

Supernatural beings as symbols in masquerades and traditional oral tales in Ogba

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ABSTRACT: Oral traditions encompass tales, legends, customs, and beliefs that provide invaluable insights into a people's history, worldview, and cultural identity. The paper aims to investigate the roles of supernatural beings in oral traditional tales and how supernatural beings emerge as significant symbols that reflect the beliefs, traditions, and moral framework of the Ogba people in South-South, Nigeria. These tales often depict interactions between humans and supernatural entities, illustrating how these beings in Ogba oral literature serve multiple functions such as acting as guardians, tricksters, or embodiments of natural forces, showcasing the complexity of human existence and the world's mysteries. Relying on Turner Victory's theory of symbolism in oral literature which highlights the crucial role of symbols in conveying cultural meanings and values, the paper explores the symbolic cultural meanings and values of the supernatural beings in traditional oral tales in Ogba. The paper concludes that by examining the symbolism of supernatural beings in Ogba tales, one can appreciate how these stories not only entertain but also educate, transmit cultural heritage, and strengthen social bonds, ultimately enriching the collective identity of the Ogba people. In conclusion, the paper recommends studying traditional oral tales to promote Ogba cultural heritage and transmit knowledge to future generations through collaboration with community members, leaders, and external organisations.

Keywords: Ogba, oral tales, supernatural beings, symbolism, traditional.

INTRODUCTION

In African literature, many African writers have drawn upon oral traditions in their literary works. Authors such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o have incorporated elements of myths, legends, and narrative devices into their fiction. This integration of oral tradition into literature represents a distinct trend, where the historicity, narrative structures, entertainment value, and other literary techniques of storytelling (tales) have been adapted and woven into contemporary African writing. The oral traditions of the Ogba people are rooted in the art of storytelling, presenting narratives that blend fiction with historical elements to assert their authenticity. These oral traditions embody a dynamic, theoretical art form that exhibits distinct features of literature. The Ogba oral narratives (tales) are purported to be factual but their veracity is often questioned due to the transient nature of the oral community.

Within these traditional stories, various genres of Ogba oral literature can be found, including proverbs *elu*,

folktales *atita a*, folksong *egwu-ornu orie*, riddles *eeghno*, tongue-twisters *okwu-itabri-ire*, dances *igba-egwu* and festivals *iri-egwu*. All of these genres involve the art of storytelling, echoing Egudu's (1973) observation of the Igbo tradition, where "in traditional Igbo homes, storytelling is an art commonly performed and enjoyed by both parents and children. Usually after dinner men and women regale one another until they are carried off by sleep" (p.56). In consonance with the demands of oral literature, every Ogba oral tradition is performed on a specific occasion. Occasionality is an integral feature of this literary form, as the type of performance is determined by the context in which it is delivered. Songs, dances, myths, dirges, folktales, and legends are all composed and performed for particular events, such as funerals, weddings, victory celebrations, soothing a baby, or accompanying work-related activities. Unlike written literature, which is composed in isolation and later transmitted through the impersonal medium of print, Ogba oral pieces are

designed for and arise directly from the situations in which they are uttered. This direct involvement with the occasion of performance is a defining characteristic of the Ogbá oral tradition, underscoring its dynamic, community-based nature and the central role it plays in preserving and transmitting the cultural heritage of the Ogbá people.

Oral traditions form an integral part of the culture of any group of people. They are also the beliefs and customs that define a community or a people's lifestyle that dictates their code of conduct. Oral traditions are verbally transmitted. The invention of the print media has not eroded the oral literature; for the inability to get everything in print due to illiteracy and poverty has necessitated the oral transmission of the customs, beliefs, and expectations of a race to the young by the elders or a community. Inferentially, therefore oral traditions embody the people's total way of life. It is the aggregate of customs, beliefs, and practices that were not originally committed to writing but contributed to the cultural continuity of a social group and helped to shape its view.

