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## The Form and Function of Oral Tradition in African Literature: The Literary/Linguistic Study of Proverbs Adaptation by Writers

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### ABSTRACT

Oral tradition is adapted by African writers to spice-up their writing. They seem to explore myths of origin, religion, belief system, socio-political experiences and the vast human experiences in their works. Many African writers both at home and diaspora use the tradition in nostalgia to pin their works in all genres to traditional novels, plays and poetry. Among these writers are Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Amah, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Amos Tutuola, Gabriel Okara, John Pepper Clark, Isidore Okpewho, Niyi Osundare and many others. This paper analyses the oral tradition features in the African literature; explaining in details the cultural milieu as perceived in festivals, dances, funeral songs, songs generally and proverbs. It examined the literary/linguistic use of proverbs in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Devil On The Cross* and Miesoinuma Minima's *Odum Egege*. This paper focuses on the aesthetic values of the oral tradition in African literature using ethnopoetic theory and qualitative design method. The adaptation of oral tradition in African literature is a unifying force that brings the people together to live in peace, unity and love. The use of oral tradition especially the proverb functions to restore morality, wisdom, social justice and above all preserve the cultural heritage of the Africans.

**KEYWORDS:** Form, Function, Oral Tradition, Proverb, African Literature.

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### INTRODUCTION

The word form carries bulk of meaning in each genre of African literature. The form of African oral tradition also means organisation, arrangement, substance and the significance of the oral tradition includes such substance as themes explored based on the people's perception and worldview of the oral tradition. In this paper, it means the people's arrangement of facts and perception of proverbs and how it is adapted in African literature. Under form, it is clear that the people's perception of their oral tradition is arranged and manifests through their worldview. Form gives a clue to the oral tradition and provides a clear message to its observers/adherents. The oral tradition encompasses political, religious, historical, legal, social and psychological features. Wilber Scott highlights on the concept of form and content as organisation of a work thus:

The dichotomy often expressed as form and content – has been for our time an important one since the formalists have argued for the heavy emphasis, in the practice of criticism, upon the way of saying the arrangement of the parts, the “how” of a poem's meaning, while moral critics have attended to the “what” of meaning. (23).

The novel is a new development in African literature which began in late eighteenth century; a long prose narrative that is both factual and fictional created from the author's imaginative human experience. The African novel is preoccupied with experiences bothering on aspects of life that are peculiar to the people in this geographical expression – Africa. Therefore, the African novel explores issues such as farming, worship of gods, marriage, culture, politics, the way of life of the African people in a particular geographical setting. Consequently, every mannerism and idiosyncrasy of Africa is expressible in the African novel.

The African novel draws its themes from culture of the environment and having a good grasp of the content of the African novel, will help in no small ways to identify and reconcile with the cultural and linguistic differences in Africa. When Achebe writes for instance, one sees the Igbo culture in full glee is in *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer At Ease*, *Arrow Of God*, etc. Equally, when one reads Ferdinand Oyono's works, one perceives the Cameroonian culture in conflict with the French colonialists' culture that tends to stifle and annex it to French culture via the French policy of assimilation as could be seen in *House Boy* and *The Old Man And The Medal*. Kamara captures this in his words thus: “True, he is concerned with the burning humiliation, emasculation of the black man's manhood by the white colonial master” (157).

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From this thrust, we see Achebe's humanistic projection of African society. African novelists of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were imbued with a sense of inviolable mission of telling the African side of the story. This in the words of Achebe is "to say where the rain began to beat us". The idea of projecting the African oral tradition in literature through the African literature form was essentially to correct the distorting of African reality imposed by slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and other forces that were used to harm the African cultural values by the Europeans. The wide reception given to contemporary African novels is a good testimony of the success of this genre and of the African experiment. Emenyonu comments on the contribution of the African novel to culture (language): "...African novel by the dexterous way in which they have juxtaposed within the frame work of the conventional novel form, African traditional elements such as songs, sayings, riddles, myths legends and proverbs. Proverbs in particular, have become Africa's distinct contribution to the art of the novel in the modern world" (vii).

