



EXPLORING THE REPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS ANAMBRA FOLKTALES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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Abstract

The Nigerian indigenous folktales are important storage of cultural information, ethical teachings and societal belonging to the Igbo community of the Anambra State. The paper will analyze how the indigenous folktales of Anambra have been represented in modern Nigerian young adult (YA) literature, focusing on how oral traditional folktales are modified, redefined, or sidelined in the modern texts that target this readership (13-18). The study will relying on a mixed sources approach explore how far the folktale characteristics like motifs of trickster animals, moral dilemmas, and supernatural creatures are incorporated in YA novels, and how they can be better incorporated in the school and home context to promote the preservation of culture. The study was carried out in urban and rural settings of the Anambra state such as Abagala, Aba, Enuguwu-Ukwu, Awka, Onitsha and Nnewi involving 100 secondary school students, 10 YA authors and 10 traditional storytellers who were purposively sampled. Primary data was collected by using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and textual analysis of 10 modern YA novels. The qualitative data showed the themes of cultural hybridity and antiwestern influences whereas quantitative data showed that two-thirds of the students favored the character of stories that are based on folktales and their problems with contemporary life. The sample population was mostly Igbo, with a mean age of 15.5 years, 52 percent females and an equal distribution of urban and rural. It uses the postcolonial theory and the morphological theory developed by Propp to unravel the narrative structures and also how folktales can give power to young readers in the face of globalization. Findings highlight a loophole in more realistic presentation, with only forty percent of the reviewed novels using unmodified motifs of Anambra locality. The suggested model supports the idea of shared authorship and curriculum design. The study is relevant to the literature field as it helps to combine oral and written to uphold cultural sustainability in Nigerian YA literature.

Keywords: Anambra Folktales, Nigerian YA Literature, Cultural Representation, Oral Traditions, Postcolonial Theory, Narrative Analysis

Introduction

Adaptation of aboriginal folktales into the modern literary culture signifies an in-the-crossfire of oral tradition and the new narrative modes, especially in the postcolonial environments such as Nigeria where the cultural preservation struggles with the foreign forces. Folktales have long served as modes of moral education, social unity and amusement in the Anambra State, home to the Igbo cultural traditions, with archetypal elements being utilised in some cases, such as the crafty tortoise or the sagacious elders as they manoeuvre through the intrigues of the community. These are the tales that have been taught through generations and they are the wisdom of the Igbo community, it has values of resiliency, community and harmony with nature. However, the use of such folktales is not well explored in modern Nigerian young adult (YA) literature, aimed at capturing the navigational identity formation of adolescents, being mostly watered down by Western literary traditions or urban sensibilities. This paper explores this representation, discussing the way that the indigenous stories of Anambra are depicted in contemporary YA literature and proposing the idea that its strategic use should be used to make these works more culturally relevant and interesting to the readers.



The role of oral traditions on African literature has been in the limelight of the scholarly discussion since the middle of the 20th century. The first attempts, e.g. *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe (1958), showed that oral traditions such as proverbs and folktales could be reweaved into novelistic frameworks to affirm cultural authenticity over the colonial discourse. Achebe believed that African writers had to revert to the oral traditions to oppose the misrepresentation of the European literature, and this idea is reflected in the works of Tutuola (1952), *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, which mixed Yoruba folktales, and surrealism, too. These primordial writings emphasize the transformative power of the oral in contemporary writings where the folktales are not just decorations but structural guidelines to understanding social problems. In more recent scholarship, Okpewho (1992) in *African Oral Literature* focused on the performative nature of folktales, as they are flexible in the modern world, whereas Finnegan (2012) revised her classic book *Oral Literature in Africa* to incorporate the digital retelling, highlighting the transformation of the spoken word into the multimedia version.

Representation of indigenous elements has become a trend in the sphere of YA literature with the need to demand various narratives. YA fiction has also become more inclusive across the globe in that in the examination of fairy tale retellings by Zipes (2006), the theory states that a contemporary retelling of the traditional motif makes the young reader more empowered, since contemporary versions of the story reinterpret the original narrative based on gender and ethnicity. This tendency is reflected in such literature as Adeyemi, (2018) *Children of Blood and Bone*, where West African mythology, including Igbo-related apparition, is employed to create a fantasy epic that talks on the topic of oppression and heritage. But little has been done in research on Anambra folktales. *Deconstructing the Role of Storytelling* by Ogbu (2018), was about the preservation of indigenous knowledge via Nigerian traditions, but in general, rather than YA. More recently, in *5 Essential Books to Get to know African Folklore*, Nde (2025) suggested books that crossed the oral and written word, in order to combat the erosion of culture.

The folktales of Anambra are based on Igbo cosmology and commonly include themes such as the Omambala River to represent the life and the mystery, or the use of the tortoise as a wit-based trickster instead of a strength-based one. These stories are described in historical records, including Basden's (1921) *Niger Ibos*, as part of social rituals, and modern collections, including the Usman's (2025) exploration of pan-Nigerian folktales, identify variants unique to Anambra, and include alterations due to Christianity and urbanization. This representation differs in YA literature, with *Akata Witch* by Okorafor (2011) adding Igbo juju influences but mixing them with American diasporic experiences, but critics such as Traore (2021) believe that these hybrids other times whitewash indigenous complications to the global audience.

