



# The Tortoise and the Leopard

*Igbo People - Nigeria*

The leopard had been trying to catch the tortoise for a long time, until one day he came across her on a lonely path.

‘Aha! I’ve found you at last!’ said the leopard. ‘Prepare to die!’

The tortoise, knowing that her life was going to end right there, and that she would not even have the option of wrestling with her predator said, with a sad but calm and determined, look on her face:

‘Can I ask you a favour before you kill me?’

The leopard, amazed at the tortoise’s serene attitude, and knowing that there was no way the tortoise would be able to slip away, agreed.

‘Allow me a few moments to prepare my mind,’ added the tortoise.

The leopard nodded, again in amazement. Then the tortoise started jumping and scampering up and down the road. She scattered dirt in all directions and skidded from one side of the road to the other. Finally, she calmed down and, adopting a dignified air, returned to the leopard and said:

‘I’m ready.’

The leopard, deeply intrigued, asked the tortoise:

‘Is this how you mentally prepare yourself to die? Why did you do all that?’

The tortoise answered:

‘Because, from today onwards, when anyone passes this way and sees your footprints and mine, they will think, “Here was a great combat between two rivals of similar power”. And so, everyone will remember that even the lowly tortoise once fought on equal terms with the mighty leopard. That will give them courage enough to face you from now on.’ □

Development of an adaptation by Igbo writer Chinua Achebe (1987).

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## Comments

...storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit – in state, in church or mosque, in party congress, in the university or wherever.

—Chinua Achebe (1987, p. 141)

The Nigerian Igbo Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), renowned worldwide for his novels about life in Africa, has remained one of the greatest names in African literature. Throughout his life he maintained a clear political commitment to defending African values against Western values in the search for a genuinely African voice, particularly with a lecture he gave at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst in 1975. This lecture was to become a landmark in post-colonial discourse.

But being a novelist did not prevent him from delving into the oral tradition of his people, including a good number of folktales and proverbs in his novels (such as the one above). This is a very rich oral tradition, given that the Igbo People are one of the most numerous in Africa, with a well-articulated cultural and religious worldview, in which the feminine has a leading position and is closely related to the Earth and nature. Thus, not only is there a belief in the existence of an Earth goddess, but lands, rivers, hills, forests and caves are all controlled by female deities, and hence their connection to central themes of human life such as agriculture, fertility, morality, customs, beauty and blessings (Nwoye, 2011).

In fact, the Igbo worldview attaches great importance to the balance between masculine and feminine principles, especially for human well-being. This was highlighted by Achebe in his Igbo tale of Heaven and Earth as well as in his most famous novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), in Chapter 7.

The moral heroes and heroines of Igbo culture are taken from the animal world, as we can see in the character of the tortoise in Achebe's story. For them, the tortoise

... is admired for its capacity to deploy its creative ingenuity in the direction of finding solutions to the problems of living. The tortoise is also believed to know when to open and close its armour in keeping with the sensations of safety or danger. (...) The tortoise is also admired among the Igbo because it is believed to move at its own pace without having to be dictated to from without. For the Igbo these qualities reflect an imaginative deployment of intelligence for personal safety and well-being. They are the qualities the Igbo would like to be identified with as full-fledged humans. (ibid., p. 310)

## Sources

- Achebe, C. (2000). *Things Fall Apart*. Oxford, UK: Heinemann Publishers.
- Achebe, C. (1987). *Anthills of the Savannah*. Oxford: Heinemann Publishers, p. 128.
- Corie, C. J. & Nwajiaku, I. C. (eds.) (2022). *Chinua Achebe and the Igbo-African World*. London: Lexington Books.
- Nwoye, C. M. A. (2011). Igbo cultural and religious worldview: An insider's perspective. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 3(9), 304-317.
- Yashinsky, D. (2006). *Suddenly They Heard Footsteps: Storytelling for the Twenty-first Century*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, p. xv.

### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Principle 1b: Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 13b: Support local, regional and global civil society, and promote the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making.

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

