

## Reality or Fantasy: A Study of Animal Behaviour in Igbo Folktales

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### ABSTRACT

In Igbo folktales, animals are depicted behaving like human beings. In this way, they are shown with family relationship similar to human's. Such family members have duties spelt out. Outside, they have towns with kings and even soldiers doing their duties. Among these animals, there are inter and intra species friendship. A situation such as this has led early analyst to conclude that such stories are created out of the experience of man in order to teach human lessons. But then, the stand of this paper is that if we rely on scientific investigations, we can discover that what the tales relate is how it is in the actual world of animals.

**Keywords:** Animals towns, houses, families, friendship, reality, fantasy.

### INTRODUCTION

In Igbo folktales, the characters that feature most often are animals. Although we recognize them as animals from the presentation of the raconteurs, they are imbued with human attributes-- their actions, behaviour, organizational structure, family set-up under which they marry and fend for the members of their families, etc. In fact, there is little difference between them and humans apart from their exhibiting certain peculiar acts which animals are known for. A situation like this has generated such a view as is here credited to Brunvand:

Animal tales have as their main characters domestic or wild animals (mammals, birds, reptiles, insects, etc) that speak, reason or otherwise behave like human beings. Usually, these animals correspond to certain stock character types such as the clever fox or rabbit, the stupid bear, the faithful dog, and the industrious ant (106).

In this, we see that each of these animal characters is "... given the psychology and passion of people. Through this, the tale becomes a mirror of society and of life because it helps to reflect social reality in the African folktale" (Akpobaro 120). Under this condition, there then is a problem in evaluating the tales. This problem is whether what the tales relate are real human situations and conditions but masked and presented as animal tales. Or do we take it that what the tales portray are conditions obtainable in real or imagined animal kingdom? The first option is the view of most critics. They see these portrayals as what can be used to shield the raconteur from the ire of the persons who they are indirectly attacking with the tales, using names of animals instead of people. The most outrageous of people with such views are the early European explorers who see themselves as the dupes who the African tricksters are cheating. This view can also be seen in their American counterparts when they analyze the Anancy stories of the Afro-Americans. This view from the colonialists must have influence scholars who study African folktales if we are to judge from the plethora of such opinions.

So, starting from the whites, let us pinpoint some of them beginning from Radin who puts it that in the study of these tales, "We are not dealing with anthropomorphization but with a humanization of animals which has a certain family resemblance to what developed in Medieval Europe" (11). But let us note that whether we are ascribing a human form or behaviour to animals as it is suggested by the word anthropomorphization or whether we are giving human attributes to the animals, we are saying nearly the same thing--that animal characters are made to behave like humans. This overwhelming view that has been circulating since the colonial days must have influenced Emenanjo who is quoted by Nwachukwu-Agbada in an Internet article. According to him, "...in the Igbo folktales, one really requires a willing suspension of disbelief to comprehend and appreciate what happens with animals speaking and behaving like humans...."

But it is the stand of this paper that these animal characters do behave as it is in the tales. For their speaking like humans, this is not where to look into it. We are only to talk about their behaviour for what the tales say is how it is in nature. In reality, the animals have different homes and families, towns and organized governments just as the tales relate. The animals train their soldiers and go for wars; some of them go for slave raid and commit murder just like our forefathers encapsulated in the tales they handed over to us.

However, there are few subdued voices trying to let us know that there is reality in what the tales say. But among such voices none has been so bold and vociferous to state it bluntly for fear of being misunderstood. Some who are bold to affirm the reality in the behaviour of these folktale animal characters simply hint at that and leave it there. Such only whets people's desire to see the proof but since none is forth coming, nobody is convinced. This is how we view Krappe's stand that "...no genuine animal story is possible without the tacit assumption that animals act very much like human beings and think logically, for all we know at this day and age, they do" (61).

