

Embellishing Language in Oral Tradition through the Use of Proverbs in Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of proverbs as an aspect of oral tradition. The study draws its inspiration from the observations of people's attitudes in society and attendant consequences. The novel encapsulates the vast pool of human deeds in their notorious and sublime forms—a story of all the tragic, moving, comic, boring, challenging, perturbing, and even ennobling actions and inactions of human beings. It is the narrative of four women namely Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chime, and Chibuka. The study discovered that the novelist used her artistic power through proverbs to give an insight in what the culture of the Umuga people was before the coming of the white men. The novelist made use of the Igbo setting. There are names, proverbs, idioms and practices that epitomize the Igbo culture and Igbo world view. Her works are linked between her [fiction](#) and her lived experience. The major source of her stories in the novel is her own direct experience through fiction. Oral Aesthetics is highly portrayed in Ezeigbo's works in her constant use of songs, proverbs, lullabies

and the Igbo cultural setting. The paper did a textual analysis of the novel using primary and secondary sources of data. The theoretical framework for the study is based on the theories of semiotics which means the study of signs and symbols especially as means of language or communication. This study concludes on the various aspect of oral traditions in order to portray the unique quality of being African in the use of proverbs and create an indepth meaning and exploration of the situation at hand.

Keywords: Proverbs, Culture, Tradition, Riddles, Lullaby, Orature

Introduction

In Africa, especially in Nigeria, expressions are only considered rich and intelligent when they are duly laced with proverbs, which are many in our diversified cultures. This explains why a traditional African man would constantly punctuate his speech with appropriate proverbs and aphorisms to drive his points home. One who can make good conversation with the use of proverbs is being regarded as a good orator that is blessed with the wisdom of the gods as well. .

There is a belief in Igbo land that if an individual is given a proverb and he cannot decipher the semantics of the said proverb, then the bride price or dowry paid on the mother's head is useless. This is to prove that proverb is dynamic and the horn of the cow that helps in the development of the people's culture and tradition. Proverbs are common features of conversational eloquence in African cultures especially Nigeria and are diverse according to the ethnic language involved. In the olden days, proverb was the means by which the people of the society base their arguments and affairs of life. These proverbs were rendered orally in the society especially by the elders. The culture of the people is embedded in proverbs and it is normally, rendered orally like: "our people say

that", "our elders said that", or "our father said that" or "our elders said that". This has been a bond between the people and their culture before the influence of western culture. Proverb as a concise statement and an oral tradition loses its originality prior to the influence of western culture.

Literary works reflect to all angles of life in the society such as political system, economic system, cultural system, sociological system, ideological struggles and many others. Through the work of literature, one can understand events happening within and outside one's society. Through literature, a literary artist highlights, satirizes and criticizes the evils in the society. The criticism may be political, social, economic to the cultural, but the most prominent among them is the social system because it is the social system that talks about sociological and psychological life of the society and how the events happening in the society affect every member of the society. The social system talks about the relationship that exists among the members of the society and how they contribute towards solving their problems in the

Though some writers write to entertain people, realistic writers, especially realistic novelists, write to convince and educate the people within and outside the society in which the work is extracted in order to be aware of what happened or what is happening in the world and why such happened, as well as criticising the evils and ills of the leaders and the people they were leading. Realistic novelists arouse the consciousness of the people in the society with the aim of changing the behaviour of the society.

Literature is a tool, a means of self-expression, an avenue through which writers express their experiences, outlook, sense of sympathy and patriotism to their various societies. Writers have

expressed in many works, their cultural values, norms, attitudes, traditions, belief and dignity. Proverb is an important and valuable ingredient in orature. It is a short popular saying that although occur as part of everyday discourse as well as within other longer genres (both verse and prose), belongs among verse form principally by virtue of its symmetric structure. F.B.O Akporobaro says:

Proverb is a short popular saying of unknown authorship expressing some general truth or superstition; "A finger cannot pick out lice from the head", "A dove cannot beget a snake" Proverbs are found in most world countries, especially Africa (55).

They are more of observation of life, couched in refreshing imagery and language. In folk transaction, they might function as authority to bolster point of view or as a justification for a recommended course of action or as a discreet correction to errant behaviour. Jasper Onuekwusi also says:

A proverb is about a man as he interacts with fellow men, with objects, animals, and plants in his environment. It is a truth derived between man and all phenomena in his environment and indeed between the various elements in the environment and themselves. Some examples of proverbs will be useful in our understanding of characteristics of proverbs (17).

