



REVIEW ARTICLE

PROVERBS IN MODERN AFRICAN DRAMA: EXAMPLES FROM OLA ROTIMI'S
OVONRAMWEN NOGBAISI

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ABSTRACT

Proverb is often linked with wisdom in talk or utterances. People are usually described as wise when they decorate their statements/talk with proverb. Proverb is a stylistic/literary device which people apply in their daily discussions in order to, among others, warn, advise, support, reject or remind a listener/reader. This article, which is analytical, is set to show the use of proverbs in Modern African Drama as a common phenomenon; and equally show the class of people who mostly deploy it in their talks. The specific purpose of the article is to analyze the proverbs deployed by Ola Rotimi in his play, 'Ovonramwen Nogbaisi'. Hence, the analysis is to explicate proverbial meaning therein. The findings include and confirm the use of proverb in the play to reinforce position, emphasize a point, give warning or advice etc. The article concludes that the device (proverb) as deployed by the characters in the play, was an effective tool through which they make their points.

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INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are common features not only in novels (like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*) but also in Modern African Drama texts such as Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and The Jewel* and *Trials of Brother Jero*, Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* and Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru* and many other plays across the continent. This is not surprising since verbal/oral tradition is part of the speech characteristics of African people in general. Therefore, African literary artists are expected to deploy these features in their writings. Doing this gives their writings traditional African touch and texture. Thus, the paper explores Ola Rotimi's play, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, in order to prove that proverbs are important literary features that feature in Modern African Drama. In doing this the playwright uses his linguistic knowledge and artistic prowess to manipulate the language he uses in the play. This leads us to where, why and how he makes use of proverbs in the play.

The Play, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi

This is a historical drama which portrays the bitter contact between Benin Empire represented by Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi and the Britain represented by the white man.

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The god-king Nogbaisi faces a lot of growing challenges and rebellion within the kingdom from different angles which include rebellion from the Iwebo family, Chief Udezi of Akure, Ijekiri traders, Ekpoma elders, and Agbor people. These internal problems are further complicated by the ever determined interference of the Whiteman (external forces) in the affairs of the kingdom. These internal and external forces eventually brought about the downfall of the Oba and his kingdom by the trial of the Benin war lords and the subsequent exile of Ovonramwen Nogbaisi himself.

What is Proverb?

Everyone seems to know what a proverb is. However, scholars have different definitions for the term. Thus, according to Bland (1914: I: xi), a proverb is, A short figurative expression or sentence, currently used, commending or reproving the person or thing to which it is applied, and often containing some moral precept, or rule, for our conduct in life.

And according to Gidley (1974:96) proverb is,

The use of words to illustrate a certain action but completely unrelated to the literal meaning of the words... just as metaphor is the use of words to indicate something different from the literal meaning...

And to Penfield (1983) in Onyejekwe (2001:129), proverb is 'a tool for maintaining traditional norms and values in a sarcastic manner to redirect an erring individual'.

Further, Guoling (1985:1169) defines proverb as 'contracted speech that contains wise saying and wisdom in full meaning'. Again, Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1988) defines proverb as 'a short sentence that people often quote and that gives advice or tells you something about human life and problems in general' (P1156).

Similarly, Webster's New Century Dictionary (2001:515) defines the concept as 'a short traditional saying expressing a truth or moral instruction...'

To conclude our reference to the many definitions of proverb above, we present Bichi's (1997:150) definition of proverb as 'wisdom talk...'

