

Why Igbo Tales Lack Trickster Heroines

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Abstract

It is generally assumed that all traditional societies marginalized their women who they took as minors. However, this is not the evidence that is portrayed in Igbo trickster tales for such tales appear in societies with a lot of socio-religious restrictions for the weak and the less privileged. If actually Igbo women who from time immemorial have been in control of such tales were marginalized or maltreated as modern scholars want us to believe, these women would have inserted their experiences in the tales. The evidence in the tales is that there are few female tricksters who can represent the few women who did not have it rosy. But this is not how it is in some Muslim societies for in them are socially sanctioned restrictions on women. Therefore, in such societies, there are many female trickster heroines. But since there is nothing of such nature among the Igbo, the conclusion is that originally, there was nothing like women subjugation in the land. If there was, these women did not see it as such.

Keywords: Tricksters, Heroes, Marginalization, Subjugation, Male, Female

Introduction

The trickster motif is one that pervades almost every culture of the world. Trickery is practised mostly when somebody is in a tight situation. Trickster characters appear in the guise of humans, animals, birds and even deities. One thing that is peculiar to them is that they are small in stature and weak physically. However, what they lack in physical strength, they are compensated with cranial ability.

This ability is what enables the trickster to be succeeding and surviving even when conditions make it impossible for others to do so. However, this his ability tilts towards the negative side because for him to achieve his aim, he cheats, lies, causes confusion and can go to the extent of committing murder. His only interest is self aggrandisement no matter what it takes. But to enable him to be winning, the raconteurs make his antagonists gullible and naive. Sometimes, he acts against traditionally approved way of life, and even when caught, he sometimes goes scot-free. In studying this character, S. E. Schlosser has it that a trickster is a mischievous or roguish figure in myth or folklore that typically makes up for physical weakness with cunning and subversive humour. The trickster alternates between cleverness and stupidity, kindness and cruelty, deceiver and deceived, breaker of taboos and creator of culture.

For him to succeed, he uses all the means available to him in order to win his determined, strong but gullible opponents. As in the case of the major trickster among the Igbo who is Tortoise, he is both an elder and a native doctor. As an elder, he knows the culture of the people but he easily twists that culture to his advantage. As a native doctor, he is fully aware of the latent power of African herbs and minerals. When pressed, he puts these into utmost use. Therefore, what Wilda F. Hayward observes does not fully hold among the Igbo people. According to her, folklorists theorize that the absence of magic in trickster tales suggests that the tellers of these tales espouse the power of language and the triumph of wit over military and political might. The trickster who was physically less powerful, not only challenged but also made the larger physically powerful animals appear foolish.

While the present researcher agrees with Hayward that the “tellers of these tales espouse the power of language and the triumph of wit over military and political might, he does not agree that there is absence of magic. Tortoise the Igbo trickster makes use of his ability as a native doctor in order to deceive his opponents and make them to look foolish.

This is exactly how he deceives Lion in one tale in which he is carrying home a parcel of fish (Umeasiegbo 96). When Lion wants to know the content of the parcel, he tells him that it contains the remains of his (Tortoise’s) father. Lion sympathizes with him and insists that traditionally, one person does not carry a corpse. He, Lion, must help. Tortoise agrees and tells him that before they start moving that he would like to empty his bowel. He goes into a bush, defecates and inserts pepper into the faecal matter. After instructing the faecal matter what to say in case Lion calls, he departs to his house. Lion after waiting for some time calls again and again; the faecal matter again and again answers him: “I am coming.” The pepper is a metaphor for charms and these charms produce magical feats for the trickster to achieve his aim.

