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Contextual Explication of Idioms: Igbo Proverbs in African Drama

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Abstract

Modern African writing can be traced to the history of European education in Africa. The modes of literary expression in the works of modern African writers derive from the language of the colonial educators. Learning, speaking and writing in foreign languages are accompanied by hindrances in translation and transliteration. A consequence of this can be the loss of meaning. But what is the need of communication without meaning? This essay considers the renewed call for language and cultural revival in Nigeria and the important role of proverbs as technical device of writing in the folkloric mode. It examines how Nigerian, specifically Igbo writers, utilize the local language idioms and proverbs as technique to convey meaning, and enrich the wisdom contained in the Nigerian languages which capture the folkloric essence of their local milieu. It also looks at the social and aesthetic functions of local proverbs in African literary writing; how they are derived, and how young writers can emulate the derivative techniques. The discussion further shows that the proverb in folklore is a veritable classroom technique (method) and not style (appearance), that not only generates interest from the candidates whenever it is given as illustration, but also excites nostalgic hunger for their traditional roots. It will also draw a parallel between proverbs which elucidate and sometimes prophesy impending course of action in the plot of a story against idioms which are closed, clannish and more dialectic.

Introduction

This article was inspired by a mail I received from Atlanta Duffy (2009), a designer from the United Kingdom, who wrote: "I am afraid that I am no nearer understanding the proverb about the left

hand..." (19th January); and by difficulties expressed by my student, Omolegho Ehimika, a directing student who had been given the arduous task of taking up *The Village Lamb* as a theatre workshop project. Two issues are outstanding here; one, Miss Duffy is from a background that is culturally different; and two, Miss Ehimika, though African and Nigerian, is Edo, which is also culturally different from the Igbo. If Miss Ehimika is to direct the play, she must familiarize herself with underlying concepts behind the language of the play to aid her interpretation. *The Village Lamb* is a play acclaimed for its rich language and cultural content.

I make extensive reference to the meaning of the proverbs in *The Village Lamb* in the context which they are used. But my concern is limited to the context in which the proverbs therein are used within the Igbo language phraseology, and the skill of translation adopted in crossing the bridge of communication that are linguistically poles apart. The play is a far cry from the knotty verse pattern of T.S. Eliot (*Murder in the Cathedral* or J.P. Clark's *The Raft*, and the deep cultural practices contained in many of Wole Soyinka's works like *A Dance of the Forest*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Strong Breed*, among many. Nonetheless, its own depth of construction makes it worthy of study. In his *Folklore in Nigerian Literature*, Bernth Lindfors acknowledges that only Africans are better equipped to pass judgment on their folkloric heritage; "judgment" being how best to, or how not to write, using the parameters that exist in other cultural literary traditions.

There is a sudden awareness for cultural reawakening, especially in the use of mother tongue, among an increasing number of the Nigerian middle class. But the question that comes to mind is, what percentage of the educated youth of elite background under 30 years of age can speak their indigenous languages effectively (especially if they were not brought up in their cultural environment but in the cities where there are fewer options to the use of the indigenous language or mother tongue)? The loss of the rich, spoken texts of these languages also means the loss of the fundamental resource of discrete proverbs inherent in them. Suffice to say that it is increasingly rare to speak many Nigerian languages with proverbs, especially outside of their original domains. However, as Lindfors

again observes, using the works of Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Cyprian Ekwensi, as critical case studies, as did Aristotle with Sophocles and other Greek tragedians in *The Poetics* (335 BC), for writings “set in tribal society, the narrative itself, is studded with proverbs and similes which help to evoke the cultural milieu” (75).

Modern African literature can be traced to the history of European education in Africa. To this end, the mode of literary expression in English, French, or Portuguese in the works of African writers derives from the language of the colonial educators. As Oscar Brockett affirms, it was the only way to reach a wider audience (663). It is also thought that Africans did not have their own formalized indigenous writing beyond the use of symbolic or representational images which did not survive the weight of modern literary tradition.¹ However; Gerard (1981) disagrees completely with this opinion, contending rather that creative writing in black Africa is at least 1500 years (147-148), a figure that predates the coming of the white man in Africa.

