# Digitising folktales: Cultural remediation and children's participation

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Abstract

Digitisation has altered and reinvented the fabric of African folklore, redefining the concept of the audience and the performance, as well as the audience-performer relationship. These reconfigurations have raised questions regarding the capacities of digitally remediated folkloric forms to sustain traditional African cultural values and folkloric performance among African children and youths. Not disregarding the fears of the sceptics, and focusing on the YouTube digital media platform, this study attempts to examine the alterations instigated by the intersection of digital technology with these cultural practices. It accomplishes this by identifying new cultural patterns engendered when technology acts on and remediates autochthonous cultural forms like the folktale. These cultural patterns include the destabilisation of the fixed temporalities of folktale performances, the introduction of a new kind of "permanence" that makes cultural archiving possible, and the use of visual representation in place of verbal descriptions. This article also explores how the performative features are adapted, especially on the axes of functionality, morphology, structure, and performance. More specifically, it appraises the use of YouTube in remediating Igbo folktale in the era of digital technology. To do this, the study comparatively examines the performative features of primary Igbo folktale performances alongside the remediated versions available on YouTube. This strategic inquiry aims at exploring the suitability of remediated cultural formats in retaining autochthonous cultural values and the functions of the primary folktale. It also shows that for children/youths, remediated folktale performances stimulate a heightened sense of autonomy. This kind of participatory autonomy is made possible by the modes of cultural interactivity facilitated by YouTube technologies.

Keywords: folktale, Igbo, digitisation, children, youths, remediation
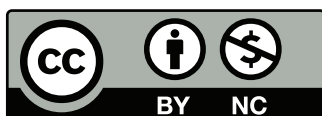
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Introduction

The evolution of society is characterised by the reinvention, restructuration, hybridisation, and diversification of socio-cultural frames and features (Eisenstadt 2010). In present times, these processes are highlighted by the constant digitisation of data and the presence of a perpetually evolving digital culture. Digitisation, as used here, is operationalised to signify the conversion of technology from an analogue to a digital format. This process catalyses spontaneity, accessibility, and simultaneity of information – prominent features of digital media platforms in an increasingly networked society. With reference to folklore, these evolutionary processes have a substantive impact; they influence the composition of different aspects of that creative culture, consequently shaping the perception, adoption, and transmission of ethos and values.

African oral poetics have experienced reconfigurations and reinventions that reflect the above-stated changes, some of which have been examined by scholars like Yeku (2015), who interrogates the new texture of the subversive features of the African trickster in digital spaces and their transcendence from 'pristine' folkloric contexts to technologised cultural fields, and Bello (2020), who explores the alterations and reinventions of oral poetry performance through technology (video/YouTube) as subversive tools for women's agency. In the light of these discussions, and the need to track the persistent innovative interconnections between digital media and folklore, this article poses and responds to the following questions: 1) what new cultural patterns are engendered when technology acts on and remediates autochthonous cultural praxes/forms like the folktale; 2) what performative features are adapted, especially on the axes of functionality, morphology/structure, and performance? To put it more specifically, how is YouTube deployed for the remediation of folktale in the era of digital technology?

In reflecting on these questions, this article situates its concerns within longstanding inquiries shaping the intersection of orality and technology, such as the conflict between the functionality of cultural forms like the folktale and the digitally-oriented and modern sensibilities of the urban Igbo child. Another important debate that has witnessed multiple contributions but is yet to be sufficiently exhausted is the conundrum of primary, or rather, "pristine", expressions of oral literature being incompatible with the demands of modern reality. In response to the idea and the popular misgiving that digital media stimulate vitiations of folkloric poetics, championed by scholars like Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991) and Nkoli and Okoye (2016), this study examines the digital remediation of Igbo folktale renditions on YouTube spaces alongside the features of the supposed "pristine" performances. Remediation, as used in the context of this work, gestures at creative reconciliations between old and new cultures, a process of improving on what has already been in existence through the use of digital technologies. This study, while looking into the place of youths in these performances, comparatively explores the structure, setting, and medium of old and modern folkloric forms. The aim is to show the re-configurative nature of the digital forms and how this is facilitated by the properties and features of contemporary technology.

Owing to the established pervasiveness of digital technology in present times, there is no doubt that the young urban African is caught in this digitally crafted web/society. Ephraim's (2013, 275) study validates this claim; as he argues, "children and youths aged between 13 and 30 – the target demography of this present study – constitute Africa's heaviest use of social media." Their social existence is structured around media infrastructures and digital communications, which also provide new opportunities relating to the preservation, enhancement, and development of cultures (Mostert et al. 2017). Thus, in this paper, the terms children and youths will be used interchangeably to refer to this demographic.

The youth's innate tendency to adapt and internalise evolutionary inventions justifies claims about their growing dependence on digital interactive media platforms. According to Bello (2020), out of the more than 7 billion humans on earth in 2019, about 67% were mobile phone users, 45% were social media users, and internet users peaked at 57%, which illustrates the pervasiveness of digital media. In addition, according to Clement (2020), Nigeria is home to the sixth largest number of internet users in the world. The vast majority of this cohort are urban youths, who have a significant socio-economic advantage as a result of the wide financial and infrastructural gap between urban and rural locales in African countries. These statistics lead Bronner (2009, 21) to claim that there is a decline in face-to-face interactivity and, as a result, in the community's "naturally authentic customs". One implication of this is a change in the nature of cultural communicative and expressive forms or creations, a reality that has been misconstrued by sceptics of technological evolution and ubiquity as a neutralisation or vitiation of folkloric arts. Among these sceptics is Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991), who claims that folktale traditions in the Igbo society are in decline. He attributes this perceived wane in folktale tradition to the emergence and accommodation of Western modernity in Africa; he also argues that this rapid technologisation of society destroys the spirit of community and the bonds of family. Nkoli and Okoye's (2016) work upholds the same notion of the technologically stimulated erosion of cultural forms. Another school of thought, while more flexible, holds that even if African folk culture survives the inevitable effects of technology and social dynamism, its primary aesthetics and essence will be neutralised to a point of ineffectiveness. Representing the latter school is Sesan (2014), who, in favour of indigenous performance, stresses the inability of digitised folktale formats to allow any spontaneity or immediacy of response or reaction to folktale performances. He substantiates his claim by

noting that the digitisation of folktale is characterised by a disruption to tangible or physical spaces, as well as the social space. This opinion finds validation in Bronner's (2009, 21) notion of a "socially alienating" quality as characteristic of an extensively technological society.