Theoretical intentions behind this paper are based on the postcolonial theory as presented by Fanon (1963), in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he criticizes cultural imperialism and supports decolonized narratives. To this is the *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) by Propp, a



structuralist theory that allows the identification of 31 narrative functions, which are ubiquitous in tales, and which can be applied to the discussion of how Anambra motifs operate within plots of YA. The analysis is further informed by the oral and literacy theory of Ong (1982), according to which oral traditions are based on the communal involvement, which is usually lost in written material in the YA texts and can be recovered in the case of hybridity. Newer uses, like in the Cultural Aspects of African Folktales by Sanu, (2025) use intercultural models to draw parallels between Nigerian stories and international ones, and unveil common patterns within them, such as hero quests.

The YA boom in the Nigerian literary scene since 2000 has included authors of Pet, such as Emezi (2019) who investigate the possibilities of utopian worlds full of folklore to discuss transgender identities and justice. Recent works involving 2020-2025, such as Uwadi (2025) list of books by Nigerian authors, feature new genres such as Afrofuturism, in which folktales drive speculative fiction. However, there are still holes: An article by researchers about Tiv and Yoruba folktales published in the 2022 F1000Research journal mentioned that as a culture, cultural values were evident in stories but failed to recognize the unique riverine myths of the Anambra people. The research fills such gaps by discussing Anambra, where literary centres in Awka and Onitsha contribute towards youth activities.

Demographic situations play a key role; because the state is only home to more than 40% of the 5 million inhabitants of Anambra, its youth lacks identity due to the rapid urbanization (National Population Commission, 2023). Folktales have provided grounding, which can be seen through Okupe (2021) *Iyanu: Child of Wonder*, which is a graphic YA novel based on Nigerian myths. Earlier works of literature such as *The Joys of Motherhood* by Emecheta (1979) depicted the oral narrative in the home context whereas the contemporary criticism in the recommendation of Jaye (2022) indicated the merger of traditions by Soyinka and Emezi.

This introduction therefore combines the historical and modern literature to contextualize the purpose of the study; to discuss Anambra folktales representations in young adult literature and come up with integration frameworks. In this way, it plays a role in the cultural hybridity discourses, such as *Early African Literature* anthology by Belcher (in progress), which follows oral origins dating back to 1900 CE.

Building on the postcolonial relationships, Bhabha (1994) hybridity concept describes how the YA writers mediate between native folktales and Western genres resulting in the third spaces of meaning. This is reflected in the Nigerian YA where Adeyemi (2018) uses orisha figures reminiscent of the chi spirits used by Anambra to criticize power structures. Similar studies, such as Motjoadi et al. (2020) review of African narratives (though energy-oriented) are empirical but also emphasize adaptation to be relevant. In the case of Anambra, oral legends such as *The King and the Ju Ju Tree* (traditional collections) are similar to the themes of environmental justice in Bowen (2021) *Skin of the Sea*.



The oral-written literary development is furthered in the work by Okpewho (1992), describing the cycles of the epics and Finnegan (2012) marks the change under the impact of digital. This development is manifested in YA through Ifueko (2020) *Raybearer*, where moral challenges of the folktales are reflected in court intrigues. The recent 2025 researches, such as those in EHASS Volume 6, cover curriculum integration, which fits the objectives of this study.

The introduction proceeds with elaborate discussions of certain folktales. As an example, the Omambala River myth, which is described in Akukoeri (2019), is an image of fertility and danger, which is underrepresented in YA even though it can have an ecological theme. In relative terms, Igbo folklore tales of the tortoise (World of Tales, n.d.) are similar to global folklore by archetypes of the trickster as discussed by Zipes (2006).

The gaps in the scholarly literature are the lack of a regional orientation; Ogbu (2018) disaggregates the issue, whereas recent retellings in Rachona (2025) serve to affirm the identity of diasporic youth. This paper fulfills this by putting its focus on Anambra using primary data to confirm representations.

Overall, the literature indicates a trend of oral purity to hybrid modernity, and YA is one of the most promising areas of salvation. This preconditions methodology.

Methodology

The methodology used a mixed-method method to get a thorough understanding of how the indigenous folktales of the people of Anambra have been represented in Nigerian YA literature in general by taking qualitative into consideration and quantitative aspect into consideration. The research was carried on the state of Anambra, urban and rural locations, including Abagala, Aba, Enuguwu-Ukwu, in the environment of Awka, Onitsha, and Nnewi, which is lively in literature and cultural activities of youth. These locations have been chosen because of their varying socioeconomic backgrounds and the sites could be compared in terms of urban exposure to global media and rural following of traditional storytelling.