Such glaring misinterpretation of these animals characters as we saw earlier must have pushed Osten to train a horse in order to prove to the world that animals are as wise as humans --in other words as wise as the

tales say even though in his attempt, he never mentioned tales. As Wilson refers to him, we are told that: An eccentric German Van Osten set out to show that animals were as clever as man and he spent two years educating a horse which became known as clever Hans. It would shake its head appropriately for “yes” or “no” and would communicate in other ways by tapping its foreleg on the ground. Clever Hans could apparently undertake quite difficult calculations involving the four fundamental rules of arithmetic. He could change common fractions into decimals and could then change them back again. He could even tap out what day of the month it was, could tell the time and would shake its head to show that a mistake had been made if a musical chord was wrongly played on the piano (83).

It is for a purpose that we allow this long quotation in order to start satiating, doubting Thomases. In short, there were such people then. Because of them, a committee of eminent zoologists psychologist was set up to study the animal in order to see if there were possibilities of deception. None was found by the committee and so clever Hans intelligence was substantiated.

Furthermore, it is not only Osten who was able to conduct scientific experiments in order to show that animals have a modicum of intelligence like men. One of such men is Arthur Mann, a researcher into several British cats. Mann studied one of the paintings of a cat he named Orangello and to his amazement, he discovered that the scribbling of Orangello “... were quite obvious drawings of common objects around Mann’s house” (Kuncl 75). This experiment led to the study of drawings from various cats. The same discovery was made. This study is the origin of the word “invertism” as coined by Mann in order to describe Orangello’s approach. At this stage, “Other art scholars later pointed out that human artists had previously used such method, one being a German neoimpressionist named Gerog Baselitz “(76). The summary of these experiments is that where these animals are today is where we were in days gone by.

In view of such experiments like this, we are going to state that it is not only clever Hanns and Orangello that are intelligent. There must be others. Also since what our eyes see may be misleading, we are mainly basing this enquiry on scientific investigations for us to arrive at the point that what Igbo folktales say of animal characters is how it is in real life. The tales initially were not for the hiding of the raconteur’s attacks on people but to teach people, entertain them and build the culture of the Igbo nation. That the behaviours of animals resemble that of human is just incidental because both belong to the general group “animals” If we do not feel insulted by such a view. This cannot be wondered at if we note like countess Cesaresco who puts it that: The great and cautious Darwin said that the senses, intuitions, emotions and faculties such as love, memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason of which man boasts may be found in an incipient or even sometimes in a well-developed condition in a lower animals (qtd in Nwala 51)

It is for such a knowledge that “Jainism and the Brahmanic teaching have in common the belief in the similarity of all creatures ... (Joy 144).

But it is at this point that we delve into our enquiry starting from where the tales relate that the animals live.

### **Animal Towns and Houses**

A typical Igbo tale always starts with a conflict situation in an unnamed animal town. It is usually either a drought or a famine that occurs in *Obodo umu anumanu* – the town of the animals. There may not be much argument with the famine or the drought since the dry season can bring the two to a horde of animals most of whom have no means of storing water or food for such a season. The only problem is the town there simply called the town of these animals. One would like to know where such a town is located. A perfunctory attempt may place it in any forest – forests being where the animals live. But this is not so because if you have discussed with hunters or you are one, you will discover that most animals are at home in certain forests and when they are chased away in one, they always sprint it back to that one.

This knowledge is what some early explorers to the continent of Africa lacked when they landed in Lambarene, Gabon. There was a thick forest that harbored the sort of hard wood that they wanted to use for a construction work and so, they wanted to co-opt the natives who would help them to fell the tress but these “... natives maintained that [in the forest] the gorillas live together in villages and they do not dare enter the forest known to harbor these gorilla colonies” (Joy 98). That sounded funny to these Europeans most especially when these natives tell them that the wood from the earliest days belonged to the gorillas, not to men. To the whites, the natives would not have believed such tales and so, they decided to explore the wood themselves. But what happened?

After they had wondered about for some distance unmolested, they saw a gorilla who withdraw immediately upon seeing them. A few minutes later, a pair of gorillas suddenly appeared. These also withdrew, though a bit hesitantly. A few moments later, the men found themselves face to face with a couple of gorillas and a young one (Joy 98).

What happened was that due to their skepticism, they mistakenly entered into the town of gorillas. Nobody told them to retreat most especially when a gorilla “... runs on all fours, supporting itself with its long

forearms on the ground; a few meters from its victim [one of the explorers] it suddenly rises to its full height to seize him by the neck” (101).

