

**NIGERIAN LITERARY ARTISTS AND PROTECTION OF  
AFRICAN VALUES IN THE PRESENT AGE OF  
URBANIZATION: THE IGBO EXAMPLE**

**By**

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**Abstract**

The work is a survey on the part which literary artists can play in protecting the much cherished African values from the influence of urbanization and modernity. The African, in their traditional life, see certain things as valuable. Obviously, it is these valuable things that make life worth living. The African values give an African different cultural personality and enable him to acquire necessary wisdom and knowledge that help him to make his positive contribution to society. Thus, these African values make life meaningful. Presently, the trend in Africa is the pursuance of nation-building and every person's sincere effort to uplift his living standard. Consequently there has been a rapid growth of cities and urban centers to the detriment of some most cherished African values such as a large family, love for and practice of the extended family system, respect for elders, religion, hospitality and love for community, greeting, honesty, integrity etc. This motivated the researcher into finding out the part which the Igbo literary artist can play in creating awareness with regards to the issue of protecting and retaining the much cherished African values in the present age of urbanization and modernity. To do this effectively, the researcher reviewed many published works and also consulted the internet. Thus, enough information was gathered and analysed. The theoretical framework adopted for the study is Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory. This literary approach is relevant to this study because it is a discourse type that persuades an audience to think and feel or act in a particular way. It is hoped that this study will help the Africans, particularly the Igbo

people, to continue to cherish their values, strive to retain them and also hand them over to succeeding generations. The researcher recommends that since the African values help to make life worthwhile and meaningful, the literary artists have to devote adequate attention to writing on themes that will help to inculcate African values on the audience.

### **Introduction**

Over the years, the African in his traditional life attaches great value to some things. It is these valuable things that make life meaningful and worth living for the Africans. The African values give Africans different cultural personality in the sense that these values make them stand out from other groups of people in the world. These values also enable them to acquire necessary wisdom and knowledge that help them to make necessary contribution to society. The present trend in Africa is pursuance of nation – building and sincere effort by every individual to uplift his living standard. Consequently there has been rapid growth of cities leading to urban population in Africa. This phenomenon of city growth and urbanization though good in itself, has tremendous adverse effects on African traditional values.

Obviously, as the African proceeds in his present trend of nation-building, national growth, development and urbanization which always go with industrialization, he has to bear in mind that these growths and development phenomena are creating serious hazards to his most cherished African traditional values that make life meaningful and worthwhile. For example, religion is one of the important values of the African. He is regarded as being very religious in the sense that the hopes and fears of the ancestors, spirits and divinities or gods and the Supreme Being, guide everything he does whether seen or unseen. He is mindful of the taboos and the sacred, all in keeping with the desire of his maker. Mbiti (134) posits that Africans do not believe in existing without religion. He asserts that their traditional religions are meant for the community rather than for the individual. As such he notes that he is part of the

traditional religion. He observes that normal human beings have to belong to the community and participate in the belief, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. Thus Mbiti claims:

There are no irreligious people in the traditional society. To be human is to belong to the whole community and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to self-excommunication from the entire family of society.

This is a pointer to the fact that religion is one of the long cherished African values. But today, things have fallen apart and the center can no longer hold. The African is no longer mindful of taboos and sacredness needed to maintain his peaceful existence.

Apart from religion, there are other traditional values of the African which have been adversely affected by urbanization and modernity. Such African values include large family, respect for elders, greetings, time, integrity, love for strangers, honesty, entertainment. The government has been making sincere effort in the area of national development and uplifting the living standard of the people and this entails hazards to the peoples important traditional values. This paper submits that Igbo literary artists can be an effective instrument for creating awareness with regards to the issue of protecting and retaining the long cherished African traditional values.

### **Explication of Terms**

#### **The Literary Artist**

Ikeokwu (67), quoting Ezejideaku's definition of poet, notes that a literary artist is a man of many parts. He avers that he is at one and the same time a visionary, a reformer, a political or socio-cultural watchdog, a satirist, a praise singer, a chronicler of events, a teacher and the people's spokesman. He further posits that the literary artist is often considered eccentric primarily because his personal perception of society and reality is different from that of other members of his society. He uses his third eye to see what eluded the

sight of other members of society or what they are yet to see.

