

ORAL NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN SELECTED CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES BY AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO

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Abstract

The study adopts the Formalist literary theory as its tool of analysis with the aim to investigate the effects of the supernatural, the magical, the talking animals and journey quest as fundamental elements of narrative techniques in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Adventure of Anum the Tortoise* (2006), *Whisker the Brave Cat* (2005), *Snake Child and Star Baby* (2005), *Ezezemale and the Tree Spirits* (2006), and *Red One and the Wizard of Mula* (2005). The work also adopts the qualitative research methodology in which non-statistical mode of data collection and analysis is applied. The study analyses elements of oral narrative techniques deployed in Adimora-Ezeigbo's children's narratives to achieve thematic, didactic, structural, and aesthetic purpose(s), not only in Nigerian children's narratives but also in all other forms of literary works. Thus, the study finds that the supernatural, magical, talking animals and journey quest are oral narrative techniques deployed in examined texts.

Key words: Orature, Oral Narrative Techniques, Children's Literature

Introduction

The term orature was coined by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu in the early seventies of the last century to counter the tendency to see the arts communicated orally and received aurally as inferior (Wa Thiongo, 2007:4). This brief definition of orature as the use of utterance, as an aesthetic means of expression remains tantalizingly out there, pointing to an oral system of aesthetics that did not need validity from the literary. Whatever the case, in a clearer and lucid manner, Abraham (2013:2) upholds that "oral literature refers to any form of verbal art, which is transmitted orally or delivered by word of mouth". Abraham maintains that today, these two terms are used interchangeably. Thus, orature of a community remains a window to their traditions while playing the pivotal role of binding the different cultural aspects.

For Liman (2010:132) "Orature in Africa is diverse because of the wealth of its genres and sub-genres." Ogundokun (2015:181) asserts that proverbs, oral poetry, myths, legends, folktales, music, songs, chants and invocations also form parts of daily life of the African people in which their culture is expressed. Similarly, Wa Thiongo (2007:6) identifies the major generic elements of orature as "riddle, proverb, story, song, poetry, drama and dance - are an imaginative attempt to explain the universe." Unlike the postulations of Liman, Ogundokun and Wa Thiongo, orature can

be categorized into three broad genres: the spoken form (oral narratives), the sung form (poetry), and the performance [drama] (*National Open*, 2009:18). Oral narratives (the spoken form) is divided into: myths, fables, legends, folktales, anecdotes, riddles, proverbs and tongue twisters. This is supported by Liman (2010:132) who posits that "in narrative forms, for example, there are various types of tales, classes of proverbs, riddles, wise sayings and oratory skills." In Nigeria, the first two titles to be published were children's books: *First Book of Spelling and Reading Lessons for the Old Calabar Mission Schools* by Reverend Hope Waddell and *Miqua Usuana Esup Nwed* by Samuel Edgerley. Both books were published in Calabar in 1846 (Apeji, 1991:13).

Akuso (2014:13) posits that "subjecting it to a single definition is preposterous" because the problematic of defining children's literature could be traced to the fact that some books meant for adult literature are read by children and vice versa. Some authorities are of the view that children's literature is that which appeals only to the sensibilities of a child (Smith, 1967; Nikolajera, 2005; Hunt, 1995; Mickenberg & Ray, 2003). One major issue with this definition is that it seems to uphold the notion that children's literature can only make sense to no other audience than children. For Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2009:235), "Children's literature is designed with children in mind as the primary consumers". This

outlook is fair enough because it focuses on children as the primary audience of the texts in question. Akuso (2014:13) defines children's literature, from African perspective, as:

That piece of literary creation which draws its matter from the African world view and which is written in a language and style the African child can comprehend. It must be seen as promoting African culture and enables the child or the young adult to understand and appreciate his or her environment better and it must give him or her some pleasure.

