


## The Aesthetics of Rumor as Contemporary Legend: The Study of selected Tales in the south-east

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ARTICLE INFO	Abstract
<p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Aesthetics, folklore, oral narratives, rumour, contemporary legend.</i></p> <p>©2025 Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International</a></p> 	<p><i>Rumors are part of the daily lives of a people within a particular geographical area. These tales make the rounds and exert some influences that condition the way a group of people live their lives. Many a times have one heard of such expressions like, “It’s just a story, ‘Oh it’s one of those gossips or it’s a sheer rumor”. This implies that people tend to disregard and neglect rumor. And do not pay any attention to it nor care to verify the authenticity and the validity of such tales, which invariably leave them apprehensive, worried, panic stricken and equally fearful. The study investigates rumour with the purpose of establishing their significance and relevance as contemporary legend. Thirteen tales which form the population of the study were selected and analysed using four theoretical frameworks – sociological, formalism, oral formulaic and contextual theories, The paper studies this by highlighting not just the text and the texture of the tales , but also the context that gives birth to the text . The study finds out that these tales are essentially products of the society and are aesthetic by the reason of the aesthetic undertones they possess, which condition man to either act or react in a particular way, even when their authenticity cannot be proved and when they are not even believed. The study recommends amongst others that the society should always tap from the cautionary, informative, alert consciousness, entertaining and educative undertones of this rare folklore genre.</i></p>

### Introduction

Literature is a mirror which writers and artists use to reflect and recreate the stark realities of human lives and usually unfold such in real terms. It has become an important aspect of human life in the quest to adapt and understand the world better. In the words of Obi, “Literature has become an important means of understanding and interpreting human beings and aspects of their societies such as politics, religion, economics, social conflict, class struggles and human conditions through the medium of language”(487)

Nnolim Charles emphasizes that: “Literature as art deploys language embellished with pleasurable accessories and that it is around the embellished use of language that the creative energy of the story deploys itself.....(3)”.

Literature does not grow in a vacuum, for in the words of Ngugi, ”It is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic fore in a particular society.” (16)

Nwahunanya collaborates this assertion when he states thus”

“contemporary society poses a lot of challenges that provide a variety of working materials for the creative writers.....”(398).

Literature thus is a social art which originates from the society, a means of exposure and self expression through which the societal values, dreams and aspirations are brought to lime light. It presents the unrealized and the hidden values of a society, and as a mirror, it holds up to man and society, the neglected and several unrealized aspects of the dreams of his age which it hopes to help the society realize.

## **The Nature of Contemporary Legend**

Contemporary legends are one of the most pervasive forms of folklore in active circulation and they are not far from modern phenomenon. The term as used by folklorists has appeared in print since 1968. Jan Harold Brunvand, a professor of English at the University of Utah, introduced the term to the general public. The same processes of using narrative to communicate and negotiate anomalous experience can be traced back thousands of years. Contemporary legends are contemporary to the teller and audience, and what has been thought of as purely local narratives were found to exist in multiple manifestations throughout the world.

Contemporary legend is a form of modern folklore consisting of fictional stories, often with macabre elements deeply rooted in local popular culture. These legends can be used for entertainment purposes as well as for semi serious explanations for events such as disappearances and strange objects.

David Holt and Bill Mooney attribute contemporary legends to our modern day folktale. Like the joke, it has fast replaced the folktale. These tales are often reported as true and are often heard in conversations, found in newspapers or televisions and radio newscast. They can be found in many variations all over the world and are usually passed on through conversation. The settings and characters change to reflect the attitudes and the societies of the teller and the listeners.

