

The Use of Proverbs as Essential Ingredients for Communication in Igbo Culture: A Critical Approach to Ikechukwu Asika's *Omalinze*

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Abstract

The African system of communication thrives on proverbs which help in driving salient points home. A study of this nature encourages other scholars to probe into the imagery of writers in Africa, Nigeria and the Igbo race since proverbs help to explore the situation the writers are portraying. This paper explores the use of proverbs as an aspect of oral tradition in Asika's *Omalinze*. Proverb is the form which has proved itself to be of great continuing relevance to modern man. Proverbs are often identified with elderly members of the society. The study discovered that the playwright used his artistic power through proverbs to give an insight in what the culture of Igbo was, through the dramatic setting of Iduu Kingdom. The aim of this study is to explore the use of Igbo proverbs in Asika's *Omalinze*. The plays to be used for the critical illustration of how Asika uses Igbo proverbs in *Omalinze*.

The choice of this play out of several written by Asika anchors on the fact that these plays, more than the other plays of Asika, make use of Igbo cultural background and proverbs. The playwright made use of Igbo setting. There are proverbs, idioms and practices that exemplify the Igbo culture and Igbo worldview. Oral Aesthetic is highly portrayed in Asika's *Omalinze* in his constant use of songs, proverbs and other oral traditions. The paper did a textual analysis of the play using primary and secondary data. The theoretical framework for the study is cultural criticism, which is the study of literature at a work in a social context. They believe that cultural studies must be inter-disciplinary in its tendency. Making use of insights from anthropology, history, sociology, psychology, philosophy and other field. The cultural critics typically make no distinction between high and low culture. The study concludes on the various aspect of oral tradition in order to portray the unique quality of being African in the use of proverbs and creates deep meaning and exploration of African situation in the worldview.

Keywords: Proverbs, Oral tradition, culture, folklore

Introduction

African literature consists of a body of literary works in different languages and genres, ranging from oral literature to literature written in African and colonial languages. In most culture of the world, folklore has always been the earliest type of literature. Folklore which can be called Oral literature is as old as man. It is a type of literature disseminated in a particular community as an intrinsic part of their existence. The literary works that were written in African languages as well as the traditional oral texts went virtually unacknowledged until the late 20th century.

This increased the acceptance of oral traditions in African literature. Therefore, the use of African oral traditions such as proverbs, riddles, songs, folktales, oral narratives and poetry

persisted and generally influenced contemporary African literature (drama, prose and poetry). Ezenwa-Ohaeto in *Contemporary Nigerian Poetry and the Poetics of Orality* once remarked “The exploitation of oral tradition through a synthesized creative crucible enables the modern Nigerian writer to produce fresh, exciting and artistic poetry” (23). Ezenwa-Ohaeto's assertion here clearly expressed the ability of oral traditions such as proverbs, tales, myths etc. to sustain works of African literature. Certainly African literature consists of the orality of verbal communication and absorbs extensively, several cultural elements to communicate and to give African literature a local content. Interestingly too, this consciousness exhibited by most African writers shows the need in the use of African oral traditions such as proverbs in creative works.

Also, folklore can differ from one culture to another in form, text, and context. It exists as a basic component of these cultures where they are transmitted orally from generation to generation.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh in her book *Trends and Issues in Nigerian Literature*, once expressed that:

The oral literature of a people is an embodiment of their ways of life, their culture, and beliefs. Through this medium, these societies ensure the continuity of their cultural heritage. The oral literature therefore comprises of all values, beliefs, and generation of a community of people. These are passed down generation lane through face-to-face contact between the elderly and custodian and the younger generation. (11).

Man is a storytelling being, who loves singing, dancing and religious worship as source of pleasure and mode of being. His aesthetic creations in stories, folktales, songs and myths and proverbs are like today's modern stories, novel and drama

constitute the forms of his social, moral and spiritual communication.