Obviously, the literary artist sees it as his responsibility to sensitize the members of his society to socio-cultural issues. Ikeokwu (67) notes that the literary artist creates or recreates, formulates, or reformulates these socio-cultural issues through his spokemanship. For Ikwubuzo (176) he functions as the consciousness of his society and as the repository of his people's cultural heritage. He claims that the artist spoke for his community and that his work was considered beautiful if the audience found in it their own life experience well articulated and illuminated. Ikwubuzo further observes that a poet, a novelist or a playwright is not insensitive to the socio-political realities of his time; he is affected by them like any other member of his society.

The literary artist employs certain devices of visioning and mirroring the society to build, warn of impending danger, persuade, reflect, bring to view his points, ridicule or satirize, caricature, or applaud good virtues, and or overhaul a part of human system. All these devices aim at fulfilling his functional role effectively. This is because he sees himself as duty bound to see that his literary work creates necessary impact it is intended to create in people's life in particular and entire society in general.

### **Urbanization**

Urbanization, simply explained, is the process by which small towns grow into cities. It is a transformation of social structure. Urbanization also affects culture. Communities have their own local culture and traditions. Living in a community is valued as a way of life in Africa. One observes that growth and other changes threaten to undermine one of the long cherished African values: the close connections associated with the culture of small towns. According to Calhoun et al (519), urbanization is the process whereby large numbers of people leave the countryside and small towns to settle in cities and surrounding metropolitan area. Thus, urbanization involves migration from sparsely populated regions to densely populated ones. The scope of this migration, as Calhoun et al (519) opine, has been enormous in the present time. They note

that densely populated urban regions have become a dominant feature of the modern landscape.

### **Theoretical Frame-Work**

The study adopts Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory which is the basis of this study. According to Abrams (2009:311), the theory advocates that the study of literary work will be based on the means and devices that the writer uses in order to achieve the intellectual and emotional effects on the audience that will persuade them to see the writer's point of view. In the words of Mckee (1820-29), persuasion means to influence, to explain, to urge and to advise. He further notes that there are three kinds of modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker, the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind, the third on the apparent proof provided by the words of the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. This is the major concern of Aristotle's rhetoric theory.

Dobie (2012:129-130) posits that the concern of the early rhetoricians which Aristotle is one of them, is how to move and persuade an audience. Dobie further says:

Aristotle also explored the many ways in which an argument can be made convincing to listeners. He thereby influenced Loginus, Cicero, Quintilian, and other rhetoricians (ie other rhetoric theorists) to this day in making choices about organization and style, so that what they have to say will appeal to a particular group of people.

That is to say that Aristotle was aware of the power of words to stir or convince people and thereby make them see and act according to a particular point of view.

A strong revival of interest in literature as a mode of communication

from author to reader, has led to the development of a rhetorical criticism which, without departing on the primary focus on the literary work itself, undertakes to identify and analyze those elements within a poem, drama or prose narrative which are there primarily in order to effect certain responses in a reader. Abrams (313) asserts that a number of recent critics of literary works, particularly poems, have emphasized the author's use of a variety of means in order to engage the interest and guide the imaginative and emotional responses of the readers to whom, whether consciously or not, the literary work is addressed.

### **African Traditional Values**

Africans are known to have and respect many traditional values. Some of the major African traditional values are:

- **A large family:** One of the major African traditional values is a large family. The African believes that the major purpose for marriage is child bearing. This will enable him to have large family. As a result of this importance attached to child bearing and children, polygamy was so prominent in traditional Africa.
- **Extended family system:** Every African, in his traditional life has love for extended family system. Wikipedia (1-2) notes the fact that the extended family characterizes the life of the African and somehow shapes his personality and outlook on life. It claims that the African child has only to take a few steps in his village to visit several people who can substitute for his father, mother, brother, and sister; and they will treat him accordingly. Thus the child has many homes in his village, and he is simultaneously the giver and receiver of widespread attention. Wikipedia (1-2) observes that in the extended family system everybody is linked with all the other members, living or dead, through a complex network of spiritual relationship into a kind of mystical body. Consequently, it notes that it is not just 'being' that the African values he cherishes 'being-with-others'
- **Sense of Community:** The community offers the African the psychological and ultimate security as it gives its members

both physical and ideological identity. Calhoun et al (520-21) note that the Africans emphasize community life and communalism as a living principle of which the basic ideology is community-identity. They note traditional African community attitude to work as another factor which made it impossible to have beggars within the community. They posit that life in the African community is based on the philosophy of 'live and let live'. In the words of Okoro (67), the authentic African is identified and known by and through his community. He argues that the spirit of interdependence among men and the knowledge that people are mutually owned fertilize African communalism.