Contemporary legends concern recent events or situations that could be in keeping with our modern sensibilities. They are usually full of irony and occasionally have a supernatural elements. Most of these legends reflect our concerns, our fears, our prejudices and our delight in other people's folly and misfortune. In fact, they tell a lot about ourselves. Sometimes, contemporary legends are repeated in newstories or distributed by e- mail or social media'

Many contemporary legends are framed as complete stories with plots and characters. The compelling appeal of a typical contemporary legend is it's elements of mystery, horror. Fear or humor. Often they serve as cautionary tales. Some contemporary tales are morality tales that depict someone, usually a child acting in a disagreeable manner, only to wind up in trouble, hurt or dead. And someone or some people meeting with some kind of misfortune. Coincidentally or sadly enough, the contemporary society in the bid to perform it's role and meet up with the challenges of a modern era, provides the writer with the necessary materials which may be socially, politically, religiously and economically, And these materials come together as some kind of tales that make the round in such society. These tales feature and reflect as well as mirror the challenges and experiences of people in the society. From the contents of these tales, one can easily know about the issues in a particular society.

The paper studies the make round tales as contemporary legends, by highlighting their forms, characteristics and significance within the contemporary set up.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Researches done on rumor and related tales are scanty, if non existence. Lores on them are overlooked and neglected. They seem insignificant to the general public, who view them as false, fake and of no value, yet, they continue to exert some influence in their lives. They create anxiety, euphoria, fear and panic in the general public. Yet, these tales are yet to take their place in the annals of oral literature, Again, contemporary legends have relatively remained unexplored, and the few collected legends which are studied in the absence of their contexts, are rarely studied as literature.

## **Objectives of the Research**

The study aims at unraveling the hidden treasures underlying these tales as well as establishing that they are indeed contemporary legend

### Significance of the Study

The study makes contribution to both knowledge and practice as well as addresses problems of social significance. Rumor, gossip and related tales are first of their kind, they are fresh and original by the reason of their texts.

### Scope and Limitation

The scope of the study centers around thirteen (13) tales collected and their inherent qualities that certify them as contemporary legends. The study is also limited to these tales and their analysis.

### Research Methodology

The study adopts a critical study of its primary texts - that is the sample of tales analyzed to represent certain aesthetics that distinguish them as contemporary legends. The means of data collection include interviews, and recording of the tales collected in their induced natural contexts, as well as translation of the tales into English. The study is supported with library research, which includes both web and print. A combination of formalistic, oral formulaic as well as contextual theoretical frameworks are used as discourse tools and the documentation is based on the American Psychological Association citation style.

### Review of Related Literature

Writers both foreign and local have written oral pieces, As regards to contemporary legend, writers like Bruvand Jan Harold, David Holt, Bill Mooney to mention but a few come from foreign perspective, while the likes of Rems Umeasiegbu and a few others come from Africa.

Jan Harold Bruvand, in his collection of Legends, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meaning*, used his work to prove that legends and folklore do not occur exclusively in the so called primitive or traditional societies and that one could know much about urban and modern culture by studying such tales.(p.8)

David Holt and Bill Mooney, in their collection, *Spiders in the Hairdo*, clearly show that folktales are not the exclusive domains of the past and that they are alive and kicking in urban legends.(p.1)

Umeasiegbu, Rems, while investigating into contemporary Nigerian legends, questions the existence of ghost and the possibility that the dead interact with the living in his collection *Ghost Stories*. This work centres mainly on contemporary occurrences, strange, horrific and terror stricken in Nigerian societies.

Asika, Ikechukwu on his own side, used his poem “Oso Monkey” to question the authenticity and otherwise of contemporary legends through this work which is his personal examination of a society in disarray.

### Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the sociological, formalistic, oral formulaic and the contextual theories for a deeper and wider exploration of the text.

The sociological theory is relevant to this study in the sense that tale 1 (the monkey pox tale), originates from the society and is spurred by the social forces within the same environment. This theory believes in the axiom that literature is an expression of the society, since the social forces and conditions in the society gave rise to it. It further assumes that societal forces inevitably form and condition the writer, his work and his audience, and therefore what he creates has to be studied as a social phenomenon and literature as assumed, occurs only in a social context, as part of a culture in a milieu.