Nigerian writers writing in English are more selective than those writing in Nigerian languages in the use of oral traditions like proverbs, riddles and anecdotes in their creative works. Often, the Nigerian writers who write in English relate the use of oral traditions in their works largely to the stylistic aspects of oral literature. Consequently, most of their works, with a few exceptions, make use of proverbs for purposes of localizing their works. Moreover, this relationship between oral tradition and written literature found in contemporary Nigerian literature can be said to be consistent and seminal. Udentia in *Revolutionary Aesthetics & the African Literary Process* agrees to the claim above when he asserts that:

Modern African literature and the critical response to it are a consequence of two distinct cultural and aesthetic forces: the received traditionalist aesthetic imagination and the aesthetic over-determined by colonialism. The interplay of these two currents sometimes cripples African Creative Productions and critical practice by either confining the literature to the dictates of an immutable traditionalist aesthetic injunction or by foisting on its bastardized forms of Euro-centric aesthetic thinking (24).

The aesthetic-artistic qualities of folklore lie in the context of performance. The most basic characteristic of folklore is that it is a performed expression. FBO Akporobaro in his book *Introduction to African Oral Literature* agreed on this as he expressed.

By this, we mean that an oral literary expression exists as a performance, as a speech accentuated and rendered alive by various gestures, social conventions and the unique occasion in which it is performed. In effect, oral literary forms have their existence and qualities in the act of performance. It is a speech act or discourse whose

beauty of form and aesthetic effects derived from the process and act of its articulation or recreation orally (3). One of the most compelling trends in African literature today remains the constant use of African oral traditions by literary artists. With particular reference to Nigeria, many Nigerian creative works so far produced are steeped in the oral traditions of their indigenous communities, with a strong emphasis on oral performance. There is always a performer in Folklore. To arouse and maintain audience responses and interest is one of the major functions of the oral performers as an artist. Also, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh in her book *Trends and Issues in Nigerian Literature*, explains:

Nigeria has a rich and thriving oral tradition which has existed as long as there was life in the numerous ethnic communities. However, intensive attempts have been made by several uninformed white writers to establish some pointless, even useless hypothesis, namely that the black man has little or no significant oral literature. This assumption that the oral literature is an inevitable by-product of a general Western prejudice regarding some other cultures (11).

The folk tradition in African literature has thus become part of the essential qualities of its literary expression, for the value of work of art transcends its documentary functions as the artist gives expression to perception of which he may not entirely know. Nnolim, on his part, in *Issues in African Literature* brilliantly argues that:

To whatever society (secret or communal) that our traditional folkways and oral tradition appealed, they did have the appreciation of the beautiful in mind - beauty surprised at its own arrival, in addition to performing the following functions: Impart practical wisdom... Provide some didactic purpose by teaching lessons in prudence,

generosity, patience, wisdom, and common sense... Point to moral through songs, sayings, legends, myths and proverbs... Make people, especially younger members of the society, aware of their ethos, their cultural heritage, tribal history, mores, laws... African folkways and their oral tradition dealt with man's dilemma in his existential being and tried to grapple with man's dilemma and adventures in life (110).

Nnolim's assertion above is valid in all ramifications. This is because for the Nigerian writer, Africa has the tradition he needs. As he views at what seems to be different in geographical boundaries, he sees, essentially, the same African people, the similarity of ideas, of patterns, of thoughts, of modes of behaviour. He, thus, tries to put together the relevant ideas and thoughts in his writing. This view, though gradually transforming as a discipline of folklore develop over centuries in Africa and are seriously moving studies of folklore or oral literature in general towards a global perspective. These writers rise up to dispute the erroneous view of the West.

Proverb according Chinua Achebe is the "palm oil that people use to eat words." Proverbs are an embodiment of the people's smartness. They are mnemonics encompassing the intelligence of people's philosophy. Africa continents always view conversation filled with proverb to be linguistically rich and eloquent. They are prerogatives of the wise. They express the truth of African personal and social experience. Proverbs have used by many writers to ascertain some certain facts about life. Through proverbs, one can have deep thought into some philosophical view about life. Achebe in most of his literary works, well used proverbs as means of driving out his point in a concise way.