The novelistic prose has recorded a remarkable success and contribution to the development of language in Africa. Through the adaptation of the oral tradition in African literature, indigenous language was promoted in literary writing. For instance, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has achieved greatly in writing with his mother-tongue *Gikuyu*; there are so many indigenous literatures (novels) in the local languages such as Igbo and Yoruba languages. Bolland's quoting Bakhtin notes that: "the incorporation of indigenous language into a unitary language and truth, the canonisation of ideological systems... all this determined the content and power of the category of "unitary language" in linguistic and stylistic thought" (3). The African novel developed from cultural affirmation and reconstruction, different confrontations with history as reflected in early novelists' artistic encounter with the histories of their various countries as is evident in their novels such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi *Weep Not Child*, Alan Paton's *Cry The Beloved Country* which protest against lost pride and identity through slavery and colonialism; to protest against Apartheid as in La Guma's *A Walk In The Night*, and Peter Abrahams' *Wild Conquest*. These protests in African novels are pinned down on formalists' tradition concerned with the writer's technical prowess and craft skill. According to Roman Selden and Peter Widdowson, "from this background the formalists set about producing a theory of literature concerned with the writer's technical prowess and craft skill. They avoided the proletarian rhetoric of the poets and artists, but they retained a somewhat mechanistic view of literary process" (29).

Thus, literature is a weapon in the battle of cultural politics and much of the great African literature of the past and present bears witness to the infusion of the oral tradition, with full commitment to African cultural values. Adeola James adds voice in African female writers' use of the oral tradition thus:

The African writer's language as the vehicle of her imagination is shaped by her culture and at times by the fact that her mother-tongue is not English. The language is often, therefore, coloured by the oral tradition, replete with proverbial sayings, information passed down from the elders, colloquial reportage, and sometimes the rambling that often characterises our style of greeting and passing on of information (1).

The African literature, especially the novel has brought tremendous changes in the African continent. To achieve these changes, the African novel has blended the local and foreign flavours; local colour, dialects, customs, administrative and political issues are used to authenticate the setting and the theme to bring to the fore major issues highlighted in the African literature. The list of traditional trend of the African literature is inexhaustible. For instance, the use of Yoruba legend in Soyinka's poetry "IDANRE" is highly explicated in African literature.

### **THE LITERARY TRADITIONS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE**

It is pertinent to note that in all cultures, man listened and spoke before he wrote. This suggests that oral tradition is as old as man in the world. Immediately man invented language in pre-literate societies, he sought ways of saying things pleasantly to his fellow humans. In fact, man's first attempts to create literature are traceable to early man's after labour narration of farming, hunting, fishing and other experiences to his fellow persons in their cave dwelling. During these narrations he tried through peculiar arrangement of words, sometimes in novel forms, to increase the pleasantness of expression and the content and functions of words as carriers of information, education and emotion. It is through these processes that storytelling in form of folktales, proverbs, legends, myths and other emerged.

He tried in these narratives to poke fun at nature and his fellow beings, to provide men with information and entertainment and indeed to communicate to them experiences and emotions. These characteristics of the early man's narrations ever since have remained the functions of literature whether spoken or written which are consequently adapted by writers' especially African writers in African literature. Although the word, literature, suggests a body of knowledge that is the product of imaginative writing, essentially designed to be read, to regard oral literature or orature, an amalgam of oral and literature, first used by Poi Zirimu, a Ugandan linguist and critic, as the beginning of all literary traditions has remained an unavoidable conclusion in all cultures. Ernest Emenyonu's assertion in this matter, especially as it concerns orature among the Igbo, an African ethnic nationality that has demonstrated a remarkable ingenuity for literary creativity in oral and written forms could be generalised for Africa. He writes:

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The foundation of all Igbo literature is the Igbo oral tradition, sometimes known as folklore but more recently called oral performance. Igbo oral literature embodies the literary aspects of Igbo oral performances such as folksongs, folktales, riddles, proverbs, prayer, including incantations, histories, legends, myths, drama, oratory (forensic and otherwise) and festivals.... Contemporary Igbo novel, poetry, or drama is the extension of Igbo oral literature (2).