Learning, speaking and writing in foreign languages are accompanied by difficulties that are inevitable with translation and transliteration. One of such impediments is in the loss of *absolute meaning*. The other is the evolution of *multiple meanings*, and the third is that a *shift* could occur in the intended meaning, leading to some vagueness, or ambiguity beyond the author's intention. To this end translations are bugged with phrases that in some cases generate argument in academic discussions. A good example is the translation of the Bible where differences occur in the accounts of the synoptic gospels owing to its translations from its Hebrew originals. Evidence also shows significant drop not only in the depth and richness of the imagery, but also in the flavour and the aesthetics of the first language. A common example of this situation is a reading of the English Bible compared to that in any one of our African languages. The fact that meanings are lost when ideas are translated from one language to another is not unknown to language scholars but the inevitable sharing of ideas and linguistic wisdom of the peoples of other races has continued to make such writings an even more enthralling experience. One such unique

appendage to African literary production is the use of proverbs as an inevitable technical and aesthetic tool as it features in African languages, especially Nigeria. Chinua Achebe (1981) was unequivocal when he stated that "a proverb is both a functional means of communication and also a very elegant means of artistic performance itself. I think that proverbs are both utilitarian and little vignettes of art" (5).

Translating these proverbs calls for the examination of some schools of thought on what translation is and what it is not, and if it is possible to be "faithful", loyal or truthful in translating. Others have in fact, argued whether translation is an art or science. In the submissions, the issue of culture, technique, skill and experience feature prominently in the search for balance and meaning while translating. Kolawole (2007) sums the views in a manner that clarifies the exigency for translation as one among the inevitable tools of "awareness" which closes up those "worlds beyond our own worlds" (83). These "worlds" of course, can be described as the barriers which differences in language pose to communication.

Housen and Kuiken (2009) submit after a study of recent authorities like Shekan (1998), Ellis (2003, 2008) that proficiency in a second language depends on the mastery of a number of variables (461). Such variables include the nuances that are found not only in the phrasal lore but also in the culture that patterns and flavours the aesthetic integrity of such languages. It follows then that effective translation must contend with the stringed triad – complexity, accuracy and fluency required to unearth the complex task of translation.

Kolawole (2000)² wonders whether a translator can truly be faithful when translating a written work from one language to another. But before he came to a conclusion, he analyzed the views of some authorities in two main schools of thought – those who believe that translation is possible and those who do not, or, to the point that "translation is possible only to some extent" (26). In particular, Catfort (1965) is of the opinion that once a translator is able to find an "equivalent textual material in the target language" to replace the one from the source language, then translation is met. Lock and Booths (1965) sees translation from the angle of

“symbols”, where a set of patterned symbols is made to elucidate another set of patterned symbols. Interestingly, Eugene Nida (in Haeseryn 1977:103) makes a slight shift from Catfort by recognizing the knowledge and ability of the translator, and so argues in favour if the translator is able to locate the “closest natural equivalent” both in meaning and style from the source language to the target language. But one must agree with Trediakovski as well that the need for translation supersedes its attendant encumbrances; therefore the fear for loss of meaning should not “question the legitimacy for translating” (36). In conclusion, Kolawole observes that fidelity in translation depends on the objective of the translator toward the original work. If the intention is negative, the work would be approached with every parameter of injustice, or vice versa.

African writing is a product of these vagaries of linguistic crossovers, and often, extra efforts go into writing in a second language, even more so in creative writing. This extra demand is due to the influence of the first language, which demands in most cases a translation or transliteration of age-old traditional expressions like proverbs, idioms and slang. African languages, especially Nigerian languages, employ significant use of proverbs in everyday expressions, and authors from different geographical regions of the country particularly the east and the west have amply demonstrated through their writings how significantly proverbs feature in daily Nigerian communication. To demonstrate how deeply proverbs feature in local African languages, the Yoruba of Western Nigeria say as follows:

- (i) “owe ni esin oro, ti oro ba s’onu, owe ni afi nwa,” which translates to mean, “Proverbs are the root of words, when words tangle, proverbs come to the rescue” By this singular statement, one of the major functions of African proverbs is highlighted, that is, to act as arbiters in resolving certain difficult issues. Does this fact point to the universality of the functions of language? Aristotle in the *Poetics* writes that the functions of language include “(a) the disputation or disproving of a case leveled against a character (b) the resolution or amelioration of a situation; (c) the explanation or the expatiation of a point”

(Poetics II.19; Betiang 2001: 47). In fact, this and many other illustrations as would be given later meet Aristotle's enumeration of the functions of language in its various dimensions. However, the quality of meaning owes largely to the translator's ability to manipulate the transitiveness of verbs. Odebode opines the verb has the "capacity to transmute or reshape in regular and irregular fashion" (149) which if wrongly placed, may lead to further complexity or complete dislocation of meaning.

The density of proverbs makes them complete, independent and self-standing instruments at situational discourses, such that when they are applied they immediately clarify the knotty issues which prompt the invitation of appropriate proverbs relevant to those situations. A counterpart adage that elucidates how deeply interactive proverbs feature in African communication medium is the Igbo people's position that:

- (ii) "ilulu bu *manu Igbo ji eri okwu*," which translates to mean, "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" This statement is internationally credited to Chinua Achebe, but which received literary attention through Bernth Lindfors who also converted the adage to read, "The palm oil with which Achebe's words are eaten" (2002: 73, 2005:158). This means that proverbs act as lubricants that oil expressions in the day to day discussions of the Igbo people.

The use of proverbs for rich and deep expression of wisdom is strongly rooted in language and writing, even in the Bible such that a whole portion of the Bible is devoted to proverbs as a collection of wise sayings far beyond any one defined cultural boundary. The proverbs in the book of proverbs attest to the universality of proverbs in that a sizable portion touches the general human condition the world over as most of them fall in line with what obtains in our own society owing to economic or social pressures, for instance, "being kidnapped and being held for ransom never worries the poor man!" (Proverbs 13: 8). This is a case of he who's down fears no fall; for kidnappers make heavy demands in property or financial terms, and the poor man has neither.

Employing proverbial expressions in African literary writing demands a combination of skill and deep understanding of the indigenous dialect from which the adage originates. That courage is the creative consciousness employed in order to retain the integrity and flavour which the same adage enjoys in the local dialect. But no amount of care taken has been able to effectively curb the degree of loss of that flavour which an adage undergoes in the process of translation. It seems proverbs provide abundant evidence of this depreciation due to the *functional depth* of their *significance* to the *context* in which they are used. For instance, in the Igbo adage above, the phrase in italics transliterates thus "...oil Igbo use in eating words." Linguistically, local dialects most often defy or dilute what stands as the central dialect to the point that the author's dialect reflects in his expression of the proverbs as it would normally apply in his tongue to the extent that only the meaning is retained but not the phrasal integrity. For instance, adage (ii) could further read "Ilulu bu manu Igbo ji *akpa/aha uka*." The new shift with this new phrase presents the adage like an art of weaving (or "proverbs are oil that the Igbo use in arranging words"), but which literally means "proverbs are the palm oil with which the Igbo discuss." Likewise, a simplistic translation of the Yoruba adage above reads thus "proverbs are the horse of words, when words are lost, we use proverbs to *locate* them". Once again, Lindfors acknowledged this much in "Soyinka and the Horses of Speech" (105). However, the words in italics (ii above) stand only as symbols to the word "discussion" or "conversation" while the word "locate" in the horses of speech actually says "look for." This of course is an area for language experts but nonetheless points to its existence as an encumbrance in the plotting of proverbs for dramatic dialogues since playwrights do not narrate in their works but converse.

Beyond Black and Jennings' (2002) definition of communication as being a flow of ideas between people with a feedback, Aristotle again understood the function of the manipulative effects of diction in the expression of thoughts for variety and richness through "the heightening of ordinary words above the common level" (Poetics II.20), and he believes that one of the most effective ways for achieving this is through the use of

“metaphors” or words of varied “connotations” of which, proverbs are made in rich density. In the play, *The Village Lamb*, dialogue between the characters draws extensively from the resource of the Igbo proverb. Take for instance, the scene in which the character Ujowundu says: “The root says that if fresh air were his problem, he would have come up for some” (TVL 78). The air here alludes to Ujowundu in the context, while Uzokwe and his group is the root. The root, an unseen part of the plant as the object looks for another unseen quantity in the atmosphere (air) as the subject.