The oral traditions of the Ogbá people manifest their culture, lifestyle, and beliefs. The people believe in customs and traditions. Thus, they analyse the nature of man, his peculiar environment, and the world; which is made up of three worlds: the world of the living; dead, and unborn. The Ogbá people are guided by the belief of their gods and dead ancestors. Every year, celebrations and sacrifices are made to the gods. They believe in nature and admire and worship it. Nature includes lakes, hills, earth, trees, waters, air, rivers, sea, and other supernatural beings inhabiting the atmosphere. All these elements of nature are incorporated into traditional oral tales as symbols in their various existences. One such tale is the folktale that adopts the use of songs to drive the audience to participate. Taiwo (2024) describes folktales as one of the features of oral literature. She states that the Yoruba society entertains and educates itself especially the children, through folktales. "Folktale is a narration or storytelling targeted at children for moral rejuvenation and entertainment and these stories are narrated at night by elders to children for good guidance. It is used to instruct the young and teach them to respect the dictates of customs" (p.38). Ohia (2024) views folktales as "the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of the Ogbá culture and it encompasses all knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms through words of mouth" (p.56).

Ogbá folktales *atita* consist of actors and their performed actions. However, archetypes such as the trickster exist. These are animal tales and humans and supernatural characters that teach morals to the youths and teens. Ogbá folktale is a core area for the cultivation of social and moral values in society. As a prose-narrative, it is interspersed with songs. These tales are peculiar to the Ogbá people and often represent their cultural values as a kingdom. For instance, the world creation myth by the Supreme Being *Chuku-Abiama* and inhabitants in the

creation process and the tale of Tortoise and Birds before the Supreme Being in heaven. These are classic tales told among Ogbá people.

Hence, the objective of this study is to state the use of supernatural beings as symbols that trend in Ogbá masquerades and traditional oral tales, and this to a large extent teaches morals, enriches the collective identity of the Ogbá people, ultimately promotes Ogbá cultural heritage and transmit knowledge to future generations in line with literary traditions. Ohia (2025) notes that "literary tradition has been and will continue to be affected by methods and media of preservation that evolve over time. Oral literature is an important point in the evolution of literature" (p.10).

Ohia (2023) validates the Ogbá oral tradition/oral literature in his assertion concerning Ogbá cosmology that:

the whole world in Ogbá cosmology exists for man's sake and the universe is divided into two: the visible and invisible parts (the heaven or sky and the earth). The sky is the invisible as well as the underworld that is below the earth, while the earth is the visible part. The Ogbá people believe in the link between earth and heaven which they reflect in their oral traditions (p.11).

It is absolutely clear that the supernatural beings according to Ogbá tradition live in the invisible world but are in close link with human beings in the visible world. Oral traditions form an integral part of the culture of any group of people. They are also the beliefs and customs which define a community's or a people's lifestyle that dictates their code of conduct. Oral traditions are verbally transmitted. Inferentially, therefore oral traditions embody the people's total way of life – their culture. It is the aggregate of customs, beliefs, and practices that were not originally documented (written) but contributed to the cultural continuity of a social group and helped to shape its view. The oral traditions of the Ogbá people manifest their culture, lifestyle, and belief. The people believe in customs and traditions. Thus, they analyse the nature of man, his peculiar environment, and world including man's interaction with supernatural beings which includes gods, ancestors, fairies, and other spirits of nature. In a related way, Wilson (2024) asserts that "oral tradition is a cultural material transmitted orally from one generation to another. Oral tradition or oral lore is a form of human communication in which knowledge arts, ideas, and culture are received, preserved, and transmitted orally from a generation to another generation (p.18).

