

INTERROGATING THE APPLICATION OF PROVERBS AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL IN BARCLAYS AYOKOROMA'S: *A CHANCE TO SURVIVE*

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Abstract

*The importance of proverbs in African cosmology cannot be underestimated as it plays multifunctional roles. It is used in teaching, communication, writing, molding and modifying characters as well as social interactions. Proverbs are veritable instrument for dramatists, novelists and story tellers in their craft of playwriting. Proverbs play important role in the preservation of our cultures and cultural heritage, thus, keeping it from extinction. The aim of this work is to examine the use of proverbs and their contextual meaning in Barclays Ayokoroma's, *A Chance to Survive* with a view to locating the multifunctional roles of proverbs in communication, teaching ethics, norms, values and cultural heritage. The research uses the content analysis approach of the qualitative research methodology. The result of the analysis shows that the Playwright used proverbs to convey his messages as the lessons were efficient, instructive, motivating and appealing. The study recommends for trainings, workshops and seminars to aspiring writers to emphasize the use of proverbs, not only as a writing tool but for the preservation of our cultural values.*

Keywords: Proverbs, Application, Interrogating, Communication, Tool

Introduction

Communication “is a tool for the empowerment of the populace through sharing of relevant information” (106). The channel of communication ends when the message or information has been received and decoded or understood by the receiver. Microsoft Encarta Dictionary defines communication as the “**exchange of information:** the exchange of information between people, e.g. by means of speaking, writing, or using a common system of signs or behavior **message:** a spoken or written message **act of communicating:** the communicating of information” (np).

Playwrights are agents of communication. Information is passed to the people who read their plays or watch the dramatized work either on stage or screen. By understanding the message from these works, playwrights, novelists and dramatists communicate through their writings. Pius Emiela corroborates the preceding assertion as he relates the playwright's use of drama to a real source of achieving an enduring democratic culture. According to him:

Playwrights use drama as a medium to communicate to the audience to enable the society to grasp the message with ease. Indeed, the playwright makes it palpable that the best way of achieving democratic culture is through creating the nexus among the people involved. To this end, drama portrays a fictional world which in its basic details can stand as the analogous to a real world... knits the effort of the playwrights coherently (77).

Proverb is one of the means the playwright uses in communicating his messages to the people. The study of proverbs is called paremiology (from Greek *παροιμία* - *paroimía*, "proverb") and can be dated back to as far as Aristotle. Proverbs, according to Meider Wolfgang in Azizollah Dabaghi, Elhan Pisbin and Leila Nicknas is “a short generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in metaphorical, fixed and memorable form which is handed down from generation to generation.” (807). In explaining the nature of proverbs, Maria Hanzén submits that:

Proverbs are a part of every language as well as every culture. Proverbs have been used to spread knowledge, wisdom and truths about life from ancient times up until now. They have been considered an important part of the fostering of children, as they signal moral values and exhort common behaviour (1).

Omoera Osakue and Inegbegboh Bridget agree that proverbs are symbolic expressions of people. They describe plant and animal life and all activities of man in the world; they point humanity on the way forward or the acceptable way of living (16). Expatiating on the functions of proverbs, Barthby Mitchel, Mankas Foester and Sysword in Omoera and Inegbegboh opine that “proverbs describe patterns that operate in everyday life, offering us advice on how to conduct ourselves in various situations” (17). From the above, it is clear that proverbs belong to the oral folk tradition handed down through mouth to mouth from generation to generation and has helped in shaping the society through the preservation of standard behaviour and offering moral lessons for the people, thereby, setting behavioural standards. Contributing on the nature and uses of proverbs in African culture, Ruth Fennigan in Beryl Ehondor avers that proverbs are culturally linked to people and cannot be moved or interpreted outside the cultural context as it will produce another meaning. According to her proverbs are “highly culture and context dependent and thus cannot be understood outside the cultural context in which they are spoken as they may have an entirely different meaning” (6). In a related expression, Fennigan further asserts that:

In many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs. The figurative quality of proverbs is especially striking; one of their most noticeable characteristics is their allusive wording, usually in metaphorical form. This also emerges in many of the native words translated as 'proverb' and in the general stress often laid on the significance of speaking in symbolic terms (380).

To further clarify the nature of proverbs, Crystal David in Alimi S.A submits that “the effectiveness of a proverb lies largely in its brevity and directness” (122), while Bernth Ludifors in Charles Nnolim enumerates the functions of proverbs in Achebe's literature to include statements reminding us of some of the motifs in the novel, ...the importance of status, the value of achievement, and the idea of man as a shaper of his destiny; to add touches of local colour and to sound and reiterate themes; and finally, to comment or to warn against foolish and unworthy actions” (36).

