

## FOLKLORE, CULTURE AND THE NEXUS BETWEEN: PERSPECTIVES ON 'EGWUONWA' AMONG THE IGBO PEOPLE

By

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### Abstract

*'Egwuonwa' ranks among the treasured aspects of folklore not just among the Igbo people in Nigeria but many other societies in Africa with far reaching benefits for both the adults and children involved. That was many decades ago before the advent of electronic gadgets and ICT that fully launched us into a global world. With BernthLindfors Interpretative approach to the study of folklore as the theoretical anchor, the study seeks to reopen conversation on moonlight games and it's socio-cultural cum philosophical imports in Igbo societies. Through field research and samples of moonlight games collected in different communities in Igbo land, in the Eastern part of Nigeria, the study reexamines these moonlight songs and games in the light of their communal importance. The paper seeks to reestablish their relevance in our present-day society motivated by the dearth of moonlight activities and its ideological and philosophical underpinning relevant for the propagation of a healthy and morally grounded generation.*

**Keywords:** Egwuonwa, culture, folklore, cosmology, philosophy

### Introduction

Moonlight games popularly known in the Igbo language as "egwuonwa" is part of the rich constituents of folklore within the larger framework of orature, inline with Pio Zirimu's term for oral literature. Oral literature refers to many of the materials, and elements of the rich heritage of any homogenous society. They are not written down rather they are part of the tradition of a people that have survived and thrived in the pre-literate past and handed over from generation to generation orally that is through a mouth to face contact. Folklore, an aspect of orature, therefore, is the traditional art, literature, knowledge and practice that are disseminated largely through oral communication. Every group of people who shares a common tradition, culture, and language possesses something that is unique to them. These groups of individuals share as a central part of that identity, folk traditions-the things that the people traditionally believe, do, know, and say. In the opinions of Charles Nnolim:

By folklore we mean the unrecorded tradition of a people as they appear in their popular fiction, custom, belief, magic, ritual, superstition and proverbial sayings.... it is a major component in the total folk culture of such a homogeneous group of people.... (16)

Culture, a key variable in this study, is perceived as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Adedimeji, cited in Aharanwa, Ubaku&Ugwuaja, 36). The critics

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further support that culture “is an all-embracing entity without which progress in society would remain a mirage. This explains the consensus of opinion amongst scholars that the basis of development is culture and any community that aims at progress without its culture is only deceiving itself by engaging in self-immolation” (Aharanwa, Ubaku&Ugwu, 36).

Moonlight and its attendant games and activities are integral part of the folklore of African societies. The Igbos of the ancient past instituted the tradition of playful interactions at the appearance of the moonlight popularly known as the *egwuonwa* which was a rich source of education, entertainment and recreation. This was a time, many decades ago when the Igbo society was devoid of high-tech technological innovations and ICT, a time children had limited or no access to formal learning and westernization. The moonlight game is one of the defining cultures and practices of not just the Igbo people but many societies in Africa. Mama Sophia interestingly reveals that:

The moonlight game is a traditional evening recreation for youth still practiced in some places. “Onwatibe, ijeagubaagadi” – “the crippled elders long to walk again when the moon is out” – is a proverb that describes how much the elders miss youthful age. The present-day form of night worship provides adequately what were lost in the area of African evening recreations. (148)