Although this might appear apt at first glance, a more critical appraisal will identify a fault in Bronner's observation. As part of new media technologies, interactive digital platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, etc. approximate social relativity, creating a virtual reality populated by people (netizens), mostly young people, who are both producers and consumers (prosumers) of their own interactive content (Yeku 2015). YouTube, the chosen platform for this study, has been described as constantly providing/enabling a participatory culture among young people. By implication, YouTube creates an atmosphere where youths can produce and share content, while also making and sustaining social interactions (Chau 2010). With reference to traditional notions of interactivity that characterise autochthonous folktale renditions, these digitally mediated forms of folktale are not only inevitable reinventions corresponding to the complex demands of the present era, but they are also suitable for attracting the socio-cultural participation of the modern child, whose subjectivity is, among other things, modern and digitally oriented. Pursuing his initial stance, Sesan (2014) goes further to explore the supposed vitiations attributed to the intersection of technology and folktale, which, as Bello (2020, 25) succinctly describes, are an alarmist rhetoric that shows and amplifies a general scepticism toward technology that reaches the height of pessimism in anti-technology's "apocalyptic envisioning of lifeworlds overrun by sentient machines." Within circles of decolonial theorising, many scholars are accused of romanticising Africa's past, which in this context refers to an uncritical favouring of "pristine" folktale renditions in a modern age. There is also, tucked away in this favou-

ritism, a presupposition of the superiority of pre-colonial cultural praxes through associated notions of timeless relevance and cultural self-sufficiency. The uncritical perpetuation of this fetishising logic, therefore, as noted by Hallen (2009, 76), sets up "tradition somehow [to] become antithetical to innovation." The opinions of these sceptics need to be deeply examined to reveal their shortcomings, such as their reductionist and stagnating approach to culture/society, since culture/society is always in a state of perpetual evolution.

Therefore, these views, which are essentially anti-technological, come across as mostly alarmist, especially since the virtual space not only doubles as a social space, but allows for the performance and approximation of folkloric practices. This point is emphasised and demonstrated by Bello (2020), whose work in locating Robert Samuel's concept of automodernity as the convergent zone between a techno-centric era and oral performance demonstrates how oral performers can maintain autonomy and agency through automated technologies. Bello's work on oral performers as automodern provides useful direction in understanding how digitally mediated folktale performances, rather than obstructing children's agency, heighten their sense of freedom by encouraging cultural participation and expression. In other words, the constitutive realities of indigenous folktale performances, like interactivity and the sense of autonomy that accompany them, are heightened by the digital remediation of folktales through interactive digital media like YouTube. Children/youths in the modern dispensation locate themselves in the myriad participatory networks available at their fingertips. It is thus essentialist and unduly insular to describe a technologised society as "socially alienating".

The methodology employed to explore the adequacy of digital media in effectively remediating cultural forms like the folktale in technologised spaces, specifically YouTube, without excising its cultural legacies, is informed by analytic juxtapositions. This approach allows the performative features of YouTube folktale performances to be uncovered. For my analysis I selected two YouTube folktales: *Ada na Udara ya*[1] ('Ada and her Udara fruit') and *Nwa Inyinya Ibu*[2] ('The horse'). The aim of my analysis is not to exhaust the subject of cultural remediation in digital folktales; nor are the observations critically teased out here meant to account definitively for how new media creatively tampers with or enhances the structure and performance of indigenous folk forms. My analysis of these YouTube folktales shows some of the properties that are gained and lost in this remediation process, while also informing us of the capacity of these technological formats both to preserve and to transfer culture. Although the samples are drawn from the cultural reserves of the Igbo people, they are not definitive or representational texts of the genre and culture. However, since folktales have common structures/features across cultures, they can be seen as providing insights on the digital remediation of folktales generally.

The Igbo people, who occupy the southeastern part of the nation of Nigeria, constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria and in Africa (Ohadike 1996). They have a distinct language with a multiplicity of dialects and related customs and traditions. This diversity is illustrated in the multiple dialectical terms for folktale in the Igbo language, which include *ife*, *iro*, *akubufe*, *akukufere*, *ufe*, *akuko*, *inu*, *ilu*, *ihwe*, and *ihwo*. The core of the people's art, epistemologies, belief systems, values, and other cultural materials is located within their oral tradition, which is primarily trans-

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[1] *Ada na Udara ya* tells the story of an orphan, Ada, who suffers greatly at the hands of her aunt. One day, Ada is visited by an angel, who grants her a magic *udara* seed that grows into a magic tree with the sweetest fruits in the world, so she has an unlimited supply of food.

[2] *Nwa Inyinya Ibu* is the story of a lazy horse who tries to trick his kind master, a salt trader. He constantly falls into the river while transporting salt, in order to lessen his burden and ruin his master's trade. His master discovers his trick and, to punish him, fills his bag with cotton that gets heavier when soaked in water.

mitted through a collection of myths, legends, folktales, songs, proverbs, and other forms of oral literature (Akanwa 2014).