About Drama

Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1988; 427) defines drama as 'a serious play for the theatre, television, or radio'. In every drama, we expect its elements to be brought to light. These elements are: plot, character, thought, action, song and spectacle. Hence, drama, like its counterpart, the prose fiction, utilizes plot and characters, develops its theme and arouses emotions in its dealings with life. The dramatists communicate through the characters they created by using language in a peculiar way (artistically and or figuratively) with the aim to creating aesthetics. Thus, proverb as a genre, is used in modern African drama particularly Ovonramwen Nogbaisi in order to express and convey ideas, send message across, clarify and or emphasize point. This is a style of language use which allows disusing plain language.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The proverbs have been presented in the order they were used in the play and the context under which they were also used. This is because, proverbs are generally understood better if treated in the context they are used. One interesting thing about the play is its richness in proverbs. Another entertaining thing is the major characters' frequent use of proverbs in almost anything he says or explain. In fact, he opens the play with proverb and closes with proverb! Consider the proverbs as they are used therein.

The Proverbs

Some birds dread water; ducks sleep in it. This proverb, which opens the whole play, is used by the main character, Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi. He translates or interprets the proverb to mean 'some men dread trouble, others court trouble'. He uses this proverb while talking to the prisoners from the House of Iwebo who killed his Chief adviser, Uwangie Egiebo. Indeed, they invited a serious trouble which they cannot control. This is why he further says to them, in proverbial statement, 'Your brothers threw ashes in the face of a rising wind. . . in reply, the wind smothered them with the same ashes from their very hands'. On becoming more angry and furious with what the Oba (king) says, one of the prisoner chiefs, Obaruduagbon, replies him using a proverb, that they killed his chief adviser because, according to him, If a

provoked houseboy cannot match his wicked master strength with strength, he maims the master's favourite goat!

The above rude and nasty words caused them their lives because the king became so angry that he immediately orders their immediate sentence to death by hanging; a judgment which chief Ologbosere justifies when he refers to their behavior as unbecoming and unacceptable because, 'first the murder, now rude words'. Ologbosere further gives a rather too late advice to the prisoners (who are also chiefs in the empire) when he uses the proverb to caution them that, '*a man does not test the depth of a river with both feet together*'. It is the whole Iwebo family members that are involved in the fight against the king. On warning the whole Benin people including the Iwebo family members, the king of Benin again uses a proverb that, no matter how long and stout the human neck, on top of it must always sit a head. This is to show his power and position over them: that he is the king and they, the subjects; no matter what they think and or do.

Again, to remind the prisoner chiefs that he is always there though seems to be silent (which people want to take for granted), Ovonramwen says to them, proverbially, because the moon is dim, the eyes of little stars cast a carefree glitter. On showing his supremacy over not only the prisoner chiefs but other subjects in Benin Empire, the Oba reminds them that . . . No matter how long and stout the human neck, on top of it must always sit ahead. In this case, Ovonramwen, the king, and the head in this context, must always remain on top of the Benin people, the neck (no matter how strong or powerful they think they are). In his dealing with the Ijekiri traders who violated the trade agreement of the kingdom by trading directly with the Whitemen, thinking that he is being docile, he says, 'I deal lightly with men no more. Indeed harshly now have I learned that, if like soap you try to make men clean, like soap you will dwindle in the act'. And so, he warns and reminds them that, It is the man with thorns in his foot who limps to meet the man with a pin for help. Thus, he says, for trade embargo to be removed on them, the Ijekiri chiefs have to agree with the terms of relationship between them and the kingdom. That Ijekiri is still under the leadership of Benin Empire. This is where the above proverb can be interpreted to, in this case, mean that it is Ijekiri people that have problem (Man with thorns in his foot) who must meet the king who has the solution (the man with a pin) for help. When reconciling and directing the Ekpoma elders to remain loyal and pay homage to the eldest son of the dead Enogie as the new Head of Ekpoma, they asked what they were going to do in the event that the new Head rules badly. And in his answer to them, Oba Nogbaisi uses a proverb that, you do not predict the temper of the chick still in the egg which means that, they are only being pessimistic in the way the new Head will behave. That they should give the new chief a chance to prove his worth which they agreed with and left. In his attempt to advise the Oba on the need to run a government that is all encompassing, Uzazakpo, the court Jester, recalls and tells the former that, king Adolo, (the father of the present king), used to say, 'a single finger cannot remove a louse from the head'. This means, the king should know that he cannot single handedly rid the empire of the evils in it. He must look for the help of others. Eventually, the support of one of the most courageous Benin war loads, Ologbosere, was sought and gotten. He stood by the side of the king up to the end of the play. Similarly, in trying to show his discomfort with the presence of the