- **Love for Nature:** In his traditional life, the African loves nature. He seeks harmony with nature, natural things, events and phenomena, such as trees, fields, forests, open spaces, lakes oceans, rain, harmattan. These are regarded as values that must be respected and upheld.
- **Respect for Elders:** Respect for the elderly especially one's parents, grandparents and relatives, is one of the major values in the traditional African society. Elders have many years of experience. They know and hold the traditional values that have always kept communities together. Okoro (65-66) posits that ancestor's worship is an important related value in African culture. He observes that the basis for the honour and respect accorded to old people in the traditional African culture is their closeness to the ancestors. He further asserts that according to the traditional belief, the African ancestors – the morally good ones of course - are held in high esteem. He notes that people have great recourse to them as powerful intermediaries between God and the living members of their particular families. These good ancestors, as Okoro opines, are expected also to reincarnate into their families in due time.
- **Entertainment:** In African traditional life, entertainment is one of the major values. Entertainment is by way of music,

dance, wrestling, drama and oral literature. These must be didactic and instructive, and should also contain a moral message or lesson.

- **Religion:** The African is regarded as being highly religious in the sense that the hopes and fears of the ancestors, spirits and divinities or gods and the Supreme Being guide everything he does whether seen or unseen. Various schools of thought have given various definitions of religion. Karl Marx says it is the opium of the people. However, in relation to Africans, Okoro (66) avers that religion is an indispensable value and that the African exhibits a cultural personality which is different from that of Western man. As it were, religion as a value of the African is seriously affected by urbanization and technological development that is sweeping across Africa today.
- **Greeting:** Greeting is one of the major African traditional values. From childhood, children are taught to greet people, even strangers. Ignoring anyone is rude. This all important value has suffered from the effects of urbanization. Presently, children hardly greet people, because their parents have no time to teach them this..
- **Hospitality:** The African is noted for his sense of hospitality. He welcomes strangers and easily incorporates them in the community. Okoro (66) notes that Africans have symbolic ways of expressing welcome such as forms of presenting kola nuts, local gin etc. Okoro claims that among the Igbo, the basis of hospitality is the generally accepted principle that a guest should not mistreat his host so that he does not develop a hunch back on his way home.

As the Africans moves from the traditional to modern urban and semi-urban life with industrialization and its money economy, his traditional values are bound to be affected. And that is why the thrust of this paper is to show how the Igbo literary artist will use his literary work for sensitizing people to retain the long cherished African traditional values and protect them from the negative



effects of present day urbanization and industrialization

### **Effects of Urbanization on African Traditional Values**

Sociologists are of the view that urbanization has had effects on the communities (if Calhoun, et al (520)) by community, sociologists mean more than a particular place inhabited by people; the term also describes a certain quality of relationships. People who form a community have common values and interests, engage in frequent face- to-face interactions, feel close to one another, and tend to think of themselves as part of a group. That is, they have a sense of 'we- ness' in effect, a community is a large primary group. In the first place, large densely populated urban areas have destroyed all possibility of community. Urbanization has given rise to a new kind of community - one that does not depend on people that are closely related to one another. Urban industrial society is dramatically different because people are brought together through formal organization and markets, rather than informal relations and a sense of belonging. Their dense populations guarantee that many of the people who encounter each other in the course of a typical day will be strangers and their interactions impersonal. Relationships tend to be very superficial, even with neighbours. Calhoun et al (520) note that often neighbours come from very different backgrounds, so they may not share ancestry, values, norms or attitudes. They observe that all these create social distance. They further assert that those ties which urban dwellers do have tend to be fragmented; for example, friends may live across town, co-workers mile away and relatives on the other side of the country.