The folktale tends to serve didactic purposes for its primary audience, which usually includes children. It also provides a platform for entertainment, community, and relaxation; as Nwaozuzu (2007, 28) writes, "the widespread human tendency to teach, entertain and satirise by indirect means seems to be the root and evolution of folktales." The content of these tales emphasises hard work, morality, obedience, patience, respect for elders, etc. It is through these recurring motifs that the Igbo child is familiarised with the values and behaviours expected of members of society. These stories usually follow a cause and effect sequence aimed at constructing and structuring societal behaviour to a state of conformity. This is pivotal, alongside its inherent ability to impart and transmit other forms of the Igbo identity to children as agents of cultural transmission and preservation. The folktales feature human and animistic stories where animals are personified; in them the tortoise occupies a central position as the ultimate trickster (Nwachukwu-Agbada 1991; Nkoli and Okoye 2016). Put simply, folktales are defined as "prose narratives which are regarded as fiction" (Bascom 1965, 4). To properly classify this oral form in the light of other folkloric narrative types like myths and legends, Bascom expands his conceptualisation of folktale to include the following characteristics:

> They are not considered as dogma or history, they may or may not have happened, and they are not to be taken seriously. . . . they are told only for amusement . . . Folktales may be set in any time and any space, and in this sense they are almost timeless and placeless. . . . [they] usually recount the adventures of animal or human characters (4).

In the sections that follow, I first look at the aesthetics of primary Igbo folktales and then move to explore the role of YouTube in the digital remediation of folktale performances. In the case of both performance forms, I examine the setting (physical and temporal), the structure, and the audience-performer relationship. Then I proceed to analyse two Igbo folktale performances to identify how these redefinitions are carried out and also to discuss their implications.

Aesthetics of primary Igbo folktales

Igbo folktale performance applies under very specialised conditions; these conditions have been viewed by Duruaku (2015) as typical and indispensable. Apart from the generic exaggerated or heightened quality of performance, Agbo (2011) outlines the following as the constitutive features of the Igbo folktale performance. For her, the performance usually commences in the evenings, with the tale told by an elderly person to a gathering of little children. Temporal settings are as vital as physical settings; the combination of the two is usually a deliberate attempt at evoking a blissful environment and aura. Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991) substantiates this claim by stating that the folktale session always commences after twilight and never earlier. This choice of time is directly connected to the intended experience of these folktale sessions. It lends an aura of calm, entertainment, and communality that has come to be associated with the rendition of folktale among the people. Abu Abarry's (1982, 24) opinion that the choice of the dark for folktale rendition among the Gas people of Ghana "provides a fantasy-inducing aura emanating from the ethereal effulgence of the moon, or the wistful scintillations of the stars; and the dismal glow of the evening log-fire" also adequately captures the significance of the temporal setting for the Igbo people. The specificity of this time, however, is debatable given that other scholars like Nkoli and Okoye (2016) do not make such specific assertions; nevertheless, the time considered appropriate

for folktale renditions still falls well between sundown and night time. In his response, Nwachukwu-Agbada emphasises the abnormality of telling folktales during the day time, negating Finnegan's (1992) and Bascom's (1965) claims that performances are not mechanically bound by factors like time. This contention notwithstanding, there is a consensus about the defining place of temporality by the aforementioned Igbo scholars. This emphasis is necessary to establish definite primary features that will be viewed parallel to the provisions of modern day folktale presentations. The performance of folktale is woven into the daily lives of the Igbo people; however, Nwachukwu-Agbada asserts that some market days are carefully set aside for the rendition of folktales, while special seasons like the dry season are chosen by some communities for the same purpose. These details reveal the significance of the folktale to the people's oral tradition. In addition, the physical setting is characterised by the presence of the narrator, who is often elderly and usually surrounded by children, sitting on the bare floor, closely huddled together around the fire place. Sometimes, the audience and narrator may consist only of a mother or father and the child/children. In this case, the bond of family is strengthened.

Structurally, primary Igbo folktale renditions are prompted by "stock phrases" (Nwachukwu-Agbada 1991, 22). These are phrases that have been repeated so often in Igbo folktales that merely mentioning them signifies the commencement of a folktale. The absence of such phrases might fail to elicit the level of excitement or interest associated with folktale among children. These phrases are usually accompanied by responses that give the opening structure of the Igbo folktale a call and response quality. This encourages narrator-audience comradeship, one that fosters the concept of community characteristic of the Igbo people. After the initial prompt, proverbs are also embedded in the opening phrases; this lends the folktale its pedagogic edge and validates the initial claim that the folktale is a unique

blend of other oral narratives. Some of these opening phrases include the following:

Narrator:	*Ifo cha kpi…..!* call
Audience:	*Wooo…..! x2* response
Proverb by narrator:	*Nkita nyara akpa* if a dog carries a bag (Proverb)
Response from audience:	*Nshi agwula n'ohia.* faeces have finished in the bush

These stock phrases differ from community to community and from dialect to dialect; in some instances, especially when the narrator is elderly and grounded in the knowledge of the people's oral tradition, the proverbs could be more expansive, often revealing or hinting at the crux of the narrative and the didactic message embedded in the tale. Often, the narrator's calls are not responded to. Responding to the call of a narrator is an endorsement or encouragement for the story to continue, but this does not always occur. With vocal responses either in refutation or acceptance of the narrator's performance and performance-rendered facts, the centrality of the audience to these folk performances is emphasised.

Furthermore, audience sustenance is often a function of the narrator's performative theatrics, that is, their ability to mould or distort narrative details for the cognitive benefit of their audience, which is also a distinctive attribute that contributes to the aesthetic experience of each individual narrative session. Folk performances are a communal affair, and the already established communal attributes of these performances often take away the edge of novelty from these stories. Put differently, the stories are often well known by members of the community and have been told repeat-

edly in similar settings. This is where inventive and imaginative performative telling plays a crucial role. Although the content of the folktale is derivative, the onus lies on the performer or narrator to make their session memorable for the audience. Supporting this notion, Finnegan (2012, 311) opines that "the verbal elaboration, the drama of the performance itself, everything in fact which makes it a truly aesthetic product comes from the contemporary teller and his audience." Consequently, performances tend to differ from one narrator to another, making oral flexibility an important device in folktale performativity, accentuating the significance of the narrator.