Now, ask why these gorillas should cluster themselves in that particular forest. Even when they wander far away and are being chased, they always run back to that particular forest. The simple reason is that there is their houses and town. They are their kith and kin. There, they are sure to enlist the help of others in order to defend them. If that is the case, is it wrong to call such a place the town of the animals? The people of Lamberene saw it like that and so, called that forest the town of the gorillas. Therefore, whenever the storyteller mentions the town of the animals, he is being particular about a place where these animals live in colonies.

In such a place, one can find their abodes where they can be located after they have foraged for the day. It is not that these abodes are scattered and unorganized and that any of these animals can use any as the need arises. Each has a particular place that belongs to it. The easiest identifiable home is the nest of the birds hanging up there on the trees. At the end of the day’s flight, each bird resorts to its nest. Animals have their own abodes in the form of burrows for those who live underground. For others who live above the ground, “... it is common in the animal world for animals to mark out their territory often by urinating and intrusion will meet with resistance” (Wilson 67). In support of this practice as being a constant way of animals who do not have easily identifiable structures as their homes, the Encyclopaedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite states that: “A male dog establishes a territory by marking the boundaries with urine, scent from the anal glands, or even faeces. The dog will then defend that territory against intruders”.

Therefore, when in the stories an animal pays a courtesy call on another, it is to this demarcated site without compound walls or even buildings that the animal goes to. That is the other animal’s house. Then, a problem may arise when we consider how other animals will know and recognize that there is a circular place demarcated off with urine some days or months because by then, the urine would have dried up. This is not a problem because these animals have far higher developed nasal sensitivity than humans and can smell the urine for days, weeks and months. Then, when the owner has used it for some time, all would have known who the owner is. Also constant usage of a particular spot will leave the place with signs of fur, faeces, foot prints, etc which these animals can easily recognize. Have you asked yourself why most dogs while moving, always smell the ground? Why is it that a dog which is taken to a far distance can always trace its way back home? These are special gifts which bountiful nature has caged in them.

It is not only mammals as represented by dogs that have their homes. Other animals do so. But let us look at their avian counterparts whose territory is in the sky. Concerning them, we are told that: Most song birds are territorial during the nesting season. That is they will not allow others of their own kind within a particular zone they have staked out for themselves. A male who cannot establish a territory of his own will not attract a mate. On the other hand, a territorial cannot extend his domination beyond his boundaries or to the next generation. His young will have to compete for territory the next year, and only a few will be successful (Clement 11).

If such a place is not a bird’s house, what is it? The usefulness of houses in human life can be seen here also. Any man who is unable to secure a piece of land and build his own house exposes his children to problems as it is among the birds. Also, most parents among the Igbo would like to know if their intended son-in-law has his own house whether rented or personally built. Therefore, such places are what we refer to as the houses of the animals in Igbo folktales. In each house, you find families depending on how each creature behaves and these families are referred to in the tales since we can hear of an animal, its wife and children. Therefore, in the next segment we shall be looking at the animal family as we are constantly reminded in the tales.

### **Animals and their Families**

Just as we have human families, so do we have animal families with the duties of each member well spelt out and carried out for the benefit of all concerned. This is how the tales portray these animals. As an illustration in “The Tortoise and his wife,” we are told of the wife the trickster being muddle headed. “Not once did she ever collect enough firewood with which to complete the cooking of a meal” (Egudu 79). In this story, Tortoise provides the meat and the wife gathers the firewood and does the cooking. Is this not how it is in the human family? What is shown here is the idea of division of labour in carrying the family forward. This is how it is in the real animal family.

For us to illustrate, let us start with an obvious one, citing an example with the fowl. Who has not seen the hen sitting over the eggs, going along with the chicks, feeding them and protecting them? The family head, the cock who sometimes has a bevy of wives, goes about displaying his colorful plumage and crowing prowess, getting insects and sharing among the wives. At the end of the day, he may go to roost with an empty stomach. When killed, what do you find in the gizzard? Sand, small pebbles, shells and other indigestible materials.