Proverbs come with age. Older people use proverbs more than the younger ones. This is also reflected in the adoption of older characters as conveyance of proverbs in literature (drama, novels and stories etc) by writers. This is corroborated by Innocent E. Agu, Evangelista C. Agu and Faith A. Olijeh, where they assert that proverbs “are used to emphasize the words of the wise and are the stock in trade of old people, who use them to convey moral lessons and give advice to the young” (2). Again, adoption of older characters is partly because of the experiences they have gathered in life which they transmit when communicating through proverbs. This is further attested to by Isidore Okpewho in Omoera and Inegbegboh who affirm that “age and experience put them (elders) in a better position to understand the full implication of the wisdom and truth contained in the proverbs and so to impart these to the younger members (21).

Ethics is the study of morality, one of the major topics in philosophy. Microsoft Encarta Dictionary defines it as “the branch of knowledge or academic study devoted to the systematic examination of basic concepts such as truth, existence, reality, causality, and freedom. Etymologically, it is from the Greek word, 'Philosophia'. Philia, meaning love or friendship and sophia meaning wisdom. Literally, it means love of wisdom. Expatiating on the meaning of ethics, Mohammad Chowdhury copiously quoting Kovac, (1996), submits that:

There are three meaning of ethics. Firstly, ethics is commonly taken as a synonym for morality, the universal values and standards of conduct that every rational person wants every other to follow. Secondly, ethics is a well-established branch of philosophy that studies the sources of human values and standards, and struggle to locate them within theories of human individual and social condition. Thirdly, professional ethics, and it is not universal nor is it ethical theory; it refers to the special codes of conduct adhered to by those who are engaged in a common pursuit.

Professional ethics is an integral part of the concept of a profession (1-2).

Proverbs are agents for instilling ethics, gauging human values and standards. They communicate meaning, ideology, principles, morals and ethics. UNESCO 1991 in Chowdhury concur that "morals, values, and ethics are strongly attached to society, spirituality and culture" as the society expects that we imbibe good characters. This is what proverbs teach. Emmanuel Iroh, agrees that understanding the meaning and usage of proverbs "enables the child to know what is good from bad, and understand and tell what is right from wrong as well as accept and practice good manners and behaviours to societal expectations" (48-49). In the southern part of Nigeria, elders prefer to speak in proverbs most of the time. This is because "proverbs serve two important ends. They enable the speaker to give universal status to a special and particular incident and they are used to soften the harshness of words and make them more palatable" (np), without losing the message they want to pass on.

The playwright is saddled with the presentation of themes that will lead to moral and character moulding, good upbringing resulting to a better society. Proverbs provide an authentic source for the playwright to perform this task effectively. This fact is acknowledged by Kasarchi Collins Okpeh who agrees that "there is no gainsaying that the playwright occupies a vital position in the business of societal transformation. All the issues about life find expression in the realm of playwriting one way or the other" (43).

African playwrights, novelists and dramatists use proverbs to drive home their points to their readers. They explain or express themselves better through the use of proverbs as well as add the beauty of African language to their works. Some of these writers include Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Esiaba Irobi, Henry Bellgam, Alex Asigbo, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Barclays Ayakoroma whose work this paper is using as case study. In *Hangmen Also Die*, the proverb, "uneasy lies the head that wears the crown" (93) by Ibiaye explains the troubles that Chiefs or Kings face in their daily responsibility of administering the people. Again, the proverb, "when a blind man cries, there are no tears seen" (98), by Tamara explains the plight of the poor as nobody looks at their condition, nobody is willing to help him, even when his condition is very bad.

Chinua Achebe uses African proverbs to communicate, express his themes and as well as to juxtapose English expressions and language for the understanding of Africans thus clarifying his lessons. His preoccupation in the use of these proverbs is to promote African culture through the transfiguration of proverbs from oral to written, alert Africans on the hidden agenda of the colonial masters which is to keep African perpetually subjugated and to promote African cultural values, ethics and morals embedded in proverbs. A slow look at the following proverbs will enlighten us more. For instance:

1. The man who has never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat" (11).
2. A toad does not run in the day unless something is after it" (21)
3. The fly that has no one to advise it follows the corpse into the grave"
4. Let the slave who sees another cast into a shallow grave know that he will be buried the same way when his day comes" (27).

Gogoi Gitanjali agrees that these proverbs convey different messages. According to him, Achebe's "dexterity in the use of oral elements lies in the way he manipulates their application to suit the different social, cultural and political contexts portrayed in the novels. Through the use of proverbs, Achebe reviews the past, examines the present and assesses the future. This particular linguistic strategy imparts a distinctive characteristic to Achebe's writings (55).