The variations found in folktale performances can thus be credited to the uniqueness of the narrator and even the audience. The physical presence of the narrator, the performative strategies in the form of gesticulations, verbal inflections, facial contortions, and even the ease of expression also engender familiarity between the narrator and the audience. The voice is clearly a primary acoustic medium in folktale performances; however, validating earlier established notions of the significance of the blend of performative devices in storytelling, the use of the voice can improve the aesthetic experience with a combination of verbal features like "pauses, pitch and tempo, and the imitation of human and non-human voices" (Sherzer and Woodbury 1987, 10). A combination of these devices alongside impressive non-verbal cues will no doubt achieve the "captivation of audience, retention of audience, and transfer of cognitive experience," which Sekoni argues are the goals of creative oral narrative performers (Sekoni 1990, 140).

The main story is often also preceded by a phrase that refers to times past, usually imaginary times, when animals possessed humanistic attributes and the universe was designed quite differently from the reality we know today. Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991) elaborates on the concept of primeval referencing and the use of stock phrases in the commencement of Igbo folktales by stating the following:

The illustration begins with a time and a setting which exist in almost all Igbo tales. The "time of action" is often indicated as *otu mgbe* (a time or once upon a time), *o nwere oge o bu* (there was a time), *na oge gara aga* (in times past), *n'oge gboo gboo* (in the dim past), or *otu ubochi* (one day). There is no effort to place the time of action within any kind of calendrical system, except perhaps to say that the action took place in the dry or rainy season – the two principal seasons in Igboland. To indicate the timelessness of the story-events to be narrated, a story's time-setting could be ascribed to *mgbe uwa ka di ohuru / ka gba oto* (when the world was still new [or] naked), *mgbe ezi di n'ukwu ukwa* (when breadfruit trees dotted the entire earth), or *mgbe uwa di n'anyu isi* (when the world was still in darkness). (25)

These phrases and their implications of timelessness justify most of the fantastic claims made in the story that ensues; they usually elicit specific responses from the audience. This stage is sometimes performed with further proverbs that usher in the tale, usually fables and mythical events that impose elements of realism on the characters. The characters are predominantly animals, humans, and supernatural beings. The stories imitate real life situations regardless of who the characters are, or, as described by Finnegan (2012, 337), "these animals are portrayed as thinking and acting like human beings." Their adventures are often coloured with humour, exaggerated performances and songs, while their didactic message is also fully expressed. Most of the time, the tales depict evil as being supplanted with good; bad characters/personalities within the tale are usually presented as paying for their crimes; disobedient children are often punished or end up with regrets. The tales are a way of communicating the people's aversion to disobedience, pride, jealousy, hate, stealing, and all other forms of social vices. Audi-

ence appreciation is usually measured by the response and excitement of the audience during the course of the performance. As noted earlier, the content of the folktale embodies the people's values, culture, and world view, which are often reflected in the nature of the tales. This accounts for the constant reference to ancestors, gods, evil spirits, good spirits, etc. The stories reflect the activities or events in the community; they explore the entirety of the people's way of life, which is why Ashton (1957, 20) notes that "the introduction of folkways in folktales is merely to give verisimilitude to a depiction of life in a particular locality."

In the course of each performance, there are usually intermittent breaks for songs that invite audience participation through their call and response feature. This re-affirms the place of folk narratives like folktales as social contracts, where the audience is as integral to the performance as the narrator. Theirs is a mutual, symbiotic, non-subversive relationship, where the narrator's relevance is defined by the audience and vice versa. It is easy to arrogate prominence solely to the performer while sidestepping the crucial contribution of the audience, even a passive one, to every folktale performance. But doing this disregards the dynamics of the folktale audience response. As Finnegan (1992, 102) argues, "even the most passive 'audiences' may be deploying learned conventions of audience skill which play crucial role in a successful performance." Furthermore, songs are essential to the aesthetic experience; they often punctuate the tales and are sometimes sung with the accompaniment of indigenous instruments such as "*ekwe* (slit wooden drum), *ubo* (native guitar), *ogene* (gong), *udu* (earthen pot), or *lgba* (talking drum). Sometimes, a narrator uses *ekwerikwe*, the wooden xylophone" (Nwachukwu-Agbada 1991, 26). These instruments, when employed, tend to spice up the rendition and excite the audience. However, in the absence of these instruments, the narrator engages the audience, who respond with rhythmic clapping,

hums, and other actions that can provide harmony and eliminate monotony. There is often laughter, clapping, and dancing shaping each performance. Situations also abound where the audience helps to point the story in the right direction or even to correct the narrator. These scenarios amplify the communality that is essential to every Igbo folk performance.

When the tale has run its course and fulfilled the function of education and entertainment, the next stage in the structure of Igbo folktale is the closing stage. This stage is characterised by a restating of the essence of the story or the use of proverbs that encompass the entire didactic intention of the tale. This type of ending is usually succeeded by teaching or quizzes to ascertain the extent of audience understanding. This section of the rendition is also employed to inculcate morals and instruct children against certain vices by making reference to situations and characters from the tale. During this session, the imparting of the people's way of life, world views, opinions, and values is accelerated as children are quizzed and their responses deliberated upon. At the end of this section, which also includes the quintessential message of the tale, the narrator proceeds to end the story with conventional closing phrases that differ from dialect to dialect. They are often theatrical repetitions of the opening phrases and usually involve the participation of the audience. They may include the following:

Narrator: Ifo cha kpii!!!

Audience: Wooo!!!

Narrator: Chaakpii! Chaakwi! Taakpii! Taakwii! Ootii!

Audience: Woo! Yoo! Haa! Oyoo! yaa!

Having examined the performative features, morphology, and functionality of primary folktale performances, in the next section I

will examine and compare these core indigenous features with those constitutive of contemporary digitalised folktale renditions via the YouTube platform.