But then, not all animals (the name used in folktales for all creatures apart from humans, spirits and trees) are very well organized. Among the best organized is the Hymenoptera under which are bees, wasps, ants and sawflies. The organization here includes the king, queen, workers, soldiers, young ones – similar to well

organized kingdoms. But since we are not at the moment talking about governance, let us limit ourselves to the activities at the family level. In this, Tschinkel writing in Encarta has it that: “Worker ants do not have wings and perform most of the work of the colony, including searching for food, nursing the young, and defending the colony against ants from other colonies”.

When studied, we see a well organized family with each member carrying out its duties so as to see to the growth of the family. While this is going on, the young keep on growing under this family umbrella until they are mature enough to start their own families. At this stage we are made to know in the same Encarta that: Under highly specific conditions of weather and time of day, the reproductives leave the nest and fly high into the air where they join reproductives from other colonies in what is called a nuptial or wedding flight. The reproductives usually mate with partners from a different colony that they encounter during the wedding flight.

But we must point out here that not all animals are as conscious of incest as the Hymenoptera. A typical example is the domestic goat. But as it is here, so it is among humans. Some detest incest, some do not. But Igbo people are squeamish in the face of certain behaviour and so do not talk of sexual relationship in their tales – unlike the Akan, Fante and Ewe peoples of Ghana.

This family structure can also be seen among the feline family. Each animal knows its duty and carries it out just as our tales relate. Under this, Gurney tells us that among the cats:

Like mothers everywhere, the cat has her work cut out for her. She must train her offspring in almost all phases of activities. Basic training consist of teaching the kittens how to win over the master by curling up his lap, purring and looking lovingly at him. Also, on the agenda is how to chase a stuffed mouse, bit of paper ... to further please the master. Other fundamentals include how to look innocently when caught eating on top of the dining room table (28).

If cats train their offsprings in order to please their human masters – even deceive them – how different are they from humans? Are they not being realistically characterized in folktales since what is shown in the citation is not different from how they are portrayed in tales? That explains what happened when Lion consulted Goat to let one of her children to live with him. Goat called all her children and interviewed them. She in the interview was looking for any of her children who would be able to deceive Lion, not defeat him in physical prowess. Is this not what the cat in the quotation teaches its offsprings? The two animals know the limit of their strength and they cannot match their masters in an open confrontation. Therefore, in the tale, Goat after interviewing the last born saw no need to train him further and so sent him to live with Lion (Oruche 19).

Furthermore, let us highlight the duties of the members of the family but this time, among the wolves. As it is among them, so it is among humans. Why then do our critics look at this organization as something copied from humans? Why then do we “require a willing suspension of disbelief [for us to] comprehend and appreciate what happens with animals ... behaving like humans ...”? Why this suspension while what we are told is a naked reality? Then, how right are we in seeing these animal characters as being anthropomorphosized? But whether we like it or not, among the wolves:

The wolf father leads the pack on the hunt, the mother attends to the pups, and baby-sitters and the puppies mock fight, tumble and play games. The wolf family is very much like the human family; within it conflicts arise and arguments are settled, jobs were assigned and done (George 16).

But we cannot continue looking at the families of other animals. Suffice it to state that what is among humans is replicated among their animals. So, from the family, let us get to the society of these our distant cousins.

### **Animal Society and Governance**

These Igbo tales are replete with the towns of the animals and what happens in them. Very prominent are the activities of their king. From time to time, the animals disagree and go for war. In continuation of our stand, we have no need stating that these are actualities. To begin with, let us start with the work of the Zoologist, George Schaller who lived close to gorillas in the Congo. As it was written by Wilson, Schaller:

... found [that] they [the gorillas] lived in social groups of between five and thirty, and they have few natural enemies. Apparently, they stayed together for companionship as much as anything. There seemed to be a head ape who led the other animals around, and they followed him more out of respect than fear (75).

This head ape who others follow out of respect is definitely their king. This is the one whom our tales refer to as *eze umu anumanu* – the king of the animals, at least among the apes. When all animals congregate, one emerges as their king – presidents, heads of state, prime ministers, etc being not in the dictionary of the local raconteur. At this stage, let us be reminded that earlier, we pointed out a similar structure among the Hymenoptera. Or how do you think that every member of that large group does its duty without taking directives from any one or being supervised by a higher authority?