Mama Sophia in espousing the rich values of *egwuonwa* argues that the missionaries contributed greatly to its destruction: “Young men and women should not go out at night,” the first missionaries said. “They might fall to temptations and commit sins of impurity.” She defends that: “sacredness was maintained during moonlight games before the missionaries arrived. The young men stayed on their part of the village square while the young women stayed on theirs. But each group was not too distant from the other. This was for protection and help in case of emergency.” (148) This customary recreation, she notes, has been effaced from many African societies, particularly in urban areas as some people deem it pagan and uncivilized and one can quickly add that the lacuna this created in societies is increasingly glaring. *EgwuOnwa* delights everyone across the length and breadth of Igbo land. At the appearance of a full moon, the euphoria and excitement is consciously and unconsciously transmitted. Everyone partakes in these games that are gender-friendly and sensitive. While the female folks engage in songs, dances, and games befitting their gender, the boys delight in wrestling contests, acrobatics, stunts and musical displays. The elders sit in groups, around campfires, sipping and sharing local drinks exchanging nostalgic tales of the heroic and interesting past while entertaining each other with mild taunts known as *Njakiri*. Sometimes, the elders engage the children in moonlight tales. Other times the children recall and share tales from memory. These tales are usually about the tortoise and its excesses in the animal kingdom. Adults and children benefit greatly from these practices which hinges on communal life, harmony, peaceful co-existence, unity, the oneness of purpose, and solidarity. In cognizance of this wealth of values, Chinua Achebe avers in his memorable novel, *Things Fall Apart* that:

..When we gather together in the moonlight village ground, it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. Therefore let us continue with the team spirit and enjoy the power of togetherness... (45).

Today, sad enough, this beautiful culture of playful delights under the moonlight, *EgwuOnwa* is among the neglected cultural practices among the Igbo people. This is due to technological growth and sophisticated inventions aided by western education and acculturation that have altered the scene of our modern-day societies, eroding our once cherished ideals and indigenous cultures.

### **BernthLindfors' Interpretative Approach to the Study of Folklore: A Theoretical Justification**

The theoretical framework adopted for this research is the Interpretative Approach to the study of folklore as suggested by BernthLindfors which he believes "avoids careless overstatements and amasses data only when it is useful to the argument advanced" (12). According to Lindfors, "There appear to be three basic critical approaches to folklore in African literature: the impressionistic, the anthropological, and the interpretative. These may be arranged in a hierarchy with "impressionistic" at the bottom and "interpretative" at the top, for each successive level, seems to require a greater degree of critical sophistication and cultural expertise" (8).

While the impressionistic approach to folklore in African literature involves assumptions and suggestions rather than facts and proofs, the anthropological approach is "obsessed with documentation." The interpretative theoretical approach, which Lindfors suggests is the best among the three, "avoids careless overstatements and amasses data only when the data is useful to the argument being advanced" (12).

The interpretative critic who studies traditional elements in contemporary African literature, according to Lindfors, is more likely to be interested in investigating their artistic functions or their aesthetic and metaphorical implications than in merely validating their existence (12). The choice of this theoretical framework is largely due to the fact that this study amasses useful data from fieldwork and subjects the collected data to interpretation regarding the artistic and aesthetic functions of the materials collected from which insightful scholarship ideas are promulgated in this area of study.

### **Methodology**

As fieldwork, the researcher in this study selected moonlight games and songs from six towns all within a particular state in Anambra State in the Igbo Land-the Eastern part of Nigeria. The samples were collected from interviews conducted on seven interviewers gleaned from six towns within the state- Nise, Nibo, Awka, Agulu, Amawbia, Enugwu-Ukwu, all located in Awka South, Anaocha and Njikoka Local Government Areas of Anambra state.

The accounts from the interviewers, four females and three men formed the materials in which this study based its analysis of the moonlight artifacts collected and thus examined. Through a random sampling technique, elderly men and women, all over sixty years were randomly selected for the research and the analysis is based on the extracts from these interviews.

### **Analysis of Samples of Moonlight Games Collected in Some Part of Igbo Land**

The moonlight game is best enjoyed during the dry season, the time of and after harvest when

people settle to enjoy the proceeds from the farm. This period is known in the local calendar as "Onwaasaa." The game usually starts around 8 pm, when most families in Igbo land have enjoyed their dinner and are ready to join other families and friends for a communal playing under the moonlight. These games cover a wide spectrum of activities. They include "hide and seek," "action songs," "tongue twisters," "breath control games," "riddles," "puzzles" "song display/ dance choreographies and some dramatic performances. The young maidens, as part of the essence of the midnight gathering, delightfully interact among their peers and exchange breaking news and local gossips, without losing the sight of the young good looking men that usually form the object of their fantasy and admiration. The young men on their part, aware of the lingering admiration of the maidens, engage in wrestling bouts and acrobatic games, stunts and musical/dance displays that taste their talents, courage, bravery and tenacity.