It is perhaps oral literature of Africans and later modern African literature which blossomed in content, theme and style by drawing from it that made the colonial world reconsider its tags of denigration on Africa. African literature, oral and written, convinced the world that Africa had since time immemorial created and nurtured literary traditions and verbal arts that should be respected in a culture that her people should be proud of. A written word represents meaning first conceptualised in the thought process and which, if necessary, could have been first expressed verbally. It is the outward expression of the mind that ensures the growth and sustenance of the culture. The reality is that orature or oral literature is the beginning of the literary tradition in all cultures.

Literary tradition has been and will continue to be affected by methods and media of preservation that evolve over time. Oral literature is an important point in the evolution of literature. Helen Chukwuma suggests in her efforts to question Andre Jones's attempts to call known forms of oral literature pre-literature thus:

Soon the next generation may talk of post literary forms. Literature remains literature though indeed its content and forms change through time. African literature is an art culture of its own and also serves as background props and sometimes formulaic tools of literary creations (19).

Oral literature is a product of integrated artistic forms. There are three basic forms of orature. They include the narratives (what is spoken), poetry (what is song); and drama (what is acted). These forms are intimately related in orature. All these forms and their function as oral traditions are adapted by writers in their works. There could be a combination of verbal elements and music as in Soyinka's *Idanre* and *Kongi's Harvest*. There are also visual elements consisting of body movements and gestures and this is a dramatic form. Libation texts are poetry in their own right in so far as they involve high linguistic expressions. The expression of proverbs by male elders especially in the masquerade performance in texts, for instance, the *egwugwu* in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* bear eloquent testimony of the adaptation of the African oral tradition by the African writer. The dramatic outing of a masquerade involves carving, painting, costume designing, choreographic practices and some forms of stage craft. All these are aptly described by the writers in their works.

### **OVERVIEW OF PROVERBS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE**

Proverbs have been widely acknowledged as an integral part of African oral and written traditions (Finnegan, 96). Chinua Achebe notes that "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten (99)". In African societies, this emphasises their role in enriching communication and conveying cultural wisdom.

Scholars such as Babatunde, Ohia and Ojaide have analysed the use of proverbs in African literature, highlighting their importance in expressing cultural values and beliefs. Speaking about ogba proverbs in their sociolinguistic relevance, Ben-Fred Ohia avers: "Ogba proverbs are relevant to both oral and written communications within and outside the ogba environment. They are employed to embellish, spice and beautify oral and written communications commonly and proudly explained in ogba people's interpersonal relations through conversations" (55).

Sociolinguistics helps to analyse the language variations, pragmatic functions, and discourse patterns associated with proverbs. Little wonder African literary artists adapt the use of proverbs as an aspect of the oral traditions of the people in their various works. For instance, proverbs may exhibit phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic features that are specific to a particular language or dialect, thus contributing to the construction of language identity. Additionally, proverbs are used strategically in discourse to perform various functions such as conveying advice, resolving conflicts, and reinforcing social norms. Proverbs constitute not only as a rich source of imagery but also serve as projectors of community life. They manifest socio-cultural values and heritage of a particular community life. They equally explicate socio-cultural values and heritage of a particular ethnicity. Proverbs are pleasant expressions which adorn the rhetoric of a people it constitutes a part of the oral tradition of a people, which is unconsciously acquired from generation to generation. It is philosophical, allusive and metaphorical because it refers to some truths outside itself.

The ubiquity of proverbs cannot be overemphasised as each ethnic group in Africa and even in the whole world has its act of proverbs, maxims and popular sayings formulated and collected over generation. These are some of the opinions about what a proverb is, and upon which African writers leverage on in their literary works. This is a peculiar trend in fiction. This trend injects oral tradition (a new trail) into literature. For instance, myths and legends are storytelling events which present fictions with some historical data to prove their authenticity. The oral traditions portray the dynamics of lively and theoretical art form with some characteristics or features of literature. The oral traditional story is purportedly real but with a questionable veracity because of the transience of oral communication. This paper attempts a survey of the pattern of influence of African oral traditions in African

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literature; the fact remains that many African writers utilise the oral tradition of their environments in their works in a bid to derivate or depart from the norms of western literature.

