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A Sample Survey of Etulo Proverbs as Integral Tool for Traditional Discourse

Shi Victor Vincent

Department of English, Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria

Email address

talk2docshiv28@gmail.com

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Abstract

A painstaking search within the African traditional societies awfully reveals that so many are still without an alphabet so that (their) proverbs which constitute very integral discourse materials, in any society, are immensely endangered. Even though they are employed by members of the communities for various occasions and diverse functions orally, they still stand chances of overbearing modifications by individuals and subsequent extinctions if not collected and preserved. Most societies today have their proverbs, as a genre in folklore, strictly identified with them. The invention or manipulation vary according to the communities because it is generally argued by scholars that African proverbs offer insight into African philosophical thought, cosmology and worldview, so that collectively their proverbs form a communication system that preserves and transmits the accumulated cultural and spiritual values of the people. The thrust of this paper is to collect the Etulo proverbs since she is one of those communities whose orature has not been given attention adequately owing to facts that she has had no letter. Only recently did Jerry Adams begin an independent work on the people's alphabet. This study plays a role in preserving a sample of Etulo proverbs for discourse in traditional setting and particularly for posterity.

1. Introduction

"A thousand books may not total one strand of the beard of a quiet proverb"--Niyi Osundare

Among the various genres or sub genres of the folk speech, proverb is the most significant and creative and has also stood the longest time in oral tradition. As one of the most important genres of African folk-speech, it is a device of rhetoric which enables the speaker to present a speech in a more concise and more picturesque manner than in ordinary expression. In both traditional and modern context, proverbs fulfill social and communicative function in a very complex way. It could also fit into the syntax of speech as figurative expression. The proverb is a stylistic device with a semantic force. Culturally, proverb is a rhetorical device which offers the speaker a veritable medium for the projection and fulfillment of a variety of socially desired goals. Wherever there is doubt about a stipulated line of action or perhaps whenever certain traditional norms are threatened there are always proverbs to provide answers.

Albert emphasized that proverbs are used to procure a gift and protection from a superior, to obtain a favourable judgment in a case, to defend oneself against calumny and to succeed. Indeed proverbs do provide answers to all human communication problems. It is rewarding to establish that proverbs according Stith Thompson comes from many sources-anonymous and all of them difficult to trace. Their first appearance

in literary form is often an adaptation of an oral saying. Stith adds that these proverbs sometimes embody superstitions, whether lore or medical advice etc. Most literate societies value their proverbs and are engaged in collecting them for posterity. They have been used in ancient clime for ethical instruction and particularly in Verdic writings of India to expound philosophical ideals.

Proverbs can be couched in different words; it is a rich source of imaginary and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can draw. The Bosman believes that “proverbs in conversation are torches in darkness”. According to the Persians, “proverbs are the adornment of speech” and the Romans assert that “Proverbs are salt-pits from which you may extract salt and sprinkle it where you will”, according to the Igbo, “the proverb are the palm oil which words are eaten” and to the Yoruba “a vehicle of conversation, when conversation drops, a proverb revives it”. For Fortress (2013:10), “There was already in place a well established oral and performance tradition centered on the natural environment long before the first contact with the West.” This implies that Yoruba proverbs are as old as the users of the language itself. If this fact is anything to go by then the Etulo’s proverbs is as old as its users too. The foundation is embedded in the wisdom of the Etulo culture and cosmology. It is therefore pertinent to stress that proverbs are the vehicle for understanding the depth of the language. The above definitions echo elaborately the genre as an integral spectrum of every traditional discourse.

In the manipulation of proverbs in a traditional discourse, the Etulo’s do also have a high regard for proverbs which is called “Ito oze” and literally it means deep, terse statement. It is often used by elders and more fashionable among men of substance but on the other hand the youth rarely employ this in conversation. The survey and collection of this corpus of proverbs is carried out among the Etulo people of Adi, Buruku Local Government and Kastina-Ala Local Government. The Etulos are notably located around two notable rivers in Benue State of Nigeria: they are river Katsina Ala by the west and by the south is river Buruku. It is evidenced that the older class are coincidentally the custodians of the “Ito oze”. There is no formal restriction in the use of proverbs as individuals of all ages could explore this in their communication. Because of the rarity of use of the genre in their communication system, it is becoming apparently difficult to access their ideals, essentials of their values and cosmology so this precarious situation predicates the rationale for this concise study. However in an interview with Osundare, David Shooks (2007) stresses that nothing defines a culture as differently as its language, and the element of language that best describes a society’s values and beliefs is its proverbs.

This paper explores about twenty proverbs used among the Etulos in their various categories of relevance. The number is intended only to present an insight into the position of proverbs as traditional rhetoric that for the various ideological patterns of the Etulos and perhaps spur further

studies here. The first category encourages tolerance and resilience, the second instills hope; the third encourages communal living, fourth is transparency, and fifth upholds inevitability of death or rather undaunted belief in the supernatural etc. Importantly, the Etulo’s have nineteen consonants and seven (7) vowels but for the thrust of this paper; we shall not drift into that phase.