The formalistic theory is relevant to this study in the sense that it is essentially aesthetic and assumes that the literary artifact is an aesthetic object capable of arousing aesthetic experience. Such an aesthetic object interests for its own qualities and the aesthetic which it arouses is a form of contemplation, a loving attention to qualities and quantitative structures. (Wellek and Warren, 241) Therefore the study of the tales collected in this study expose the inherent features that arouse the aesthetics in it and these include the supernatural, macabre, mysterious, horrific and fearful nature, as well as the ironical and humorous nature of such tale.

The oral formulaic theoretical approach on its own looks at the narrator and his performance. It studies the formulae and the theme, which involves a study of the structures of the tale as a whole, as well as the form and style of an oral text. Here, the selected text will be studied in terms of its means of transmission. Of more importance is the fact that this tale vary in its forms. A tale may be told differently in different societies, features like settings, characters and themes usually vary, so that one see a tale in varied forms.

And last, the contextual theory emphasizes strong pre occupation with the environment in which the folklore text is embedded. It objects strenuously to the text being extrapolated from its context in language, behavior, communication, expression and performance. These ideas unite young folklorists as Roger Abraham, Dan-Ben -Amos, Alan Dundes, Robert Georges and Kenneth Goldstein. What distinguishes these generation of young folklorists is their insistence that the folklore concept apply not to the text but to an event in time in which a tradition is performed or communicated. Hence the whole performance or communicative art must be recorded. The collector can no longer simply write down or tape record a text, for the text is only a part of a unique event. To circumvent this difficulty, Goldstein proposes “The Induced Natural Context” whereby the collector organizes a folklore content, where a natural one cannot be obtained.

### **Analytical Framework**

The analysis of the collected tales is based on the outlined theories which provide ample bedrock for this exercise.

Looking at Tale 12 (Nachi Healing Pool), what readily comes to mind is the myriads of physical and spiritual problems that abound everywhere. A lot of people are beset with problems ranging from barrenness, marital problems, unemployment, sickness, desire to get married, poverty, diseases, to mention but a few, which is characterizes by the contemporary set up. Alongside the shameless act of religious hypocrisy and fraud that has spread everywhere among those that call themselves, “pastors and prophets of God”. The result is that the majority of the masses who have been swindled and duped to their last kobo, in the guise of prayer and healing dramas, end up frustrated, helpless and hopeless, but are ever ready to see to the end of their problems and so will jump at any option available to get them liberated. It is in this situation that we consider the tale about the Nachi healing pool. At a time, Nachi thicket became motor able and the once quiet and remote town became so popular even today that at the mention of the town’s name, even a child tells you the tale.

Tale 8 (The job tale) is also a social milieu, conditioned by the societal force of graduate unemployment within the Nigerian system. The desire and hunger for a good life that comes with a good job prompts Nigerian graduates into going to any extent as long as they will be employed. Again this ugly situation has provided ample opportunity for evil minded people to lure and entrap the youth so as to satisfy their selfish whims. Today, graduates, both male and females fall easy prey to all forms of modern day slavery, as well as human part contractors and merchants. These gullible graduates are gotten so cheap, sometimes they are anesthetized or even killed in the process.

The tales analyzed here, all conform to the tenets of the sociological theory which states among other things that the societal forces inherent in a society give impetus, shape and spur the tales into existence.

Next is the formalistic theoretical framework, As the name depicts, this centers on the style and form of an oral piece. It is essentially aesthetic and capable of arousing some aesthetic feelings by the reason of its qualities. Again, it assumes that the aesthetic experiences which an oral piece arouses is a form of contemplation. Tales 13, 3, 9 and 10 are used to exemplify this assertion.

Using tale 13 (the Horror crime tale), what is obvious is the insecurity nature of our society and the high incidence of crime, together with the strange and the horrific manner in which crimes are perpetrated today. However, one of the aesthetic appeals of the tale lies in its horror and diabolic nature. Otherwise how can such level of crime go on when one is fully awake. And the fact that the robbers operate stark naked, all testify to its macabre nature. This tale appears ironical as well as mysterious. It is an irony that one is awake when a robbery incident is going on yet, one cannot confront the robbers. This is as well mysterious and a very strange occurrence, yet the authenticity of such crimes though is unverifiable, it sends chilling colds down the spine of whoever that hears it as well as serves as a caution to people.