Whitemen and their intent of 'befriending' and 'sincere support' for the progress of Benin Empire, king Ovonramwen, in proverbial language, disagrees with their action since according to him, they are 'like the early morning sun, uninvited, you venture from your home to light up places distant and unknown?'. In fact, to him,

It is not kindness but need for a clean mouth that makes the hippopotamus open its mouth wide for the river bird to peck at. Certainly, from the proverbial statements of king Nogbaisi, we can conclude that all the Whitemen's actions and pretences are for their benefit and not Benin. This is the understanding and position of the king. However, another very important and noteworthy proverb used in the play is the one applied by the court Jester, Uzazakpo. This he uses in the presence of both the king and war lord, Ologbosere, in the king's palace. It is in connection to the Whitemen's departure when the king outrightly refuses to sign the trade treaty between Benin Empire and the Britain. Ologbosere observes and mentions that, their manner of departure was not pleasing and so, was not comfortable with the way they left. Uzazakpo, in response to Ologbosere, says, The waters in a well – silent . . . deep. Beware such waters. The feeling of Uzazakpo is that, the Whitemen are going, not to their land, but to get prepared to fight Benin. Indeed, as the play unfolds, we realize that the Whitemen are indeed 'waters in a well'. Another relevant proverb used in the play and which at the same time needs to be brought to light is the one used by the Oba himself during the war council meetinging his palace. The discussion began on how the empire should face the challengers of the Whitemen who remain adamant on entering Benin by whatever means. To make his point, Ologbosere refers to Benin Empire as 'a fierce snake sleeping' which prompts the Oba to use the proverb that ...Because a fierce snake sleeps, does not mean it has lost the power to kill if rudely vexed!

The Oba, using another proverb, maintains that, if the Whitemen rudely prod them further, in spite of the warning to them, then they will know that, the way a cat walks is not the way it catches a rat!

Again, the Oba makes use of another very striking proverb to remind the Benin that they are really in trouble since they have killed a number of Whitemen. He is sure that the whites are going to retaliate. Thus, he cautions his fellow Benins that, Children of our fathers, Benin, I fear, has this day swallowed a long pestle; now we shall have to sleep standing upright. In defence of his people's action in killing the Whitemen, the Oba, making reference to his ancestors' words of wisdom in responding to General Moor's interrogations, says: If you must blame the hawk for wickedness, first scold mother hen for exposing her children to danger. The above he uses to justify their action since according to him, . . . Indeed, my chiefs did wrong in killing your people. But if the Whitemen had gone back as my chiefs warned them, there would have been no killing. . .

However, not satisfied with the king's excuses for killing his fellow Whitemen, General Moor also, proverbially replies the king that, there can be no smoke without fire to which the latter also agrees. On realizing that he does not have the capacity to fight the Whitemen, the king proverbially informs his chiefs that, he is going into hiding. Thus, he says, one does not try the monkey's tricks on the bush – pigeon, my people. It will fly away. . .

And he concludes 'that is what I'm going to do . . . vanish! They will search for Ovonramwen, but the gods of earth and sky shall blur their vision and confound their minds. I said so' Earlier, the king had already entertained fears that since the Whitemen could win more powerful leaders such as Nana of Ijekiri and Jaja of Opobo, then his could be simpler and easier. He says, If fire can consume the tortoise with the iron – coat, why not the fowl with the feathered gown?