The traditional African drama, like Asika's *Omanlinze* dramaturgy, often associated with rituals, oral traditions and social

events emphasizes mime, dance, music and costume rather than verbal art alone. Verbal art according to William R. Bascom in *Verbal Art*. Delivered at the sixty-six Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, was proposed as a term to distinguish folktales, myths, legends, proverbs and other „literary forms“ from the other materials which are commonly considered as folklore, where folk refers to a group of people with common culture.” The verbal art, such as proverbs, has influence on contemporary African drama and is particularly significant in Asika Ikechukwu's play. Oral literary forms continued to develop for radio and popular usage despite being new in African plays. Nevertheless, oral traditions including tales, drama, riddles, histories, myths and legends, songs, proverbs and other expressions are frequently employed to educate and entertain African people. Legend story, myths and proverbs additionally serve to remind every community of their ancestors“ heroic deeds, their past and the precedents for their customs and traditions. Essential to folklore, most times, is a concern for presentation and oratory. Rems Umeasiegbu in *Ask the Storyteller: Tales from Northern Nigeria* assesses this notion by accepting that oral tradition is an important aspect of African life. „Proverbs are used in daily intercourse even in the judicial process; tales are told daily and talented storytellers are in high demand” (7). In submission to this, F.B.O Akporobaro in his book posits

Proverbs are essential ingredients in African speech and culture. They are powerful carriage of traditional wisdom, social mores, and are effective means for moral education of all members of the society. Proverbs are humorous, delightful and aesthetically pleasing to the hearers(78).

These critics whose opinions have been projected here are of the view that African proverbs have played a crucial role in giving the literature of the continent African identity, especially as it remains

an imaginative piece that evokes emotion and promotes the beauty of African oral tradition.

Proverbs are common features of conversational eloquence to in African cultures and are of difference according to societal language involved in African society, proverbs are the means by which the people of the society base their arguments and activities of life. These proverbs were rendered orally in the society, most especially by the elders. Nwafor, John Onyema *et al* succinctly states that:

These proverbs were rendered orally in the society especially by elders. The culture of the people rendered orally like: “Our people say that” our elders said that, or “Our fathers said that” or our elders said that”. This has been a bond between the people and their concise statement and an oral tradition loses its originality prior to the influence of Western culture. (108).

The value of proverb to us does not live only in what it reveals of the thought of the past. African proverbs are literary forms which offer the traditional writers, speaker a medium for the projection and accomplishment of varieties of goals, in every conversation or formal conversation. He further says:

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 cause the children to think intuitively. Proverbs are very closely related to riddles. They are expressed briefly and concisely. They involve analogy whether of meaning, sound, rhythm or tone(110).

Most proverbs teach in social contexts. They are didactic – impart moral lessons. Away from the adorning roles, proverbs exhibit enormous socialization potential. In most African communities like the Igbo, elders use them to teach the young wisdom about the world and how to behave. Regarding the educational dimensions of proverb, Finnegan, again comments as follows “Now proverbs often imply some general comment on the way people do, or should, or should not behave” (413). There is need for the infusion of proverbs into the literary works and adoption of various indigenous rhythms in the use of verbal tropes and concepts of space and time to structure quality essence in Nigerian literature. In both traditional and modern context, the proverbs accomplish its social and communicative function in a very delicate form. Proverbs express culture, beliefs and social psychology that it may be agreed that proverbs constitute the genius and life of the people. Jasper Onyekwusi 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).

Proverb does easily change overtime. Proverbs are unique to Africa. They may sometimes give an indication of the moral ideas underlying native attitudes. Proverbs have become a popular saying among people which is meant to advice, teach or warn. To be precise, Igbo proverbs are pithy verbal expressions that express the philosophy and the wisdom of the Igbo. It also embodies the culture and traditions of the Igbo. Umeasiegbu in *The Palm Oil of Speech* states his own definition of Igbo proverb further:

The Igbo word for the proverb is *Ilu*. However, this word

does not help very much in our search for definitions. Every adult knows the meaning of the word, but only few of such people are able to say what makes a statement an *ilu*. Another meaning of *Ilu* is “bitterness”. The *ilu* adds some bitterness to a speech. Just as anything bitter is accessible to a few who can withstand the bitterness, proverbs are inaccessible to most people since their meanings are not apparent to the uninitiated (9).