Tale 11 (the Cow pox tale), appears not only strange, but horrific, by way of having a human condescend so low as to have sexual intercourse with an animal. The tale is informative and cautionary. It informs the ignorant on the happenings in the society and cautions him on the consequences of consuming disease infected meat. Another element of aesthetics this tale possesses is its unverifiable source, for example, though the tale is shared on social media, viable and reliable information about the place, date, names, regarding the incident cannot be obtained and same goes for all the tales collected for this study.

Bringing tale 3 (the Shit tale), into focus, one notices some features that assign some aesthetic appeal to it. First, is that it is gothic in nature. Again, the certainty of facts about the incident cannot be ascertained. The tales' setting is "a certain village", and as long as the setting remains hidden, verifying the assertion is a very difficult one. Its elements of strangeness, horror, its informative and cautionary undertones attest to its aesthetics.

Tale 9, (the Diaper tale), is informative, educative, horrific, strange, cautionary and could be told in a variety of ways. Its informing power lies in getting the ignorant to come to the knowledge of the nature of the things happening around him. It further educates one on how best to dispose baby diapers so that it will not get into the hands of ritualists. Being horrifying and cautionary, one becomes cautious about his disposal, knowing the danger that awaits a careless handling of such diaper. Many mothers and care givers were really very apprehensive and cautious about this particular tale that some had bags of used diapers stocked in their homes for months, for fear of the known and even the unknown. House helps were also given serious instructions on how to dispose used baby diapers. In the words of Mrs. Wisdom Ofoaka, "I usually remove the woolen parts of my baby's diapers and then sprinkle kerosene on them before disposing them, or I will tie them into a number of leather bags before throwing it into a river behind my house and I make sure I dispose it myself".

Tale 10 (the Placenta tale), recounts the placenta alleged to have been eaten raw by a medical doctor. This tale despite its strange, fear gripped, and horrific nature, shares a number of aesthetics. It is gothic in content as well as ironical. It is ironical that a medical practitioner, whose utmost goal in the practice of his profession is that of caring and saving lives, now turns around to destroy it. Unbelievable though it seems, it still shares some elements of plausibility. However, its authentication proves abortive as it lacks detailed and verifiable facts like names, date, location and time. It is morally laden as well as cautionary not only to pregnant mothers, but to anyone who seeks medical help from medical practitioners. The tales discussed here share similar aesthetics which distinguish them as oral narratives.

The last theoretical framework is the contextual theory which emphasizes the event or the situation and circumstance in which a folklore concept is performed or communicated. In other words, the content forms an essential part of a folklore phenomenon. Tales 12,7,5 and 4 are used here to analyze the statement above.

Tale 12 (Nachi healing pool), on its own stresses the necessity and the relevance of the folklore context. The tale which discusses the Nachi Healing Pool, and the subsequent invasion of Nachi, a town in Oji River Local Government Area of Enugu State, by virtually everyone, would not have been without the myriads of problems, both physical and spiritual that are ravaging humanity. These problems include, poverty and diseases, physically challenged ailments, barrenness, sickness, to mention but a few, Contextually, the story surrounding the Nachi Tale seems macabre, mysterious as well as hinged around some spiritual forces. The importance of the situation is the emphasis. The theory in question here seeks to draw attention to the contextual incident which gives birth to the tale. Again, the theory says in earnest that the presence of a folklore context is the life wire that supplies current to the tale.

