Use Of Proverbs In Miesoinuma Minima's *Odum Egege*.

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Abstract

The use of proverbs in our day-to-day communication is going extinct due to Western civilization and education, which has viewed it as absurd and old-fashioned and threatened several cultural practices in Nigeria. This paper showcases the use of proverbs in the play and their efficacy as a diction used by the playwright to reach his audience. This paper adopts New Historicism as its theoretical frame work to explain proverbs and their cultural importance in this play. The purpose is to reveal that using proverbs is one way of preserving the Nigerian culture from extinction, including literature reviews from different scholars. Findings showed that Africans, especially Nigerian plays, can survive without proverbs but can be better when garnished with proverbs. Such a trend has, over the decades, been practically proven in different works in the Nigerian dramatic world. The paper concludes that the rich culture and proverbs of the Ibibio, Azumini-Ndoki, and the people of Opuboama should not be ignored. They produce and remain significant cultural ingredients for the sustainability and maintenance of culture and tradition in a typical Nigerian society.

Keywords: **Proverbs, Cultural Studies, Opubo-ama, Azumini, Nene Obu**

Introduction

Oral or Folk literature refers to the imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk-beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have evolved and passed on through the spoken words from one generation to another. Though it is a new field of study without a critical long history and which have not been properly defined as a field of study by different dictionaries. F.B.O. Akpobaro define oral literature as the corpus of artistically significant verbal expression by a group of people evolved and transmitted orally from one generation to another (33}.The above mentioned ,have different definitions of oral literature but goes ahead to note that it has the following genres such as folktale, songs, riddles, proverbs ,myth and legends, ritual performance etc. For the purpose of this study, this research will delve into the use of proverbs in Miesoinuma Minima *Odum Egege*, to reveal that using proverbs is one of the ways of preserving the Nigerian culture from extinction. Chinua Achebe defined Proverb as the oil with which words are eaten (10}. It is a short saying commonly used to express a well-known truth or common fact ascertained by experience or observation. Proverbs are essential ingredient in African speech and culture. Ruth Finnegan defined proverb as a saying in more or less fixe, and form, marked by shortness, sense, and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth expressed in it(18}. They are potent carriers of traditional wisdom and social mores and are effective means for the moral education of all members of society. Proverbs are humorous, delightful and aesthetically pleasing to hear. They express the truth of African personal and social experience and are literary, artistically valuable and semantically significant.

Proverb has proven itself to be of great continuing relevance to modern man. It remains the most powerful and effective instrument for transmitting culture, social morality, manners, and ideas from one generation to another. The reason for its efficacy is that it is an aphorism, a wise saying based upon people's experience; it also reflects the social values and sensibility of the people.

Proverbs have been passed from generation to generation, ensuring the sustainability of traditional, cultural and societal norms. Their socio-geographical experience determines proverbs in Nigeria, and they are attached to theme and content. It conveys messages and makes the receiver valuable or valueless. The functional job that each proverbial statement performs at any given instance is

complex and varied, thereby making it theoretical and metaphorical form. Like Many scholars have written on different topics of the text but none proverbs as an essential ingredient in the play. Though a historical play, the story has themes that judge today's leaders' day-to-day activities.

Literature Review

Odum Egege has been reviewed by few scholars, looking at the playwright's style of presentation, his motif, source of materials, theme and so on. Literature in the main is fictive and includes poems, narratives and dramas. These forms are imitations or fictive representations of some types of what Abrams calls ''natural discourse''(62).This explain, why literature is seen as a reflection of society. It is from this point, that Miesoinuma Minima's *Odum Egege* can be appreciated as a work of art. Writers, write not just for the beauty of writing but to reach their audience with different types of messages.

Adagogo Brown writes that …''Minima selects agents, actions and settings that are able to convey and make both literal and figurative senses…Odum Egege is also an historical and political allegory ,in which the characters and actions that are signified literal''(154).

Tokumbo George states that ''*Odum Egege,* is the tragedy of the play that brings to the fore the thematic content of the play bordering on the resistance to domination, human fallibility, authority and justice''(17).William Wodi is of the opinion that *Odum* Egege is to a great extent a dialogue not only between characters but also between them and the audience. When questions do not find their answers, problems and their solutions, the audience to whom the different sides have been exposed are drawn into it''(18). But Obi Nwakanma views the play differently, he says ''As with other dramatic interrogations of history in the mode of drama and literature, there are bound to be great revisions, but that is hardly the point in *Odum* Egege, because the play is simply a critical intervention more or less in the interpretation of the life and times of Jaja of Opobo''(8). Though not much criticism had been written on the chosen text but non of the review of related literature made a mark on the aesthetics of oral literature in the text, which is the main concern of this work.