The problem with this view is that it excludes the non-African child and it is mainly focused on the African world view (philosophy or belief system), language, style, culture, setting, and delight. Another broader definition of children's literature is the one given by *Encarta Kid Dictionary* (2009) as cited in Akuso (2014:13):

The writings that are specifically fashioned to appeal to the interest of children. They are meant to be read to them. They include fiction, poetry, biography and history. It also includes: riddles, precepts, fables, legends, myths, folk poems and folktales based on spoken tradition.

This definition, in a way, is holistic in the sense that it covers both the spoken (oral narrative techniques) and written literature with the intent to capture the interest of its primary audience: children. All together these conceptualizations of children's literature point to the fact that whichever angle one may define children's literature, it must come from three broad perspectives which are that of the intended audience; purpose; and style/quality: and the purpose of children's literature cannot be far from entertainment, information, and empathy. The implication of this is that children's literature is not a watered-down version of adult literature neither is it a nostalgic reminiscence of childhood.

For Fayose (1988:6) children's literature is a distinct form of literature written with a specific audience in mind. It comprises essentially

those books that children would want to read or books that they enjoy reading. "Children" is used in this context to mean school boys and girls between the ages of four and fourteen years. They are usually in primary and lower secondary school and are still under the care and control of their parents or other adults. However, some scholars including Fayose, put the age between six and fourteen although most urban children are already in primary school at the age of four. This study is not only interested in the nature of children's literature as a genre in its own right, but it also examines the oral narrative techniques in Nigerian children's literature, with special focus on Akachi Ezeigbo's children narratives: *The Adventure of Anum the Tortoise* (2006), *Whisker the Brave Cat* (2005), *Snake Child and Star Baby* (2005), *Ezemale and the Tree Spirits* (2006), and *Red One and the Wizard of Mula* (2005)

Oral Narrative Techniques

Formalism is acclaimed to have established the scientific basis for the study of literature. Therefore, form, structure, technique and the use of language forms part of the basics in formalism as a literary theory (Carter 2006:31). It is in this regard that the present work is focused on oral narrative techniques in selected children's narrative by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's. Thus, narrative technique, as a concept, is seen as "[...] the means by which the novelist chooses to tell his/her story" (Schore, 2003:251). Narratively, technique is some form of "craftsmanship" because it is through it that a writer can translate his experiences, thoughts and emotions into art. Narrative technique does not only make difference and distinguishes the early writers from the present writers but it also distinguishes the oral narrative from any other form of narrative.

Analysis

Talking animals as a narrative strategy has its root in the oral tradition "in the form of fables" (Livingston & Brown, 2017:18) in which "animals talk and act like human types they represent" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012:9), while the journey quest, an essentially part of the West African oral tradition, is a prevalent motif in orature (Chinweizu, 1988 as cited in McINTOSH, 2015:31). Okpiliya & Akpan (2016), sees the journey quest as a situation in literary texts where

“A character either by compulsion, necessity or election, embarks on a journey, most of the time perilous, which is meant to bring about a significant change either in the condition of the person, or his society or his personality” (p.29). Okpiliya & Akpan are of the view that “In children’s fiction, the journey basically serves structural and introductive rules most especially in stories having both human and animal character” (p. 29). This motif, according to Okpiliya & Akpan, draw the attention of children to the fact that “the journey of life is extremely difficult and the time for life’s unpredictability is now”. The journey quest motif, according to McINTOSH, is not only prevalent in West African orature, but it also “permeates the culture by influencing religion, dance, music and various aspects of socioeconomic realms of life” (2015:31).

It is in the light of the above that this paper examines the deployment of talking animals and journey quest in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s children’s narratives as elements of oral narrative techniques. The paper aims to survey the relevant application of, and how these elements of oral tradition contribute to the configuration of meaning and representation in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Snake Child and Star Baby*, *Fire from the Holy Mountain*, *The Adventures of Anum the Tortoise*, *Ezezemale and the Tree Spirits*, *Whisker the Brave Cat*, *Asa and the Little Stream* and *Red One and the Wizard of Mula*.