Despite this difficulty in arriving at a proper definition of Igbo proverbs, certain factors can serve as the origin of Igbo proverbs. These are Igbo tales, customs and traditions, beliefs and religion. Speaking about the nature of Igbo proverbs, Egudu says the characteristics of most Igbo proverbs possess “epigrammatic symmetry and pithiness, balanced structure and poetic rhythm” (77). African believes if one uses proverbs for the knowledgeable, he will be led to deeper knowledge (Etta 2012:198). While Obiechina posits that “Igbo proverbs supply a substratum of meaning and interpretation (and) are so much a part of Igbo oral tradition” (14). Proverb is a form of oral tradition, expressed as coded language of a particular culture but remain an indisputable source of all human wisdom in Africa and among other culture (Etta 199).

In many years ago, African proverbs have gain attention in branding world as a powerful tool for connecting with audience. The significance of African proverbs lies in their ability to convey complex ideas and concepts in concise and memorable way. They are used to express the importance of life and teach lessons of life, moral values, and cultural life to the younger generation. In many African cultures, proverbs are also used to express emotion, solve conflicts and offer advice for a deeper level.

Use of Proverb in Ikechukwu Asika's *Omalinze*

The use of Igbo proverbs in Asika's *Omalinze* is to advise the society against taking rash decision and to embellish the plot. In

Proverb use, the important things are the messages conveyed. The vehicles which convey the messages and the appropriateness of both message and vehicle move according to the context. In the play, there are proverbs, idioms that portray Igbo world view. His works promoted Igbo proverbs and aesthetic expression of Igbo nation. Proverbs express and beautify the culture of a given society. The Igbo proverbs in Asika's *Omalinze*, points out the themes; that of heedlessness, stubbornness, pride and raw determination. In conversations, they lubricate dialogues and equally form warnings as well as guides which lead the protagonist to the prorogations and resolution of the conflicts.

Proverbs are vital in *Omalinze* as every Acts of the play contains a proverb or a wise saying usually considered folk knowledge, which intend to be either advice or say some general truth about the world. The playwright started with the narrator who made use of proverbs and wise saying. He upholds the value of proverbs in Igbo Folklore.

War, they say, is an enemy of mankind. Yet men of all ages have lived and courted this enemy to their doom. And like the foretold death that forbids the doomed dog to perceive even the smell of excreta so have many men followed this pathway to their doom (11).

The barrage of proverbs reflects the Narrator's sophistication as well as points to the great tragedy that happened to Iduu Kingdom – each activity is imbued with danger and difficulty. This proverbs implies the ugly situation that occurred in the kingdom. The narrator opened the play with the word 'war' that suggests that there was war in the land before the main story started. And the effect of this war in the kingdom of Iduu, and how the king Odumegwu III perish in the cause of the war. The proverb expressed the lamentation of the narrator over the tragedy of war in Iduu kingdom.

One salient feature of Asika's plays is his sense of historical and cultural authenticity especially in her language. Though he writes in English, she also devises an African vernacular style of proverbs which strengthens the idiom of Igbo, his native language. It is, therefore, the contention of this study that Asika, a dramatist, achieves an appropriate language for each of his plays, largely through the use of Igbo proverbs. Asika's use of proverbs can function as clues to an understanding of his play because he uses them not merely to add touches of local aesthetics but to sound and reiterate themes of human concern, to embellish the plot of his plays, to castigate or admonish the characters in his plays, to clarify conflict, and to focus on Igbo cultural values. Igbo proverbs provide syntactic values by which the deeds of a tragic hero can be evaluated and measured. Understanding Asika's use of Igbo proverbs can lead to a better appreciation and evaluation of her artistic value to the Igbo community and Africa. In Iduu Kingdom, king Kanayo and his cabinets' conversation often include proverbs. The proverbs are used by them to shorten their rigmare conversation and saves time.