In this case, he means fire (the Whitemen) can easily consume the fowl (Oba Ovonramwen) in much easier way than it does to tortoise with the iron-coat (Nana of ijekiri and Jaja of Opobo). When king Ovonramwen Nogbaisi was finally caught and arrested by the Whitemen in his hiding place (in the forest), one of the Whitemen, Roupell said to him, 'go on, overami – run off' to whom the king says, 'if the ground runs away, where will it go? Nowhere . . . except . . . except to pile up again as ground – which makes the previous running – useless. I run no more!

Finally, after the arrest (which brings about the end of both the Ovonramwen Nogbaisi's leadership and the play itself), king Nogbaisi in his final message to the Queen of England, through her emissaries, says: 'Tell Queen Victoria that at last the big pot of corn has been toppled; now mother hen and her children may rejoice!

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined a number of proverbs as used in Ola Rotimi's Ovonramwen Nogbaisi. Although most of the proverbs used in the play have been identified, not all were analysed and discussed. The paper has revealed that, almost all the proverbs analysed were used by different characters in response or reaction to one another's statement. We have seen this in especially, the king himself. This demonstrates that, proverb use in literary writing particularly drama, helps readers discover the joy of literature by involving them to see how certain proverbs they know could also be used for other purposes and in other contexts. Also, using this oral aspect of literature (the proverb) in drama, helps in preserving the genre for posterity.

The paper proved that African drama texts could be a source of proverbs which show the pattern, thought and life of African people and culture. Indeed, and in line with Bichi (1997: 150), proverbs are a 'wisdom talk'.

Appendix

1. Some birds dread water; ducks sleep in it (P4)
2. Your brothers threw ashes in the face of a rising wind . . . in reply; the wind smothered them with the same ashes from their very hands. (P5)
3. If a provoked houseboy cannot match his wicked master strength with strength, he maims the master's favourite goat! (P5)
4. A man does not test the depth of a river with both feet together (P5)
5. No matter how long and stout the human neck, on top of it must always sit a head (P7)
6. If like soap you try to make men clean, like soap you will dwindle in the act (P8)
7. It is the man with thorns in his foot who limps to meet the man with a pin for help (P8)

8. All fishes eat human flesh, yet it is the shark who bears a bad name (P9)
9. The snail pulls forward, the shell also pulls forward (P11).
10. You do not predict the temper of the chick still in the egg (P12)
11. A single finger cannot remove a louse from the head (P13)
12. A woman without a man is like rich farm- soil without the feel of roots (P18).
13. It is not kindness but the need for a clean mouth that makes the hippopotamus open its mouth wide for the river bird to peck at (P19)
14. Early morning sun, uninvited ventures from where it is (her home) to light up places distant (P19)
15. Shaking the huge iroko tree to make tiny dew – drops fall (P21)
16. The waters in a well – silent . . . but deep. Beware such waters (P20)
17. The hawk does not pick on the chick in sport (P21)
18. The monkey's diarrhea is no concern of the baboon (P31)
19. Our teeth have touched a bone. Which end must we crack? (P33)
20. Because a fierce snake sleeps, does not mean it has lost the power to kill if rudely vexed! (P34)
21. The way a cat walks is not the way it catches a rat! (P34)
22. The eyes . . . the nose . . . are one. Whenever one is hurt, the other sheds water (P35)
23. The python, seeking assurance of adulthood, measures his length with the palm tree (P35)
24. Benin . . .has (this day) swallowed a long pestle; now we shall have to sleep standing upright (P37)
25. Child of the chameleon rarely dies young (P41)
26. Prayer of the orphan: without a father; without a mother – Gods, may my next coming be different (P42)
27. To love someone who does not really love you, is like shaking the giant iroko tree to make tiny dew – drops fall (P44).
28. If you must blame the hawk for wickedness, first scold mother hen for exposing her children to danger (P59-60)
29. If fire can consume the tortoise with the iron – coat, why not the fowl with the feathered gown (P60)
30. One does not try the monkey's tricks on the bush – Pigeon (P63)
31. If the ground runs away, where will it go? (P76)
32. The big pot of corn has been toppled; now mother hen and her children may rejoice! (P78)

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