

PERFORMANCE CENTRISM IN THE PROVERBS EMPLOYED WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF IDOMA ALEKWU CHANTS

Gabriel Oche UKAH

ochesonforreal@gmail.com

Department of English Language & Literature
Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, Nigeria

Abstract

During chants, Alekwu artists employ many strategies in order to strengthen their positions, clarify issues or simply pass information. Alekwu artists in their chants employ the use of folktales, proverbs, myths, legends, folk songs, anecdotes, riddles and other subgenres of oral literature. In this study, we looked at how Alekwu artists employ proverbs during performance. Their employ of proverbs, as we have seen, have various semantic implications depending on the artist that has employed it and the perspective from which he has used the proverb. We were able to actualize this through the theory of performance centrism which indicates that oral literature is performance based and therefore, to a very large extent, the essence of the literature is only realized through performance. Our primary source of data is an audio recording of the Alekwu masquerades; Ona Akpanta and Oblu Udenyi. All the proverbs are sourced from the performance of Ona Akpanta and Oblu Udenyi with transcription and translation from the Idoma language to English language. We discovered in the study that proverbs used by Alekwu artists have various meanings because they are usually employed during chants as techniques and strategies. We discovered that the same proverbs used by Oblu Udenyi and Ona Akpanta, at different times and occasions, assume different meaning if their positions are swapped.

Introduction

It is not surprising to see the name Professor Robert G. Armstrong mentioned in researches in the Idoma Alekwu literature. This is because one can comfortably argue that he first brought the attention of the world on the Alekwu chant. In the 1950s, he carried out a series of researches in the Idoma oral literature and language and these researches helped to spark scholarly interests on the hitherto obscure area. Although before Armstrong, Dr Roy Clive Abraham had laid what we can refer to as a foundation that Abraham stood on to bring Idoma social and linguistic anthropology to the attention of the world. And this is why the Idoma oral literature Professor, Shamsudeen Amali, attested in these words that Abraham “laid the solid foundation for the promotion of the Idoma language, literature and culture”.

Before the intervention of Dr Roy Clive and Prof. Robert G. Armstrong in Idoma language and oral literature spaces, these critical areas, which are paramount for the development of every society can be said to have been in the dark. Idomaland is blessed with very rich cultural heritage and the study of same will go a long way to laying positive foundation for the overall development of the people. Important among all is the sense of pride such a study will bring into the lives of the people because it reassures them that their past was not devoid of creativity.

The Idoma Alekwu literature is a body of special art forms in the sense that almost all the subgenres of oral literature namely; folktales, dirges, myths, legends, anecdotes, war songs, work songs, lullabies, elegies and dirges are sandwiched fluently and seamlessly in it. Besides these subgenres we have mentioned, we also have the Alekwu dramatic genres which include Alekwu Ogogo, Alekwu Obueche, Alekwu Ohoweklokwa and Eje Alekwu. This clearly shows that the tag “Alekwu poetry” is misleading because it seems to exclude the other genres that are independently featured in what should be properly termed “Alekwu literature”.

The Problem of Oral Literary Research in Idomaland

More attention needs to be given to Idoma traditional literature because it has not been focused on adequately. The lack of scholarly works on Idoma oral literature is enough evidence that the field is yearning for attention of researchers especially from within. The work that has to be done is a far cry from what has been done, considering the abundance of material of oral literature begging for attention. Even the researches carried out by Ruth Finnegan on oral literature in the 60s leading to her groundbreaking publication, and those carried out by Dr Roy C. Abraham and Professor R.G. Armstrong require more investigation, especially owing to modern-day techniques of field research available to scholars.

Only a few scholars have carried out researches on Idoma oral literature judging from what is available. Researchers such as the Shamsudeen Amali, Idris Amali, E. O. Erim, Okpe Okpe, Abah Ikwue, Yakubu Ochefu and Ted Anyebe, Gabriel Oche Ukah have given attention to Idoma oral literature. The efforts of these scholars cannot be said to be sufficient. As a matter of fact and authoritatively as well, no scholar that this researcher is aware of has carried out a study on the proverbs that are sandwiched in Alekwu chant. A few studies have been done on proverbs generally, even though not sufficiently, but studies on proverbs in Alekwu chant can be said to be entirely new and therefore needs urgent scholarly attention.