Tonnies (215) sees urbanization as one of the defining trends of the modern era. He regrets this development, for he thought it meant a loss of community. He notes that urbanization exacts a toll. He focuses partly on the effects of the noisy, crowded, hectic backdrop. According to him, such constant stimulation encourages people to develop a blase attitude towards what is going on around them. This attitude enables them to screen out what they see and

hear, thus shielding themselves from emotions exhaustion or psychic overload. The result, as Tonnies notes, is that city dwellers seem to be cold, heartless and indifferent to the feelings and actions of others. He says that this protective shell contradicts sharply with the behaviour of the people in very small town.

Also urbanization, industrialization and Christianity as new African values adversely affected the African traditional values of love for large families, extended family system and community as people move from the community to urban centres in search of white-collar jobs and greener pastures. Urbanization has serious effects upon African families as it led to establishment of new homes away from home, especially by young men, women and fathers. Obviously, urbanization involves unavoidable breakup of families and relationships.

Furthermore, as a result of urbanization goes with industrialization, parents are so busy to give their children proper training. Because the children are far away from their community, they are not exposed to the long cherished African values such as greeting, honesty, respect for elders, right mode of dressing, sense of sanctity of life. For example, in the issue of the right mode of dressing, the mode of dressing of an African in his traditional life depicts gentility and modesty. These days, people are misinterpreting Christianity, hiding under it and misquoting it, that it gives the impression that God cares more about the heart of man, and less about what he wears, 'come as you are'. Thus dresses like 'spaghetti' miniskirts and gowns, tights, body-hugs and jean trousers are worn by some women with flowing hair of various colours and designs (without covering) to the church of God.

In the area of sense of sanctity of life, African in his traditional life eschewed violence. This is because shedding of blood is abhorred. Those killed are people whose continued existence is a threat to the community. This is so because the African is aware of the fact that sources of life are sacred. It is therefore an abomination to commit murder as well as suicide.

Okoro (68) notes that it is for this that Africans price marriage highly. According to him, Africans price life above every other thing, hence such names as Nduka, Maduka, Ndubuisi, Nwakaego abound. He observes that in this present day of urbanization and industrialization, as modern African values, the West is trying to legalize gay marriages and lesbianism, homosexuality and many other acts of immorality abound in African today, especially in tertiary institutions, to the chagrin of African traditional values.

In addition, Africans in their traditional life see a girl or a woman who commits abortion as a murderer, as she has soiled her hand with blood. But today due to urbanization people tend to commit abortions without having any remorse as if it is a normal business to the detriment of African values that priced life highly. Also, contrary to African values, some young men plait or perm their hair, and even wear earrings like ladies.

Furthermore, African traditional values emphasize goodness of character. Thus a good man is a man of good character who refrains from vices. Goodness does not entail avoiding vices alone, rather it also involves cultivating virtues such as keeping ones virginity before marriage and dressing properly. Africans measure development and civilization by innovation and development of natural endowment. Today, due to urbanization and industrialization, development and civilization are based on science and technology with their complicated money economy and international trade, to the detriment of African traditional values.

Today, honesty as an African value can be said to be at the point of extinction. Dishonesty is the order of the day. People want to make money at any cost and in that case they have no business with honesty. In his traditional life, the African has the fear of incurring the wrath of the gods. Nobody swears falsely to an oath in the shrine for fear of instant death (justice). This practice raised very honest people who lived long. People, who claim to be Christians

but do not fear. God, will hold the Bible in their hands, pledge to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth and thereafter they tell all the lies in the world without blinking an eyelid. The implication is that there is mistrust everywhere. One hardly finds reliable people in the society today. Generally, people are afraid of themselves because our long cherished values are suffering disruption as well as going to the point of extinction.

Lastly but not the least is the fact that communalism and hospitality and sense of human relation which are all African values have been relegated to the background. People are always out to fight against themselves, there is no sense of human relation; no human feelings at all. As a result of this animalistic behaviour, some people do not care to help people who are involved in accident. There have been cases where people went to steal money from the handbags of fatal accident victims. All these evil tendencies are the results of urbanization. One may want to help somebody by way of providing shelter, and the person turns out to be a rogue and harms his helper.