OGBA TRADITIONAL ORAL TALES

Supernatural beings in Ogbá traditional oral tales

Traditional oral tales in Ogbá are a means of entertain-

ment, history, and education. Supernatural beings, such as God, gods, spirits, and mystical creatures, often play pivotal roles in these narratives, reflecting the fears, hopes, and moral lessons of society. Historically, oral literature has been a means of preserving cultural heritage, passed down through generations by word of mouth. The presence of supernatural beings often signifies a deeper connection to the spiritual world, serving as a bridge between the mundane and the divine. These beings can embody natural forces, represent human traits, or act as moral guides, making them essential to understanding the worldview of the cultures that create these stories. The study of supernatural beings in oral literature is a fascinating area that delves into the cultural, social, and psychological aspects of storytelling. Ogbia oral literature, which encompasses folktales, myths, songs, and legends, serves as a repository of the Ogbia people's beliefs and values. Gill (2017) notes that "oral literature should be viewed right from the outset as an artistic expression of a community's cultural heritage through spoken words and performance. It is a dynamic and living tradition that reflects the history, customs, and worldview of a particular group" (p.530).

The supernatural beings in Ogbia tales impact the culture, rituals social dynamics, governance, and traditional norms. The concept of supernatural beings is a pervasive theme in many cultures, encompassing various entities that transcend the natural world. According to Mbiti (1969), "Supernatural beings are often seen as intermediaries between humans and higher powers, embodying forces beyond human comprehension" (p.45). These beings are believed to exist in a realm that intersects with the physical world, influencing the events in human life in both benevolent and malevolent ways. Similarly, in the view of Mircea Eliade (1960), "the presence of supernatural beings reflects humanity's innate need to connect with the divine. He posits that these entities often serve as manifestations of spiritual realities, guiding individuals through moral dilemmas and life's mysteries" (p.23). Supernatural beings, therefore, are not mythological constructs but play a functional role in the cultural and religious practices of societies.

Studies such as Ohia (2017), Foley (1988), Elimimian (2016) and Ikoiwak (1983) have revealed that belief in supernatural beings persists in modern societies, often adapting to contemporary contexts. Some researchers suggest that these beings are reinterpreted in the light of current societal challenges such as technological advancement and existential uncertainties, yet retain their traditional roles in explaining phenomena beyond human control. Supernatural beings are often understood in Ogbia tales as entities that exist beyond the natural laws of the physical world, often possessing powers that humans do not possess. They are typically categorised as deities, spirits, or other worldly creatures, and they are often seen as intermediaries between humans and a higher power or spiritual realm.

A historical mythologist Joseph Campbell (2004) reveals that "supernatural beings often serve as symbolic figures in the hero's journey, representing trials, mentors, or obstacles that the protagonist must face to achieve enlightenment or fulfilment (p.45). These entities, whether depicted as benevolent or malevolent, are central to Ogbia narratives and mythologies, shaping human understanding of the universe and their place within it. Examples suffice in Ogbia tales such as "mother was going to farm and told the son to roast yam but a wicked stepmother told the boy to roast the little baby". In this tale, the intervention of the supernatural being in the forest rewards the innocent child and punishes the wicked stepmother as the tale unfolds.

Supernatural beings play a fundamental role in shaping religious beliefs, and moral practices in Ogbia acting as symbols for larger metaphysical concepts. These entities often represent the unseen forces of the universe, which people try to understand and control through ritual and myth. They are integral to the structure of myth and serve a functional role in Ogbia tales and the society at large. Malinowski (1962) emphasises that "belief in supernatural entities helps individuals cope with the unknown and manage the uncertainties of life" (p.102). In Ogbia tales, the supernatural beings whether God, gods, spirits, or ancestral figures, offer psychological comfort, particularly in times of crisis, by providing explanations for natural phenomena and human experiences. These beings by their benevolent roles in the tales typically embody cultural values or serve as cautionary figures in Ogbia traditional narratives, teaching lessons about human ethical behaviour and social norms. In Ogbia tales, supernatural beings symbolise deities, such as the gods of ancient Greece or the monotheistic God in Christianity and Islam, as they are typically characterised by omnipotence and omniscience, representing ultimate power and knowledge in the tales which they are characters. Ultimately, supernatural beings as symbols are relevant in Ogbia oral tales and modern storytelling. The forms and types of supernatural beings – whether deities, gods, spirits, or mystical creatures – carry enduring relevance, providing a way for people to navigate existential questions and uncertainties, even in the 21st century Ogbia. They remain a potent symbol of humanity's quest to understand forces beyond the material world.