The study was a combination of descriptive and interpretive designs based on a sequential explanatory framework according to which quantitative data on questionnaires were used to inform the next qualitative investigations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This design enabled the triangulation of data sources which increased validity. The theoretical framework was based on a postcolonial theory (Fanon, 1963) to question the cultural representations and Propp (1968) morphological analysis to break down the structure of folktales in YA texts, which was complemented by Ong (1982) orality-literacy continuum to access the changes between oral and written versions of folktales.



The sample population included 100 young adult readers (13-18 years old) in five secondary schools, 10 published Nigerian YA writers, as well as 10 traditional storytellers, through purposive sampling to guarantee the expertise and representation. The students were selected to represent the average YA readers, creative thinkers as authors and knowledgeable tellers of the folktales. Demographic characteristics of the students were average age of 15.5 years (SD =1.8), 52 percent females and 48 percent males, 55 percent urban and 45 percent rural, Igbo ethnicity (70 percent low-income families monthly household income less than N50,000). The mean age of authors was 35 years (SD = 7.2), 60 percent of them were female, and most of them were based in Onitsha and Awka. Storytellers were adults (mean age = 62 years, SD =10.5), 70 percent men, and all lived in the country (rural).

Data collection was done in several stages as primary data. Authors and storytellers in semi-structured interviews were asked to talk about issues such as the difficulties of adaptation of folktales and the cultural authenticity of their work, producing rich accounts of Anambra-based folktales, such as the stories of the Omambala River. Discussions with students in focus groups (8-10) were used to discuss the familiarity and preferences, and should last 30-45 minutes. Students were given questionnaires in which Likert scales were used to measure exposure (e.g., How often do you read folktales in YA books?), preferences, and the reliability score was 0.82 Cronbachs alpha. The analysis of texts involved 10 YA novels, namely, *Children of Blood and Bone* (Adeyemi, 2018), *Akata Witch* (Okorafor, 2011), *Pet* (Emezi, 2019), *Raybearer* (Ifueko, 2020), *Skin of the Sea* (Bowen, 2021), *Children of the Quicksands* (Traoré, 2021), *Beasts Made of Night* (Onyebuchi, 2017), *Bitter* (E NVivo coded folktale motes analysis).

Thematic coding of qualitative data and the identification of patterns such as hybridity and moral adaptation were a part of the data analysis. The quantitative data were subjected to descriptive statistics using SPSS through calculation of frequencies and percentages. Narrative analysis projected the functions of Propp to works. The ethical procedures involved were informed consent, anonymity, and debriefing with a local ethics committee approval.

The approach ensured a strong, community-based investigation, which was in line with the aims of the study.

Findings

This research indicates that there is a complex manifestation of the indigenous folktales of Anambra within the modern Nigerian YA literature, as the quantitative results show the exposure rates and preferences, and the qualitative ones reveal thematic incorporations and issues. Out of the 100 student respondents, the questionnaires revealed that 62% had read about the elements of folktales in YA novels, yet 35% identified the Anambra motifs such as the tortoise trickster or the river spirits. There were favorable suggestions towards mixed stories, 65 percent preferred the use of traditional stories with themes relating to contemporary problems such as identity and social justice. The difference in the demographic variations demonstrated a greater familiarity



among the rural students (45% of sample) as they reported familiarity of 75% as compared to their urban counterparts (50%) due to their closer association with oral traditions.

Table 1

Student demographics and exposure levels.

Demographic Variable	n (%)	Folktale Exposure (%)	Preference for Blended Narratives (%)
Age: 13-15	55 (55)	58	62
Age: 16-18	45 (45)	66	68
Gender: Female	52 (52)	64	70
Gender: Male	48 (48)	60	60
Location: Urban	55 (55)	50	60
Location: Rural	45 (45)	75	70
Income: Low (<N50,000)	70 (70)	68	67
Income: Medium (N50,000+)	30 (30)	52	60

Storytellers interviewed recorded 15 separate Anambra folktales such as The Tortoise and the King (with reference to cunning) and The Curse of Omambala (moral of the river). According to the authors, integration issues were observed, 70% on market demands of Western-style plot, but 80% on the desire to add greater local flavor. The folktale representations in 60% of novels were identified through textual analysis, although there is a difference in authenticity. The good example is Adeyemi (2018), who uses figures of Orisha-like appearance, similar to Igbo chi, that have the hero-villain roles of Propp, and Emezi (2019), who lifts moral dilemmas abstractly without mentioning Anambra.

Themes of empowerment emerged in the focus group in which students valued folktales as a cultural source of pride. Thus, the research results are correlated with the literature on cultural hybridity as Bhabha (1994) characterized it where YA novels balance between indigenous and global concerns. The great popularity of blends reminds the retellings of identity by Rachona (2025). Representational gaps, according to Ogbu (2018), imply the necessity of structures. The limitation also involves sample size; the subsequent research may be extended to the national level.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To sum it up, Anambra folktales are underrated but powerful in the YA literature, providing the means of cultural resistance. Some of the recommendations raised are author workshops, inclusion, and policy advocacy of folktale based education in the curriculum.



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