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The Contributions of Frederick Chidozie Ogbalu to the Preservation of Igbo Culture and Oral Tradition

¹Ozowuba Dieudonne Chinenye

²Ejimadu Ngozi C.

Abstract

The preservation of Igbo culture and oral tradition has been widely studied, with scholars such as Donatus Nwoga , F. C. Anyaegbunam , and Ernest Emenyonu documenting Igbo proverbs, oral narratives, and their transition into written literature. However, there remains a gap in research regarding the direct influence of Frederick C. Ogbalu on contemporary Igbo oral tradition studies and the evolving challenges in its preservation. While Ogbalu's work laid the foundation for Igbo language standardization and the documentation of oral literature, the increasing shift towards Western education, digital media, and declining indigenous language use necessitates new strategies for cultural preservation. This study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing Ogbalu's major works, reviewing secondary literature, and examining digital and educational initiatives that build upon his contributions. Through comparative analysis and field insights, the study highlights the challenges facing Igbo oral tradition today and proposes innovative strategies for its preservation, integrating modern technology, digital storytelling, and curriculum development. The findings reinforce Ogbalu's lasting legacy while offering practical solutions for ensuring the continued survival of Igbo oral heritage.

Key Words: Preservation of Igbo Culture, Oral Tradition, Proverbs, Digital Storytelling, Cultural Identity

Introduction

Language and oral traditions are vital components of a people's cultural identity, serving as carriers of history, wisdom, and societal values. In many African societies,

oral literature; encompassing proverbs, folktales, myths, songs, and idiomatic expressions has long been a primary means of knowledge transmission. However, with the growing dominance of globalization, colonial legacies, and the increasing shift

toward Western education and media, many indigenous languages and oral traditions, including those of the Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria, face the risk of decline.

One of the most influential figures in the preservation and promotion of Igbo culture and oral tradition is Frederick C. Ogbalu. A renowned linguist, writer, and educator, Ogbalu was instrumental in standardizing the Igbo language, documenting oral traditions, and advocating for its formal instruction in Nigerian schools. His works, including *Ilu Igbo* (1981) and *Omenala Igbo* (1982), played a significant role in transcribing and analyzing Igbo proverbs, folktales, and linguistic structures, ensuring that they were preserved for future generations.

Beyond Ogbalu's contributions, his work has influenced many scholars and researchers, including Donatus Nwoga, F. C. Anyaegbunam, and Ernest Emenyonu, who have expanded the study of Igbo oral traditions in literature, linguistics, and folklore. However, despite these efforts, Igbo oral tradition continues to face significant challenges, including language shift, Western influence, inadequate documentation, and declining interest among younger generations.

This study explores Ogbalu's contributions to Igbo oral literature and culture, the scholars influenced by his work, and the challenges facing the preservation of Igbo oral tradition. It also provides practical recommendations for sustaining Igbo culture in a modern, digital world, emphasizing the role of digital archives, educational integration, and cultural engagement strategies. The paper argues that while Ogbalu's work laid the foundation for Igbo linguistic preservation, contemporary efforts must adapt to modern realities to ensure that Igbo oral heritage remains vibrant and relevant for future generations.

Igbo Culture and Oral Traditions

Igbo culture is richly textured, characterized by its decentralized political systems, strong kinship ties, religious pluralism, and vibrant art. The Igbo worldview is underpinned by the belief in *chi* (personal god), *ndi nna ochie* (ancestors), and a communal relationship between the living, the dead, and the unborn. These beliefs are taught and reinforced through rituals, festivals like the New Yam Festival, and oral traditions performed across generations (Ugochukwu, 9). Forms of Oral tradition in Igbo Society include; Folktales (*Akụkọ ifo*), *Myths and Legends*. They play a vital role in educating children and passing

down communal values. The tale of Mbe the tortoise is a popular example that teaches lessons on greed, intelligence, and consequences. These stories often involve animal characters who mirror human behaviors and are narrated in communal settings, especially in the evenings (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 218).

Proverbs (*Ilu Igbo*) are also essential in Igbo communication and reflect deep philosophical insights. For instance, “*Egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebena, nku kwaa ya*” (“Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch, if one rejects the other, let its wings break”) emphasizes tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Elders often use proverbs to teach lessons or settle disputes, reinforcing social norms and moral values (Ogbalu, 6).