Theoretical Framework

The theory to be used in this work is New Historicism. New historicism is a form of literary theory whose goal is to understand history through literature, and literature through its cultural context, It follows the 1950s field of history of ideas and refers to itself as a form of "cultural poetics". It was first developed in the 1980s, primarily through the work of the critic, Stephen Greenbelt, a Berkely English professor and it gained wide spread influence in the 1990s.

The term New Historicism was coined by Greenbelt when he collected a bunch of essays and then, out of a kind desperation to get the introduction done, he wrote that the essays represented something called New Historicism.

Harold Aram Veeser notes some key assumptions that continually reappear in this theory. They include:

1. That literary and non literary texts circulate inseparably.
2. That no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives assess to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature.
3. That a critical method and language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participates in the economy they described.

Before the emergence of New Historicism, the new critics, structuralists and deconstructionists different though they were, shared a formalist approach to interpreting literature. They gave little attention to history and culture, preferring to concentrate on literature. Many critics felt that the former betrayed the social and historical interest that help make many readers and critics care about literature in the first place.

Other critics shared the formalist interest of the new critics, entructuralists, and deconstructionist, seeing literary form as integral to the very ideal of literary study and they felt that a concern with history and culture should go along with an interest in form, complementing it rather than opposing it.

New historicism emerged from critics who hungered for a way to draw on what they had learned from deconstruction and to bring it together with culture and

history to mere background and context with the literature merely reflecting history.

New Historicism and old historicism also see history as certain and stable, as a set of secure facts. New historicism tries to read history and literature together with each influencing the other. For new historicism, history is just as uncertain and complex as literature, and those same principles that are brought to literary interpretation, should also direct how history is read.

In New Historicism, the history already has as much multiplicity and nuance as any work of literature. Moreover, literary texts influence the socio historical world that influences the literary texts, such that the textuality of history and the historicity of texts shape and reshape each other in a continous cycle of mutual influence.

New Historicism is a theory of recovering history for literary studies after the move away from history in New Criticism, Structuralism and Deconstruction. By studying history with the close attention to its multiplicity that associates with deconstruction history is seen as merging historical study with deconstruction, rescuing literary study from its tendency to oversimplify.

To see things as absolute and definite (a mistake that the best historians would not make, but still a problem in much historical study and especially old historicism literary study. New historicists argue that what makes a fact depends on the perspective we look from. It is a construction, not an essence, itself is contigent, i.e it depends on variables and constructed rather than as a stable absolute or essence.

New historicism, therefore, drawing from the increasingly prominent Marxist ideas, tries to restore literature to its social history while retaining the tools of deconstruction and post constructuralism that can help see social history in its multifarious intricacy.

The critics most identified as founding figures of New Historicism are Lious Montrose and Stephen Greenblatt, its was founder, who coined the term. He

prefers to call the method “Cultural poetic” drawing on the structuralist sense of poetic as the study of a larger system (not necessarily a poetic system).

Greenblatt discusses the relation between history and the literature. He tries to sort our what he calls "the circulation of social energy." the way that literature comes not only from individual authors but also from the cultural controversies of an age, with the controversies provoking the literature and the literature interpreting the controversies, in a continuous cycle of exchange and influence.

Greenblatt's idiosyncrasies, however interesting, matter less than the general principle that literature and history shape each other, as opposed to the old-fashioned habit of seeing literature as a passive reflector of history.

We can only view the past through the lens of the present. Therefore, New Historicists believe that to disavow our interests in the present would distort our view of the past more than to own up to our interests frankly. In that way, presentism can offer a strategy for doing historicism better, with alertness to how our view of history depends on our position in the present.

It can make a deliberate strategy out of keeping a measured distance from the past and asking, not what happened then, but how what happened then looks through the lens of our interests now or how what happened then speaks to what is happening now.

Over the years, in the wake of new historicism, historicist critics have grown into better historians, but the intense historical study that goes with historicist criticism is a challenge in itself.

New historicism, to put it plainly, is hard work, we might also wonder how it can translate into the classroom. Many students do not know much history. Some students even turn to literature in part to get away from studying history.

New Historicism is the theory to be applied in this work because, it is a theory as the definition implies whose goal is to understand intellectual history through

literature. It is a theory that will give better understanding of this chosen text, Odum Egege. It gives a better understanding of these texts and reality to history.