King Kanayo:If a snake does not behave like a snake, then the children will use it the
Firewood (42).

This Igbo proverb shows the courage displayed by King Kanayo to fight a cause against all odds. In establishing the theme of rebellion; a major aspect of the conflict situation in *Omalinze* is the contest between King Kanayo representing a strand of the political class and the *Omalinze* representing poor people of the society whose rights were being denied. We live in the world in which when you are always gentle and quiet, people like to bully you around. And unless you show people that you're being gentle does not mean that you are a doormat, people will take advantage of you. Snake is a very wise animal, hence the old saying “as wise

as serpent “. To be wise in the sense to have understanding of people and situation and to know what is best to do. Snakes only bite people in self- defense which their lives is threatened. Otherwise, they are gentle creatures minding their own business. In the same way, our default approach to life should be gentleness, but when people wants to exploit or mistreat us, we must stand up for ourselves.

The elders uses proverbs are used among them, it is believed that they understand themselves than layman in their midst. They fondly communicate in proverbs Asika capacity to recreate and project African worldview and socio- cultural values by means of English language. Whatever one does as dramatist is done in and through language. As a dramatist, Asika employ language to create a literary world, project characters and situation and situations, give credibility to the narrative and sustain the attention and readership to his audience. The success of his literary work is dependent on his capacity to creatively manipulate Language to achieve his purpose. In *Omalinze*, Asika adapt the English language as means of access to Igbo indigenous culture and aesthetics view. In his drama, the use of proverb by the elders contributes to linguistic competence of the characters and their overall level of proficiency in the art of conversation within the socio- cultural context.

Chief Udeh: ... Tomorrow, the mother hen will surely find a new husband tomorrow, I believe kporo kpoto will display itself before the gaze of cow (43).

It can generally be agreed that proverbs are word of wisdom. They are established in concise statement. They are also a product of cumulative knowledge and experience of the society. That is why proverbs are often with elderly members of the society. For the Igbo, the concept of truth has continuous significance in their lives hence it has been characterized in various ways: in wise sayings, in

proverbs, moral values, even in myth. A lay man denotatively can interpret this as a Mother hen will surely meets her husband tomorrow and also takes the kporo-kpoto as an animate object. Proverbs are connotatively interpreted. One must have critical thinking in order to understand proverb. It is common way to say “goodnight” in Igbo culture, but was said in proverbs.

The use of proverb in Ikechukwu Asika's *Omalinze* showcase his aesthetic creativity in the literary works. Proverbs promotes the existence culture and its mode of expression.

It also believed in Africa, that one who in the affairs of society. Asika's use of proverbs also infuses the play with a uniquely Igbo perspective on a range subjects. Asika places many of these proverbs into the mouth of the narrator, who uses them to comment on the play. A powerful example occurs at the end of the play, when the narrator concludes.

Narrator: Indeed, there is no happiness when there is no wisdom. Wisdom is like a skin Bag and we all carry ours. He who has ear let him hear (78).

This proverb expressed the bitterness of the narrator over the sad ending of the story. Yet this proverb is Ominous.

Here the proverbial expression tells us about the sorrowful death of Omalinze, Hamachi and Egodiniru. With **Omalinze**, Asika uses proverbs to hint the audience of the things going on in the society and cultural view of the society, with relation to the main characters of the play,

King Kanayo. Through proverb, King Kanayo normally expresses this feeling about a particular situation in anger, in argumentative conversation with Omalinze, he said.

King Kanayo: When an Nza bird burns its legs and arms in fire, it

will foolishly think it

Is producing oil...(45).

The mood of the character determines his use of proverbs. They are **mythical and personified**. Denotatively Nza bird is smallest bird among others. But hence it is used as a myth, trying to explain the impossibility of life. It is believed that ``Nza bird`` cannot burn his legs and arms to produce oil, the ``Nza bird`` is personified as a child, who thinks by his growth and development, he can have enough strength to challenge his elders.