Conditions that Produce Tricksters

An Igbo proverb has it that if somebody says that all heads are equal, that person has merely committed a verbal emission. In other words, there must be inequality in existence. There must always be the poor, the weak and all those who do not measure up socially, financially, physically, etc. That somebody belongs to the lower class does not mean that it is all over with the person. One has to put into use whatever that is available for survival. However, that which is available may not be honourable but the emphasis in such tales is survival at all cost. To survive adverse conditions using any available means can explain why Harris and Sitterson have it that trickster often attempt to level the playing field in order to reduce the inequity in social and power situations. Further, they say that persons of lesser social status such as African Americans during slavery and immediately following, could work indirectly to bring about whatever measure of equality they could manage

In other words, for one to be a trickster, one has to be at a disadvantageous position—either financially, physically, etc. but not cranially deficient because the brain is the only endowment of the trickster. It is with his brain that the trickster has to narrow the gap between him and his antagonists. That can explain Hayward’s observation that trickster

tales depict a hierarchical social structure wherein the privileged group had the military and political power but not much intelligence. Conversely, there was a group at the lower state with no recourse to political and military power able to survive because of cleverness and sheer common sense.

Because trickster tales are meant to teach the underdog how to survive, one can say that this is how society gives a tacit approval for people to commit misdemeanours as far as they can escape detection. In popular jargon, there is a saying which has it that “*Wayo* is a game if you can play better”. *Wayo* which is an illiterate way of saying tricks is approved if it is done with finesse, or how do you expect Tortoise, Spider, Ant, Squirrel, et cetera to survive in the jungle with such gigantic and ravenous animals like Elephant, Leopard, Puff adder, et cetera prowling around? Can any of such animals survive the ponderous tread of Elephant? This condition must have motivated Uchenna D. Uwakwe in his observation that:

The conception of the animal world is the forest which is particularly identified with the *law of the jungle*. In this regard, power is present as a survival strategy. This accounts for the audience’s interest in the trickster figure who manipulates grave situation to his favour despite the outlook which places it in a marginalized circumstance (3).

Such is portrayed in folktales as can be seen in the tale “The big test”. In that story:

There were many reports of murder coming to Chief Nkapi, the chief and ruler of all the animals. A new law was made that no animal had the right to kill another animal. Offenders would be punished by hanging them in the market square. The little and weak animals were particularly delighted. Before this legislation, carnivorous animals such as the lion and the tiger could and did kill little innocent ones (Umeasiegbu 72).

Under this dangerous and chaotic system, these little, weak and innocent ones have to devise means of survival. Since nature never imbued physical prowess into them, their only survival strategy has to emanate from their brains, but most often what they come up with verges on cheating and trickery for these actually can help them faster. This is why it is noted that: “Kindness and good faith do not often pay any dividend in a community where everyone cheats and bullies [as it is in the jungle where these animals live]. One must therefore be shrewd, double-tongued and ready to compromise when necessary. Such, briefly is the nature of *Ifo* [folktales]” (Nwaozuzu 2).

What it boils down to is that fear, inadequacy, persecution, et cetera breed tricksters. Even in real life, children who fear that they will be beaten resort to lies and dissembling just as the tricksters do in the tales. People tell a lot of lies in the court so as to escape being convicted. Employees for fear of being surcharged can even destroy their employers’ property such as documents in order to shield themselves and cover their tracks well. That was how it was among the Africans who worked as slaves in America and the Caribbean. As was noted by M. Clay Hooper:

... Nat Turner who at a young age is forced to shed his “kind and docile” manner and adopt the tactics of masking and misdirection that were often the slaves’ only defence against the arbitrary brutality of the slave system as well as his only means of personal gratification. In short, he adopts the tricksters’ craft of translating weakness into power within a particular set of situational constraints (38).