2. Analysis of the Data Collated

The proverbs of the Etulos when dexterously employed could help the speaker present issues persuasively to the audience and compel them to take action constructively. This reinforces the assertion that these proverbs occupy an integral spectrum of the discourse.

There are situations that entrap a person and could largely cause him or her to give up effort in the midst of struggle. It is known fact that people sometimes venture into certain enterprises initially small hoping for a change in the course of time but other people considering the humble nature of the business, conclude that this one would not yield anything worthwhile. The Etulo’s are people known immensely for diligence at farm work, petty trade and other investments hence idleness is an outcast among them. This explains the need for the people to resort to this genre to persuade every hand to find something to do irrespective of the size. The “Ito oze” which is translated as proverb is a rhetoric device that does not exist independently as it does explore some figurative expression-metaphor, simile, personification and other times figures of sounds are vehicles of its expression (i.e. tonal variation is a spice).

The young people are instructed in these words; “Aturukwu-Egyeni” which literally means “the tattered net has cut a big shark” and the target or cognate can be thus; “can anything good come out of Nazareth”. This proverb summarily instills hope in anyone who attempts a humble job amid derision. It encourages that everyone works something to contribute to the common stock. The following works in this category but could also serve other purposes.

1. Agishi-se leobuta (source proverb)

The place is good for the hen that is why she lays her egg in it (literal)

2. Okyileha-numgbayε (source proverb)

The grinding mill of the rejected lady will not grind sand (literal)

3. Ogasele (source)

The shade of the hut where the grains are tied has fallen and the fowl laughed (literal).

It has been established that these proverbs lie not in the way they persuade people into action, stir hope and also to strengthen tradition in various ways which guarantee or depict life’s continuity of the given community.

The next category of proverbs by the classification in this community is that which advocates for resilience and tolerance since crises is a common feature in human society. The people are surrounded by neighbours of different climes

situated in the heart of the Tiv land in Benue State. These proverbs help both young and old manage offences or grievances; and perhaps what to do in a contest. Men and women in Etulo are advised persuasively to shrug off insults hurled at them since insult don't kill. The people by this are portrayed as a peace loving community. These proverbs serve the same purpose but could be used at different occasions:

i. EfukumÉ-edakumÉ (source proverb)

EganabO-eganabO [Mbweongyalagbe-MbweongyulO la gbe]

A tit for tat (cognate)

Dangerous persons have met themselves so there must be a disastrous end (literal)

ii. Atsutsukpa (source proverb)

Flies perching on the skin do not create a hole (literal)

iii. Ale bedu (source proverb)

Abuses don't kill a person (literal)

iv. Omagbenyiomagbekyo (source proverbs)

Once salt gets into water, it is gone or wasted (literal)

Crying over spilt milk (cognate)

The first proverb in this category looks and also sounds poetic thus points to the fact that this sub genre does overlap with other genres. Even though the two words, each, in the two lines of proverbs do rhyme, there is a slight variation in the tone which does not adversely affects the meaning of the "Ito oze". "Mbweongya" that is two wild animals facing each other (one male and the other female) holds what disaster will give birth to.

This most times is preferred for an oppressor who has molested people everywhere he goes, but eventually he meets his match. People, especially the victims of his antics, celebrate that encounter and wish that the oppressor be in turn oppressed.

There appears other circumstance where an oppressor, wild person, finds an innocent person and headlong begins to inflict abuses on such. He or she uses this as a ploy to make the other party respond or perhaps give him/her an occasion to beat him up. Elders in such situation, persuade the innocent party to overlook the troublemaker to make room for peace. This however is not done in mere prosaic statement but couched fitly in personification or metaphor. For instance, when an elder just says "ale bedu" to an offended party; it is enough to give him an unusual capacity to withstand the rain of insult poured on him without responding rashly. These proverbs already also depict the people's reliance on proverbs as instruments in conflict resolution and management. It is also an instrument for culture transmission as traced to the fact that proverbs are based on the people's experiences which reflect their social values and sensibilities. Akporobaro refers to a collection of these proverbs of a community in this sense as ethnography of the people which systematizes, gives a penetrating picture of their culture, their philosophy, moral truth and criticism of life.

The under listed are some "Ito' ozes" among the Etulos which occupy an integral space in their traditional communication system.

i. Dzakanya-EsÉ lo wunun (source proverb)

Brothers are keys to our lives (literal)

Blood is thicker than water (cognate)

ii. AdzÉlegwa-ikwudondombeyi (source proverb)

Death is a kinsman to all (literal)

iii. Omendzembwaba-kwintsi-igabOwen (source proverbs)

Prey in the midst of predators (literal)

iv. EkwOokalu -okabaInyingagwu (source proverb)

Yam is yam; water yam is water yam (literal)

Or you cannot pretend to be what you are not.