Synopsis of the Play

The battle for supremacy and individual and communal rights against the injustices of man to man played prominently in the text, Miesonuma Minimah's *Odum Egege*. Though the play is historical, the playwright uses his poetic license to adjust names, symbols, imagery, diction, plot, to mention a few.

The play starts with the agitations of the Azumini people of Ndoki, who feel the people of Opuboama rob them of their farm produce without getting good returns. This leads to the house of Odum Egege, a known and fearless warrior. Odum Egege organizes the people of Azumini into a formidable team that expels the "Islanders" people of Opuboama out of Azumini. However, the Islander left but not without a fight that left Nwakaku, the daughter of Akara and Mgbeke, dead.

The people of Opuboama refuses the new trade terms given by the Azumini people. This leads to the conflict and calamity that will eventually befall the two countries. The people of Azumini, who want full benefit for their labour, place a trade embargo on the Islanders and seek alternative trade routes and options. Meanwhile, King Jaja, the King of Opuboama and the Chief's council, sees it as a rebellion against the state because, by trade oath with the Azumini people, they automatically become subjects of Opuboama.

King Jaja declares war on Azumini and orders his soldiers to capture Eze Odum Egege alive so that he can face trial for treason felony. The war between the Azumini and the Opuboama becomes so fierce that there are massive casualties from both sides, especially from the Opuboama contingents, who suffer huge losses from men's boats and armaments. King Jaja consults his oracles and deities through the priest, Oruogolo, who says that the gods, including Nene Obu, the Ndoki deity, demand generous human sacrifices. King Jaja generously gives more than he requires, especially to Nene Obu, the Ndoki deity. The Azumini people, led by Eze Odum Egege, also consulted Ete Akpan, the native doctor from Ibibio.

Ete Akpan promises them victory, but only if they make haste in preparation and, most importantly, sacrifice a young adult male who must be a freeborn of Azumini. The elder cast many falls on Ekeke, an ally and in-law of the Islanders. Ekeke refuses to deliver his only son as a sacrificial lamb but substitutes him with an Azumini-born Ibibio Eti Isang. The elders of Azumini become selfish and accept the substitution, which Nene Obu rejects.

The consequences of their actions lead to Azumini's defeat and the capture of Eze Odum Egege by soldiers of Opuboama, as King Jaja sends reinforcements that make the war a success. Oruogolo warns King Jaja to spare the life of Odum Egege, who is only fighting for his suitable "spare Odum Egege's life... The gods have punished him for his error of judgment. There is no just cause…" (117) In defiance, the King goes ahead to sentence Odum Egege to death by skinning him alive. Historically,in Opobo oral tradition, Odum Egege war with King Jaja became one the greatest war fought to retain the inflow of palm oil the source of livelihood of the kingdom of Opobo.

Communication Through Proverb

For ages, proverbs have played vital roles in all parts of Nigeria and African traditional society. Proverbs in Africa remain a unique form of communication, and they have been passed down from generation to generation. As Ruth H. Finnegan rightly points out in *Limba Stories and Storytelling*, it is "marked by terseness of expression by a form different from that of ordinary speech and by a figurative mode of expression abounding in metaphor" (399). Such picture sequences, figurative nature, or poetic quality differentiate proverbs from other everyday speech or discourse forms.

Proverbs are seen as an essential device for embellishing speech, a factor that derives directly from its particular uses of language in Africa. As Nkem Okoh asserts in *Preface to Oral Literature,* "In every African society, proverbs constitute a dominant device, whether in everyday conversation or more serious, formal talk (142)".

A good look into the text shows the playwright's diction in proverbs that dominate the characters' speeches. The proverbs in the text are all original from the Ndoki-

Ibo and Ibani languages and shall be translated into English for proper understanding.

> As the tension from the conflict builds up, Odum Egege tells his people
> *Achuo aja ka ikpe ma ndi mam* (67)
> Let the sacrifice be offered to the gods and let the blame go to reciprocate by responding favourably to their requests.

People use such a proverb to appease people who are worthy of such sacrifice, such that those who offer the sacrifice do that to avoid a war of blame. It is done to satisfy all parties involved in a deal or business agreement. It refers to the sacrifice of a young male of Azumini who has attained puberty as demanded by Nene Obu, the god of the Azumimi people, who promises them victory in return for the sacrifice.