This has necessitated Chinweizu et al to write that “Eurocentric critics like Adrian Roscoe and John Povey claim (rather falsely) that African oral narrative has a negative influence on the African novel because of the limitations of the oral medium” (26). Unmindful of this claim, innovative African writers of the novel rely heavily on the use of the narrative of African oral traditions for structure, theme, and style. Such writers include Ghana’s Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aidoo and Kofi Awoonor; Nigeria’s Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Niyi Osundare, Amos Tutuola and Kenya’s Ngugi Wa Thiongo whose *Devil on the Cross* is heavily influenced by Africa’s oral traditions.

### **ORAL TRADITION IN AFRICAN LITERATURE**

Oral traditions form an integral part of the culture of any group of people. They are also the beliefs and customs which define a community or a people’s lifestyle that dictates their code of conduct. Oral traditions are verbally transmitted. The invention of the print media has not eroded the oral literature; for the inability to get everything in print due to illiteracy and poverty had necessitated the oral transmission of the customs, beliefs and expectations of a race to the young by the elders of a community. Inferentially, therefore oral traditions embody the people’s totality of way of life. Hence writers writing about the environments adapt these traditions to tell the stories of the environments where their works are set. Africa is replete with diverse cultures more importantly these cultures are reflected in oral traditions. The oral traditions of the people reflect the society. The songs sung at play, work, war and funeral; the stories told besides the fire in the hearts of mothers, or outdoors in the moon, cloaked nights, the riddles swapped and completed for, masquerade displays that draw together whole communities in a theatrical frenzy; festivals of the new yam, dramatic enactment at funerals, etc are all part of the oral tradition of the people. “The application of proverbs in speeches and oratorical sayings are all literature: but oral literature” (Chukwuma, vi). The oral traditions of the people manifest their culture, lifestyle and belief. The people believe in customs and traditions. In this work, the purpose is to look at oral tradition in African literature holistically and the proverbs as an aspect of the oral tradition are used to measure the linguistic usage of the proverb in African literature.

Culture is a dynamics phenomenon encompassing the totality of attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and worldviews. In other words, it is these “complex patterns of behaviour and material achievements which are produced, learned and shared by members of a community” (Amehe, 201). Culture is in the tradition of a people and it is used interchangeably as there is culture in tradition and tradition in culture. Basic to the meaning of culture is a sense of refinement as the denotation of being “cultured” suggests. Every human community has its distinctive cultural or traditional patterns through which the totality of what, how, where and when a man in a context is known. One crucial part of culture is language as every culture has a language that best expresses it; there is no culture without a linguistic basis. The statement is still true when it is reversed; there is no natural language without a cultural foundation.

Given the preceding definitions of culture above, it appears curious, if not mischievous, to assume that a human society does not have a culture. This apparent misinformation or disparaging distortion incidentally contributed to the emergence of written African literature. Therefore, any piece of writing that expresses human experience and feelings through imagination is literature. This writing (literature) becomes African when it addresses aspects of African life, society, philosophy and experience regardless of whatever language that attracts its sympathy. Chinua Achebe, an exceptional African literary giant, was taught that Africa had no culture while he studied sub-human race. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, was one of the most read colonial novels at about the time of its publication in 1899. Conrad described Africa as a “wild”, “dark” and “uncivilised” continent. Following Conrad’s novel in 1952 was *Mister Johnson*, a novel of Joyce Cary. Like *Heart of Darkness*, *Mister Johnson* was also quite a popular novel; its reviews suggest it was a more popular read than *Heart of Darkness*. In *Mister Johnson* the protagonist Mr Johnson generally is a “childish, semi-educated African who reinforces colonialist stereotypes about Africa. The profound influence of Conrad’s novel on Achebe’s artistic mission and the author’s uncanny character assassination of Africans have been discussed in Achebe’s essay, “An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” (Achebe, 27).