Techniques of Plotting Proverbs

Technique cannot be at the expense of meaning; meaning being the ability to understand and make sense from a statement. Technique, if nothing else, should aim first and foremost at elucidating meaning, which in fact, is the reason why illustration is usually at the forefront of the search for clarity. As deep and difficult as proverbs may seem, they stand to illustrate, elucidate, and sometimes prophesy an impending curse of action in literary writing, no matter how closed, clannish and dialectic.

Language is the power tool; understanding the first language where the idea originates, and understanding the second language where the idea is to be exported is primary to clear understanding of the stated idea. Then expression is the password for delivery. This of course, recognizes the individual talent in the crafting and knitting of ideas together, and it is a personal gift which is best described as style. According to T.S Eliot, “when we praise a poet, [*it is*] upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else” (1932: 48 – addition in italic mine). On this basis, style differs from technique. Technique to me refers more to the method, the art or process, whereas, style is easily a fashion to adopt after a technique has been introduced or perfected. In teaching and literary writing, meaning is in the method; usually an object or subject is involved. That object or subject is the bearer of the message through metaphor or simile as its “horseman.” According to Marshall McLuhan, “The Message is in the medium” (1987: 7-21); where McLuhan’s “medium” is the object which transmits the message.

Every writer knows and appreciates the intricate search for not only meaning but balance when writing or interpreting in another language, especially those who are privileged to speak more than one language. Michael Powell inadvertently revealed this fact when he read Swinburne's poem of the same title in English and French: "I...spoke the phrase in English "the weariest river", then repeated in French "la riviere La plus lasse," and I shivered with pleasure at the writer's skill in finding in another language the exact words from Swinburne's *Dying Fall*" (1987:4).

Translation of course is hard enough for the professional, and only in rare instances like the one above can it be said to be near exact; it is either better or worse depending on the skill of the interpreter/translator. By "professional" I mean someone who understands the depth of the original language and has good grasp of the second language, and so is able to know when the word or phrase available is not adequate to describe a situation. For instance, this situation is captured perfectly in the opening direction of *Kurunmi* as follows:

The play opens in Kurunmi's "agbo'le", the closest English term for which is "compound". Even this term falls miserably short in portraying the sacred pictorial essence of what an "agbo'le" really is. In this particular "agbo'le", for instance, the gods of the tribe are present in varying images of earth, granite and wood. He also exist, or are believed to exist, the spirits of departed ancestors" (1971: 11).

Rotimi could have used the words "backyard" or "courtyard" but the content of the scenery of the space is difficult to translate; he could not even call it 'personal shrine'.

However, I am of the opinion that transliteration deals a murderous blow to the quality and depth of our Nigerian proverbs. This is due to the missing words in English or the second language, and hence an attempt to avoid an outright murder of the original idea. But this is a conscious attempt only by those who know and respect the sanctity of that word in its original tongue as Rotimi did above. But the other group consists of those who are not just callous

but unlearned in the art to be observed. They lack the kind of learning required to relay the proverbs, or idioms to a second or preferred language. Often, they choose transliteration within their linguistic grasp in the guise of translation. This situation assumed an upward dimension with the rise of home videos in Nigeria's entertainment industry, which together with stand up comic acts, have compounded this watery and unaccepted mode of expression to an alarming proportion. That is, what was previously known as "Onitsha Market Literature" found a new tent in individual or unchecked paperbacks, written as trite as they are spoken in pidgin. The fact that candidates at institutions of higher learning adopt this poor standard of expression is not only disheartening but requires instant redress; it is a despicable trend that every true literary minded scholar should shun.