Ekeke is against Azumimi going to war with Opuboama, but he is self-centred, selfish, and also a fifth columnist; he tells them of the impending danger that is hovering around Azumini, the implication of war and the possible outcome, thus:

> *Akara nti ma onu-i"……..*
> *Asi osis kuru uka ana-i a dabgu mmadu*
> *Akara nti ma onughi (mgbe e gburu isi, nti na eso)* (66)

When the ear fails to heed advice when the head is cut, the ear goes with it. It is a warning against heedlessness.

> *Osisi Kuruka a na-i adagbu mmadu*
> The tree that announces its fall cannot fall on people.
> It means to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Whenever there is doubt about an accepted pattern of behaviour, when traditional norms are threatened, or whenever there is doubt about the stipulated line of action, there are always proverbs to buttress and illuminate the wisdom of the traditional code of conduct.

As F.B.O Akokporobaro in *Introduction to African Oral Literature* states that

> The value of proverbs to us does not lie only
> in what it reveal of the thoughts of the past.
> The proverb is a compressed or forceful

> language model for poets today or … speakers who are … artists in words (79).

In both traditional and modern contexts, the Nigerian proverb fulfils its social and communicative function in a very complex form. The playwright lavishly uses proverbs as part of his chosen diction for his characters and characterization to deliver his message to his audience. "*Ekpo kpa eyen ikpaa utong* (A proverb of Anang)" means "when one dies, it is the eyes that die, not the ear. In Anang, people become Ekpo "spirit" at death. Their eyes are closed, and they cannot see, but they are believed to hear all that is said. Therefore, the dead should listen or hear and come to the aid of their children calling on them.

Proverbs are part of African culture and have remained integral to African socio-cultural life. That is why severe issues in traditional settings, such as judgment, incantations, worship, masquerade performances, songs, tales, and so on, are garnished with proverbial ingredients to suit their situation. All proverbs have their origin and are suitably applied in the circumstances, but they can also be borrowed into another culture depending on the situation in which they are needed.

Proverbs are applied to critical issues to describe the situation, so Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* best defines the proverb "as the oil in which words are eaten "(10). Sometimes, the difficulty of a situation might make it impossible to deliver such to the audience. Nigerian proverbs are highly pleasing to the ear, graphic and delightful mode of expression, and they also highlight their artistic feature, as Akpororobara opined that

> … proverbs are all successful forms of communication because of their truthfulness or self-evidence but also because they are immensely pleasing and delightful to hear. Because of the graphic quality, they sweeten speech, making even the unacceptable digestible and acceptable. A touch of humour, laughter, and truth are simultaneously presented in proverbs (312).

Proverbs are forms of communication because they exploit resources such as metaphor, hyperbole, similes, and rhymes. Man has lived with proverbs from

ancient times; proverbs have remained integral to our society. In Africa, especially Nigeria, communication in wise words is incomplete without using proverbs. The message of any traditional interaction and communication is foregrounded by proverbs, which usually leaves the uncultured to marvel and ponder on the proverbial communication.

The Holy Bible recognizes the power and the usefulness of proverbs, thereby using them as words of advice; that is why King Solomon, in his wisdom, uses proverbs to counsel his subjects. For persons seeking spiritual growth, verses from the Book of Proverbs are essential for application. Proverbs 27:17 "Iron sharpeneth iron and one man sharps another." Metals can be sharpened with another metal, just like brethren in the same faith sharpen, encourage, and help each other to grow spiritually in good friendship. This research encourages readers to study the book of Proverbs, packed with great wisdom and advice from King Solomon, the wisest man that ever lived.

Rama Kant Sharma asserts that:

> Proverbs are culturally specific, yet their meaning is universal, and everyone can relate to them somehow and at some level. There is a proverb for almost any situation. We may sometimes not understand a big lecture, but we understand a small proverb quickly because the truth they speak can span the globe (34).

In terms of forms, the proverb is a graphic statement that expresses the truth of life experience. Its beauty and source of delight is that what it says is readily perceived and accepted as an incontrovertible truth. The truth presented in proverbs is not a logical, prior, or intuitive truth; it is often an empirical fact based upon and derived from the people's experience of life, human relationships, and interaction with the world of nature. As Dowell Ighohwo Oba sees proverbs as:

> The value of the corpus of societal proverbs lies not only in the way that strengthens tradition but in the variety of ways in which they may contribute to the life continuity of the given society and the individual who lives in it (68).