Tale 7 (the Stranger's tale), points to one of the contemporary issues that ravages contemporary societies especially as it concerns the 21<sup>st</sup> century youth, whose desire to get rich quick, has drove into all manner of nefarious acts. Occultism, ritualism, yahooism, kidnapping, organ harvesting and their likes which have brought so much insecurity to Nigerian nation are grave and serious cases to worry about. Aside the content that is the text, the context seems much important because a folklore item cannot be discussed outside the setting where the incident took place. From the tale, the incident happened at a popular, strategic and a place known for both bad and ugly occurrences. One is not surprised at the location since Upper Iweka, located at the heart of Onitsha is both a destination and exit point of all travelers across the city. Everyone passing through Upper Iweka is always cautious, careful and on high alert against the known and even the unknown. Visitors and travelers caught late by time will always feel their blood run through their spine just at the mere thought that they will pass through Upper Iweka axis or even stop there. The relationship between the text of folklore item and the context as it concerns the stranger's tale, is that such a mysterious and fearful tale could only happen at Upper Iweka. Every one resident in Onitsha believes that every evil act around Onitsha environ always happen at Upper Iweka.

Tale 3 (the Shit tale), happened in an unnamed village in Abia state. Just like the stranger's tale before it, the shit tale, as gory as it sounds, highlights its elements of occultism and Satanism associated with the modern society. Probably because the city is densely and highly populated, some people decided to trade with humans because they feel that the human society will always re populate. Besides, Abia state is traditionally known to be highly insecure. Towns in Abia like Ohofia, Ngwa, Mbaise, Isiukwuato ,among others are known for their age long heinous acts of kidnapping, killings and eating of human flesh. Ironically the indigenes of these towns appear more wealthy than others from other parts of the state. From the analysis made above, one is not surprise that such tale is coming from that side of the south east. It once again, re emphasized the relationship between the folklore item and its context which cannot be separated.

Finally, tale 4 (the Baby Search tale), replicates various instances of religious fraud in the contemporary society, where the gullible masses, who are desperate to see to the end of their numerous problems – social, political and so on, are not only deceived and brainwashed into believing that their problems are over but also get worst or even meet their death in the process. The agents of these religious frauds are in fact satanic agents in the guise of men and women of God. The numerous problems that besiege man which range from social, cultural political religious, emotional and otherwise, drive these victims to these fake prophets and prophetess, who use them for their own gains. Prominent among these problems is the issue of childlessness, which drives many women to seek possible solutions from all sorts. Ironically those who they trust and run to in the believe that they will help them turn out to be their devourers. Some of these seemingly men and women of God who may not be occultic in any way, resort to pure deceit to deprive these victims of their hard earned money, leaving them sapped financially and otherwise at the end. Thus, one sees this scenario as one of the issues that plague the contemporary Nigerian society. Contextually, one sees the house of God as a house of solutions to all problems, since the Bible tell us to “cast our burdens unto the Lord, who

will take care of them all". What one expects is that since the contemporary Nigerian government has failed in tackling the litany of problems of the Nigerian majority, people now resort to the men and women of God who they see as their saviors, without the least knowledge that they are actually business men and women who used the name of God to manipulate and project them physically and spiritually.

The tales analyzed here all emphasize the importance of the context first before the tales. They show that a strong link exists between the context and the folklore items and that the study of the folklore item is actually needless without studying it along with the context that give rise to it.

### Findings

From the analysis above, one can say that the tales studied here are essentially products of the society and are given impetus by the same society. These tales are aesthetic by the reason of the aesthetic undertones they possess, which condition man to either act or react in a particular way, even when their authenticity cannot be proved and when they are not even believed. Again, these tales are not islands in themselves but are instigated by certain contexts, circumstances, behaviors, practices, traditions and situations that gave flesh to them.

### Conclusion

The research work studies the make round tales as contemporary legends, taking into consideration the characteristic features and the influences it exerts on the society, even when people disregard and do not believe them. The study believes that the societal forces brought about these tales. It was deduced that these tales bother on the society's practices and phenomenal occurrences, which continue to emanate from such society as long as human societies exist.

The study is of the view that this folklore item be accorded its regard since it has a way of making its effects felt by the society. Finally, it is also noted that contemporary legends are part of the human society and will continue to fulfill its role as a folklore genre.

### Recommendations

The study recommends a more detailed research in this genre of folklore to complement the fewer researches conducted on it. Apart from the negative effects this folklore genre always invoke, in the society, it is recommended that the society should always tap from the cautionary, informative, alert consciousness, entertaining and educative undertones of this rare folklore genre.

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