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THANK YOU OMU: AN ODE TO IGBO FOLKTALES

Folktales are an integral part of childhood in Nigeria, especially for my tribe, the Igbos of Southeastern Nigeria. For us, stories like music are food for the soul. They serve as sources of entertainment, vehicles for the moral education of children and eternal repositories for our culture, tradition and history. Many children born before Generation Z will testify to the fact that they heard folk tales by moonlight while growing up. Igbo folktales especially those told through songs activated my interest in stories and storytelling. Folksongs are a fundamental part of Igbo folktales, the salt which seasons our folktales. Igbo folktales are incomplete without songs. One of my greatest dreams as a writer is to bring Igbo folktales to the children of the world, especially folktales told through songs. However, this has proved near impossible and I have not been able to articulate how to recreate folksongs in written literature until now.

Reading *Thank You Omu* by Nigerian American, Oge Mora opened my eyes to the possibility of writing folktales with folksongs through contemporary stories. *Thank You Omu* tells the contemporary story of a grandmother who makes the best dinner ever - a scrumptious pot of thick red stew - but doesn't eat it because she ends up giving all of it away to visitors who knocked on her door, attracted by the delicious aroma of the stew. This essay dissects *Thank You Omu* to show how Mora recreates the folksong and choric refrain of Igbo folktales in a modern-day picture book.

Folksongs are songs sprinkled throughout Igbo folktales to make them more exciting or entertaining, to emphasize an idea within the folktale, to create an emotional effect or to

encourage audience attention and responsiveness (Ogbalu 58). They are an integral part of Igbo folklore.

The refrain is a poetic device that has been defined as

‘ ... a verse, a line, a set, or a group of lines that appears at the end of stanza..’

(Literaraydevices.net).

Refrains serve as ‘sound and rhythmic devices’ (Nwachukwu-Agbada 27) which create lyrical text, reinforce ideas, create dramatic effect or keep the attention of a storyteller’s audience.

Azuonye defines refrains as phrases ‘often sung in chorus by the audience in folk storytelling events’ (Azuonye 41). For the Igbo storyteller’s audience, the most endearing element of the folktale with a folksong is the refrain because through the refrain, the audience can partake in the storytelling event. It makes the storytelling experience truly communal.

Folktales - and their attendant folksongs and choric refrains - are ancient tales which typically form part of oral literature, that is, they are originally shared by word of mouth before, if at all, they are written.

In *Thank You Omu*, Mora reverses this process. She writes a contemporary story - in the form of a picture book - which is first written but can also be told as a folktale, complete with the folksong and choric refrain. I elucidate.

Above, folksongs are defined as songs sprinkled throughout a folktale. This implies that they appear multiple times within one story. In *Thank You Omu*, the reader encounters the following lines four times.

‘... her thick red stew’s scrumptious scent wafted out the window and out the door,
down the hall, toward the street and around the block, until –
KNOCK! KNOCK!’

I contend that if *Thank You Omu* were a folktale, the lines above would be its folksong. In the lines above, Mora uses sensory and rhythmic words to describe how good Omu's stew smells. However, more importantly, she draws the reader's attention to the inciting and recurring incident in the story, the scent of the stew wafting out to the street and attracting unplanned visitors to Omu's door.

Mora therefore achieves several purposes of the folksong: creating emphasis and emotional effect and providing entertainment. The repetition of these lines provide crucial information while enlivening the story.

Going by the definition of the refrain above, as a word or words repeated at the end of a stanza for emphasis or entertainment and the description of the Igbo storytelling event, as one where the choric refrain comes at the end of the chorus and is sung by the audience *after* a pause by the storyteller, I contend that the words 'KNOCK! KNOCK!' repeated at the end of the song above form the refrain.

Simply put, if the story in this picture book were told like a Nigerian folktale, then the repeated phrases could be song with a choric refrain. For example:

'... her thick red stew's scrumptious scent wafted out the window and out the door,
down the hall, toward the street and around the block, until –

The section above could be song by the storyteller and when he or she gets to the word 'until' the storyteller can pause and the audience will respond ...

... "KNOCK KNOCK"

... thereby providing the choric refrain and achieving the call and response goal of the folksong and indeed many Igbo folktales.

A visual representation would look like this:

storyteller/author: "... her thick red stew's scrumptious scent wafted out the window and out the door, down the hall, toward the street and around the block, until ..."

pause ...

audience/reader: "KNOCK! KNOCK!"

While simply reading this book shows a heart-warming contemporary tale of the joys of giving and sharing, a careful analysis of *Thank You Omu* reveals a modern story with folktale leanings. The author weaves little threads of her heritage into this story, reawakening precious memories for the reader who can see beyond the surface story.

This story struck an emotional chord with me because it reminded me of my childhood and the joys of call and response during storytelling events and all the stories I can carry inside me that I thought I would never be able to share. But more than that, it holds the promise of an avenue for the recreation of these precious stories and memories.

With this book, Mora explicitly details how to achieve the primal effect of the folktale with a folksong and choric refrain in modern day literature. She may have inadvertently provided a solution to the revitalization of a tradition that is slowly but surely fading away. This essay is just a tip of the iceberg, it merely scratches the surface of the work done by Mora in *Thank You Omu*. I believe that further research on this picture book will provide insight into the creation of contemporary stories in the form of Igbo folktales.

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