided and condemned those who still made sacrifices to Akuye, but that the enshrined power of Akuye soon caught up with him. The account conveys that, like every agrarian society where farming is a common activity, Ikouda was on his way to his farm one day. His journey started out well, but as he walked deep into the forest he was confronted by a strange phenomenon. Akuye was waiting for him by a large tree and as soon as Ikouda came close, he saw the huge snake hanging from its branches. The snake swallowed him up. Within the bowels of the serpent, Ikouda immediately started begging Akuye to have mercy on him, saying “Uwe, I am your child now, I am a child of your friend Uku, I know I have erred, please forgive me and I promise that if you let me go this time, I will not persecute you again in my life.” Akuye had mercy on Ikouda by vomiting him out. Those who knew Ikouda said he was never himself

physically after this encounter. Ikoudas's story emphasizes the importance of holding onto beliefs and traditions, despite the presence of Christianity in a place like Iyuku. This account makes a case for the persistence of beliefs in the power of the ancestors over the lives of the living, and opens up a gateway for viewing a community's life patterns through the lenses of folktales.

Contemporary oral tradition in Iyuku continues to depict the protective influence of Akuye in the lives of the indigenes. A common story concerns a certain indigene of Iyuku, who experienced the protective benevolence of Akuye during the Biafra war in Nigeria. He was fighting for Biafra and the story has it that his regiment was surrounded by the government forces, leaving no way for anyone to escape. They were surrounded and everyone else in that regiment was killed, but mysteriously a hand lifted him up from the scene, thus preventing him from being shot. The man later found himself in Ibadan, some three hundred kilometers away from where the incident took place. When he finally found himself on the ground, the only thing that was visible to him was this huge snake moving away into the nearby bush. Then he remembered to pay homage to the great Akuye.

Conclusion

Folktales record histories and educate members of a society. In addition, they elucidate hidden truths about the society and help in composing and relating facets of information that eventually enhance our knowledge of important historical events such as the impacts of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Akuye stories focus attention on the lasting impacts of dangerous slave dealers in the region. The importance of folktales in preserving and conveying information about a community's past can thus be seen to have a role to play in the building of information relating to the current cultural heritage of the people of Nigeria.

Note

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