But from our citations so far, it looks as if only Europeans devote their time to study animal behaviour. This is erroneous judging from the reports of our hunters. According to Chukwudubem, “... greedy ones [animals] like the lion and leopard mostly moved in single file. The one at the back was always the biggest,

presumably the chief” (1). Here, every supervision of the journey is done by the strongest one at the back – the *eze umu anumanu* (the king of the animals) of the pack.

Again, let us emphasize that it is not only among the ants and the feline groups that we have such an organization. It is also obtainable among the birds. For our illustration let us look at the crews about whom we are told that.

Crows know the value of organization and are as well drilled as soldiers – very much better than some soldiers, in fact for crows are always on duty, always at war, and always dependent on each other for life and safety. Their leaders are not only the oldest and wisest of the band, but also the strongest and bravest for they must be ready at any time with sheer force to put down any upstart or a rebel (Seton 55).

So, what is wrong with our being told in folktales of such a war between the birds of the air and the animals of the ground? It is during such a war that the arch trickster Tortoise devised how to win in order to be crowned the king of the animals – *eze umu anumanu*. He invited the birds including these war mongers, the crows, locked them up in a hall and set the house ablaze (Egudu 73).

Just as was observed in human history, the history of hitherto existing animal society has been the history of species’ struggle. This has made some animals to start training soldiers and going on wars. For an illustration, what do you say in what happened in Gombe, Nigeria? We are told that the: “ ... chimps in the Gombe Game Preserve wage war on neighboring groups that infringe on their territory and they kill members of their own group for motives no easier to discern than “senseless” human murders” (George 99).

To highlight the state of insecurity and anarchy in the real or actual animal society, let us be aware that among them are slave raiders. Here, we are not referring to birds of prey and carnivorous animals. These two are also terrors on their own, thereby heightening the state of insecurity and struggle. To buttress the idea of slave-raiding, let us refer to Tschinkel’s article in the Encarta which we earlier mentioned. We are told in that article that:

Many species of ants exploit the labor or resources of other species of ants. Slaves-making ants steal pupae from the nest of neighboring ants of a different species. When the pupae emerge as adult workers in the slave-raiders’ nest, they regard that nest as their own and embark on a life of labor for the ants that captured them.

With a society as chaotic and dangerous as this, we do now see reasons with the crows – crows being regarded as being wise. Hence, we have the saying, “Wise as an old crow” who to survive, their leaders in real life, train soldiers to be at alert always. In referring to one of such leaders who he named Silverspot because of the spot on its body, Seton has it that:

“He has hammered away at drill teaching them all the signals and words of command in use, and now it is a pleasure to see them in the early morning” (71).

If there are military drills, there must be wars. For these wars, the soldiers are drilled to be at alert. If the raconteur tells us of such a war in folktales, what crime has he committed? Is he not realistic in relating what he saw or was told? Do we now say that the animal characters whose life he is truthfully telling you about are imitating human beings? But we have the right to say so because of our limited knowledge.

As we observed earlier, these animals are always at alert for intruders. Have you ever had an encounter with bees? One stings, then another and another especially when one mistakenly goes near a beehive. Who tells the second and third bees that an enemy is in the prowl? How do they get the information or is it out of instinct? That is how we think although we are wrong. Their colleagues inform them and they are taught how to make use of the weapons found in their natural arsenal.

Finally, we cannot continue on the theme of governance and war till the end of this article. But since we said something about war, let us also counterbalance it with the theme of peace and friendship among these animals as can be also be seen in the tales.

### **Peace and Friendship Among the Animals**

From the foregoing, it looks as if the life of these animals is always the life of war. It is not, for among them are great friends – even between animals of different species. We only need to recall the story of the “ ... dog who was seized by police because of his friendship with a kitten. The poor dog was sentenced to be hanged by the stern judges of Salem [in the trials of 1600s] Clement 23).