Proverbs persist, endure and embellish language in people's communications and knowledge of history and culture. As a major aspect of language and component of orature that is used to test people's capacity for using language. Jasper Onuekwusi says:

One's ability to use proverbs in traditional African society is indicative of ones level of intelligence. That proverbs

emanate from careful observation of attributes, actions, situation, circumstance and indeed roles and activities of persons, animals and objects in the environment (39).

Thus, proverbs are used by elders in order to educate the young ones, but unlike folktales, proverbs do not have predictable patterns. They are amusement for intelligence and excellence, especially to the children. It exercises the mind and causes the children to think intuitively. Proverbs are also very closely related to riddles. They are expressed briefly and concisely. They involve analogy, whether of meaning, sound, rhythm or tone.

It is these important constituents and others that make oral tradition unique and distinct as it has been used by most artists in writing most of their works. It is what has given the research the impetus and interest in -the dexterous manner in which Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo has employed some of the constituents of orature, in creating captivating stories about characters and events that recreate the significant themes explored in the novel *The Last of the Strong Ones* to advance the collection of contemporary African experiences, beliefs, culture, norms and heritage.

Proverb made its first appearance in literature in an oral form. But today, the place of proverb in the literary world can be seen on its influence on language and literature. Proverbs have grammatical structures. It can be rhetorical in nature, example of such proverbs are; "So you want to be more Catholic than the Pope". It can be imperative negative, "Don't beat a dead horse". Imperative positive, "you shall reap whatever you sow". It also overlaps idiomatic expressions example: "Birds of the same feathers flock together" is also an idiomatic expression.

Proverb is appealing because it is succinct and uses simple rhyme. Proverb can be ironical. It can take the place of a metaphor. It can compare or contrast. Reprimand or compliment.

It can be allegorical and symbolic and the statement is embodied with strong imagery that is appealing to the innermost self of one.

Many proverbs, have found their ways into the norms of the society over the decades. Many authors like Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi, Odili Ujubuonu, Akachi Adimora, Uchenna Nwosu, Amos Tutuola and others borrowed heavily from the rich culture of proverbs in their languages. It is evident that proverbs play significant roles in clarifying, exemplifying, underscoring, influencing and communicating in the society. The major concern here is to explicitly discuss the use of proverbs and its nature, and to highlight its relevance to the study of literature, to appraise the rich tradition of proverbs which is embedded in culture with the novel under study.

The literary theory used for this study is "semiotics" which means the study of signs and symbols especially as means of language or communication. The term "semiotics" was first used by an American philosopher named Charles Sanders Peirce but Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss Linguist in his book entitled: *Course in General Linguistics* proposed a science which he called "Semiology" According to him, semioticians argue that there are other means of communicating meaning apart from words. That is;

Communication can be verbal and non-verbal. This means that in a particular society or language group, people can speak with their mouth, using words, their face, looks, hands, eyes, movement, objects such as flowers, kola nuts, symbols such as light, fire, birds in flight, cross, sword, gun, young palm fronds, colours such as white, green, black and red, animals such as tortoise, snake, dog, pigeon, lion, elephant among other living creatures (quoted in Ifejirika, 152).

According to Ferdinand De Saussure, in a symbol or in a less ambiguous phrase-sign proper- the relation between the signifying item and what it signifies is not a natural one, but entirely a matter of social convention. For example, in Igbo land, the presentation of kola nut is conventionally treated with respect and honour because it signifies warm reception, unity or togetherness while in the Hausa and Yoruba cultures, the kola nut may not possess such high social significance as in Igbo land.

Echezona Ifejirika also states that semioticians know very well that verbal communication or expression is just one of the ways through which man makes his feelings, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, cultures and social events known to others. That apart from verbal communication, for example, when a group of people put on black clothes and walk in groups or procession, they are speaking a loud language as far as Igbo cultural and conventional practice is concerned. Their language is that of grief, sorrow or sadness resulting from bereavement. If some young palm frond is placed on a piece of land, the language is simple: "Do not trespass because the land is in dispute and when placed in front and back of a car or vehicle, it simply means that the vehicle is carrying a dead body" (154).

The advantage of semiotics as a literary critical theory is that it reveals to the readers that, apart from verbal communication in form of explicitly written words, there are other alternative means through which literary writers express themselves in their novels, plays or poetry. Through the work of semioticians, writers are encouraged to use sign language as a means of expressing their societal conventions, history, beliefs, myths, legends and folklores.