Oral literature is fast fading away and therefore concerted efforts must be made to research in the area. In many Idoma villages the story telling sessions, riddles and jokes, folk songs usually performed during moonlight have become extinct. This is why Toni Duruaku made the following submission: “Many Nigerian folk heritages including that of the Igbo race are going extinct” (123). In Idomaland the same is the case as. The Alekwu chant is a major sufferer as Ruth Finnegan puts it: “Such creative works of oral literature

are increasingly endangered as globalization and rapid socio-economic change exert... complex pressures on smaller communities..." (18).

Since the Idoma Alekwu chant has not been explored well enough this researcher focusing attention on it such that subgenres such as folktales, proverbs, dirges, elegies, anecdotes, riddles, jokes and other sub-genres of oral literature which are usually integral parts of the Alekwu chants are given attention by scholars.

This Study and the Idoma Alekwu Literature

The practice of singling out a particular subgenre in Alekwu literature for scholarly investigation is new. This scholar, from information available at this point of research, is the first to study folktales usage in Alekwu literature. Our attention in this study is on proverbs in Idoma Alekwu literature. Scholars who have studied Alekwu chants prior to this have only studied the utterances as poetry, bringing out the poetics in them. The proverbs and other genres which feature significantly in Alekwu chants deserve to be examined critically showing the uniqueness of their use by the Alekwu performers. This is because the sub-genres in Alekwu literature are distinct in techniques of employment from their performance outside the Alekwu medium.

Deficit of researched material is one of the major factors militating against research in Idoma Alekwu literature. A major significance of this study is that it promises to be an important addition to researched material available. Although a lot has been written on oral literature, but we need more material on Idoma Alekwu literature hence this research is timely.

This research among other positive results will help bridge the gap between Christianity and African culture. This is because one of the major reasons why oral literature is fading away is westernization, Christianity and globalization. Our people have to know that

many of our ancestral heritages are not harmful but rather useful to us. According to Nwachukwu Agbada, "...folktale tradition is on the wane, due in part to the influence of modernization [and Christianity] ..." (qtd in Duruaku, 125) which many Idoma Christians have shown enthusiasm for. This research will help such people to see oral literature as creativity passed down from generation to generation. The research will help Christians to take pride in the ingenuity of their fore-fathers, rather than despising the rich cultural heritage.

This study is focused on proverbs in Idoma Alekwu chant. Only proverbs used in the Idoma Alekwu chant between Ona Akpanta, Oblu Udenyi and some of the members of the audience whose voice are audible for us to hear in the audio recording will be considered. As we said earlier, the Alekwu artists usually employ other forms of oral literature but our focus is on proverb. We are interesting in seeing how the proverbs have manifested differently from their ordinary, everyday and normal usage during conversation by the Alekwu artists.

Performance Centrism and Proverb Use in Idoma Alekwu Literature

At this juncture, let us begin by defining "performance centrism". It simply means performance centered. Oral literature is performance centered. This means the "literature" in oral literature, unlike its written counterpart, can only be realized or can only manifest through performance. The quality of written literature depends largely on the skill and experience of the writer while in oral literature the dexterity, experience and versatility of the oral artist are only meaningful during performance. No performance, no oral literature.

Ruth Finnegan declares authoritatively thus: "oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion - there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product" (2). It is the same way literacy skill is

central to written literature: drama, prose and poetry. Oral literature without performance is like a piece of poem in the writer's head which has not been put down in written form.

Albert Lord's comment comes handy here because, according to him, "When we realize that the performance is a moment of creation for the singer, we cannot but be amazed at the circumstances under which he creates. Since these circumstances influence oral form we must consider them" (14). Lord's submission is very important because, since the moment of performance is the moment of creation, one cannot expect that all the folktales, proverbs, riddles, myths, legends and anecdotes will be employed the same way they are employed in everyday conversation. This simply means the Alekwu poet for instance creates and recreates with proverbs. And since these proverbs are often used during arguments and debates between two or more Alekwu artists, the user definitely uses the proverbs to his best advantage in order to win the debate.