But why did Turner behave like that? Why did he risk getting into greater problems in case he was caught? Did he think of the moral implications of his actions? But if situation was conducive for him, would he have started misbehaving? These and other disturbing questions might not have occurred to him in their stark enormity because what he was looking for was only to escape from being punished. However, the gravity of his actions can be viewed lightly when compared with the actions of other slaves. One can easily see this in the citation made by Sitterson and Trudier from Lawrence W. Levine’s article. According to the scholars in an Internet article, Levine while studying the actions of Afro-American slaves, has it that a significant number of slaves lied, cheated, stole, feigned illness, loafed, pretended to misunderstand the orders they were given, put rocks in the bottom of their cotton baskets in order to meet their quota, broke their tools, burned their masters’ property, mutilated themselves in order to escape work, took indifferent care of the crops they were cultivating, and mistreated the livestock placed in their care to the extent that their masters often felt it necessary to use the less efficient mules rather than horses since the former could better withstand the brutal treatment of the slaves.

The article goes on to state that these slaves went forward to create stories in which animal actions mirrored human actions during and after slavery. That accounts for the origin of Uncle Remus stories. For them to get more at their masters, they transformed African trickster stories into an aggressive weapon and a form of consolation in that they saw themselves as the small and weak tricksters, and their masters, they likened to the strong and aggressive but gullible animals. In that case, their masters could only remain at the top for some time and not for ever for with their brains, these slaves would pull them down.

As it was among the slaves, so it is in any society where there are restrictions, for in actual fact: “It could be stated as a general rule and defended fairly well by ethnographic evidence that the occurrence of trickster tales is directly proportional to the degree of oppressiveness of socio-religious restrictions” (Greenway 149).

It is in view of the above observations that one can study Igbo trickster tales in order to see if actually Igbo women in the ancient days were subjugated or marginalized as modern scholarship wants us to believe.

Occurrence of Female Tricksters

In the traditional society, women are said to be deprived of a lot of their rights. They were to be seen and not heard. They had to fulfil their desires either through their sons, brothers, husbands or fathers as the case might be. As it is observed:

Whereas in patrilineal society, a woman cannot own land or cattle, neither can she in a debate or negotiation concerning property to a legal action.... She has always got to be represented by her father or brother or husband or son. Also, she often participate has limited authority even over her sons who are above a certain age (Ngcob 536).

To add to this apparent distressing situation, this researcher some years ago when he was far below ten years of age, as in the midst of some married women one of whom was his mother. These women wanted to break a kola nut. One of them raised the issue of a man who would break it for them. That was how he was called to do so but since he did not know how to do it properly with the necessary prayers, he was told to touch it and give it back to them. In short, there are numerous cases which modern people view as the subjugation of the traditional woman. Some scholars are of the view that she was dehumanized. In short, the editors of *Encarta* opine that feminists are united by the idea that women's position in society is unequal to that of men and that society is structured in such a way as to benefit men to the political, social and economic detriment of women.

Probably, this view may be true but the question is: If trickster tales are used to portray the lives of subjugated people, why is it that only few female characters are showcased as tricksters and none of these is a heroine? If actually women were the endangered species, why do our tales not portray them as they struggle for survival? They were like the Africans sold into slavery but the slaves in their bid to survive resorted to trickery. After, they coined these tricks into tales.

This situation is more glaring when it is on record that these women as mothers and grandmothers have been the main raconteurs who for ages have been handling these tales. Therefore, they had all the time and every needed tool at their disposal to show their grievances. For one, the raconteur can take any story of her choice and turn it to suit her purpose. For the other, many men pretend and some actually believe that these tales are for women and children. In that case, any woman that wants to show her grief through these tales will have no interference from men. Yet, in all Igbo trickster tales, all the regular tricksters (Tortoise, Ram and Sunbird or sometimes Wren) are depicted as male characters. It is on very few occasions that female tricksters are portrayed as irregular or occasional tricksters for none is a regular one.

But this is not how it is in all cultures, for in some, as it is in Muslim societies, women are depicted as arch-tricksters. As it is observed by Margaret A. Mill:

The topic of women's tricks--*Makr-e Zain* or *Kayd un-nisa*--is a particularly rich one in Islamic literature, written or oral and in popular thoughts. Women are considered to excel even the devil himself in trickery as various Persian proverbs and aphorisms attest (158).