Since semiotics is all about communication both verbal and non-verbal, this researcher feels that it is related to the topic of this paper "The Use of proverbs" as it discusses the use of

language, ideas, expression, beliefs and values of a people and it is also an indispensable source of history and religious values. Through oral means of course, these proverbs give local colour to the novel under study.

Use of Proverbs in Adimora Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*

The story of *The Last of the Strong Ones* revolves around four formidable women - Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka. Adimora Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* addressed herself to the way people tend to see fictional works. People see fictional works as being fictitious, but there must be fact. Ezeigbo made use of the Igbo setting. There are names, proverbs, idioms and practices that epitomize the Igbo culture and Igbo world view. Her works are linked between her fiction and her lived experience. The major source of her stories is her own direct experience through fiction. Oral Aesthetics is highly portrayed in Ezeigbo's works in her constant use of songs, proverbs, lullabies and the Igbo cultural setting. Examples are:

- i. My little one,
Please do not cry;
If you stop crying,
I will give you
The things a child gives
To her younger one (p.129)
- ii. It is the visitor that leaves the homestead, not the land owner. (p.21)

- iii. A traveller's eyes constantly peer at the sky to ascertain the weather condition (p.21).
- iv. Our people say that it is the traveler who must make the return journey and not the owner of the land (p.7).
- v. According to the people, a matter that had been discussed at length and agreed upon only required a nod for its excursion to begin (p.27).
- vi. The bow that shoots the bird, eleke, deserve the prize of a thousand arrows meaning, "the man who succeeds in winning your affection deserves no less honour" (p.27).
- vii. When the tapper enters the palm grove
His heart is filled with joy
When he climbs up the palm tree
And then reclines against his etc
He strikes the palm with his chisel
Gbe nchiki, gbe nchikichiki,
Gbe nchiki, and his heart is filled with joy. (p.32).
- viii. The happy child swings
From branch to branch,
Agile like a monkey,
Nimble like squirrel

On a withbed branch;

The world is a pleasant place

Let the enemy beat a retreat

There is no room for him here. (p.36).

ix. Egbebere bia nje were o-o-o-o!

Egbebere bia nje were o-o-o-o! lullaby (p.67)

x. Those who desire to carry snake must first look for holdalls. (p.206)

xi. When a viper creeps into a house, the household is thrown into a panic. (p.210).

xii. On the day of the hunt, we will stalk the grasscutter in its backyard! (p.212)

This study shows her own personal experiences in her novels and short stories since literature generally evolves from a people's historical and cultural experiences. The novelist endows women with the power of speech as subjects in their use of linguistic features. This is because the novel is a diversity of social speech types, language use also predisposes both sexes along linguistic differences. The novel is an imaginative reconstruction of the history of Uga, a town in South Eastern Nigeria. Woven around the lives of four influential women who flourish alongside their male counterparts in the leadership of their town, the story relates the struggle of a people to free their community from the clutches of meddling British colonialists, chronicling their experience as they resist a disruptive order that threatens their tradition and their humanity. Amidst the dramatic build up to an inevitable collision between tradition and change, the author

embarks on a journey of role re- evaluation and redefinition of womanhood within the context of the Igbo culture. Following the footsteps of Nigeria's first female novelist, Flora Nwapa, who protested the relegation of the Igbo whom in a patriarchal society in her works *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1968), Ezeigbo's work is a reaction to the unacceptable socioeconomic situation of Igbo women in particular and Nigerian women in general, under colonial rule.

Like other novelists in the womanist genre, Ezeigbo is preoccupied with the struggle for change, consciously expressed in the different forms of protest. In the case of *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996) however, the author chooses to 'reconstruct the social realities of the Umuga community by entrenching women in active leadership roles alongside their male counterparts. This can be seen as a deliberate insistence on positive Igbo heroines as a means of drawing attention to the importance and relevance of the woman's voice, despite tradition.

Thus, by tracing the history of the Umuga community through the voices of women and reconstructing the transition process via women's experiences, pains and emotions, the author protests the one sided presentation of gender roles in the writings of men which overlooked the militant role of women in the struggle against Colonialism (C.F. Nina Mba 1997).