How proverbs evolve naturally from the voice of the Nigerian

One misconception is that we tend to see proverbs as aphorisms instituted by spiritual forebears. Our ancestors were men and women of their times. In effect, every age-old proverb was first said by somebody. It is not as though an ancestral conference was called in order to device them. A few steps usually precede every proverb; all centre on keen observation and sensible application. They are as follows:

- (i) One is to spend time with the elderly, or the old masters; village elders, and family heads.
- (ii) Travel to your ancestral village, attend village gatherings or community meetings; observe, record and be prepared to try out.
- (iii) Testing: you learn to abandon overused proverbs and think of creating new ones by not only observing but studying people, objects and nature.
- (iv) Listen to folk stories, analyse the images whether they are realistic or abstract.

- (v) Create mental pictures of these objects in action, put pen to paper; take a lead role as if in a tutorial class.
- (vi) Develop a unique technique that you can effectively control. Overtime, this may be your style.

When one talks of observation, Ola Rotimi applied it in *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* in this way when he wrote: "When a bald headed man goes into the shop of a barber, his reason is not to have a haircut; it is another problem" (17). We know that baldness is a condition that connotes lack of hair. There is yet another in the book, "when the vine entwines your roof...it is time to cut it" (66). Vine as valuable as it is should produce only wine and its leave should provide shade not obstacle; in Rotimi's use, it should be a companion or items of comfort. Some proverbs allude to positions of authority or responsibility. The Igbos have often said: "no matter how small the mouse is, he merits his late father's turn of the palm wine." It is an honour that must be accorded the position and the heir must demand it. Rotimi in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* puts it this way to assert his authority and dominion despite his age: "...No matter how long and stout the human neck, on top of it must always sit a head" (7). From here, we can identify two categories of proverbs, those in popular use, and those that are not yet in popular use. By popular use I mean the age-old ones that have become part of daily usage, for instance the Youba and Igbo proverbs translated earlier. Often, they cannot easily be traced to a particular author, but rather have become part of the oral tradition handed down before people learned to express themselves in writing. The second category can easily be traced to its first author, but may not yet be in popular use. But when it is sensibly and effectively applied, the truth is obvious; people identify with it and subsequently adopt it in future discussions. However, the significant thing about a proverb is not in its popularity but in its timelessness; the listener instantly perceives the truth and wisdom in it and instantly identifies with it.

Proverbs are universal, and each geographical settlement has its own approach to proverbs even in the same context. For instance, Soyinka of western Nigeria had written in one of his works, "whom

the gods will kill, they first make mad” while the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria using a domestic animal would tell the obstinate person thus: “When death beckons, the dog would hardly perceive wastes.” Perhaps only those brought up in the villages know that our local dogs relish such wastes as rotten fish, eggs, and meat as to ignore them. Somehow it literally means that when one is possessed, he would hardly heed warnings. Both refer to same situation of describing someone who is headstrong and stubborn.

Yet some particular proverbs serve to alienate people from the crux of a discussion; this example comes handy. For instance, Aligwekwe in *Spellbound* is able to tell Janet owing to her stubbornness that Igbos have seen white people before, and have even given birth to their likes, and so the magic of their presence no longer marvels:

“Tell onyeocha that the swaggering eyeballs of the white one is no longer spectacle, after all, our daughter Chi-Chi the albino, is also a blonde. Tell her.”

But of course, this is not the type of proverb one expects someone who is alien to Igbo culture to grasp easily.

The following are the major functions of African proverbs:

- (a) First, and perhaps foremost, proverbs are regarded and applied as the language of highly refined minds in the African setting. Hence it displays a sign of virtuosity of knowledge and language. It elevates one’s oratory to an art in family or public discussions. That is why it is rarely said by children; not that it is forbidden, but because children do not yet have the mental capacity to draw the complex inferences required to create proverbs beyond the ones they hear.
- (b) Beyond verbal discussion, it is used to give local flavour to African writing, make the ideas richer within the traditional context and situate them better in that milieu. The proverb about the dog illustrates this point.
- (c) It is used to test how deep one knows not only of local dialects, but also of indigenous knowledge systems. As the Igbo say,

“when proverbs are told and explained to the listener, it makes mockery of his mother’s bride price.”