Talking Animals as Oral Technique in *Snake Child and Star Baby*, *The Adventures of Anum the Tortoise*, and *Whisker the Brave Cat*

As stated in the preamble, talking animals in literature, generally, has its beginning in the oral tradition in myth and folktales that invoke animal characters which “is so universal a convention that we hardly notice” (Le Guin, 2004:22; Jaeger, 2018:19). An instance of this can be realized in *Aesop’s Fables* where animals are imbued with the capability to talk. Viewing this from the formalist perspective, Granata (n.d:3) points out that “[...] the talking animals are only a fictional device [...]” that authors choose to adopt as a narrative device. In this regard, therefore, the present research is of the view that talking animals is an oral narrative device or technique (i.e. a structural device) deployed in children’s texts to achieve

certain purpose(s). Thus, this segment of the study is meant to unravel the purpose(s) for which talking animals are used in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Snake Child and Star Baby*, *The Adventures of Anum the Tortoise*, and *Whisker the Brave Cat*.

In *Snake Child and Star Baby* a child (Udude) who is, in a way, an animal is featured. The narrative reveals that Udude’s parents, Afa and Ufu “[...] did not know that Udude was a snake. This was the reason he could not walk. He could change into the shape of a snake when he wanted” (pp. 21-21). Here Udude is depicted as a shape shifting character (a human character who can turn into an animal). In literature, typically, a shapeshifting character (in this regard a talking animal) plays the trickster role (Jaeger, 2018:21). Udude who is, here, a talking animal that has a shapeshifting nature in the text always tricks his parents because they do not know his nature. At night when his parents are asleep, he would turn into a snake to swallow the eggs, the hens and the cocks. In fact, he is the one who eats up the two female babies earlier born in the family. The omniscient narrator states that:

When the second daughter disappeared after three months, Ufu and Afa became worried and afraid. Afa had left the baby sleeping in its cot for about twenty minutes to take some vegetables from the garden. She came back to find the baby gone. There was evil around them, but they did not know who or what it was. Could it be one of their neighbours who was doing this? Was it an evil spirit? Not for one moment did they suspect that Udude was responsible for what was happening (p. 24)

Thus, in *Snake Child and Star Baby*, Udude, as shapeshifting character, becomes an oral narrative device deployed not only to play the role of an animal trickster, but also as a device that allows the child character to blur the boundaries of good and evil, human and animal. This kind of narrative device and technique, according to

Jaeger (2018), helps the child readers to learn “[...] to negotiate their identities and their place in the world” (p. 21). Thus, metaphorically, “Identifying the animal in us all allows us the opportunity to explore these expectations, shapeshift our identities, and rise to meet them” (p. 21).

As an oral narrative technique, talking animals can be deployed as a device to show that “[...] the civilization of animals mirrors the desired western civilization of people” (Jaeger, 2018:20). The instance of this is demonstrated in *Whisker the Brave Cat* which is centered on how the eponymous Whisker the Brave Cat discovers and exposes the evil perpetrated by the lion and his kinsmen who eat up the weaker animals. At the end of the story other weaker animals decide to leave the forest to live with the civilized humans for fear of being attacked and eaten up by the most savage and uncivilized bullying lions and the other cat family animals. The movement of the weaker animals from the jungle to the city to live with the human symbolizes a journey from an uncivilized and anarchical society to a descent, civilized and well-ordered society. The text, thus features jungle characters who must in a way integrate into human society in order to find peace and success. By this, the text also demonstrates and juxtaposes the dualism of good and evil inherent in the world that the child readers are being exposed to gradually.