Adimora Ezeigbo, through her fictional or novel enlightens her readers on issues concerning her society. Social realities are entailed in her works, these issues are facts. Her novels are stories of vast subjects and settings revealing dramatic situations in the life of ordinary as well as not so ordinary people, with the minutest details never escaping the prying and sensitive gaze of the author. Indeed, the attachment of Adimora Ezeigbo to the short story form and her reluctance to abandon its narratological schema is evident in her incidents, characters, and

episodes of her first novel, *The Last of the Strong Ones* where the handling of materials produced what would seem at first to be an incohesive story. African writers in general and the Nigerian novelists in particular have taken advantage of poetic license, "creativity", "originality", "innovation" and "uniqueness" to manipulate the English language to suit the African milieu, purpose and experience. So, Chinua Achebe brags "I have been given the language (English) and I intend to stretch it to accommodate my African thoughts." Achebe appreciates this gallantry and makes the following proposal:

"The African writer should aim to use English the way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its values as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He shall aim at fashioning out a kind of English, which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experiences" (61).

This singular authority has given rise to the manipulation of the English language by African writers especially the African novelists to suit their communication needs. This has given us the impetus to use linguistic benchmarks to assess Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* to see how she has manipulated the English language to communicate her views to the world. The presence of "cloud" "thunder", "chaos", "violation" and "destruction" which are words usually associated with "jeopardy" in the prologue is an indication of the expected confusion, which colonialism will bring to the one time peaceful Umuga community, their tradition and religion. This is what the Umuada, Oluada and Obufo intend to nip in the bud but they fail. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo uses these natural phenomena stylistically to depict the beauty, harmony, love and peace, which existed among the people before the invasion of Umuga by Kosiri, (colonial masters) who brought in chaos and violation, which signify disharmony, tension, unrest and bitterness.

Adimora-Ezeigbo manipulates language to show detestation and disapproval to Nigerian patriarchal structure. Hence, she uses "actors" to refer to her women instead of "actresses". This choice is purposeful to avoid a sense of attenuation for her women. Therefore, she drops the suffix "-esses", which marks diminution. She uses it from the point of aesthetics to affirm her "womanist" stance, which depicts the whole intent and drive of her works to foreground the unconquerable spirit of her women, which are the type of women she intends to implant in Igbo land, Nigeria and Africa in general.

The Igbo had heavily disjointed and politically independent communities before the invasion of the British colonial government. Due to the incongruity of the Igbo decentralized system required by the indirect rule, British colonial rule was marked with open disagreements and much apprehension. This is the case with Umuga community. The Umuga in no small terms stood against the colonial rule (Kosiri) and all it portends.

Therefore, the Umuga state their unacceptability and abhorrence for 'Kosiri' (colonial masters) or their rule vehemently in the following negative terms: 'the intruders', 'the meddlers', 'the enemy', 'the voracious creatures', 'the offending creatures' and 'an obstacle.' Adimora invents the term, "Kosiri", for stylistic effects. It is neither Igbo nor English, but a metaphor for the colonial government and the colonial masters. The word "Kosiri" and all the terms of negation, which are used to describe it, signify a total rejection of the colonial master and her government.

Adimora-Ezeigbo also uses some affirmative adjectives in the description or qualification of the preferable change and the quality of the Amazonian characters in *The Last of the Strong Ones*. She uses such attributive adjectives to indicate that she does

not want just any kind of change but a “positive” one. Again, she uses such adjectival phrases like “heavy clouds” and “dark cloud” to point towards the state of skepticism, dilemma, bewilderment and uncertainty that pervade Umuga at the moment. In delineating the Oluada, adjectives of quality are used thus: Daughter of Umuga 'wise' in the ways of our land. Ejimnaka, the most respectable Oluada is also described with a most attributive adjective, thus:...a “professional” who knows how to fondle words, restrain feelings and disclose facts. One “gifted” with clarity of thoughts and power of vision, understanding, interpretation and appreciation. Adimora uses these positive adjectives for signification and style. They foreground the uniqueness and significance of the lives of her illustrious women for their self-confidence, self-determined and unconquerable spirits.