In this play proverbs have an important impact on the storyline. All proverbs have some kind of deeper meaning behind them, and is part of Igbo culture. Proverbs are used by people of all ages and statures to tell others about importance of something. The Igbo tribe use proverbs everyday as they are an important is regarded very highly through the clan. Use of proverb makes difficult truth more understandable, for children and adult alike.

Otagburuagu: You must wedge this water now that is still at feet level. You must remove Monkey's hand from soup pot before it turns into human hand ... (66).

... The forest that detests a basket should not grow mushrooms.

My king this what your fate has taken away from you. Pride is what it has buried inside you. Lack of wisdom and pride, two sword of opposing edge; one edge must cut you no doubt and you will wish by heavens that you had listened.(67)

Otagburuagu as a great seer, used proverbs to warn the king of great calamity that is about to fall on the people of Iduu Kingdom to his disobedience to the gods. In Igbo tradition, it is believe there is tendency to end calamity at the small level than to tight it at bigger level. This attributes to this proverb ``you must wedge this water`` warning proverbs that was understood by the elders there.

Another proverb of warning is the proverb used by chief Udeh... Our people say that when gbala gbala become excess it becomes a

typical case of Madness (69)

Anyone who toys with his god, toys with his destiny. As a dramatist, Asika uses this Igbo proverb to castigate and admonish and character of King Kanayo as a man who was headstrong to the gods. On the other hand, such an Igbo proverb depicts the values of Igbo society, values by which king Kanayo lives and dies. This is still pointing of the warning of the king to listen to the instructions of the gods to avoid their calamity.

Also, in Igbo culture, proverbs are commonly used by elders on themselves especially in conversation and the elders use them on children as advising tool or to encourage them. It is forbidden that children use proverbs to elders. They consider a child using proverbs to elders as a rascal.

This was seen in the dialogue between Omalinze and the king, and the reaction of the elders.

Omalinze: After all, a person who kicks the toad only aids his journey (45).

Chief Agumba: (irritated) she uses proverbs for the king. How dare you use proverbs before the king?

Ah! Child, why not beg for your life. The drunken mother hen will soon meet with the mad willy cat.

King Kanayo: A child uses the same proverb as his father should be willing to pay the debt his father owes. When a maiden learn how to talk tough, she should also learn how to provide fish for the soup pot.

Chief Odilora: Ah!, when you warn the ear they will not listen. But when the head goes off, the ear follows it.

Omalinze used proverbs on the king, and there was reactions from the king's cabinets. Chief Agumba was irritated and furiously

scolded Omalinze for such a disgusting attitude. The playwright here expressed through his character that it abomination in African culture for children to use proverbs on elders. The reaction of the elders and the king shows their detestable expression over Omalinze who rascally speaks to the king. In the response of the king, “a child uses the same proverbs as his father should be willing to pay his father owes” when a child considered himself as a grown man, it is believed that he bears the consequences of his action. The king furiously expressed his action on Omalinze's contempt in the midst of elders.

Moreover, an Igbo proverb also serves as a thematic statement to remind one of the major motifs in the plays; for example, the value of genuine achievement, where no evil done by man will go undetected and unpunished and the idea of man as the architect of his own destiny. Thus, on a general note, the Igbo proverbs employed by Asika in *Omalinze* plays a major role in setting the tone of the story appropriately, the embellishment of the plot of the story as well as development of characterization.

Conclusion

African proverbs are rich source of wisdom, cultural heritage and knowledge. They reflect the values and belief of African societies, and give guidance, inspiration and advice. The significance of African proverbs in African culture cannot be over emphasized and their use in educating and empowering the younger generation in African level. Asika's creativity of diction with use of proverbs on his characters, expressed the beauty of literary creativity in art. In the play, Asika's aesthetic view in African literature promotes African literature promotes African culture and educates the society. His audience are put in suspense over the use of proverbs in his play. This oral tradition defines our identity as Africans. The playwright through the play, will educate

the younger generation of the value when proverbs are used in their conversation. And when they frequently use proverbs in their communication it will define their true identity and as well promote and uphold African tradition in the world view.

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