Why do these Islamic women insert their woes in trickster tales and Igbo women raconteurs do not? Does it mean that Igbo women were well off and so had no need to start crying when nobody was beating them? Were they terrified of the repercussion from their domineering men? But since Nat Turner did not care about such repercussion, why should they be afraid? Since they were enjoying the stories alone with their children, why would

they be afraid of male interference? In addition, the events of Aba riot of 1929 indicate otherwise for in actual fact, these women were as fearless as a wounded lioness. They were even more daring than their men.

If these women were weak and were subjugated and so were incapable of challenging their male counterparts, and at their disposal were innumerable tales, they would have created more female tricksters than male ones for in actual fact:

Guile (*Makr*, *Kayd* in Afghanistan language) or trickery can be categorized as a weapon of the weak and thus quintessentially of women. Tricks work best for underdogs though not only underdogs are tricksters. Trickery as a concept, including duplicitous persuasive techniques (deceptions, sleight of hand, and conjuring) ... may in some cases cross over into *jadu* (sorcery) and of course, disguise (which may include magical disguise or shape-changing) (Mill 238).

However, it is not only in the Igbo nation that the greater number of tricksters is male. In other words, whatever we come up with in this discourse can apply to many people because in actual fact, many of such nations were at the same level of development and so were experiencing similar problems.

This puzzle over the paucity of female tricksters has been noted by Ash Silverlock who states that it is interesting to note that the vast majority of trickster figures are male even though, lies and duplicity are hardly limited to one gender. Even the few examples of female tricksters rarely enjoy the same status as their male counterparts. The reason for this is hard to say. Perhaps it is because the first trickster myths originated in traditionally patriarchal societies or perhaps it is because of some deeper level these tales articulate some distinction between men and women. No one really knows, and this is but one more mystery that can add to the greater enigma that is the trickster.

However, one can get near the reasons by studying the society involved because what motivates one society may not motivate another, for contrary to the above view, Afghanistan has more female tricksters than male. Why? The occurrence of that type of tales that feature trickster characters is directly proportional to the degree of socio-religious restrictions. In other words, where there is less restriction, there are few tricksters.

That the relationship of the sexes in the traditional society is being misconstrued today as being similar to that of a slave master and the slave is as a result of the influence of the West. In those days, the role of every member of the family was clearly defined. Each person knew what was expected of him or her. In all, the sexes complement each other. Even, where there was a failing from one side, the other would try to help out. That explains why some women in those days had to go to their people to help them raise some money for their husbands to marry other wives. That also explains why the man had to cultivate the greater part of the farm with yams and the woman would plant vegetables and coco yams for these were seen by society as belonging to women. Therefore, for the absence of women as regular tricksters which means that women were not maltreated, a lot of reasons can be adduced, the most obvious being that these women were not over restricted.

Another of such reasons is that the Igbo people from then till now have certain expectations from women. In that society, no woman even today is expected to be rough or be a rogue as the life of the trickster entails. It is not that society approves such behaviour for men but the women as the custodians of propriety as can be seen in the goddess of propriety, Ala or Ana or Ani (depending on the dialect) is expected to be the embodiment of good behaviour. That which she has is what she can use in training the children for she is nearer to them than the husband.

The influence of this expectation on women can be seen in the tale “*Agadi Nwaanyi Uru na Ewu Ohi Ya*- The Old Woman Pilferer and her Stolen Goat” (Nwaokoro 61). This old woman’s husband steals a goat, kills it and puts the blood in a container. When the people start tracing the whereabouts of the goat and other missing items, the woman seizes a child who comes to her house to get fire embers. She covers the child with a cloth and pours the blood on him, thereby transferring the odour of the goat to him. When the people want to go from house to house in order to search for the animal, she convinces them that it is a waste of time. They would rather be sniffing on people to know who has the odour of goat on him. That is how they catch the unfortunate child as the thief that stole the goat. The social expectation manifests clearly because it is the husband that stole the goat and he is not referred to as a pilferer. It is only her that the raconteur calls a pilferer when she is just an accomplice. This stand of the Igbo is similar to the observation of Brenda Sutton. In her observation the trickster is almost always male, though some female trickster characters are well known. In a recent conversation with writer Ellen Kushner, she learnt that we probably do not have many trickster figures because the most obvious outward symbol of woman is that of mother and wife. Trickster is so very undependable, devious and at times wicked. The idea of mother or wife imbued with these characteristics is more than most humans want to consider.