Praise Poetry (*Abụ Otito*) Among the Igbo, praise poetry is used to extol individuals, especially titled men or successful members of society. It reinforces social hierarchy, honors family heritage, and encourages valor and accomplishment. These oral poems are performed during naming ceremonies, funerals, and festivals (Okpewho, 172).

Riddles (*Ikpo ajuju/Gwam Gwam Gwam*) and Traditional Songs and Chants serve educational and recreational purposes. They sharpen the wit of children and often embed

cultural references. Traditional songs, whether religious or social, are means of remembering history, invoking spirits, or commenting on contemporary issues (Ogbalu, 121).

Notable Works by Frederick C. Ogbalu

Here is a selection of Frederick C. Ogbalu's key works that have contributed to Igbo oral literature and language studies. Among his many works, the ones that most extensively document Igbo oral tradition include: ***Nza na Obu - A Collection of Igbo Proverbs (1979)***

A significant contribution to the documentation of Igbo proverbs and their meanings. It focused on Igbo Proverbs and their Cultural Significance. This book is a collection of Igbo proverbs (*ilu Igbo*), which are a key part of Igbo oral tradition. Proverbs in Igbo culture are used to teach wisdom, resolve conflicts, and communicate deep philosophical ideas.

Ilu Igbo - Book of Igbo Proverbs (1981): A detailed collection and explanation of Igbo proverbs used in storytelling and traditional communication. In this collection, Ogbalu gathers and interprets Igbo proverbs, which are short sayings that convey wisdom, advice, or commentary on various aspects of life. This work preserves traditional Igbo

wisdom that was historically passed down orally.

Omenala Igbo - A Handbook on Igbo Culture (1982): Covers various aspects of Igbo traditions, oral literature, and storytelling. This book focused on Igbo Traditions, Customs, and Oral Literature. It covers traditional Igbo customs and rituals, including storytelling, folktales, and traditional music. It discusses Igbo festivals, marriage customs, initiation rites, and ancestral worship, all of which are deeply tied to oral tradition.

A Dictionary of Igbo Proverbs and Idioms (1983): A lexicon-style work that provides translations and explanations of Igbo proverbs. This book focused Language and Orature Preservation.

Igbo: The People, Their Culture and Their Language (1962): This book is a comprehensive introduction to Igbo culture, language, and history. Ogbalu explores the Igbo people's origins, traditions, customs, and values, as well as their language and its significance in Igbo culture.

Igbo Folktales (1975): This book is a collection of Igbo folktales, which are stories passed down through generations by word of mouth. Ogbalu presents these tales in their

original Igbo language, along with English translations.

Each of these books contributes to preserving Igbo oral traditions, but *Omenala Igbo: A Handbook on Igbo Culture (1982)* is the most comprehensive in terms of documenting folktales, storytelling customs, and oral heritage. However, *Nza na Obu* and *Ilu Igbo* are also very important because proverbs are a core part of Igbo oral traditions.

Selected Igbo Proverbs and Folktales Documented by Frederick C. Ogbalu

1. *Onye buru chi ya uzo, o gbagbue onwe ya n'oso.*

Translation: He who runs ahead of his god runs into trouble.

This proverb encourages patience, humility, and respect for ancestral or divine timing. According to Donatus Nwoga in *The Igbo Proverbs*, this proverb reflects the Igbo cosmological belief that every individual has a *chi*; a personal spiritual guardian or destiny. Acting rashly without spiritual alignment is seen as a violation of cosmic order (45). M. J. C. Echeruo notes that such proverbs reinforce personal discipline and the need to consult elders or deities before major life decisions (88).

2. *A naghi eri ilu, a gwuo ya.*

Translation: One does not eat a proverb but interprets it.

This establishes that proverbs are metaphorical; understanding them requires wisdom. Ruth Finnegan, in *Oral Literature in Africa*, argues that African proverbs are tools of compressed wisdom. This proverb self-references the nature of proverbial speech in Igbo society (93). Ugochukwu observes that it is often used by elders as a teaching device to challenge the youth to “decode” meanings, hence fostering intergenerational transfer of knowledge (330).

3. Egbe bere, ugo bere; nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwapu ya.

Translation: Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch; if one says the other shouldn't perch, let its wings break.