Symbol of supernatural being in Ogbia traditional masquerade and oral tales

In the study of supernatural beings in Ogbia oral literature, especially masquerade, the symbolism of the supernatural beings plays a crucial role in unveiling the deep cultural meanings these figures embody. According to Turner (2020), "symbols in rituals and stories are more than mere representations; they serve as dynamic entities that communicate complex layers of meaning within a society"

(p.45). This notion of symbolism is essential for understanding how supernatural beings in Ogbá tales function as representations of broader cultural values, including ancestral power, moral authority, and the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. Ohia and Onyedibia (2003) note concerning the presence of the supernatural being in the Ogbá masquerade that:

the *echina* is a wooden image that is normally carved in a thick forest where human beings cannot see it to represent the spirit. The cult also adopted the use of the *nkaba* language... to deify the masquerade as spirits... According to the members of the cult, it is to raise the spirit essence of the dance so that people would not take it so common (p.108).

Supernatural beings in Ogbá masquerade in particular and oral literature generally are “potent symbols” that transcend their literal presence in stories and rituals. For instance, in Ogbá masquerade traditions, these beings are not just depicted as characters from myths but as powerful ancestral spirits that travelled across seven seas and seven forests and exert influence over the living community.

Their roles in tales and masquerades extend beyond narrative and cultural entertainment, but they serve as symbols of community’s connection to the ancestors and the spiritual realm, reinforcing the moral structures that guide the Ogbá society. The symbolism is central to rituals in which supernatural beings are invoked, as these beings often enforce moral codes by rewarding various good behaviours and punishing transgressors. There is a binary fusion in the functions of the supernatural beings represented by the masquerades, a kind of dualism symbolised in the costumes. In his opinion, Ohia (2021) posits:

...the masqueraders costumes have binary fusion of the material and immaterial aspects which accord well with African cosmological conception of dualism by which existence is considered at two places. In the same vein, any art work or object has the physical aspect and spiritual aspect but unlike European art, the physical aspect is tied solely to perceptible material value of effective response with associated function (p.97).

The costume of Ogbá masquerade *Okrosnu* keeps to the dualism being advanced by Ohia because the regalia is spiritually fortified, and this differentiates the masquerades from other members of the *Okrosnu* masquerade group or initiates.

In the words of Horton (1993) “supernatural beings in African oral literature embody “deeper cosmological and spiritual truths” that govern the interaction between the

human and spiritual realms” (p.312). This aligns with Ogbá’s belief that ancestors maintain an active role in the lives of the living, shaping the social and moral order through their supernatural power. These beings, whether depicted in tales or portrayed through masquerades, serve as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical worlds. The tales, therefore, are not just stories but reflections of the broader cosmological beliefs that define Ogbá culture.

Connecting this to the title of this paper, it becomes evident that the supernatural beings in Ogbá tales and masquerades are more than simple mythical characters. In the view of both Turner and Horton, these beings function as vital cultural symbols that communicate the values, beliefs, and spiritual practices of a people as it is in Ogbá. According to Horton (1993), “the representation of these beings reflects the community’s reliance on ancestral power for guidance and moral direction; highlighting their belief in the interconnectedness of physical and spiritual realms” (p.313). Furthermore, in the Ogbá traditional oral tales, the appearance of supernatural beings often marks significant moral lessons or social commentary. These beings symbolise the ultimate moral authority, reminding individuals of the ever-present influence of ancestors. Therefore, the supernatural beings in Ogbá literature go beyond entertainment to serve a functional role in maintaining societal harmony and cultural continuity.