The section of the research deals with a few of the raw moonlight songs and games collected in some parts of the Igbo Land.

One of the games collected is entitled "Dodo nido, Doni." In this game, the participants are divided into two groups. Each of the groups will hold one side of a bamboo stem and as soon as the contest begins, they sing:

|                                               |                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Dodo nido, doni.</i> (2 times) -           | (suggesting let us pull, let us pull)               |
| <i>Ngodoweteogugu ka anyinafo do- do ni</i>   | -Ngodo bring the bamboo stem so that we contest.    |
| <i>Arahwetaogugu ka anyinafa do- do ni</i>    | - Arah bring the bamboo stem so that we contest.    |
| <i>Umuazuwetaogugu ka anyinafa do- do ni</i>  | - Umuazu bring the bamboo stem so that we contest.  |
| <i>Isiakpuwetaogugu ka anyinafa do- do ni</i> | - Isiakpu bring the bamboo stem so that we contest. |

Ngodo, Arah, Umuazu, Isiakpu are names of the four villages in Nise, in Awka South of Anambra State, Nigeria. The different groups will begin to pull the bamboo stalk. Anyone who falls and loses her grip on the bamboo stem is eliminated and the group with the greater number of survivors wins.

This game is targeted towards enhancing the physical strength of a child and the instincts necessary for survival in society. Apart from enhancing cohesion and interaction among children, it gives a child a sense of belonging in his/her society.

Another game is entitled "Nwa m, Nwam". In this game, there are two groups with an equal number of team members. At each instance, a team dispatches one a person who will continue to hop with one leg while they sing:

|                                              |                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Nwa m, Nwa m, nwa m o- kpangene</i>       | - My child, my child, -kpangene                        |
| <i>Nwa m jeluokunaagbaja- kpangene.</i>      | - My child that went to answer a call in faraway land  |
| <i>Okpaluogi ani ginoduoo, -kpangene</i>     | - If your two legs touch the ground, then stay back.   |
| <i>Okpaelughigi ani gi nata ba – Kpagene</i> | -If your two legs do not touch the ground then return. |

(The idea of two legs touching the ground means if you are comfortable do not return, if you are not, return to us)

The two contestants will continue to dance and challenge each other on one leg. The first to let her second leg down is recruited by the other team. In that way, the game goes on till one team is bereft of team members.

This game, apart from testing the physical strength and tenacity of a child, bothers on several philosophical ideas beneficial to a child. On one hand, it expresses the need for comfort and adaptation. No matter where life takes you, make it a home, a habitable place for you and all concerned. But on the other hand, the game prevails on a child the imperative need not to forget his home. True to this, the Igbos so much believe in home and many of their proverbs communicate on the need to stay close to home for that is where one truly belongs. This is the two-dimensional meanings this game of innocence communicates to a child at such a tender age the mind is willing and eager to learn.

Another game collected is "Asigene". In this game, children are seated in a circle. There are three major characters. One is called Amagu, the other, Ichele, then the lead singer, Asigene. There is a pebble which is the bone of contention during the game. Ichele is condemned in the circle to search out with utmost keenness on the movement of the pebble among the circle. Whoever fails to pass on the pebble as supposed, will be caught and the person will replace the one in the middle of the circle and the game restarts. While the game is on, the leader would be singing and passing the pebble on:

|                                      |                                                                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Asigenekpangaofe, oho oo, oho</i> | -Asigene pass on the pebble                                        |
| <i>Onyenaonye ka nchiche nata?</i>   | - Who is being plagued by leprosy?                                 |
| <i>Ima nanchicheanaroatanu m oo</i>  | - I am not plagued by leprosy                                      |
| <i>ononaogbo ka nchiche n' ata</i>   | - It is the one standing in the middle that is plagued by leprosy. |

From the song, whoever is in the middle is assumed to be plagued by nchiche- leprosy. It is this derogatory remark and shame that propels the victim, to at all cost, discover someone who will replace her and save her from the shame. Once this happens, the game restarts with another victim of assumed leprosy menace occupying the middle.