YouTube and digital folktale performance

The YouTube platform is no doubt an exemplar of the startling and on-going transformations in the texture of human interactivity, social networking, folk culture, media businesses, and even education. YouTube, founded by Chad Hurley, Jawed Karim, and Steven Chen, made its debut in June 2005 and has continued to grow and transform, primarily within the axis of "its business model, its interface and features, its cultural role, and the extent to which it regulates content and behaviour" (Burgess and Green 2018, 8). These areas of transformation provide the framework for the discursive exploration of the reconfigurations of primary folktale performativity within this digital medium. Burgess and Green (2018) are of the opinion that YouTube was originally intended solely for technological purposes, in contrast with its current predominant assumption of a cultural role. It was primarily geared towards eliminating technical barriers, which often barred non-expert participation in the culture of video exchange or sharing on the internet. Therefore, it simplified a culture of sharing and a particular interactivity process by letting non-experts without the attendant technical knowledge, high internet speed, and complex web browsers into the otherwise exclusive expert practice of video uploading, publishing, and streaming. This encapsulates the notion of digital media platforms as social levellers. Put succinctly, the elimination of these technical barriers laid the foundation for the decentralisation and democratisation of digital/technical spaces, giving room for less exclusive interactivity that has led to a more active representation of a non-expert majority (Yeku 2015).

The creators of the platform initiated a feature of limitless video upload where users are free to upload as many videos as they desire, while also interacting and connecting with other users as "pals". Although this interactive networking feature was initially designed to improve the quality of popular blogging platforms such as WordPress and Blogger, this flexible interactivity, alongside the ease of video/content creation and accessibility, has engendered a widespread acceptance and adoption of the YouTube platform by young people (Burgess and Green 2018; Chau 2010). These young people tend to locate themselves within the participatory networks offered by digital media platforms like YouTube as consumers and content producers, among other performative possibilities, often producing specialised content for a specific audience. Greenhow (2010) emphasises the participation of youths in digital media platforms, as well as their crucial role as multimedia content creators. However, aside from the option of content creation, networking, as one of its functionalities, has given rise to new discussions on a YouTube participatory culture. For instance, cultural theorists are engaged with interpreting the discursive paradigms of this nascent interactivity, since new cultural patterns are clearly continuing to emerge.

YouTube remediated folktale performances are contemporary variants of the primary performances. They are also a form of cyber-narrative that tends to replicate in remediated forms the tradition of primary folktale narratives earlier appraised. They reflect and reinvent the defining features of traditional renditions. The incorporation of digital technology in folktale performance mediates the functionality of the folkloric form. Structurally, these cyber-variants and their older forms share areas of continuity and departure. As an example, with reference to the setting, these cyber variants deconstruct the concept of temporal setting and the specificity and rigidity of time. In other words, Nwachukwu-Agbada's emphasis on twilight gatherings or evenings

for performances is supplanted by the option of choice enabled by the timelessness of performance and their asynchronous accessibility for the audience. The YouTube folktale performances selected for this article were accessed in the day time without the temporal restrictions associated with indigenous folktales. In other words, technology in this context expands the possibility of experiencing folktale performance outside of fixed temporalities. While technology introduces interpretive significances like timelessness, reach and the democratisation of audiences, experiences, and choice, it also erases the fixed notions of folktale as inherently shaped by the contexts described above. There is also a redefinition of the concept of audience, especially since virtual interactivity is a major feature that characterises the use of the new media in producing cultural forms and content. The physicality of audience gathering is substituted for a virtual interactivity. This raises the question of the cultural role of youths/children as participants in primary folktale performances. In traditional folktale performances, children/youths participate actively and passively in every performance, often with synchronous reactions in the form of enthusiastic responses to intermittent songs, their part in the call and response feature of the opening and ending of every narrative session, etc. This no doubt constitutes a metric by which the performer-audience relationship can be gauged. In the absence of this form of physicality, the logical question is how children play this role effectively in YouTube remediated folktale performances. One point to note is that remediated participation – that is, virtual participation in performances of folklore – is just as active or passive as it is in the case of primary performances.

On the one hand, simultaneous interactivity is sustained with the virtual audience through the use of avatars, which are digital substitutes for human physicality. The use of avatars in digital media has often been compared to the deployment and retention of

ego features through which humans recreate ontological features of themselves in digital environments. Avatars are considered ego-personas or virtual egos that humans use to communicate, represent themselves, and act in anthropomorphic capacities online (Harilal 2020). Their ability to be re-designed according to the tastes of digital users and their connection to human self-concepts or ideas of self means that they are anthropomorphic and that they have psychological implications for their users (Unal et al. 2018). Humans have even been argued to have avatar attachments and affections, indicating a psychological bond between a human and a created avatar (see Wolfendale 2007). Given this possibility, the avatars children/youths create online as ontological representations and virtual profiles provide them with opportunities for the virtual witnessing of digital folktale performances, which also allow for participation. On this note, they are prosumers conforming to the subjectivities that digital media provides, while experiencing the realities of the virtual world based on its parameters. However, to effectively achieve a semblance of or advancement on the concept of physicality, the use of avatars for audience representation is substantiated with a combination of interactive tools. It is more or less the deployment of multi-modality in the performative praxes of cyber-audience participation. These multi-modal features include the use of texts, emojis, memes, and symbols, most of which realistically convey emotions, thoughts, and even actions.