Again, talking animals as an oral narrative technique can be adopted by writers to humanize, socialize, and educate the child readers. That is why Jaeger (2018:19) notes that in children’s literature, “[...] no matter how animalistic the animal character behaved, the narrative point was directed towards educating or humanizing child readers” (Jaeger, 2018:19). This is demonstrated in “Tortoise, Man and Leopard” one of the story cycle in *The Adventures of Anum the Tortoise*. In the first part of the narrative, Anum the Tortoise, who embarks on a journey quest, is helped to cross a river by a human named Jaga, a farmer. And at the end of the story, Anum the Tortoise uses his wisdom to rescue Jaga from a leopard that intends to eat up the man. This is meant to teach the child reader that “One good turn deserves another” (p. 18).

In “Tortoise and Snail”, another story

cycle in *The Adventures of Anum the Tortoise*, Anum is depicted as a fraudster and an imposter who is recognized as the best singer at a funeral of a big chief in Zompi village. What the human audience at the funeral does not realize is that Anum has hired snail to sing on his behalf while hidden in his bag which he always wears like a necklace. The narrator relates that, “Anum promised to share with Snail everything he would receive at the funeral. In fact, he said that if he won the singing contest, he would share the prize with Snail” (p. 59). Anum and the Snail agree that Snail would hide inside Anum’s bag and sing from inside there. Well, at the end of the day Anum won the singing competition but he refuses to fulfill his own part of the bargain. This is indicative of Anum’s level of dubiousness, deceit, and greed all rolled into one. Such thematic issues as these have led Jaeger (2018:20) to argue that, “Humanizing animal characters simultaneously socializes children and teaches them to put aside childish and thus animalistic behaviour”. The story is, by implication, discouraging fraudulent acts and greed which can be categorized as childish and animalistic.

There are times that the talking animals in children’s literature are deployed to “[...] racialized animals, where the animals themselves take on stereotypical traits of marginalized groups of people” (Jaeger, 2018:20). This thematic concern is echoed in *Whisker the Brave Cat*, where in the forest community there is a “[...] disagreement and quarrel between the Lion-led group and the rest of the animals [...]” (p. 77). Consequently, the animal community breaks-up because the weaker animals feel marginalized by Lion-led group (i.e. the cat family and other flesh eating animals). Thus, the reader of the texts realizes that, “The peace the community had once enjoyed was shattered forever. Hatred and suspicion crept into relationships. Fear ruled the forest. Animals, especially the smaller and weaker ones, were afraid to leave their homes. Danger lurked everywhere” (p. 78). This feeling of marginalization is that which leads the weaker animals in the text to desire integration into human society for peaceful co-existence and success.

Journey Quest in Snake Child and Star Baby, Fire from the Holy Mountain, The Adventure of Anum the Tortoise, Whisker the Brave Cat, Asa and The Little Stream, and Red One and the Wizard of Mula

One of the outstanding recurrent motif of oral narrative technique is the journey quest. This, as earlier said, is an essential part of the oral tradition of West Africa. This study aligns itself with view that the journey quest, aside its thematic leaning, governs the structure of a narrative text because it is through their journeys that characters “[...] go through different experiences that help in broadening their horizons and transforming their character and personalities. Therefore, the journeys the characters embark on are linked to their inner search for their own identities (Ulayyan & Awad, 2016:27). It is in this regard that this research considers journey quest as an oral narrative technique deployed in the selected Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s children’s texts.

Okpiliya & Akpan (2016:29) are of the view that “In children’s fiction, the journey basically serves structural and instructive roles most especially in stories having both human and animal characters”. For example, in *Snake Child and Star Baby*, Ufu and Afa are troubled when their first and second children mysteriously disappear from their cots soon after they were born. Ufu does not give up his quest for a native doctor or seer who can tell him what to do to destroy the power of the evil around his home. One day he meets a seer in a town called Zunga, who tells him that there is only one man who could help him. His name is Mazuo, “the one who knew things others did not know” (p. 34). Ufu feels his trouble has come to an end, but the seer tells him that it is not easy to find Mazuo because he has no fixed address, he does not stay in one place, and he is not always visible to people. He could only be seen on rare occasions when he chooses to reveal himself to a seeker. Thus, Ufu embarks on a long journey in search of the man who will help them solve the mystery. At the end of Ufu’s journey, he meets Mazuo who, in an antithesis, tells him that “The cause of the problem is in your house. The solution of the problem is also in your house” (p. 53).