At the outset of African literature (novel), the language of African literature sparked off a long-standing debate among critics of African literature over the relationship between African authors and the colonial linguistic legacy. This debate which has dominated African literature in the past fifty years stems from the recognition, by African scholars/writers, the status of language to literature, and the close connection between political independence and cultural emancipation. As literary works are cultural artefacts, the basic philosophy is that, the use of colonial languages in African literature is a widening perpetuation of imperialism. Significantly, there has been a sustained polarity of opinion about the appropriate attitude the African writer should adopt towards this phenomenon. These range from the fervidly nationalist to the stridently compromising. Osundare identifies three “attitudes” viz: (i) accommodationist (ii) gradualist and (iii) radicalistic. Instructively, majority of African writers belong to the gradualist” group – (i.e. indigenising the colonial language). Gabriel Okara, Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola, Elechi Amadi, J.P Clark – Bekederemo, Kofi Awoonor, etc and fall into this category. In the main, this linguistic constraint would have informed the device

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of “transliteration” adopted in Okara’s *The Voice*. Ken Saro-Wiwa follows a plural code in a pot-pourri of linguistic codes with which he experimented his novel, *Sozaboy*, for instance, in Nigerian pidgin and his poetry collection “songs in a time of war”, in both Nigerian “standard” English and in Nigerian pidgin.

Several scholars have conducted linguistic analyses of proverbs in African literature to explore their structural and semantic features, some examine the syntactic structures of proverbs, others analyse their phonological and morphological properties and Ohia explores the sociolinguistic analysis. These studies provide valuable insights into the linguistic aspects of proverbs and their role in constructing language identity in African literature. The existing literature on proverbs and language identity in African literature provides a solid foundation for further research on oral tradition in African literature. However, there is still a need for more comprehensive analyses of the linguistic and cultural aspects of proverbs in all genres of African literature, as well as their implications for language identity and cultural representation. In African literature, proverbs are not only expressions but also performative acts that contribute to the construction of language identity. In the drama genre, proverbs relate the concept of performance, (dramatic performance). In plays, that are inherently dramatic performances that bring the characters and their stories to life on stage, proverbs play significant roles. Proverbs in plays are performed by characters, integrating the oral tradition into dramatic performances and emphasising the cultural significance of proverbs in the communities where the plays are set.

### CONCLUSION

Proverbs, as aspects of African oral tradition are speech ornaments used by Africans to embellish and beautify oral and written communications. They equally emphasise words of wisdom to convey precise moral lessons, warnings, advice as they make greater impacts on the minds than ordinary words. If adequate encouragement is given to the communities in terms of developing orthography of the proverbs as well as compiling the proverbs and other components of a people’s oral tradition in a comprehensive document, it will go a long way to preserve them for posterity.

Proverbs are one aspect of the oral traditions which writers use to send their message across to the audience; there are other aspects as mentioned in this discourse such as folklore and mythology. Folklore and mythology encompass the traditional narratives, beliefs, and customs of a community (Ohia, 302). Folklore and mythology are integral parts of a community’s cultural heritage, encompassing traditional mores passed down through generations. They provide a window into a community’s values, worldviews, and historical experiences, often employing symbolic language and imagery to convey cultural meaning. In Miesonuma Minima’s *Odum Egege* for instance, proverbs serve as an essential element that connects the play to the folklore and mythology of Niger Delta Communities. Proverbs in *Odum Egege* encapsulate wisdom, values, and beliefs of the Niger Delta Communities. As part of the region’s folklore, proverbs convey cultural knowledge and serve as a link to the community’s ancestral past.

Proverbs and oral traditions generally in African literature and closely connected to folklore and mythology of the African peoples. They embody cultural values, reflect mythological themes, preserve oral tradition, and employ symbolic communication, demonstrating the richness and complexity of the continents cultural heritage. The African writers leveraged on these qualities of oral tradition to incorporate them in their writings for a clearer message of their works. This study provides a nuanced understanding of the role of proverbs (oral traditions) in African literature and contributes to the broader discourse on the relationship between oral tradition and African literature oral traditions serve as markers of cultural identity and resistance against marginalisation. These are to preoccupations of African writers in using oral traditions in African literature.

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