Summary of A Chance to Survive

As the evils perpetrated by their leaders reach alarming height, the youths decide to take their destinies in their hands. They organize a protest/demonstration and urges Oloye to lead them. After some hesitations, he accepts to lead the fight against the misdeeds of the powers that be. He approaches the traditional ruler, HRH (Dr) Kurokaki who received a twenty million compensation for gas explosion from the oil company for his community but decides to marry a seventh wife as well as buying an honorary doctorate degree instead of using it to develop his community or share it equitably to members of his community. He demands good governance and accountability, accusing the traditional ruler of not only being corrupt and fraudulent but "arrogant, impervious to sound advice, malicious and pernicious" (26).

Oloye's mother becomes apprehensive and disturbed about the safety of her son and warns him to tread softly fearing that the powers that be may kill Oloye as they killed his father, late Makpa. Oloye encounters the daughter to HRH and falls in love with her but the relationship is resisted by both parents. All attempts to broker peace between Oloye and HRH fail as HRH plots to kill Oloye by all means. He visits the native doctor to kill Oloye through black magic but unfortunately, it backfires as the spirit of Oloye's father, late Makpa appears and on the mirror instead of that of Oloye and strikes him down, rendering him unconscious. The only solution to revive the king will be through a shock treatment from three electric fishes which must be procured within a specified time.

As the search parties could not find any electric fish in all the ponds visited, the only solution left was to go Oloye's pond for the electric fishes. The elders who approached Oloye did not succeed as he bluntly refused until the arrival of the princess who asked to be left alone with Oloye. After much persuasion from the Princess, Oloye accepts and donates the three electric fishes for resuscitating the king, thus giving him a chance to survive despite the king's refusal to give his blessing for him to marry the princess as well as his attempt to kill Oloye through black magic.

Songs are the coordinating force in most African performances. They are used to garnish performance (Obafemi 14), "No traditional performance can be conceived outside poetry (songs) and folktales, on the one hand... it could be added that of all verbal acts (folktales, proverbs, riddles, incarnation etc), song is the commonest. It features frequently in and outside performances because it is easily accessible".

Selected Proverbs in A Chance to Survive

In scene one, as the agitation for a better society gathers momentum, the youths appoints Oloye to lead them in the fight to free their community from their oppressors, Oloye reminds them of the task ahead that "he who fights and runs away... lives to fight another day" (23). Superficially, it means that we must embrace challenges on gradual basis to avoid running down. Contextually, Oloye is reminding the youths that the task ahead must be face tactically to achieve result. Again, that there is no need for procrastination as the challenges must be faced, notwithstanding the risk. Though this is a paradoxical proverb, it teaches us the need for careful planning before executing a project. It further teaches us to be careful and vigilant; to always know when to retreat as to fight again to win.

In scene two, HRH who is agitated by the moves of the youths to unseat him, remarks that "I am the bone that is too much for the dogs to crack" simply it means that he is strong and can withstand the challenge of the youths in their attempt to unseat him. Contextually, this is also a paradoxical proverb as

HRH compares himself with a hard bone too strong for the dog to crack, thus reassuring himself of his ability and indestructibility. It teaches us to believe and trust in our ability and not to be scared of threats by the opposition. It also teaches us that we must be resilient and not be pessimistic in life and to understand that no matter how difficult a situation seems; it must be defeated by strong determination.

In scene three, Oloye is determined to enforce change in his community despite his mother's attempts to dissuade him by reminding him of the dangers that may accompany his actions. However, Oloye, is undeterred as he reminds his mother that “the wrestling drums wake up unwilling muscles” (29). Contextually, he is only telling his mother that the time has come for actions to be taken against the wrongdoing of the king as the drums have woken up his muscles to take action. It teaches us that motivation is the greatest instrument that awakens one to achieve great success. Again, when motivated, we must not be discouraged but to rise up to the challenge because “an oil palm nut could never be lost in the fire” (29). Here, Oloye reminds his mother that he cannot keep quiet like others when things are going wrong in his community without saying it out and as a true son of his father; he would not sit back and see the king ruin his community and generation without asking questions or challenging the status quo. But his mother quickly reminds him that “the doorstep that has killed one's father is always passed with running footsteps” (29). Contextually, it is reminding Oloye of what killed his father may also kill him if he does not retrace his steps and admonishes him to remember his family history to avoid repeating past mistakes.