As an oral narrative device patterned in

almost all oral journey quest, structurally, Ufu’s journey, after facing challenges, results in an epiphany that can be “used to improve the world” of the hero (Gabriel, 2017:66). Thus the solution to Ufu’s trouble is wrapped in oral rhetorics (riddle), however, when he arrives home he is able to understand it better.

There are instances in which journey quest as oral narrative technique is deployed in children’s text to help the child readers understand “[...] that their lives are a series of journeys, and they can have some control over their own destinies” (Hall, n.d:1). For example, in *Fire from the Holy Mountain*, Nwakannaya, the son of Oseka, the unloved wife of the king of Goshe is told to “go to the Holy Mountain and bring fire from there to Goshe” to prove his sonship to the king. Nwakannaya prepares for his journey. The narrative submits that:

He polished his silver sword and it shone even brighter. He knew it would not be easy to reach the Holy Mountain, but he was not afraid. Ugele had told him about his destiny, so he knew all along that he would return to Goshe when the time was ripe. He also knew he had to face a difficult task before he could claim his birthright in Goshe. Nwakannaya understood that the time was near. He was ready. He was glad (p. 27).

It is in this spirit that Nwakannaya takes leave of his mother, the king and the people of Goshe and leaves the palace all alone to journey to the Holy Mountain. As the structural motif of journey quest in all oral narratives, Nwakannaya undergoes trials, receives aid from Ugele who shows him the way he is to go, he fights his enemy (a three-headed bulldog at the top of the Holy Mountain), he succeeds in acquiring the treasure sought (the golden bowl of fire) and returns to Goshe unharmed (Howard, n.d:2). This kind of journey quest, as an oral narrative technique is meant to assist the child readers, according to Hall, to connect the journey to their lives and to parallel the hero’s steps in the text “[...] to the heroic nature in their own individual journeys, no matter

how mundane they may consider their daily lives to be” (p. 1).

It should be noted that most of the journey quest begins with “the call to adventure”. It is that device that “[...] sets the story rolling by disrupting the comfort of the Hero’s Ordinary World, presenting a challenge or quest that must be undertaken” (Vogler, n.d:3). This is evident in all the selected texts of this paper. For instance, in “Tortoise, Man and Leopard”, one of the stories in *The Adventure of Anum the Tortoise*, the eponymous character, Anum the Tortoise has a daughter called Little Tortoise who coughs all the time. She is so ill that Anum is sure she will die soon if a cure is not found for her strange disease, for “No one knew how to treat the disease” (p. 5). Anum is told of a herbalist who lives on the other side of the forest. He learns that the herbalist can cure his daughter, Little Tortoise. Thus, the next day Anum the Tortoise sets out on a journey in search of a cure for his only daughter. The call to adventure is Anum’s daughter’s incurable ailment.

In yet another story from the same text, *The Adventure of Anum the Tortoise*: “Tortoise and the Blacksmith’s Daughter”, the chief of Jaga gives Anum a small bag of maize and asks him to use the bag to get him (the chief) a beautiful woman to marry, to prove the cleverness of Anum the Tortoise. “Early in the morning” the reader is told, “Anum set out on his search for a beautiful girl” (p. 28). Here, the call to adventure is the challenge thrown at the Anum by the king.

The call to adventure is also evident in *Whisker the Brave Cat*. One of such is when the young antelope is killed by the young lion and later eaten by the lion family. The narrative has it that:

Mother Antelope and Father Antelope went around looking for their young one. They went from one family to another, but did not find him. They also went into the forest to search for him. They did not find him. They came to Father Lion’s house because they knew the young lion was his friend (p. 41).