Evil is detested as the game suggests, and a child ought to stay above board in all his dealings to be free of condemnation and scorn that will earn him the criticism and societal rejection associated with leprosy-ridden patients.

Another game is entitled "Ayolo". Before the game starts, the groups are divided into two equal numbers. Then there will be a mother overseeing each group and looking after her children (group mates). Then each group will dispatch a member on a journey to lure and snatch a child from the other group to populate theirs. The person sent will addresses the mother of the opposing group as Ayolo. She chants:

|                                  |                                                |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Ayolonaabia m be gi</i>       | -Ayolo I have come to your house.              |
| <i>Ibakwa be m noo (2 times)</i> | -If you have come to my house you are welcome. |

|                                          |                                                       |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Isi nke a di ka isinwa m oo</i>       | - This head of this one is like the head of my child. |
| The team echoes: <i>oburokwanwagi!</i>   | - She is not your child!                              |
| <i>Anyanwa nke a di ka anyanwa m oo.</i> | -The eyes of this one are like the eyes of my child.  |
| <i>Oburokwanwagioo!</i>                  | - She is not your child!                              |
| <i>Iminke a di ka anyanwa m oo</i>       | -This nose is like the nose of my child.              |
| <i>Oburokwanwagioo!</i>                  | - She is not your child!                              |

(She will continue to name other parts of the body until she will begin to negotiate with the opponents)

|                                  |                                              |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| <i>Mu welunke a?</i>             | -Should I go with this one?                  |
| <i>Eeeoonaonaechuiyieeeeeoo</i>  | - No, No, No, she fetches water! No, no, no! |
| <i>Mu welunke a?</i>             | -Should I go with this one?                  |
| <i>Eeeoonaona awa nkueeeeeoo</i> | - No, No, No, she cuts firewood! No, no, no! |
| <i>Mu welunke a?</i>             | -Should I go with this one?                  |
| <i>Eeeoonaonaesinrieeeeoo</i>    | - No, No, No, she cooks food! No, no, no!    |

After much enquires, when the mother will be least vigilant, the visitor grabs one of the children and tries to flee. If successful, she takes the child to populate her group. If unsuccessful, she returns. Then it will be the turn of the other group to repeat the same act and win a member. The game ends when a mother in one group, losses all her children to the mother from the other group.

This is a very interesting game laced with several philosophical ideas: a child is ever meant to be obedient and productive in the family to earn good recommendations from the parents. A good child is the parents' pride and they protect him/her at all costs. A bad child is a source of sorrow to the parents. This game, when examined in the light of slavery in the colonial past, could reveal some shades of meaning as some natives were willingly sold into slavery by families when their excesses and terror could no longer be tolerated. This is outside those that were forcefully taken against their collective wishes. In a nutshell, the song challenges a child on the need to always be useful and abide by the ethical tenets of society to earn good recommendations and protection.

Another game worthy of note is entitled "Oku na agba." In this game, the leader of the team announces sudden fire on the mountain and everyone is commanded to run:

|                                      |                                                |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Oku na agba naenuugwu- gbagbabanuoso | -There is fire on the mountain, run runrun!    |
| okuna agba naenuugwu- gbagbabanuoso  | -There is fire on the mountain, run, run, run! |
| okuna agba naenuugwu- gbagbabanuoso  | -There is fire on the mountain, run, run, run! |

But sooner than later, the leader declares:  
okuanuo n' ikeoo

-The fire ends at once!