Furthermore, some animals do make out time for relaxation. Why all this is sounding strange is that we have been brought up to look down on them as inferior and senseless beings. But ask any hunter who digs holes in order to get bush rats. The hunter will tell you that sometimes, snakes do co-habit with this bush rats. When one runs away through one exit, the other slithers away through another normally in some Igbo dialects called *upu*. This “*upu*” exit is nothing but a carefully constructed emergency outlet made and hidden from the public. At the entrance, stones, nuts, leaves and other odd materials are deposited in order to deceive people that through it, the dwellers of the burrow can run away in times of emergency.

Then, knowing how dangerous snakes are, how possible is it that they can co-habit in the same burrow with the harmless bush rats? Why is it that the venomous reptiles allow the rats to continue in that burrow

without killing them? The two must have come to an understanding. The burrow was made by the rodents, and the reptiles, apparent intruders, are there to have a shelter and for security purposes.

To further show that friendship exists between animals of different species for mutual benefits, let us cite a research carried out by Gurney who studied a symbiotic relationship between a cat and a dog. These two are domestic animals in the house of a man. Sometimes, they team together to steal and deceive the man. In one of such occasions, we are told that:

First dog sniffs the roast [left on their owner's table]. Cat takes a triangulated compass reading on dogs nose to determine the exact location of the roast on the table so that he won't end up in the middle of the mashed potatoes when he jumps. Second, cat climbs up on dog's back to make the leap as short as possible in the event that the table is wobbly. Cat then hops onto the table and pushes the roast off the table. Note that he doesn't push it onto the floor where it might go splat – too much noise. He pushes it onto dog's mouth so that you won't hear a thing. Cat then licks the table clean to remove any evidence and also licks the floor in case dog has been a trifle clumsy .... The remaining problem is how to get the repast out of the house where it may be enjoyed at leisure without interference (96).

This shows intelligence and a symbiotic relationship, the sort that is celebrated in the tales. This further shows the sort of friendship that can exist between animals of different species. Note that we are purposely silent on the relationship between animals of the same species because that one is too obvious from what we have seen so far.

Now, if that relationship between a cat and a dog is revealed after a painstaking scientific investigation, why do we need a suspension of disbelief in the tale that relates the decision of Goat and Tortoise to team together "... and steal from a neighbour's compound" (Obodoechi 1)? But we all know who Tortoise is and what he is capable of doing. Instead of a hitch free theft similar to the one recorded scientifically, Tortoise escapes and Goat is caught. "The owner of the house caught him, killed him and made a nice meal out of him" (Obodoechi 1).

But we must not end this section on that sad note. Not all relationships end up that way. In actual fact, some of these animals so organize themselves that they monitor what is happening to their neighbours. That explains their having a port of call for each to be monitored. When raconteurs report such, they may call such a place a palace a hall, a palace or a civic center, depending on what the narrator chooses to call it. That is what the animals are doing in "Why the Tortoise has a Checkered Shell: 1" (Egudu 37). But in actual fact, what happens is that they select a place for their meeting. A naturalist that noted it is Seton who in his study of dogs and wolves states that: "Each dog or wolf makes a point of calling at those stations that are near his line of travel to learn who has recently been there, just as a man calls at his club on returning to town and looks up the register" (145).

## Conclusion

What we are saying is that what the tales relate is how it exists naturally. Our problem is that we assume that the tales are old wives, tales meant only for entertaining children with just an appendage, the etiological endings to teach morals. But that is not so, for in them, the behaviour of animals are well portrayed.

In view of all that we have seen so far, is there any need to ask whether these animal tales are to be classified as belonging to the realm of fantasy or reality? In fact, they are real but hidden to all who do not come near these animals to know what is happening in their midst. Without scientific investigations, most of their activities will be hidden to a lot of people. Therefore, what the tales say about animals is how it is. From what we have seen, let us state it that the relationship between works of realism and real life is what is obtainable between folktales and the real life of animals. Therefore, we are not to be amazed when we are told that: "Lich-tse of the school of Lao-tse (sixth century BC), expresses his conviction that the hearts and minds of animals are not as different from those of men as is generally assumed" (Joy 183). Finally and from this work, one day we shall discover that the myths of today will become the scientific facts of tomorrow.

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