It is in view of this societal requirement that women nicknamed themselves “*Ugegbe ezi na ulo*--the mirror of the home”. No family wants to be portrayed in a very bad light. Unlike the child who resorts to lies on sensing that he may be beaten if he tells the truth, these women if they are hard pressed may not easily turn to become tricksters.

Another reason why women do not feature as regular tricksters is that naturally, they are weak and so cannot resist in case there is a boomerang after the trick. That can explain why they are debarred from certain activities such as climbing palm trees, iroko trees and other gigantic trees. Disobedience many result into death and since folktales do not contain many deaths, they are not featured in dangerous episodes. When danger looms before a woman, “... she has always got to be represented by her father, brother, husband or son”. What Western feminists see as an affront against women are what the Igbo created to safeguard the mirrors of their homes for if they are left unprotected, these mirrors would crack into pieces.

Here, consider the case of the tale “Strength and Reason” (Chukwudum 78). A gorilla in the tale catches a woman in a forest and throws a wrestling challenge at her. She accepts the challenge because she has no option. But then, she advises that she plaits his hair first. He gullibly agrees and they go under a tree. She then ties his hair to a branch of the tree. After doing so, she tiptoes away to call the husband.

It is with great anger that the beast blurts out:

Weak but intelligent woman!

Weak but intelligent woman!

She has tricked me and run away!

She has left her firewood and ran away!

She is afraid of wrestling! (82).

Which Igbo woman can be a wrestler seeing that they, from time immemorial, have been well protected? Wrestling with all its inherent danger is for men. How can it be said that a society that debars its women folk from being wounded is marginalizing them? Why can the good heartedness that is embedded in protection be misconstrued as wickedness and marginalization? In order to show what is expected of the woman, the one in the tale goes and calls the husband. Under that condition, trickery is allowed and this tale now becomes one of the few tales that depict an occasional female trickster.

That women cannot become trickster heroines due to certain endowments is also the opinion of Helen Lock. According to her in the patriarchal societies that produce the archetypal trickster, the very qualities that enabled the trickster to operate belonged culturally to men or as Looday puts it, “ In a sexist society, the male trickster has the advantage of masculinity: mobility, autonomy, power, safety”. These advantages are in themselves gender-neutral but are gendered by cultural association. Trickster is not gendered--only cultural perceptions of the freedom and mobility necessary to be trickster. Thus, pre-modern tricksters were imagined as primarily masculine though with gender-changing abilities.

Since these tales serve the people in teaching them survival strategies when they are pressed to the wall, they do not teach them how to get themselves destroyed. As it is in these tales, so it happens in real life. Which woman will confront a boa constrictor or any other wild animal without alerting her brother, father, husband or son if any of them is available? By helping to safeguard her life, can the person who helps her be rightly accused of marginalizing her? What it boils down to is that Igbo women do not feature as regular tricksters because already their problems are being solved for them.

That Igbo women are seen as being subservient to their male relatives is because they are just supports in the respective families where one finds them. They are not the pillars of such families. Pillars carry the weight of the house and so can be bent by such weight to any shape. That weight can force them to do anything so as to survive. That women now have to earn in order to help is due to present economic conditions. As it was before, working in order to earn a living was not expected of her because “a woman’s greatest aspiration is finding a mate and thereafter bearing children. Every other thing is secondary: education, a career, material wealth, social acclaim. All these are sub mated to marriage and motherhood” (Chukwuma x).