The above proverb advocates coexistence, justice, and tolerance. This is perhaps the most widely cited Igbo proverb and was used by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* to reflect egalitarianism and community values (36). Ezenwa-Ohaeto notes that this proverb is invoked in political discourse and traditional legal systems to encourage fairness and dialogue (89). Frederick Ogbalu himself classified it as a “philosophical proverb”; those that offer universal truths rather than situational lessons (12).

4. Oji ngaji eri ofe, amaghi na ofe eju.

Translation: He who eats soup with a spoon does not know when it finishes.

This is a warning against detachment, carelessness, or overconfidence. Nwachukwu-Agbada interprets this as a commentary on disconnection from consequence (6). The use of a spoon metaphorically represents distance—a leader, for example, may misuse resources if detached from grassroots reality. It critiques modern leadership and bourgeoisie detachment in postcolonial Igbo society.

Selected Igbo Folktales

1. Mbe na Ugo (The Tortoise and the Eagle)

Summary: In this popular tale, the tortoise (Mbe) persuades the eagle (Ugo) to take him to a feast in the sky prepared for the birds. The tortoise cunningly renames himself “All of You” so that when food is served, the hosts announce that it is for “All of You”—thus, the tortoise consumes everything. When his deception is discovered, the eagle angrily refuses to fly him back and drops him mid-air. The tortoise lands and cracks his shell, which folklore says explains the tortoise's broken, patchy appearance today.

The thematic exploration includes pride, cunning, and the consequences.

Cultural Commentary: This tale is a foundational example of Igbo moral philosophy conveyed through animal allegory. It critiques greed, pride, and deceit, which are traditionally considered destructive to communal harmony. Ugochukwu argues that such tales serve as a “mirror of moral expectation” in precolonial Igbo society (336). The tortoise, a recurring trickster figure in West African folklore, embodies the dangers of cunning untempered by wisdom.

2. *Umuaka na Nwanyi Ncheta* (The Children and the Old Woman of Memory)

Summary: A mysterious old woman named Ncheta roams villages, sharing stories of ancestral wisdom. The children of the village ignore her until a great famine strikes. She reveals, through oral tales, the hidden locations of food and medicinal herbs passed down by forebears. Only then do the children realize that memory—*ncheta*—is not just recollection but survival.

The themes include the value of memory and storytelling.

Cultural Commentary: This tale reflects the Igbo view of memory as an active cultural resource. Storytelling is portrayed not merely as entertainment but as a repository of survival strategies. According to Finnegan,

African oral literature “functions as a library of ecological and social knowledge” (77). The character of Ncheta symbolizes the elder-as-archive, a living custodian of history and identity. This aligns with Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s argument that modernity has ruptured traditional lines of knowledge transmission, thus heightening the urgency of preserving oral narratives (91).

Contributions of Frederick C. Ogbalu to Igbo Culture and Oral Literature

Frederick Chidozie Ogbalu (1919-1990) was a renowned Nigerian linguist, scholar, folklorist, and cultural advocate who made significant contributions to the preservation and promotion of Igbo language, culture and oral literature. His extensive work in documenting and formalizing Igbo Orature has had a lasting impact on African linguistics and cultural preservation.

Here are some of Ogbalu's major contributions to Igbo culture and oral literature; Ogbalu was a strong advocate for the promotion of Igbo language and culture (Uzokwe, 11). He believed that language was a vital part of a people's culture and identity, and he worked tirelessly to promote the use of Igbo language in education, literature, and everyday life. He was instrumental in advancing the study and use of the Igbo

language. As the founder of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC), he advocated for the standardization and formal instruction of Igbo in schools.

Ogbalu did an outstanding work in the collection and documentation of Igbo Orature. Ogbalu traveled extensively throughout Igboland, collecting and documenting Igbo folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, and songs. He recognized the importance of preserving these oral traditions, which were threatened by colonialism, urbanization, and modernization (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 09). His works extensively documented Igbo oral traditions, including folktales, proverbs, idioms, and storytelling techniques. Through his books and academic publications, he helped preserve the richness of Igbo oral traditions.

Ogbalu contributed immensely to Igbo Grammar and Language Development. He wrote several books on Igbo grammar, phonetics, and syntax, ensuring that the language was academically structured and could be taught formally in schools.

Ogbalu worked tirelessly towards Preserving Igbo Cultural Identity. Through his research and publications, Ogbalu sought to protect and promote Igbo culture, emphasizing its

uniqueness and importance in the African literary landscape.