Aesthetics of selected digital folktales

In the performance of the tales *Ada na Udara ya* and *Nwa Inyinya Ibu,* the cyber artist/content creator[3], who in this context represents

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[3] A group of young creators who go by the labels "Anulika (Igbo for Kids)" and "Igbo fairy tales" with a vision of educating children and promoting the Igbo language and culture.

the performer, simulates a physical audience by creating animated versions of an audience, illustrated as huddled together within the matrix of the visuals, alongside a virtual audience whose participation is underscored by their anthropomorphic use of avatars to interact with each other in the comment sections (see Figure 5). Youths, irrespective of geography and nationality, often view these avatars as virtual extensions of themselves. Put differently, these youths tend to explore identity using these virtual features (Beals 2010). These platforms often enable the adjustment of avatars to suit the demands of a youthful community and their procedural self-discovery; hence, it is not uncommon to come across customised avatars that reflect the user's conception and expression of self and identity. In this way, digital spaces encourage creative modes of cultural participation, which reflect how they have become safe spaces for interactivity and expression.

Furthermore, in the use of the YouTube platform for folktale performance, the virtual audience format capitalises on the flexibility of its characteristic participatory network system, as audience participation may be achieved either synchronically or asynchronously. Here, the idea of Finnegan's (1992) "passive audience" plays a crucial role, as audiences can experience each performance anew in their asynchronous viewing, since they have the opportunity to re-witness performative cues or narrative effects they might have missed earlier or accorded less significance, and which shape the entire experience. In addition, their delayed experience (in instances where this is the case) mirrors a modern performative culture contract that can be seen as redefining what a "passive" audience in a primary folktale setting is. To clarify, the "passive audience" that experiences the performance later has the ability to keep the performance alive by sharing it, commenting, and engaging with others through comments.

More so, by "passivity", I mean and draw attention to two things: the absence of the physical audience during the creation (video production) of the performance, and the anticipation of this physical audience on the part of the content creator. This anticipation is crucial as it constitutively shapes the thematic and aesthetic choices of the content creator. Thus, anticipating an audience during production means the audience's presence is implied and therefore passive in a figurative sense. To borrow from deconstruction terminology, it also means the presence of an absence, where the absence is physical and the presence is implied but integral. For clarity – and this connects with Finnegan's point by remediating it as a performative feature – the presence of the "passive audience" as a belated audience is implied in the creation of the digital folktale as a future co-presence, which means that the presence is anticipated and thus that plays a pivotal role in the texture of the performance. Thus, like Finnegan's passive audience, who display certain social cues and "learned conventions of audience skill," the digital child/youth witnessing the performance asynchronously is only a future co-present audience whose "passivity" in the moment of creation (performance) manifests as a digital-age specific interactive mode that shapes the performance. Furthermore, anticipating a future audience is a core component of virtual interactivity and successful content creation; delayed responses only show learned conventional audience skills that keep performances active. Consequently, both the content creator as performer and the audience enact, on a case-by-case basis, learned social cues in playing/remediating the audience-performer role.

It is important to note that, as well as the animated representations of the audience in these visual creations, some of these narratives are realistic presentations of real life folktale renditions with actual humans recorded and uploaded electronically for the benefit of a virtual audience. Taking into consideration the virtual audience, these performances illustrate their tales using animations, as presented using the following images:

Figure 1: A representation of a real life folktale rendition on the YouTube platform
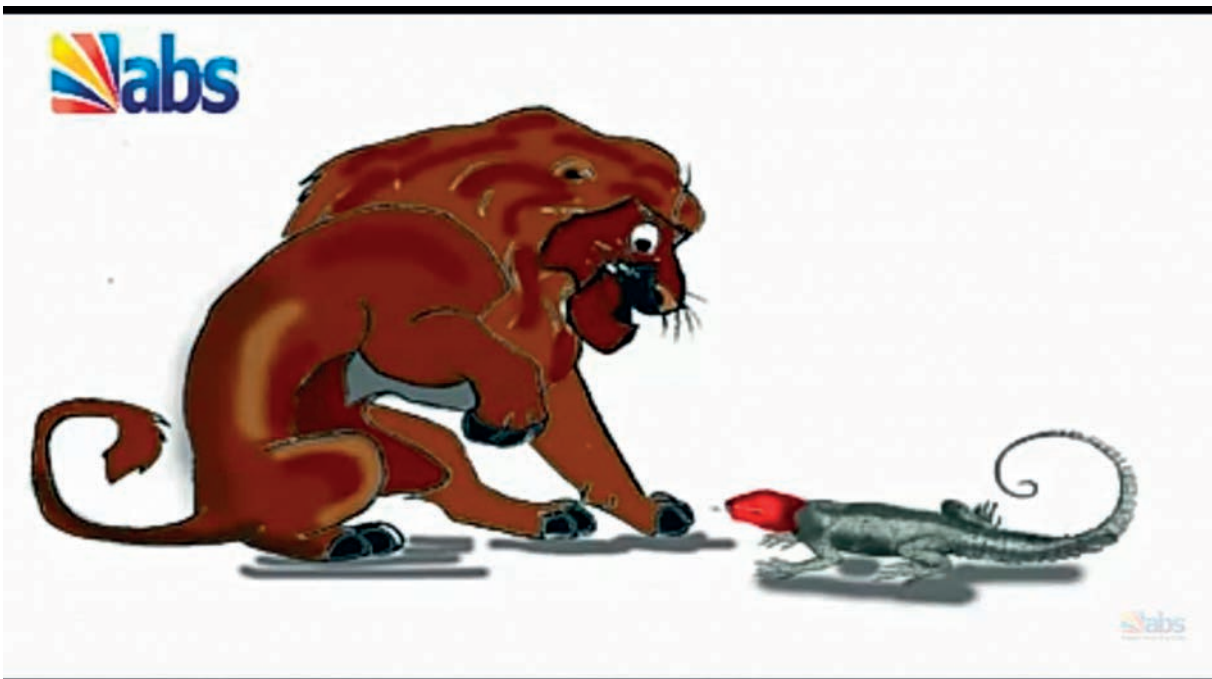(Ejeagha 2015).[4]

Figure 2: An animated illustration of the subjects of the tale
(Ejeagha 2015).

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[4] This performance, which was posted in 2015, had about 9,076 views with about 15 comments in August 2020.