In view of these obvious effects of urbanization on African values, this paper submits that the Igbo literary artists can play vital role in sensitizing the Africans of the need to retain their long cherished traditional values as these values help to make life meaningful and organized.

### **The Literary Artist and the Traditional African Values in this Present Day.**

Here, the researcher examines the part the Igbo literary artists will play to create necessary awareness with regards to reviving and retaining the traditional values which have been destroyed, or disrupted by urbanization. The literary artist according to Obi (491), regards himself as duty bound to sensitize his people on burning or socio-cultural and political issues of his time. The literary artist uses his author's vision of life through which he, as a teacher, educates the society by letting people see through his own mirror of experience. Nwadike (12), quoting Alan Casty notes that:

The writer's subjects are, for him, important because they represent something beyond themselves. With them he examines his life and ours, comments on its truths and untruths, criticizes, sympathizes, evaluates, explores the meaning of being alive.

So, one observes that literary artist usually writes through his experiences in life. Such experiences the writer draws from derive from the socio-cultural and political settings, which in turn influence and pattern people's actions and reactions alike.

For the present study, the experiences will emanate from the fact that it is so glaring that the long cherished African traditional values suffer disruption and some even at the point of extinction. These African long cherished traditional values which make his life worthwhile such as love for large family, love for and practice of extended family system, sense of community and hospitality, respect for elders, greeting, honesty, sense of sanctity of life, love for nature, religion etc. are now being treated as worthless, particularly by the African youths. Due to lack of knowledge, the youths think that the only thing that matters in this life is money. In consequence, they can go to any length to make money. They are ready to kill, kidnap, steal, deceive, cheat etc. to get money, purchase flashy cars, and build nice house(s). This is a serious error. There is therefore the need to work out a modality whereby the Africans, especially the youths, will be called to order before it is too late.

This is the typical period when the literary artist plays his vital role of sensitizing his people of the burning or socio-cultural issues through his spokespersonship. The present burning issues at hand are the disruption of African traditional values by urbanization. The literary artist can use any of the three major literary genres of literature namely prose, drama and poetry, as a veritable tool for portraying the long cherished African traditional values that help people to live an organized and peaceful life.

In essence, let us now cite typical examples in the area of the three genres of literature where three different literary artists use their

literary works to create awareness on socio-cultural issues with regards to protecting, reviving and retaining the disrupted traditional values.

In the prose genre, *Omenuko* (1933), Pita Nwana, the novelist uses his work to teach the people, especially the youths, the need to be under a master as an apprentice. In the story, Omenuko, the protagonist was under his master Mr. Omemgboji as an apprentice.

The story recorded that Omenuko served his master well for the stipulated number of years. At the end of his apprenticeship, his master Omemgboji prayed for Omeunko and blessed him and also settled him. Omemgboji passed a decree that other people would serve Omenuko well as he had served him well too. He also told Omenuko that it would be well with him. The extract of the story is presented below:

... ma nwata ahx a na-akpq Omenxko  
nqdxrx n'aka onye na-ezi ya [zx na  
ire ah[a tolite. Aha onye nwe ya bu  
Omemgboji. Nna ya ukwu wee nye  
ya ihe q ga – eji malite izu ah[a nke  
ya. Omenuko wee kelee nna ya ukwu  
ekele nke ukwu. Omemgboji siri  
ya, “ka ihe d[kwara g[ mma; ka nd[  
g[ feekwa g[ ofufe d[ka I fere m. gaa  
nke qma”

(But the boy called Omeunko grew up in the hands of his master who taught him buying and selling. The name of his master is Omemgboji. His master gave him what he will use to start his own trade. Omenuko thanked him in a very special way. Omemgboji said to him, “Let it be well with you. Let your people serve you as you have served me. Go well”)

From this story, the people, especially the youths, learn that there is the need for one to be under his senior so as to acquire necessary

wisdom and knowledge. By the time the person grows, he, in turn imparts his acquired wisdom and knowledge to others. One of the problems caused by urbanization today is that due to stubbornness, people do not go into apprenticeship any longer. They rather prefer to go into 'Okada' or 'Keke' business to enable them be in control of themselves. Such people continue to suffer because they lack knowledge. But the story, we see the artist apply persuasion, though subtly. This is in line with Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory.