Scholars have proposed different types of categories of proverbs, but this research will take a brief look at Richard P. Norrick's analysis of samples of proverbs from

the Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs. Norrick distinguishes five types of figurative proverbs: synecdoche, metaphoric, metonymic, hyperbolic, and paradoxical. It is important to note that Norrick opined that "figurative proverbs have figurative meanings that differ from their literary meaning" (72). These figurative proverbs are Synecdoche, Metaphoric, Metonymic, Hyperbolic and Paradoxical.

Several scholars of oral literature have also come up with other types of proverbs that have covered other spheres of society, such as universal proverbs, regional proverbs, and local proverbs. The fact is that proverbs and sayings are similar in meaning despite their diversity in form and language. While researching the proverbs as topics, I noticed the following noticeable themes: Motherland, Time, Knowledge, Beauty, Health, Work, and many other subjects.

As Jasper Anaoma Onuekwusi, in *Fundamentals of African Oral Literature*, states that:

> Characters in the proverbs have primary and secondary functions. Their primary function is to provide information that educates. Their secondary function is to provide abstract ideas or what has been described as the essence which is applied to the world of reality to obtain an interpretation of the proverb (24)

Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Flora Nwamkpa, Zulu Sofola, Elechi Amadi, Henry Leopold Bell-Gam, Chimamanda Adichie, and so on have applied proverbs in their works, to beautify them. Honeck hints that "one can ask whether there is anything unique about the proverbs genre that makes for its use in literature? He also goes ahead to answer. "One hypothesis is that proverbs are detachable from their original context of use, but can remind a reader of the social norms they embody; that is, the proverbs can retain their general significance despite resituating in some text"(16). Gloria Worugji"s papers "A Call for Change: Traditional African Value and Modern Africa … and "The Exploration of Cultural Conflict in Okot p' Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of O'col*" have more on this.

As it is in stories, there are characters in proverbs, and they are elements, agents, or vehicles for characterization on whom thoughts are built. Characterization in the proverb is not in terms of protagonists or antagonists, qualities of good characters, or even round or flat characters. Characters in proverbs are individuals, animals, plants, spirits, and other supernatural beings, stones, streams, and so on. Jasper Onuekwusi agrees that:

> …the nature of the anatomy of these elements could be used, it is only in terms of the referential carrying over to the world of reality where they become essential in determining the proverb meaning in the application (23)

Characters in proverbs give life to it; in this regard, it can be divided into two broad categories: natural and supernatural. In natural characters, there is the man, woman, child, and their different kinds, such as the short man, tall man, slim man, fat man, the hunchback, the limping man, the hunter, the farmer, the blind, the older man, the older adult, the one-eyed man, the barren woman, the widow and the widower, the loved wife, the sweet-tongued man, the foolish child, the wise child and so on. In this category, parts of the body act as characters, such as the teeth, the hand, the eye, and the leg. Proverbs play crucial role in identifying every aspect of human behaviour through the use of compressed but meaningful words to solve every day to day problems and in turn pass on these form of communication to the next generation**.**

As for animals, all kinds of domestic and wild animals are used to illustrate proverbs. Objects are not exempted, for they also serve their purpose, for all possible objects around man's environment can be used to make proverbial communication effective. Supernatural characters are predominantly spirits of all kinds, including one with two heads, double hands and legs, etc. In using spirits, reverence suggests man's inability to comprehend them fully.

Conclusion

The application of proverbs in the play has helped prove its geographical Nigerianness. People do not ask questions unless there is an audience. That is why a proverb user tries to push the audience to be aware of themselves by putting the proverb in question form, which calls for a response expressed or unexpressed by

the audience. The user takes liberty with an audience that shares the sn to upame cultural heritage with him and can answer his question, if they desire or not. The manner of speaking establishes a relationship that gives the speaker credibility. It also arouses all connotations in which a manner of speaking is owned, shared and cherished.

The proverb is a short and meaningful genre that has a heavy content. The point about it allusiveness has been stressed. Its ability to fall into partitions, categories which necessarily demand pauses in utterance, has been highlighted. Underlying all these is the fact that the proverb is an easily memorisable genre. It is also important to note that proverbs cannot exist in isolation but must carry figuration, which makes them classifiable. In order to ensure memorability that exits in forms, proverbs also admit several syntactical changes that ensure their compact nature. These qualities of the proverbs ensure its survival and contain its exciting artistry.

Miesoinuma Minima artistically presented Nigerian proverbs as his diction in the writing of *Odum Egege,* in which he showcases the rich communication and cultural communication skills of the Ndoki Igbo and the Ibani people through which he reached his audience. The lavish display of proverbs by the playwright gives the text a flavour to behold.

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