Also, given the capacity for virtual retention and "permanence" of digital performances, unlike in the case of primary renditions, which are susceptible to the personal idiosyncrasies and variations of the performer that accompany every new re-performance, the virtual audience (synchronous and asynchronous) is offered a collective experience, since they all have access to a performance that is preserved by the exactness of virtual retention. The feature of permanence highlighted in this paper does not disregard the right of YouTube to take down videos it considers inappropriate (see Pietrobruno 2013). Rather, it emphasises that while YouTube is armed with such powers, it retains a feature of download that subverts the arbitrariness or regulation of the policy. The download features (there are several ways YouTube videos can be downloaded, both on and outside the platform) do away with the hassles and regulations of the online medium by making the videos available offline, allowing the creation of another (personal) archive that can sustain the permanence of each performance as well as enable its dissemination and, consequently, the conservation of folk culture.

Feedback is just as possible for the audience as in the case of primary renditions, but in this case communication features such as "like" options, comment sections, and share buttons lend the performer, as content creator, the opportunity to measure audience interest, which could encourage or discourage the performer – especially in live performances. While viewing the performance of the selected tales, the viewer can easily spot a summary of previous viewers. For instance, the tale A*da na Udara ya* had recorded 859 views, 24 likes and no dislikes by 10 August 2020; the tale of *Nwa Inyinya Ibu* had 179 views, two likes and no dislikes by the same date. Obviously, this platform provides space for a substantial degree of participation, a situation that is arguably for the most part unrealistic in indigenous performance.

Just as digitally mediated folktale perfor-

mances redefine the concept of the audience, the performer is not left out in this process of remediation. Unlike in indigenous narrative scenarios, where the performer has to employ the use of extra-verbal devices such as the use of gesticulations, facial expressions, body movements, and actions in conveying their message and entertaining the audience, the narrator in the digital case relies on the multimodality that a technological platform provides to effectively convey their performance. The use of animations, texts, and the interplay of other features like sound and images aid understanding of abstract imageries that would otherwise have been impossible in primary renditions. This association of text, sound, and image in a poetically limitless way allows for what Bello (2020) describes as surprising experiences and exciting semantic possibilities. This is effectively illustrated in the selected YouTube narratives; the images in Figures1–4 clearly embody the intersections of sound, images, and texts. By mere word of mouth, as is typical of traditional renditions, the performer might be able to convincingly tell the story of a mermaid or another mystical creature; they might succeed in painting a vivid picture using words or even using their exceptional extra-verbal skills, but this cannot achieve the clarity or distinctiveness intended. This, however, is not the case in technologically mediated performances where the mermaid and other mythical creatures take form and shape and are brought to life. The people's culture is also visually represented, as the animations are often replicas of real life Igbo people in their distinctive cultural forms, illustrated by their clothing, language, environment, attitudes etc. The following images extracted from *Ada na Udara ya* are illustrations of some of the aesthetics of digital folktales:

Figure 3: The animated representation of an angel appearing to a young orphan (Anulika 2019).

Figure 4: The animated illustration of an Igbo man in full Igbo attire (Anulika 2019).

These features reinforce the capacity of digitally mediated performances to retain and transfer the distinct culture of the people for the benefit of posterity. The feature of retention and "permanence" attached to these technological platforms implies that, when available, the people's folktale is not subject to the vacillations of human memory and verbal renditions, which is sometimes the case in traditional renditions. With digital folktales, the potentially limitless virtual memory of the virtual space can preserve the people's culture and folktales.

In the tale *Ada na Udara ya*, the performer is represented in animation; he is an elderly man, who sits at the edge of a gathering of young people who are eager to hear his story, as can be seen in Figure 5:
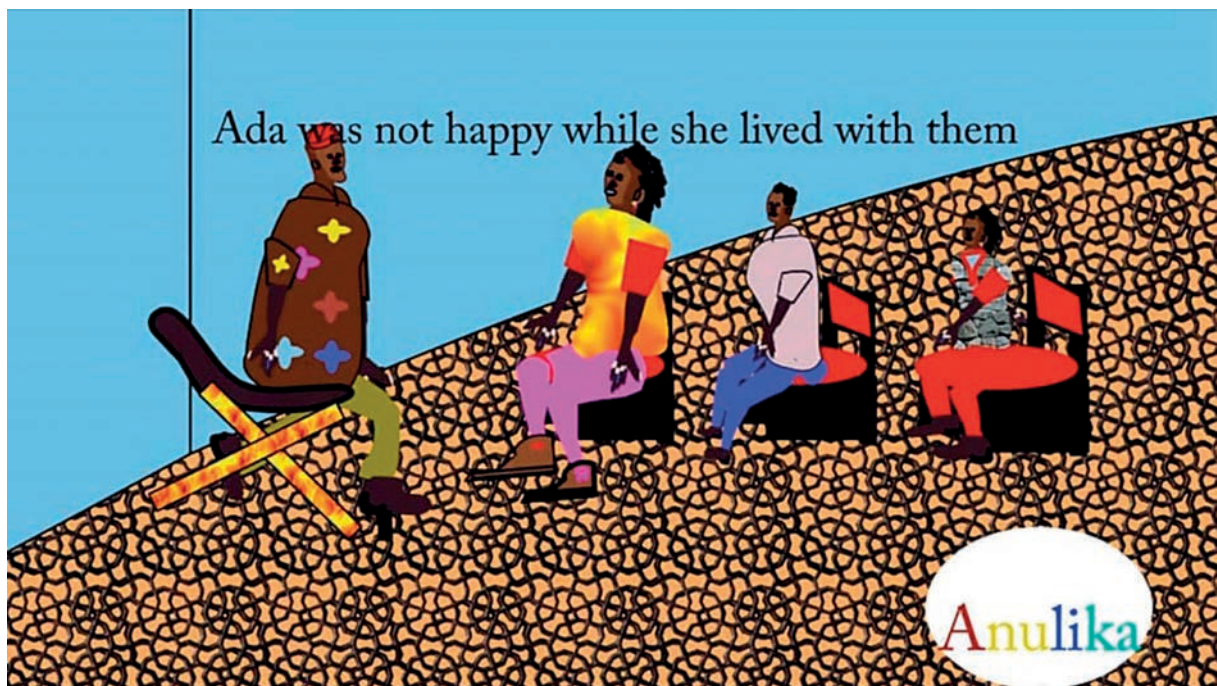

Figure 5: An animated representation of the narrator and his audience (Anulika 2019).