Contextual Meaning in the Proverbs Used by Ona Akpanta and Oblu Udenyi

According to the Nigerian authority in proverb, Rems Umeasiegbu, "A proverb is any expression recognized by a people as embodying the philosophy and wisdom of their ancestors" (9). He is however quick to add that proverb, over the years, have defied any generally accepted definition, of which the foremost father of proverb, the Archer Taylor evidently refused to give a definition because it varied from culture to culture. One acceptable definition of proverb irrespective of where it comes from is that it is a witty saying.

Godwin Yina defines proverb as "...metaphors of truth calibrated and coated with the candour of wisdom and experience" (122). Proverbs mean more than the words and phrases embodying them. This is why they are metaphors, figurative and rich in great communal wisdom. Every culture has proverb and wisdom is their marker.

What led to this bitter exchange of proverbs between Ona Akpanta and Oblu Udenyi is the kind of reception Ona Akpanta got from Oblu Udenyi and his supporters as he approaches them. From the audio recording, Ona Akpanta seems to be coming closer and closer from afar because his voice keeps growing from faint to loud. It is evident from the recording that Oblu Udenyi and his followers visibly complained. Oblu Udenyi ordered his supporters to find out the Alekwu artist that is making the noise he hears. The following conversation ensues:

IDOMA**ENGLISH**

Oblu Udenyi: Onye gay a uya yo?
noise?

Who has come to make

Who has brought that noise?

Onye bi uya oma wa a?

Noise in my arena!

Uya ole kum!

Look out, look out, tell me (his audience, look out)
gam

Mea eche ka, ma eche ka, ka

His audience: It is Ona Akpanta

Ona Akpanta ne

He is the one with the crowd

Anu bi ewa yoi wa a

Coming with the noise you hear

Yo ge bi uya wa a

Ona Akpanta: It is Ona Akpanta

Ona Akpanta ne

Am I barred from coming here?

E lumggwu nma ama ne?

I have come for burial

Eikwu bi um wa a

Not for anyone at all

O we ohigbu oche dun

Oblu Udenyi: An Alekwu is full of himself

Ekwu I jinu eyi a

The above conversation between Ona Akpanta, Oblu Udenyi and Oblu Udenyi's followers sparked the debate and bitter arguments in which many proverbs were employed by both Alekwu artists and their supporters. Ona Akpanta's major contention is

that his personality has been dragged to the mud by Oblu Udenyi and his followers. First, they referred to his chants as noise, and secondly, Oblu Udenyi referred to the scene of this conversation as his arena while it is actually the compound of the late Abakpa who is lying in state for burial. The Abakpa in question is a distant relation of both Alekwu masquerades. Another comment by Oblu Udenyi which infuriated Ona Akpanta is “An Alekwu is full of himself” referring to him as proud and pompous.

In the course of the bitter arguments caused by perceived unfair treatment from Oblu Udenyi and his supporters, Ona Akpanta had said the following proverb to Oblu Udenyi: “A we oga ne. Oga I ge je ogwunole n”, in English, “You are a stranger. A stranger doesn’t know where the backyard is”. Ona Akpanta told his audience and that of Oblu Udenyi not to take Oblu Udenyi seriously claiming that “as a stranger, Oblu Udenyi can only say strange things”. Ona Akpanta went as far as claiming that Oblu Udenyi belongs to the part of Otukpo that does not belong to the main stream of Otukpo community. He believes only a stranger will challenge his coming to the house of Abakpa. If this proverb had come from Oblu Udenyi to Ona Akpanta, it would have made a little sense because it was Oblu Udenyi who claims the compound as his arena. The proverb coming from Ona sparked a serious conflict.

According to Ona Akpanta, Alekwu masquerades like Oblu Udenyi started counting themselves as Otukpo because there was a time when “a ape to k’ alo le ewa”, in English, “come in let us be many” was allowed in Otukpo. Lending weight to Ona Akpanta’s claims, Erim had reported in his book that “not all Idoma people migrated to the present Idomaland from the Old Kwararafa confederacy. Some [of the] groups joined from other places” (29). It is this scenario that Ona Akpanta is referring to.