In the drama genre, *Onye Ulo Egbughi Onye...*(2012), Joyce Obidiebube, the playwright, dramatizes the danger of disrupting major African traditional values - love for large family and family members. In this play, the major character Onukwube was covetous and wicked. Onukwube has a brother Ikenna. When their father died, he left seven plots of land for them. Instead of sharing the seven plots of land into two, because of greed, Onukwube, the elder one and his wife, Obiageli conspired to confiscate six plots of the land. They gave just one unfertile plot to his younger brother, Ikenna. Ikenna and Nneoma his wife who are lovers of peace quietly accepted the unfertile plot of land. Here, the use of Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory of persuasion is manifested as the writer makes his audience feel the need to maintain peace at all time. During the planting season, Ikenna and the wife planted yams and others farm crops. At harvest, Ikenna's yams were very big. Due to the respect he has for the elder brother, he went with four tubers to pay homage to Onukwube and his wife. Unfortunately for Ikenna, when his brother, Onukwube saw the big yams he became jealous. Eventually, he conspired with his wife to take that only plot of land from Ikenna. They warned Ikenna never to cultivate the land again. They went further to implicate him in the problem associated with the king's Ikenga. As a result, Ikenna was declared guilty and consequently buried alive.

Later, Onukwube's stomach swelled up so much that he could not move about for years. Before his death, he confessed all his evil deeds, he and his wife died seven days later because of their wickedness.

From this, people see the need to shun evil. They see the need to love

their family members and to share things together as appropriate, which is an aspect of African traditional value. In expressing the downfall of evil doers, Joyce Obidiebube employs persuasion in her language in line with Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory, to convince her readers of the need to do good and avoid all that is evil.

In the poetry genre, in Maduekwe's poem titled 'Ego Na-Ekwu' in *Utara Nti* (Nd), the artist uses the poem to impact vital knowledge. In summary, poet teaches how in the past the Africans values wisdom, knowledge, old age, admonition, ability and honesty. He observes that today, people have no regard for these African traditional values; that it is only money that people respect. The artist notes that it is a serious evil that is eating deep into the society. The poem have four stanzas. The first stanza reads as follows:

Ego d[ mgbe any[ nq n'amamihe nd[  
okenye  
Mgbe Diqkpa ketara isi oche n qgbakq  
Mgbe isi awq guzoro inye ndxmqdx  
Mgbe qka okwu nqrq, a chqta ya idu  
obodo  
Mgbe aka pxtara ch[wa mba n ihi [d[  
ike,  
Mgbe oji qfq nq na nsqpxrx n [bx isi  
ala  
Oge nd[ ahx d[, ma ughu a, ha alaala  
Obodo hxz[r[ ya na ego na-ekwu  
kpqmkwem

(Money was there when we were in the  
wisdom of the elders,  
When the elderly is given seat at the  
high table, in a ceremony,  
When the aged stands to counsel  
When the orator is sought for to lead  
his town,  
When one comes to lead his town



because of his ability,  
When the 'ofo' holder has the respect  
to lead his land,  
But today they are gone, these were in  
those days,  
People now take it that money is the  
real determining factor.)

With this poem, the artist is admonishing the Africans to revert to the way things were being done before as that makes for an organized and peaceful society. For him, money should not be the determining factor. His powerful expression of his thought is persuasive, thus falling in line with Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory, because he uses language to make people have a re-think.

His powerful expression of his thought is persuasive thus falling in line with Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory, because he uses language to make people have a re-think.

With all these, the paper submits that the Igbo literary artists have useful part to play in sensitizing Africans on the need to revive and retain African values that have been disrupted by urbanization.

### **Conclusion**

Urbanization as a process and one of the new Africans values, creates obvious hazards to the long cherished African traditional values. However, since urbanization and other new Africans values such as education industrialization, and technology are needed by African for better life, the way forward is for the Igbo literary artists to sensitize the people on the need to protect, revive and retain the African traditional values and allow them to exist along side new African values. This they must do by relating their works to Africa traditional values just like the three artist's their works were examined in the study, to enable children and the youths acquire the knowledge of African traditional values early in life as they read these literary works.

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