Let us illustrate with a popular tale of “Tortoise and Birds with the Supreme Being in Heaven” – “*Mbekni la umunnunu la Chuku-Abiama la eligwe*”.

Text of the tale

Long time ago, the Tortoise and the Birds were friends and lived together in harmony. One day, they decided to go to heaven to visit the Supreme Being, *Chuku-Abiama*. When they arrived, *Chuku-Abiama* welcomed them and offered them food and drink. However, the birds were impatient and began to eat before *Chuku-Abiama* had finished serving them. The Tortoise, on the other hand, waited patiently and thanked Him for the food. *Chuku-Abiama* was pleased with Tortoise’s good manners and decided to reward him. He gave Tortoise a piece of yam and told him to plant it on earth, promising that it would bring prosperity and abundance to his people. The birds, which had been impatient and greedy, were given a handful of sesame seeds, which they were told to plant on earth as well. When they returned to earth, Tortoise planted the yam and it grew into a lush and productive crop, bringing prosperity to his people. The birds, on the other hand, planted the sesame seeds, but they grew into tiny, insignificant plants that produced little fruits.

From the above tale, the Ogbá people respect the tortoise as a patient animal with fashionable wisdom and manners whereas the birds represent the consequences

of greed and impatience. This particular tale is often told during storytelling sessions with the intention to teach children the importance of having good behaviours, manners, and respect for elders. It also teaches the benefits of values of being patient and hardworking in society. It is worth to note that Ogba's oral tradition operates on the principle of binary oppositions – fundamental dualities that structure human experience. For instance, concepts such as life and death, the physical and spiritual, or good and evil, serve as frameworks through which societies interpret and make sense of the world. In Levi-Strauss' (1963) view, the function of myths is “to reveal deeper insights into how the community perceives the world through the dualities embedded in their tales” (p.229). In the view of Levi-Strauss, these myths function to organise and express the core beliefs of a people, structuring their worldview through recurring contrasts and tensions. This study aligns with the theory of structuralism by demonstrating how these beings, through their representation of binary oppositions; reflect the societal and cosmological frameworks of the Ogba. This approach suggests that supernatural beings are more than mere characters; they are vehicles through which the community negotiates complex concepts about existence, morality, and the universe.

This is analogous with Okpewho's (1992) averment that “oral literature functions beyond mere entertainment; it is instrumental in educating younger generations about societal norms and expectations”. He reveals that oral narratives often carry moral lessons embedded in their stories, where characters – either trickster figures or heroes – embody virtues or vices that reflect the moral compass of the society (p.64). For instance, the trickster figure in Ogba folklore Tortoise *mbekni*, teaches lessons on the consequences of dishonesty and cunning, while heroic figures like the ram *ebuluako* emphasise virtues like courage, wisdom, and perseverance. Eliade (1957) notes about culture; “at least some understanding of the people's way of life will prove useful. Each culture maintains a lot of norms that maybe peculiar to it, or inexplicable to an “outsider” that is, one not familiar with the culture in question (P. 95)”. The flexibility of Ogba oral literature ensures that the tales remain relevant over time, as it can evolve to incorporate contemporary themes while retaining its core cultural messages. The adaptation of oral narratives by performers to suit different audiences and contexts is especially important in maintaining the resilience of oral traditions in the face of changing societal values or external influences. Finnegan (1970) reveals that “unlike written literature, oral traditions are highly flexible and interactive, allowing performers to adapt their narratives to suit different audiences and contexts” (p.21).