The search continues everywhere but the young antelope is not found. All the animals are puzzled. In fact, Father and Mother Lion join in the search.

Even Mother lion weeps with the other mothers. Her eyes are red from weeping. As the story progresses, more animals disappear, most of whom are young. The eponymous Whisker the Brave Cat wonders why no mother or father has been lost, and so he determines to find out what causes the disappearances.

In *Asa and the Little Stream* the call to adventure is also evident. Chief Igunu of Lubeluland is informed by a magician of a river that has curative powers. His adventurous daughter, Princess Akudu shows her interest to go to the river. Initially, he refuses but he later allows her to “embark upon a search for the Beautiful River. He insists that she should go with some guards who would protect her on the way. Asa was also to go with her” (p. 23). At times, the journey that is undertaken by these characters take them from the physical world to the land of the spirits. This happens when Asa jumps into the river and soon disappears as Princess Akudu. After that Asa is “[...] astonished to find herself in a big mansion, at the bottom of the river” (p. 103). This aspect of style, according to Okpiliya & Akpan (2016:29-30), is exploited to educate the children on “Africa’s acceptance of the trinity of the dead, the living and the yet unborn”.

Red One and the Wizard of Mula demonstrates an instance of journey quest in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s children’s narratives. When “a mighty bird with wings more powerful than an eagle” swoops, takes away the Red One and shoots into the air like an arrow, the entire kingdom of Ubungo is shocked. This is one of the characteristics of Nigerian children’s literature in which there is “[...] heavy reliance on the folk tradition of the Nigerian people which [...] ascribes to the ethics of magical realism – the suspension of concrete reality and the approximation of the fantasy of the cosmological backgrounds of the African existential equation” (Okpiliya & Akpan, 2016:30). This triggers a call to adventure.

Thus, King Opoko, hurries into the palace and prepares for the search for the Princess. The mandate is that “The heiress of Ubungo must be found” (p. 29). Ubungo young men and warriors volunteer to join in the search. After six months, the first batch of the young men and warriors

including General Osebo who went for the search did not return. The king again sends out another search party to look for them and for Red One. The warriors also seem “to have suffered the same fate, [t]hey did not return” (p. 39).

On the whole, as can be seen from the instances given above, journey quest as an oral narrative technique is more than the “[...] concept of transport, or being transported from A to B” (Letherby & Reynolds, 2009:xviii). It is a structural device that helps both the character in the text and the reader outside the text to learn; it is indeed a narrative device that does not only advance the narrative process, but it also shapes both the characters’ and the child readers’ personalities.

Conclusion

This study has, through sufficient textual analysis surveyed the deployment of talking animals and journey motif as elements of oral narrative technique in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s children’s narratives. It has amply illustrated the relevant application of, and how these elements of oral tradition contribute in the configuration of meaning and representation in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s selected children’s narratives. In analyzing talking animals as an element of oral

narrative in the texts concerned, it can be noticed that talking animals has become a structural and narrative device deployed for the following reasons: to allow the child character to negotiate the boundaries of good and evil, human and animal; to humanize, socialize, and educate the child readers; and to marginalize animals, where the animals themselves take on stereotypical traits of marginalized groups of people. Also, in analyzing journey motif as an element of oral narrative technique, the study has demonstrated that journey quest is a textual structural site that allows children’s narratives to help the child readers understand that their lives are a series of journeys, and they can also have some control over their own destinies; it can also be deployed to assist the child readers to connect the journey to their lives and to parallel the hero’s steps in the text to the heroic nature in their own individual journeys, no matter how mundane they may consider their daily lives to be; it is also used to help the child readers appreciate Africa’s acceptance of the connection of the dead, the living and the yet unborn especially when the journey that is undertaken by these characters takes them from the physical world to the land of the spirits.

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