By their fruit you shall know them (cognate)

v. Egatoshi-Idi kanabundÉngyÉokashitiku (source proverbs)

Entering the soldier ants territory means looking for trouble (literal)

vi. Ogamelewu-troda (source proverb)

A kite gives a shout

Sign of an omen that a journey was never going to be successful (literal)

vii. Abunkini (source proverb)

Where is mine; why should others have if I don't (literal)

viii. Onwuno da ana-ogyÉomuma (source proverb)

People connected have a better covenant and success that awaits them (literal)

In Hausa; "yana da kaka, bazai rasa komaiba" (cognate)

ix. Nkemmiyagyawa-mkameraoduluba

When you give a daughter of great value, you don't go there to disturb her family (literal)

Give out a horse; you don't need the tail (cognate).

This catalogue of proverb is deliberately selected and signals, without demeaning effect, the enormous relevance of this genre in the daily life of the typical Etulo man. The first proverb under this category, "Dzakanya-Eselowunum", which literally means one without a brother, is nobody or nothing at all rather entrenches the need for communal living among the different families or clansmen. Once this proverb is referred to or rather quoted, the listener's action or thought is virtually directed so that he begins to reminisce the past or ancestors who are always treated as divine. The person in question is aware that the proverb was not just coined by the present speaker but has come from a cultural past. This explains why proverbs even among the Etulo's are revered like the penal code in a lawful society when used by elders who assemble in a traditional setting to settle a disputes.

Another very integral aspect of the proverbs among the Etulo's is that it is highly effective in expressing the people's moral ethics and their philosophy about life and death and also sanctions disapproving ideals. There are neighbours who tend to laugh at a close relative who is bereaved and the elders here in this community disapprove of this behavior by employing a proverb to pass across the simple ideal of the people about death hence it is not any wise to jeer at the bereaved holding that death is for all (a kinsman to all).

A further perusal of the proverbs would clearly point out the people's view of identity-one cannot pretend to be what one is not. They hold that if you are weird and brutal; you are trying to hide an identity. Such a one only takes advantage of a group being a brutish but would definitely fail as time alone

will take its course on him. This agrees to the fourth proverb in the above list. The eight proverbs in the list is a blatant show of the Etulo people's belief in the supernatural deities as source of every remarkable success. The above attests to what Philip Hughes (1984) says in describing oral cultures thus, "Beliefs they hold about the universe and how to live in it are often found in their folk tales and their proverbs." This is true as when these proverbs are employed the people outrightly believe that anyone who has a covenant has the capacity to become anything good so that even the Hausa variant of this is emphasized in these words "yana da kaka, bazai rasa komiba". This literally means he has got a grandfather (grand connection) so he will not lack (anything).

3. Conclusion

Proverbs, as it were, according to Fortress Isaiah Ayinuola (2015:7) still remain an oral form with constant relevance to modern man. It is an effective tool for transmission of culture, social morality, manners, and philosophy of a people from one generation to another as this study has shown. Schott's dedication to collecting and analyzing narrative texts which, I strongly agree cannot be faulted since it pays tribute to a noble tradition of Africanist scholarship and this is what the study on proverbs of the Etulo's has done, howbeit, concisely. Robert Georges in understudying the African orature has observed that the "Nineteenth-century scholars came to regard stories [proverbs] as cultural artifacts and to conceive of them as surviving or traditional linguistic entities pervaded by meaningful symbols" (1969:313). The extensive analysis of keywords, motifs, themes, types, and structures of Bulsa and Lyela tales, which Schott initiated at Münster in 1986, offers the possibility of being extended to other African peoples, at least in West Africa. Inferring from Schott's work on African tales and its place, like Georges expresses, within the people's communicative system brings us to conclusion on this study. The concern of this paper has been to collect and to preserve the "Ito ozes" of the Etulo people of Adi which is one endangered aspect of the oral tradition of the people. This is particularly because there has been no venture such as this prior to this field research. Even though this is brief, it is intended to present a sample possibility of preservation of these proverbs which consequently reduces the fear of extinction as evidenced in the difficulty involved in its collection.

More so, it is to depict the veracity, role, and aesthetics of proverbs in the traditional communication system of the people. The paper has proven quite clearly that the Ito oze among the Etulos is a rich source of imagery and succinct expression upon which other elaborate forms can always draw. This conforms to Finnegan's position where she avers that in many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs. The figurative quality of proverbs is especially striking; one of their most noticeable characteristics is their allusive wording, usually in

metaphorical form (1970: 380).

Even though the community has been unlettered in the past, proverbs have continued to serve as an integral purpose in their traditional discourse as it gives to them an outlook of the world and life.

Recommendation

This paper does not presume to have collected all the *ito ozes* among the Etulos of Adi of Nigeria and have done an exhaustive analysis of its aesthetics and their roles in African traditional discourse. It is largely intended to serve as a launch pad for further studies on proverbs among these people since several African nations still remain untapped. Besides, it is set to encourage appropriate deployment of this significant rhetoric in traditional discourse; especially among the indifferent youth of the Etulo community. This includes everything that makes up for her oral tradition – myth, folktales, riddles, folklores, proverbs etc

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Biography



Shi Vincent Victor is currently a post graduate student of the department of English at the Benue State University, Makurdi Nigeria; an educationist, and a freelance editor for local magazines.