In scene six, Oloye joyfully informs his mothers of his plans to get a wife. The mother is elated but on hearing that her would-be daughter in law is the daughter of HRH, her joy was cut short as she tries in vain to convince her son to change his choice but Oloye walks away to his ponds. In her consternation, she turns to crying and calling on the Gods of their fathers and the spirit of her husband Makpa to intervene. She was still praying when HRH walks in unnoticed to warn her about his son's adventures with his daughter and tells her that “what will kill a man starts first as an appetite” (41). Feigning ignorance about what HRH was talking about, HRH further reminds her that “the fly that has no adviser follows the corpse to the grave”(41). Contextually, HRH is warning Oloye to cut off his dream and desire to marry his daughter so that he will not enter into trouble which may eventually lead to his death. He is further telling him that refusal to heed to his advice may lead to his death. The two proverbs are teaching us that our desires over wealth or material acquisition are dangerous and have numerous consequences that may lead to death. Again, that whoever fails to heed to instructions or advice is heading to his ruin. Confidently, Oloye reaffirms that “he that pursues an innocent chicken will surely stumble”. This merely reminds the king that his desire to marry his daughter is genuine and that his detractors will fail as he is sure that no harm will befall him. The lesson here is that if we live a clean life and avoid oppressing the poor or covetousness, we shall overcome all obstacles.

In scene seven, there is an attempt by some elders to settle the rift between HRH and Oloye. The 2nd Chief reminds HRH that the tortoise said that “we should not call him only when whatever that had not happened before, happens” (42). Contextually, they came to settle a quarrel between two warring parties and they will not wait until it gets out of hand before they settle the rift or to wait for an unnatural mystery to happen before applying caution. Therefore, it is good that when two persons are quarrelling, attempts must be made to reconcile them as delay is dangerous and acting swiftly to avoid sad circumstances will bring peace.

Similarly, the 1st Chief further reminds HRH that “if you beat a child with the right hand, you draw him to yourself with the left” (42). This means that punishment must be correctional and aimed at reclaiming the child and should not be borne out of malice. This proverb teaches us to always incorporate love when we discipline younger ones. Love conquers all things and when we correct with love, the child learns in love and it makes an enduring impression on him. Concluding, they reminded HRH that “it is only when the two hands wash each other that they would be clean” (42). This is related to the biblical injunction in Amos 3.3: can two walk together unless they agree? (). This clearly tells us that peaceful cooperation

and understanding creates room for success. So prolonging his anger on his subject will not bring peace or progress as to err is human but to forgive is divine as they urged HRH to use his fatherly love to forgive his subject.

In response, HRH reminded them that “the chicken that strays into the bush exposes itself to the preying python” (44). Similarly, “the chick that leaves the cover of mother hen is a ready target for kites” (44). These two parables have similar meaning. Children must learn to take advice to avoid risking their lives or put in another way, we must pass through our mother's tutelage to make it safely in life.

As Oloyo refuses to be cowed into reneging his proposal to marry princess, HRH's daughter and knowing the stuff he is made of, he reminds them that “a man does not beat his chest before his inlaw” (45), as he has restrained himself from showing off or being disrespectful to them because “it is only a foolish child that plays with fire” (45). This demands that one needs to be focused despite obstacles because for one to be great, one needs to be very careful with everything he comes across in life to avoid destruction.

In scene 8 amidst many challenges, HRH goes to the Native Doctor for divination. Without prompting, the native doctor tells him that a little mosquito is buzzing in his ear. HRH orders him to squash it because “the mosquito that goes to sing in the ear of a man, not to talk of venturing to suck a man's blood, knows that if it is not careful, it will serve as red pomade on the man's face”(47). This is a clear warning that whoever is committing crime should equally accept the consequences which is death. In affirming the order of HRH, the Native Doctor concurs that “it is ignorance that makes a rat to challenge a cat to a wrestling match”(47). This comes as an advice to our younger generation that if anyone wants to attain greatness, he must avoid challenging those stronger than them as it will lead to their death. Imagine a rat challenging a cat who feeds on them. This parable is akin to the Igbo axiom that says “mmadu adighi eche Chi ya aka mgba” meaning that a man does not challenge his god to a wrestling match.

Conclusion

From the analysis, there is no doubt that proverbs enrich the intellectual ability of both the playwright who infuses them in his writings and the reader who reads, interprets and understands them, thus ending the communication channel. Proverbs “are food for thought for the wary and intelligent” (29). They also stimulate the intellect since the “deeper underlying level of meaning of the proverbs is filled with images and symbols that are aesthetically illuminating” (29).

Again, the lessons from the proverbs used by the playwright were enlightening and instructive and are easily assimilated, thus promoting African values, traditions and preventing the African cultures from extinction. This is in line with the findings of Osakue and Inegbeboh who submit that “words in most of the proverbs mean much more than they seem on the surface. The deeper underlying level of meaning of the proverbs is filled with images and symbols that are aesthetically illuminating... proverbs are philosophical, instructive and delightful and have the potentialities of enriching the indigenous knowledge base of the people” (29).

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