Anyone who fails to stand still when the fire is declared ended will be eliminated. The game continues in that order until a winner emerges.

This game tests a child's vigilance and instills in him the proper skills for vigilance, an important survival instinct in the course of life.

"Oloholo" is another game collected. In the beginning of the game, lot is cast and whoever the lot falls on will be the first to go. The person's eyes are covered while everybody goes into hiding. The search will then begin and the searcher will chant:

*oloholo, oloho, oloholo, oloho,*

The chant is more or less a sound signal to alert the participants of her readiness and the need for them to be properly hidden in their chosen corners before she embarks on the search. Whoever is discovered takes over from the initial searcher and in that way, the game continues. This game is close to what has transformed in various modes in our modern time as hide and seek game familiar in many societies of the world. It enhances social interaction and revitalizes a child.

Another game is entitled, "EgwulkpeNwiilo". In this game, the girls are seated in circles and with a learned leg movements, passes a pebble from one person to another singing:

"Aja IkpeNwiilo" (many times) This song can be loosely translated means, 'the sand of IkpeNwiilo, the child refuses to sleep, IkpeNwiilo.

Whoever fails to pass on the pebble becomes a loser and will be eliminated. This game, like some others, trains a child on vigilance and both physical and mental alertness needed for prompt growth.

The last game we shall consider here is "Onyeenena Anya n'azu":

|                          |                                                   |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Onyeenenaanyanaazu       | -No one should look behind.                       |
| mmonwuanyina aga n'ilo,  | -Our masquerade is passing in the village square. |
| onye nee anyan'azu       | -Anyone who looks back.                           |
| mmonwuanyigaapiayautali. | -Our masquerade will flog him/her.                |

This game, very popular and common in Igbo society, is performed among children. They children sit in a circle. One person with a stick runs behind everybody with the stern warning that no one should look back. The rest will respond to affirm the consequences of looking back. The person is at liberty to flog anyone who looks back. At some intervals, she drops the stick behind someone. If the person rounds the circle without the person noticing that the stick was dropped behind her, she will receive some flogging for her lack of vigilance. But if she noticed when the stick was dropped, she will chase after the person. If she catches up with the person, she will flog the person before she settles down in her original position and then she picks up the stick and runs round in the same process as before, echoing the same warning to others not to look back. The game promotes obedience and diligence in a child which in turn enhances the chances of a child being obedient and abiding by the customs, laws, and ethical values that govern the homogenous society.

### **Socio-Cultural cum Philosophical Essence of Moonlight Games in Igbo Societies**

The moonlight games are tied to the cultural and cosmological outlook of Igbo societies. The

embodiments of these activities in many ways transmit the cultural values of society to the younger ones who in turn will become progenitors of these values. The moonlight activities, in many ways, promote social interactions among children who grew on the foundation of love, oneness, and dignity, values that are fast eluding our present-day society. It is gleaned that from these interactions, kinship and brotherhood are strengthened. Even ethical marriages often stem from them. Eligible young men oftentimes meet their life partners during these gatherings. Others may return to themselves years later which could be traced to their interactions in their early childhood. Age grades are noted from these interactions and as early as possible several social formations emanate from these associations towards building a unified and prosperous society. Women are trained in the ethical paths of womanhood and male children tilt the path of becoming full-fledged men admired in society. In the age of social media and dating sites and different electronic platforms, humans are more electronically than physically close. Trust, decency and mutual respect are fast become luxuries. Since only children who fulfil the chores and duties expected of them at home are rewarded with the privilege to partake in moonlight games, children were more obedient and duty-conscious too. In such ways, respect, hard work, duty consciousness, and doggedness are sown in children as early as possible.