Ogbalu engaged in the compilation of Igbo Proverbs and Sayings. His collections of proverbs served as a bridge between oral and written literature, ensuring that traditional wisdom passed down through generations was preserved for contemporary and future Igbo speakers.

Ogbalu championed the advocacy for the use of Igbo in formal settings, including education, media, and governance. He emphasized that language was a core part of cultural identity and must be preserved against external influences (Uzokwe, 09).

Ogbalu played a key role in the development of Igbo orthography, which is the system of writing used to represent the Igbo language. He worked with other scholars to create a standardized system of writing Igbo, which has helped to promote the language and its literature (Nwachukwu, 17).

One of Ogbalu's greatest achievements was his contribution to the standardization of written Igbo. Before the 1960s, Igbo was written in various dialects, which made formal education and literature in the language difficult to unify. Ogbalu was part of the movement that helped establish Standard Igbo, a unified form that could be

used across schools and official communication (Nwachukwu, 20).

Ogbalu founded the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) in 1949. This organization played a crucial role in advocating for the use of Igbo in education, media, and literature. SPILC organized conferences, seminars, and writing workshops that encouraged young Igbo writers and educators to develop materials in the language. The organization was instrumental in ensuring Igbo was recognized as a subject in Nigerian schools.

Ogbalu strongly opposed the marginalization of indigenous languages in Nigerian education. He argued that language is a key carrier of culture, and if Igbo was not taught formally, it would gradually decline (Nwachukwu, 21). His efforts led to the introduction of Igbo as a subject in schools and influenced university programs in Nigerian linguistics (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 23). Today, Igbo is a recognized discipline in universities, partly due to Ogbalu's advocacy.

Ogbalu made remarkable Contributions to Igbo Literature and Orature. While he is primarily known for his linguistic works, he also contributed to Igbo storytelling, folklore, and proverbs. His book *Nza na Obu* is not just

a collection of proverbs; it explains their deep meanings and cultural applications. He encouraged Igbo writers to document folk tales, myths, and traditional narratives, preventing them from being lost to modernization.

Ogbalu had a very strong Influence on Igbo Linguistics. Many modern Igbo linguists and writers draw inspiration from Ogbalu's works (Uzokwe, 13). His influence is seen in the growth of Igbo linguistics as a discipline. The preservation of Igbo oral traditions through formal documentation. The development of Igbo lexicons and dictionaries.

Ogbalu was involved in editing and publishing textbooks for students learning Igbo. He wrote extensively on Igbo grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics. His works remain foundational texts for Igbo language learners (Nwachukwu, 24). Many of his publications are still used in schools and universities today.

Impact, Legacy and Recognition

Ogbalu's works remain essential reading for scholars of African oral literature, linguistics, and cultural studies. His advocacy for Igbo language preservation influenced policies in education, leading to the increased inclusion of Igbo studies in Nigerian school curricula

(Nwachukwu, 25). Many of his works serve as foundational texts for Igbo language learners and researchers. Certainly, Frederick C. Ogbalu was a towering figure in Igbo linguistics and cultural preservation. Beyond his well-documented contributions to Igbo language and oral literature, there are additional aspects of his work and legacy worth exploring. Ogbalu's impact is still felt today: His books are still referenced by scholars and students. His efforts contributed to the development of Igbo language studies in universities. His work helped inspire later scholars like Pita Nwana, Chinua Achebe, and F.C. Anyaegbunam, who also wrote extensively on Igbo culture. (Uzokwe, 14)

Challenges Facing the Preservation of Igbo Oral Tradition Today

Despite Frederick C. Ogbalu's pioneering work in standardizing and preserving the Igbo language and oral tradition, various modern challenges threaten the continued vitality of Igbo Orature. The preservation of Igbo oral tradition continues to face several challenges which includes; **Language Decline and Western Influence:** With increased globalization and urbanization, English has become the dominant language in many Igbo homes and schools (Ohia, 3). Younger generations often prefer English-

based media, literature, and social interactions, leading to a decline in the use of Igbo.

Lack of Documentation and Institutional Support: Many Igbo folktales, proverbs, and idioms remain undocumented, relying on oral transmission. Schools and universities do not emphasize Igbo literature as much as English and other subjects. There is limited government funding for Igbo cultural preservation projects. National education policies does not adequately support indigenous languages (Ohiri-Aniche 61).