However, the same does not apply to *Nwa Inyinya Ibu*. In this digital performance, the story plays out with the vocal accompaniment of the narrator. The narrator is omnipresent, although applying the same tonal modulations that characterise face-to-face narrations, while the interjections of folksongs are performed harmoniously with the accompaniment of musical instruments. The viewer does not see the folksong performers, but experiences a near replica of the atmosphere characteristic of primary folktale renditions. In other words, the songs still have the capacity to move the viewer to tears or create an eerie or suspense-charged atmosphere. The cyber artist through whose technological and cultural skill the performance is brought to the viewer is the performer. The viewers are often youths, as inferred from the upload information for some folk narratives on YouTube. Here, I draw on the re-inventive and self-representational functionality of the avatar – included in the upload information – which discloses the commenter/audience member's basic description of self. Because the avatar functions to show how each participating audience member wants to be perceived and because the avatars in the performance are indeed youth-

ful, it seems likely that the participants are youths. Moreover, the discourse patterns and the contents of their comments illustrate a keen conversance with the interactive lingo of youth culture. In addition, in the guidelines of viewership provided by the content creator include this caveat: "the tales are not intended for children under the age of 13." Put together, this information supports the study's position that it is children and youth who are participating as either passive or active audiences of these performances. This emphasises the place of youths as prosumers in this era of digital technology. It further counters sceptical assertions about how digital technology is disengaging youths from physical reality, and rather strengthens notions of heightened creativity and autonomy through participation. In other words, it promotes youth participation, as exemplified in their creation of virtual products and resources. They are as much producers as they are consumers.

Further demonstrating the areas of convergence between modern and indigenous folktale performances, the cyber folktale performances are also prompted by stock phrases. In *Ada na Udara ya*, the narrator commences the tale with phrases that make references to times past, or imaginary times, eliciting the feeling of a faraway time.

Ada na Udara ya

Narrator: *O ruru otu mgbe.*
           There was a time.

Audience: *Otu mgbe e ruo.*
           A time there was.

Narrator: *Akuko a m ga akoro unu wu ihe mere n'obodo anyia otutu mgbe gara aga.*
           This story I'm about to tell you is about something that happened in this land a very long time ago.

The same applies to the tale *Nwa Inyinya Ibu.*

Nwa Inyinya Ibu

In this context, the writer commences by introducing the tale by its title:

Narrator: *Nwa Inyinya Ibu*
           The Young Horse

Narrator: *Na otu oge . . .*
           At one time . . .

Although these cyber narratives vary in how they present their opening statements, they continue the age old practice of referring to ancient times, which gives the tales the weight of history. What usually follows is the main story, which expresses the world views, belief system, and values of the people. The stories still maintain the didacticism intended to inculcate cultural morals in the younger generation. *Ada na Udara ya* also retains the mystic quality of primary folktales, containing supernatural and magical objects. The tale *Nwa Inyinya Ibu* focuses on the value of hard work and loyalty. *Inyinya*, which refers to a horse, is adopted by the narrator to explore the implications of disloyalty, trickery, and laziness. The horse in this tale is personified; in other words, it exhibits human tendencies such as speaking, thinking, and listening. The horse is visually represented and his mischief is also portrayed. The use of images gives the audience the luxury of seeing these characters or symbols react to plausible human situations. The horse's facial expressions share similarities with human expressions, giving the young audience the opportunity to relate to and identify with the characters and symbols. Emphasising and symbolising the foolishness of disloyalty, scheming, and trickery, the horse is punished at the end of the tale for trying to trick his doting master. The narrator concludes by stating the following:

Narrator:	*Site n'ubochi ahu ga n'iru, Inyinya Ibu ahu ekwezighi I nodu ala n'ime mmiri ozo.*
Translation:	From that day hence forth, the lazy horse did not sit in the river with the bags of salt with the intention of dissolving the bags of salt and tricking his master.

This conclusion is drawn following a careful description of how the horse's actions were punished, while the narrator also delineates the foolishness of the action in the first place.

Conclusion

Following the realities of the 2020 pandemic and the concomitant centrality of digital media in facilitating global affairs, the view that digitally mediated cultural forms like folktales on YouTube are appropriate for an increasingly virtually networked society is further emphasised. However, contestations are bound to arise. This work has examined the existing scepticism toward the capacity of digitally mediated folk performances to retain the old cultural traditions and the essential functionality of primary performances. It discourages mourning for a supposed loss instigated by these digital reconfigurations, and emphasises that new cultural patterns commensurate with the texture of current society are being engendered and that these traditions are being retained and learned by young people, albeit digitally. It recognises the growing digitisation of folktale praxes in contemporary Africa and views the Igbo child as compatible with the digital society. It proposes that children and youths are capable of adopting the use of technology to preserve their people's folklore, irrespective of the differences in expressive quality. Having extensively explored the use of YouTube in the remediation of the Igbo folktale, this article has shown that the established changes are inevitable, advantageous, and appropriate for this day and age. It has done this through a careful analytical juxtapositioning of the performative features of primary folktale renditions and those of YouTube remediated forms, and by discussing their similarities and differences. Finally, this article has highlighted features that reveal the adequacy of technologised forms for performing the essential functions of Igbo folktale, which include familiarising children and youths with the people's folklore, values, traditions, and expectations.

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