OGBA ORAL LITERATURE

Oral literature, as a multifaceted aspect of cultural heritage, serves not only as a form of artistic expression

but also as a vital tool for preserving cultural knowledge and social values. In Ogba, oral literature plays an essential role in the transmission of historical knowledge, moral codes, and cultural practices in the society. This underscores the fundamental role of oral literature in shaping the historical consciousness and worldview of the Ogba culture. Foley (1988) reveals that “oral traditions, especially in non-literate societies, serve as vital repositories of historical events, genealogies, and cosmological beliefs” (p.48). He emphasises the performance aspect of oral literature, where music, dance, and ritual are often intertwined with storytelling, creating a communal experience that reinforces social bonds and shared identities.

Supernatural beings are pivotal in the oral literature of many African cultures, and this is particularly true for the Ogba people of Nigeria. In their folklore, these beings transcend mere myth to embody the societal values, spiritual beliefs, and environmental connections of the Ogba communities. For instance, the tales surrounding *Nwnaoruke*, a spirit being serve not only as cautionary narratives but also as affirmations of respect for nature and the interconnectedness of all lives. It is believed that *Nwnaoruke* moves about with his talking-metal *Oji* to decree the existence and non-existence of things in both physical and spiritual worlds.

Nwabali, another noteworthy supernatural being in Ogba legends and tales, is characterised as a mischievous spirit known for inflicting pain and sickness on humans. The narratives involving *Nwabali* often carry moral lessons, emphasising the consequences of bad manners – greed and selfishness. The spirit frequently adopts various forms to attack humans, especially at night. *Nwabali* as a supernatural being symbolised the Ogba belief in the necessity of balance and reciprocity in social interactions, highlighting how mischief can lead to interference of *Nwabali*, with such knowledge creating a balance in human actions which ultimately engenders personal growth and communal harmony.

Furthermore, ancestral spirit is significant in Ogba oral literature. These spirits are revered as the protectors of families and communities, often called upon at times of distress and uncertainty. In Ogba folklore these ancestral spirits communicate with the living through dreams and visions, providing guidance. This connection underscores the Ogba people's deep reverence for their lineage and the obligation to honour their ancestors, reinforcing a sense of continuity and belonging within the community. In essence, supernatural beings in Ogba folklore extend beyond mere mythical figures; they encapsulate the intertwining of the spiritual and physical realms. As earlier discussed in this paper, the supernatural beings in Ogba tales are classified into deities, spirits, and mythical creatures which serve as an essential framework for understanding the Ogba people's worldview. Each category plays a distinct role in both the spiritual and social life of the Ogba people, illustrating the interconnectedness of their cosmology, and environment. Deities, spirits, and

mythical creatures are revered for their omnipotence and governance over specific aspects of life and the environment. The reverence shown to them reflects a broader cultural emphasis on harmony with the environment, which is essential for sustaining the community's livelihood.

The cultural and social significance of supernatural beings in the Ogba communities are intricately linked to the people's religious beliefs, values, and societal practices. These beings play a vital role in shaping communities' worldviews and guide their interactions with both the spiritual and natural realms. The cultural and social significance are embedded in the people's duties and religious practices as visualised in their cosmology, environmental awareness, social cohesion, moral lessons and cultural identity and continuity.

CONCLUSION

Supernatural beings as symbols in masquerades and traditional oral tales in Ogba reveal a profound cultural framework that reflects the Ogba people's worldviews, values, and relationship with both the spiritual and physical realms. Symbolism, particularly as articulated by Victor Turner, emphasises the role of symbols in rituals and stories, asserting that symbols hold complex meanings within a culture. The supernatural beings in Ogba oral literature – masquerades and oral tales function as potent symbols of ancestral power, moral authority, and the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. These beings often appear in Ogba masquerade rituals and stories, symbolising ancestral spirits that influence the living in the communities. The role of supernatural beings in Ogba masquerades and tales can be understood through the theoretical sense of symbolism. Symbolism thus becomes a scarlet thread in the realisation of the full representations of Ogba oral tradition, masquerade, and tales. Supernatural beings in them unravel the various experiences in the Ogba oral community.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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