Oblu Udenyi was able to turn the table against Ona Akpanta by tracing Ona Akpanta’s lineage to a point where he claimed that a stranger impregnated a woman and that woman was wife to a supposed forefather of Ona Akpanta. Oblu Udenyi claims that Ona Akpanta

is a descendant of that stranger and not Adole, the Otukpo man he claims as his father. In Idomaland, if not Africa as a whole, insults related to paternity are taken very seriously. This is what has sparked the conflict between the Alekwu artists.

Ona Akpanta, after expressing his disappointment and disagreement over Oblu Udenyi's remarks is shocked to hear the following proverb: "E lu Igli che ola enyi me" in English "When they put igli on fire, water finishes". Ordinarily, this proverb is used to advice people to accept guilt when they are wrong but in this case, we later learnt in the cause of the arguments of the two Alekwu artists that it has been used to question Ona Akpanta's paternity and therefore rubbing his anger over the statement "my arena!". This proverb distances him from kinship with the deceased Abakpa. If this proverb had come from the offended Ona Akpanta, it would have meant "when you apologize for your wrongdoing the matter is resolved" or "apology brings peace and ends squabbles" just as water finishes when igli is on fire. We can see that one proverb can mean two or more different things depending on whether it has come from the aggressor or the offended.

After a long conversation and arguments between the two Alekwu poets and with occasional interjections by their audience and supporters, Ona Akpanta said the proverb: "O le adou le igbefe a", which means "the owner of the farm is the owner of the log of wood in it". This proverb is what Oblu Udenyi holds onto as evidence that Ona Akpanta recognizes the truth about his paternity. Ona Akpanta has other meanings in mind instead. If this proverb had come from Oblu Udenyi, it would have been an allegation, an attack, character assassination, insinuation and a psychological aggression. But the proverb coming from Ona has changed its semantic implication. It now means "I am legitimate son of whoever my mother said my father was". From Oblu Udenyi it would mean "You are child of the man responsible for your mother's pregnancy and not your mother's husband".

The debate went on until Oblu Udenyi said two proverbs critical to their argument. The first: “A ka ibana onowa, o we echa na cha ibana n. Ege n’ ibana le a na chabonu a”, in English, “When you say red ibana, you have not insulted ibana. You have simply described ibana”. This proverb functions to address perceived anger noticed in the tone of Ona’s argument. Ona has become emotional at this point even to the extent of declaring that Oblu is his junior in age. With this proverb, Oblu seems to be saying “I am only calling a spade a spade, so you don’t have to be angry”. At the utterance of this proverb, Ona flared even the more to an extent that Oblu at this point can be heard calling for calm and accusing Ona and his supporters of making the debate noisy.

Oblu’s response to Ona’s vituperations is yet another proverb indicating his unwillingness to be cowed to submission in the face of insults and throwing of tantrums by Ona and his already violent and insult-ready supporters. The proverb: “N le oyiole gba le ofie gba n”, in English, “I will not honour a son of the soil and honour a slave”. This proverb is directly addressed to Ona who Oblu thinks is asking for too much. Whatever niceties Ona thinks he deserves from Oblu, Oblu believes is not deserving of an illegitimate child parading himself as a bona fide indigene.

Conclusion

We have discussed, in this paper, the semantic implication of proverbs when employed or used in Alekwu literature as technique or strategy outside their everyday usage. When proverbs are used as techniques especially during debates by Idoma Alekwu artists, a whole new body of meanings becomes a great possibility because the meaning becomes subject to the perspective from which the Alekwu artist is coming from. The meaning of the proverbs when employed depends on the level of desperation, trickery and sometimes dishonesty of the artist. This is why Ona Akpanta and Oblu Udenyi, in their use of proverbs, are involved in a “dance of shame” unbecoming of Alekwu artists to the extent that in the recording, we can visibly hear some members of the audience pleading with

the Alekwu artists to eschew such displays of inanity bereft of exemplariness which Alekwu artists should be associated with. This critical study has shown that the proverbs mean different things when they come from either of the Alekwu artists.

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