These games are not devoid of other sides of the training of the children. Children are trained on vigilance, mental alertness, and rapid responses to situations as could be gleaned from these games. They are forged on the principles of survival instincts akin to a man in his existence. The strength and physical build-up are put to test. Boys engage in wrestling bouts and other games that put their bravery to test, qualities they would need years later to carter for their families and defend their communities whenever the need arises. Weakness and cowardice are not tolerated. Effeminate boys struggle to integrate themselves in the game of bravery and courage or lose the admiration of the girls.

Children are unconsciously trained to self-independence and management as they often control the moments devoid of the prying eyes of elders. Tolerance and communal existence are part of the gains of moonlight activities tied to the social relevance in the milieu of a homogenous set of people. Furthermore, moonlight activities apart from providing rich sources of entertainment, train a child on the path of happiness which in the long run leads to contentment. Lasting social interactions among peers are richly encouraged by these games and happy children, in no less ways, contribute to a happy society. Happiness dilutes bad blood and bile and communal happiness fostered by these games benefits society greatly. On the philosophical and ideological planes, these games deepen the cherished philosophical societal ideals especially the idea that there is no place like home as could be gleaned in some of the games like "Nwa m Nwa m." Some of these games bother on the need for a child to be productive to earn the parents' good remarks and protection as could be gleaned from "Ayolo" among others. Children ought to work in the light and paths of their parents as they struggle to make their mark in life. Obedience and respect for established laws and rules is put under test as seen in "Oneyeenenanya n' Azu."

Interestingly, the academic and intelligent side of a child is always underscored and the need for solidarity and recourse to cultural practices can never be overemphasized in these games. Most importantly, the consequences of evil deeds and certain ill actions are clear in these songs. In all, the spirit of a clan, the love, togetherness, oneness, peace, harmony,



fulfillment, contentment, and happiness are all virtues sampled and imbued in these games which are values that are fast eroding our modern-day society.

To this end, beyond celebrating the full moon, these nightly activities fulfill several functions in the society which are enshrined in the underlying philosophy guiding the moonlight games. The storytelling aspects of the game promote morals among children, provokes brotherly love and presents a good platform for learning and instilling right ethical values in children at such tender age they are in dire need of such guidance. In the end, it helps to make children innovative, responsible and self-reliant. The riddles and other puzzling games developed the rational, thinking, and quantitative part of children's brains. It helps them to be analytical, rational, free thinkers, and very creative individuals which society benefits the gains in many ways. Sadly, one notes with dismay that these values are waning and continues to obliterate in our modern society. The thin line between tradition and civilization is constantly severed and the generation is bereft of the right ethical and cultural practices that once made the traditional Igbo society unique, ideal, and distinguished from the rest of the world.

### Conclusion

The problem that necessitated this research is the dearth of moonlight activities in our society. Again, the lacuna discovered by the researcher in the study of moonlight activities as part of the constituents of folklore in Africa propelled this research on moonlight activities in the Igbo-speaking areas in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Through a fieldwork, the research aimed at rediscovering the wealth of our moonlight games, its academic, cultural, social, religious, and even economic imports in Igbo society and a study of the philosophical ideologies underlying these activities. This is as a result of the search for new modes of living and existence in the face of constant terrorism, abuse, suicide, killing, breakdown, and disorder that have become the very defining phenomenon of our modern day societies.

As much as it is near impossible to advocate for a return to moonlight activities, considering our appurtenances of our civilized world and its attendant dangers, chaos, insecurities and uncertainties. Nevertheless, recourse is begging to be made to the socio-cultural, ideological and philosophical leanings of the moonlight activities in the quest for a better society with balanced moral and ethical lifestyle. The negligence of this aspect of our culture amounts to a tragedy on the part of scholars in oral literature and the need to revitalize its study is of urgent disposition. To this end, what this paper has done is to once more open up a conversation on the moonlight activities that have remained a neglected side of the folklore of a people in the field of orature. The study hopes to elicit further conversations on moonlight games in other cultures and societies, conversations that will help the society and academia to fashion out practical ways to imbibe these values and traditions in our present-day world in order to foster morality, love, togetherness, happiness, and contentment in our global world.

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