

Anezi Okoro
The Flying Tortoise
(Fiction)

Anezi Okoro, *Flying Tortoise* Enugu: Delta Publications 2004

In twenty-six chapters, Anezi Okoro's *Flying Tortoise* makes a fictional recreation of the tortoise legends. For the first time Tortoise leaves his terrestrial habitat to traverse outer space on a 'discovery mission. In this book the tortoise of Ibo folk tales is transformed into a science-oriented tortoise that is equipped with high technology apparati and a super-scientific-mathematical mind. But more interesting is that this scientific-minded, science-oriented Tortoise still retains his traditional wisdom, unquenchable optimism, and knowledge all added to his legendary zeal of tackling and confronting obstacles headlong.

The story touches upon modern environmental problems. Tortoise's space probe is sparked by his apparent revulsion on human exploitation of the earth and environment. He watches with horror as a gigantic *Iroko* is brought down by a sawing machine. Even more pathetic is the plight of ants, lizards and other smaller creatures who live in this tree. The impunity with which the flora and fauna of his homeland are devastated sparks off a protest which is underscored by his 'abandoning' earth for outer space. He explores space for life-alternatives in the hope of bringing over his wife, children and other animals there if successful.

To his chagrin Tortoise discovers that man has already invaded space with several satellites, probes and other exploration gadgets that littered space. Once again he laments man's tardiness even in space. His adventure takes him through all the known planets. He comes back with the knowledge that outer space is not ready yet to support other life forms.

But his temporary departure had created a furore as humans had monitored his progress through their space tracking gadgets. He returns to earth a hero. He reels out difficult puzzles for humans to decipher. The idea, apparently, is to force them to recognise that animals have as much intelligence as humans.

A sub plot develops around the theme of ethnic jealousies and rivalry which become more apparent as Tortoise's popularity grows.

Meanwhile some other animals interpret this fame as a threat to their own peaceful existence in the forests and they fear that tortoise, proud of his achievements, may begin to harbour ideas about dominating the affairs of the animal kingdom. As this disenchantment grows, divisions increase among them. The bigger animals are the most jealous. Finally, the animals organise themselves into two warring groups and fight a poorly matched war in which the smaller animals: the lizards, snails, serpents, ants, and lightning defeat the bigger ones: Tigers, Elephants, mongooses, hares, leopards, eagles, ducks, etc.

It is significant in mediation and conflict resolution efforts that the smaller animals employ their wit and cunning, rather than mere brute force, to defeat their larger opponents.

There may be the temptation to dismiss the *Flying Tortoise* as a work of juvenile literature, especially with the tortoise character, yet when considered from the perspective literature that makes an important statement on man and society, the book thrives as a fine

study on human nature. It becomes a parable of human folly, jealousy, avarice, ambition and all such positive (or negative) emotions that propel man either to his success or doom. Furthermore, the book dramatizes Fanon's observations on the psychology of the oppressed. The animals make misleading assumptions and conclusions as to the cause(s) of their problems. They blame their own kind and seek the means of eliminating all but the real enemy. It takes a decisive confrontation, however, for them to identify their central adversary:

Do we need another intervention from lightning to make us accept ... that we all belong to the animal kingdom. That our enemy cannot come from your side, nor your enemy from our side. That our true enemy ... is man, not Super Tortoise (174).

This awareness unites the animals as they plan a reception for Super Tortoise. The occasion provides them with the first opportunity to fight man on his own level by using their intelligence. The animals organise several puzzles through which they intend to reveal to man that they want to be treated with respect.

However, the highly scientific language, exposing the reader to a plethora of registers, makes the *Flying Tortoise* turgid.