- (d) It serves as coded messages to make prophetic statements in matters of high secrecy. Thus it creates suspense and heightens situations.
- (e) It comes handy to isolate people, especially aliens to that language and culture from the crux of discussions.

Beyond the idiomatic approach which some proverbs adopt, they are meant to convey instant meaning without need for detail in the narration of past events. This will be seen in many of my illustrations that are history related. By technique, I mean that a proverb is like architecture. It has rules; there is need to use the right materials and observe its techniques of construction. If the combining factors are applied wrongly, the building collapses. In the case of creative writing, using proverbs, observations, and coherent syntactic modes are the major materials along the imagination (or what Stephanie Arnold calls the “creative spirit”). It is like a sculptor molding the right images. That major ingredient in terms of content is in our culture. As Traore notes, language serves not only as a vehicle of communication but also a major component of culture. The other ingredient is in the creative writer and his unique gift, which he handles in a style different from any other artist using the materials available within and around him; that special talent singles him out. Eliot observed this much in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In order words, the nuances contained in our indigenous languages have all we need to write for our people’s consumption.

Contextual Explication of Some Igbo Proverbs In *The Village Lamb* (TVL)

From the above, it becomes appropriate to go into a few proverbs in *The Village Lamb* and their significances. For instance, Atlanta Duffy had made reference to the proverb, “the left is nearer to the anus” (10). My reply to Duffy reads as follows:

It means that your next of kin is closer to you. This is because the Igbo revere kola and its presentation has become almost an art. The kola passes from one person to another in the order of relationship by lineage; kindred, clan, village and so on among those present (January 2009).

This is a proverb as well as an idiom in that it has a meaning beyond the immediate surface reference, to a much deeper implication. In the surface meaning, the left hand easily wipes the backside for right handed people. However, in reality, the significance of the proverb point to easy accessibility to problem solving; the inevitability of seeking the assistance of persons owing to “closeness” or “proximity” in the sharing of joys or pains. So the statement was not to say that Uzokwe is sitting next to Ujowundu, in fact, he doesn’t have to be.

The proverb above holds no puzzle to the Igbo person who is rooted in his language and culture; he would know instinctively that Uzokwe is Ujowundu’s brother, clan’s man, village man or the nearest relative geographically among the various people gathered. This proverb is made much clearer in *Spellbound* (2009) where the extent of relationship between them is fully established. It is important to see how the string of proverbs relates to the different contexts in TVL. Of note is when there is a change of decision. For instance, on learning of Amadi’s return, the elders suddenly abandon their earlier choice for him in (Sc 1, 10).

Maduako: The fly says that he washes both fore and hind legs because any pair may take the place of the other. So let no one ask us the reason for this sudden change of choice.

This connects to Ujowundu's apparent disinterest to cooperate but gets a warming from the elders in pressing further their demand:

Uzokwe: There is no need for details here because if we open our past with serious scrutiny, we shall uncover the albino's privacy" (11). The "detail" refers to Ujowundu as Amadi's keeper, not his biological father. However, after subsequent visits and warnings comes "heed to the rumblings in the cloud" "only the deaf dances at the cease of music" (14-15).

This means that drastic consequences will follow. We may as well examine some of the proverbs that are prophetic in the course of the drama; prophetic in that they hint at the direction of the action and conflict of the play. Odome in knowing how long Amadi was away, and the difficulty faced in rousing him says, "but we know that one can't snob his name forever" (20). This comes from his belief that a carrier hardly survives the call, meaning that at some point Amadi's consciousness or resistance will fail him. One of the most emblematic moments in TVL comes coded in the following dialogues which ensue due to Amadi's rudeness:

Okpoka: That boy is rude.

Ujowundu: The oil bean does not explode on a rainy day.

Okpoka: How smart; your oil bean pod must crack under the heat of the coming sun.

Udemba: A log positioned for splitting must fuel the fire no matter the resistance (47).