Digital Age and Changing Communication Patterns: Traditional storytelling and oral literature were passed down through face-to-face interactions, which are less common in modern society. Social media, movies, and digital entertainment are often in English or Pidgin, making Igbo oral tradition less accessible (Iwueze, 57).

Limited Availability of Igbo Books and Educational Materials: Many of Ogbalu's works are out of print or difficult to access, limiting their reach. The cost of publishing books in Igbo is high, and few publishers focus on indigenous language texts (Ohia, 3). Schools often lack quality teaching materials for Igbo oral tradition.

Lack of Interest Among Younger Generations: Many young Igbo speakers see their native language and oral traditions as old-fashioned. There is a preference for modern storytelling forms (movies, comics, social media) over traditional folktales and proverbs (Chukwuma, 4).

The erosion of proverbs and idiomatic expressions further reflects this crisis. The dwindling use of proverbs signifies a deeper cultural disintegration, as these oral forms once functioned as essential tools for moral guidance and social communication (Anyanwu 47). These challenges reflect both a sociolinguistic crisis and a cultural identity erosion.

Recommendations

To sustain Ogbalu's legacy and keep Igbo oral traditions alive, future efforts should focus on adaptation, innovation, and digital preservation.

1. Digital Documentation and Online Archives: Creation of digital repositories where Igbo proverbs, folktales, and oral histories are stored. Universities and cultural organizations should digitize Ogbalu's works and make them accessible online.

2. Integration into School Curricula: Strengthening Igbo language education in

primary and secondary schools. Encouraging storytelling competitions where students engage with proverbs, folktales, and riddles.

3. Use of Social Media and Digital Storytelling: Leveraging YouTube, TikTok, and podcasts to promote Igbo oral literature in modern formats. Developing Igbo storytelling apps and websites that teach folktales in an engaging way.

4. Government and Community Support: Nigerian cultural institutions should establish funded programs for Igbo language preservation. Local festivals and cultural events should feature live storytelling, poetry recitals, and proverb challenges.

5. Modernizing Igbo Oral Tradition Through Digital Media: Developing animated Igbo folktales: Creating cartoon adaptations of traditional Igbo stories to engage young audiences. Igbo Storytelling Podcasts: A podcast series featuring Igbo proverbs, folktales, and their meanings.

6. Igbo Oral Tradition in Popular Culture: Encouraging Nollywood filmmakers to integrate more Igbo oral storytelling elements in movies. Producing Igbo-language comic books and graphic novels that adapt traditional myths and folktales.

7. Gamification and Interactive Learning:

Developing mobile apps where users learn Igbo proverbs through quizzes and interactive storytelling. Introducing Igbo proverb and storytelling competitions in schools, modeled after spelling bees.

8. Community-Based Initiatives:

Establishing "Igbo Cultural Clubs" in schools and universities where students engage with folktales and oral literature. Encouraging Igbo elders to participate in mentorship programs, passing down oral traditions to younger generations.

Conclusion

Frederick C. Ogbalu remains one of the most influential figures in the preservation of Igbo culture and oral tradition, having dedicated his work to documenting, teaching, and promoting Igbo language and literature. His contributions to Igbo linguistic and cultural preservation remain foundational. However, the work is far from complete. This study calls for a strategic, inclusive, and modern approach to oral tradition; where storytelling, language, and cultural identity are celebrated and preserved not only in memory but also through technology and education. In doing so, the Igbo oral tradition can thrive for generations to come.

This study reaffirms the foundational role of Frederick C. Ogbalu in the preservation and institutionalization of Igbo oral tradition and language. Through his extensive work on Igbo proverbs, idioms, and grammar, Ogbalu not only safeguarded traditional knowledge but also elevated the Igbo language to a position of cultural prestige. His influence on later scholars such as Donatus Nwoga, F. C. Anyaegbunam, and Ernest Emenyonu demonstrates the lasting relevance of his contributions.

Despite these efforts, the Igbo language and its oral traditions continue to face significant challenges; including language decline, loss of proverbs, youth disengagement, and institutional neglect. However, by integrating digital media, education reform, cultural events, and indigenous knowledge into current strategies, it is possible to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. In doing so, this study not only highlights Ogbalu's legacy but also offers practical pathways to revitalize Igbo oral tradition for future generations and preserving it not as a static relic, but as a living, evolving testament to Igbo identity and cultural strength.

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