If society only expects her to deliver her duties which nature endows her with, can we say she is seen as a minor? Which man will be happy exposing his female relatives to the vagaries of life? If he shields them, how can he be accused of being domineering? That explains why women are not trickster heroes for already that problem or condition which would have forced them to be such has been solved for them. It is only nowadays that they "... are expected in addition to their traditional wifehood and motherhood to equip themselves for life in the modern times by being not only consumers but producers and co-producers of the family income" (Chukwuma x).

The evidence from trickster tales shows that originally there was nothing like women being wickedly treated among the Igbo. They were enjoying the protection of their male relatives. To show that this is historically true, some nicknames among them can be an eye opener: Dimanu [My husband is marrying me well], Obidiya [Heart of the husband], Ugodiya [Eagle of the husband], Dibugwu [Husband is prestige], Dibuko (Husband is pride), Omaobidiya [Knower of the husband's heart], Oriaku [Devourer of wealth], Enyidiya [Friend of the husband], et cetera If these accolades do exist today with present economic constraints, who knows how it was then! In fact, saying that men marginalized women is wrong although, there could be individual cases of wickedness against particular women. These are the few cases depicted by irregular or occasional tricksters. Since they were well treated and had no need risking their lives, one sees them only trying to make themselves, attractive as can be seen in their pet or nicknames. Which person battling to survive will start caring about beauty? Or which man has ever answered such names like Achalugo [Elegance of the eagle], Irugo [Face of the eagle], Adaoma [Daughter of beauty], Adaku [Daughter of wealth], Odoziaku [Custodian of wealth], Nwamma [Child of beauty], Mkpulumma [Seed of beauty], etc? They were more interested with their beauty because they had nothing worrying them.

Since these beauties and dependents are the appendages of their men, their problems are solved when those of the men are taken care of. Since they are not directly concerned with formulating survival strategies, there is no need making them tricksters

If actually women were being maltreated as some would like people to believe, they would hate their men. Also, they would be suffering from inferiority complex, and if anything happened in society, they would be unable to speak out. But this was not the situation with them judging from the events of 1929 at Aba. According to the CD-ROM, Microsoft Encarta, when these women saw the high taxes imposed on their husbands by British officials and the low return on their palm kernel crops, the women of the area rose up in mass protests, burning buildings and driving off some of the authorities. Government troops were sent in and approximately 50 women were killed in the conflict.

If their husbands were maltreating them, they would not have risked their lives challenging the imperial power of Britain. Also, if they could risk their lives in that way, what prevented them from organizing and challenging their husbands if they saw any form of affront against womanhood? Since there is no record of such a challenge, the implication is that the women did not see anything wrong with the way they were treated. This is a way of supporting the content of trickster tales where no regular trickster hero is a female. That

today's scholarship sees such daring and fearless women of the Aba women riot as being marginalized is due to lack of the knowledge of the social organization of those days.

Conclusion

Trickster tales portray characters at the lowest echelon of society who can do all that is at their disposal in order to survive. From ethnographic studies, it has been discovered that such stories abound wherever there are restrictions. In this case, these stories become for the marginalized and restricted people a valve for letting the steam off their system. It is in view of this that one can use these tales to study the extent Igbo women were restricted in the past.

In studying these tales, only male characters are regular trickster heroes. There are few occasional female tricksters. If these women were actually marginalized in the days gone by, they would have featured women as regular tricksters for they were in charge of the composition and retelling of the tales. The few occasional female tricksters they tell us about stand for few women who were suffering in some families.

On closer examination, it was discovered that the society of those days had the roles of the sexes spelt out. Therefore, since they were satisfied with what was assigned to them, these women could not protest. In other words, trickster tales among the Igbo show that there was no female marginalization to the extent that it is being assumed today. The few instances of marginalization that occurred could only be seen between some husbands and their wives.

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