The use of proverbs above as major vehicle of communication substantiates Aristotle's position that "the disputation or disproving of a case leveled against a character" is one of the major functions of language in a dramatic dialogue. The elders are convinced of the efficacy of the call through invocation; hence rudeness or stubbornness cannot avert that destiny which has been ordained by the oracle. However, as a corollary to that, Ujowundu warns one of the elders of the boomerang effect of desperate ill wish:

- Ujowundu: Remember that the fate of the lamb is like the sore throat; it may be waiting at dawn.
- Udemba: I'm not a suckling, speak your mind.
- Ujowundu: Remember that your great grand father stole a sacred ram and got a curse for it. Hold your tongue; you have offspring (48).

This came to pass because the lamb made his own choice in Udemba's daughter as his local bride. "The village can't deny the lamb his choice if it becomes public knowledge" (65), while he (Amadi) sealed his own fate with his lips:

- Okpoka: Son, would you not like to serve your land?
- Amadi: Yes, if my land has need of me.
- Okpoka: Willingly?
- Amadi: Yes.
- Okpoka: So it's a promise?
- Amadi: Yes, a promise.
- Okpoka: Ujo, the rider can only be wasting his time if the mule refuses to move (51).

It also shows how interestingly some proverbs can wrap up a long debated argument.

The next dialogue is prompted by Amadi's disregard of his keeper's advice. The idiom is obvious when Ujowundu ended Amadi's curiosity on why people avoid him:

- Amadi: Why should a girl look at my neck and tell me that she can't bear the itches of a raw yam?
- Ujowundu: May be your head isn't standing on a neck at all, my son" (45).

The interesting thing about Igbo proverbs and any writer's approach is the choice of making animate the inanimate through personification. This way, every object of nature, animals; reptiles, birds and insects are linguistically equated with man. For instance, "Remember what the cockroach told the house owner, you may starve other occupants of the house, as for me, I can survive on anything." On the surface, not everyone knows that this is quite true of the cockroach; it has alternatives even in clothes or books (*Spellbound*). The other compares animals to humans in the love for material possessions. For instance, "The cat says the reason he buries his excreta after defecation is because people easily lay claim to his property." The truth is that the cat is a secretive animal, and in the villages, a cat's waste is rare sight.

As a teaching technique, one notices that when proverbs are applied in class, it creates excitement; a new form of alertness is created as it is discussed briefly. Such brief moment of digression is consciously kept within focus, and in the context of the issues of the moment. For instance, when there is seeming lack of concentration in class particularly when a controversy arises. One such controversy may due to a suggested stringent measure against those who miss lectures quite often under one excuse or the other. Another might be the lot who fail to submit assignments as at when due, a quick proverb like "a woman with large buttocks will realize what load she has when the race begins" is thrown *Spellbound*. The implication of course is very clear; in the first instance, a student misses the point due to lack of concentration, truancy is worse, and inability to meet target is irresponsibility. The end point is that a score is at stake in continuous assessment, and an examination which adds up to the total result.

Conclusion

There is a proverb to meet every situation. As the corpse would say, "my exit is not abandonment," which to the Igbo means, that the dead maintains presence in another realm as ancestors. But in reality, the Igbo use it to say "good bye." The extensive use of proverb as technique especially in writing is not a consciousness attempt to break away but an attempt to re-evolve the fast disappearing use of

proverbs as an unconscious part of dialogue in everyday communication of the African due to urbanization and the influence of foreign language to the detriment of the first language. It is not only a conscious attempt but a deliberate one to recreate and revalidate the poetic and aesthetic flavours contained in the original mother tongue.

Endnotes

1. The one frequently referred to, and most common of course was the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptian civilization. Transcriptions from their papyrus, especially in their cursive form show a lost heritage as could have been compared to the Greek, Arabic, or Chinese writings of modern times. The works of notable scholars like Carol Andrews' *The Ancient Book of the Dead* (Raymond Faulkner edited, 1990); John Skipp's *Book of the Dead* (1989); Cheik Anta Diop's *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, as well as V.Y Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*; M. Ogbeide's edited *Egypt and her Neighbours: A General Survey* (2005), Lagos: Publishers Express and many more are valuable sources.
2. Detailed quotes of Dostert, Nida, and Trediakovski used in this paragraph can be found in Kolawole's article here referenced.

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