According to Susan Arndt, Ezeigbo uses Igbo orature in her works. This fortifies the society's patriarchy, on the fiction of Adimora Ezeigbo. The resources of orature or 'ifo' constitute the raw material and driving force of the fiction, offering the writer a range of stylistic options to create a new understanding of Igbo society and its literature. The understanding in turn, opens up a number of aesthetic, historical and social issues central to viewing the relation between the traditional society which the 'Ifo' seeks to perpetuate and the modern one portrayed in the fiction. The tales thus inspire a strategy of writing which decolonizes and authenticates the fiction of Adimora -Ezeigbo, and at the same time, enables the author to highlight her 'African Feminist commitment' that has zero tolerances for conformist wisdom. What emerges effortlessly and convincingly here is the position that, to challenge Igbo patriarchy and transcend stifling authority successfully or even to express herself well a initiate the crucial dialogue of change in Igbo society, Adimora — Ezeigbo had to understand the need to cooperate with patriarchy. In the view of

Arndt, this cooperation enriches her work, making possible a literature 'critical and entertaining, reflective and aesthetically appealing'.

The beauty in Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996) is her use of historical facts so as to 'make the past present, to bring the distant near'. According to Ofure Alto;

Adimora - Ezeigbo in her *The Last of the Strong Ones* presents a line of female ancestors to equal the male ancestral lineage in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and *No Longer at Ease* (1960) where Obi is presented as the grandson of Okonkwo, begotten by Nwoye, the disclaimed son of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. Historically and biologically, Ezeigbo's descendants should have been more convincing in this genealogy. But Ezeigbo is a woman (166).

The Last of the Strong Ones documents events as they unfold in Igbo history, particularly, the involvement of women in resistance struggles. The task is recording and reconstructing the lives of heroic women in their complementary relationship with men, but certain boundaries do limit the extent of female involvement in spite of their achieving status. The central preoccupation of this text is to highlight women's heroic stature, which the men-orientation of Igbo culture submerges, to locate the presence of female ancestors in the tradition by showing their achievements. Reincarnation as a positive and unifying channel is established through myths, history, and folklore to create awareness of hopes.

Ezeigbo employs narratives in both texts. The characters narrate their stories in reincarnation of *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996) which featured Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka. Ezeigbo's fiction is both critical and entertaining, reflective and aesthetically appealing, warning and illuminating.

It contains the power of social change; if only Akachi Adimora - Ezeigbo were a prophet — then we would be on the eve of a humanist future.

Adimora - Ezeigbo was able to explore the various genres of the Igbo oral tradition in his novel "the pregnancy of the gods" the strategic use of proverbs, the incorporation of traditional folktale, folksongs and norms guiding the societies in his novel all worked to produce a very scintillating and tradition oriented work. The study concentrated on her use of proverbs and tales respectively and their obvious significance and importance in the works under study.

Conclusion

It is clear that the various aspects of oral tradition of Africans are important for enriching the society and moral lives of the people and ensuring continuity of their culture. These are highly effective means of expressing the ideas and values of the communities and teaching young generations the history of their ancestors and helping them improve their self-awareness. This is because they are made for the need to understand their identity. African writers seek to incorporate in their works the African oral tradition in all its diversity. The essence is to resuscitate the culture awareness, which was brutally trampled on by Westernization. These writers used oral traditions as a basis for their works, in order to portray the fact that no matter how enlightened they may be, they are still Africans.

Adimora Ezeigbo, through her fictional novels enlightens her readers on issues concerning her society. Social realities are entailed in her works, these issues are facts. Her novels are stories of vast subjects and settings revealing dramatic situations in the life of ordinary as well as not so ordinary people, with the minutest details never escaping the prying and sensitive gaze of the author.

Indeed, the attachment of Adimora Ezeigbo to the short story form and her reluctance to abandon its narratological schema is evident in her incidents, characters, and episodes of her first novel, *The Last of the Strong Ones* where the handling of materials produced what would seem at first to be an incohesive story.

The novelist submits the language use as reflected in the feminist world-view, deals with women's development and identity and not 'otherness' as patriarchy perceives it. Therefore, through the careful selection of the linguistic items, Ezeigbo extends the limits of the English language to accommodate her perceptions of African cultural world view from the female perspective. The contemporary writers of African literature in a bid to reinstate the rich cultural heritage of African traditions; traditions which were critically transferred orally from our fore fathers down to us and revolutionized through printing with the inception of western civilization incorporated them in their writing. This oral tradition defines our identity as Africans. The major aim of the researcher is to join forces with the aforementioned authors to enjoin readers in the discipline and outside, to ground them in the knowledge and practice of the African oral tradition using relevant texts. Essentially too, African writers of all genres of literature should employ features of oral tradition in their works to include morals and traditions in the present and future generations.

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