

**AFRICAN PROVERBS AS PEDAGOGY FOR MORAL VALUES IN SELECTED  
AFRICAN PLAYS**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines African proverbs in the light of their pedagogic impact on moral values in society concerning some select plays. Proverbs are those phrases that give witty advice used to impart knowledge, wisdom, moral values, and teachings to the younger generation. African proverbs constitute important and strategic areas where the African philosophy of life can be extracted. In recent times, the plausibility of African proverbs being used as an instrument of change and impacting moral values has been drastically reduced. This is said to have stemmed from the lacuna created by the impact of Western acculturation on Africa, which distorted the African socio-cultural and indigenous worldview. The objective of this paper is to advance African proverbs as a viable African-centered approach to critical thinking. In the light of the foregoing, the study, while adapting a qualitative methodology, situates its argument on African proverbs as vessels for propagating change. The paper notes that African proverbs are necessarily essential in the understanding and transmission of African epistemology geared towards creating knowledge for the betterment of human existence. This is a way of providing explanatory justification for the presence of a tool for moral development that is authentically African, as the paper supports the use of African proverbs (wise sayings) as culturally grounded and relevant pedagogical practices that promote African values and thoughts. The paper also presents analyses of the proverbs in select plays and concludes that an inquiry into the African proverbs used in *Akpakaland*, *Morountodun*, *Ozidi* and *Death and the King's Horseman* will go a long way to contribute to the moral development of the African society. The study therefore recommends that all hands must be on deck to assist research efforts aimed at cultural preservation and propagation of the philosophical insights in African proverbs.

**Keywords:** Proverbs, African Proverbs, Pedagogy, Moral Values, Select Plays

**Introduction**

In Africa, indigenous languages are rich in several modes of expression, such as idioms, proverbs, and metaphors, which together show the beauty of conversation in African languages. These indigenous African languages and wisdom obtained from them have the potential to positively influence the learning and teaching process of learners. The proverbs and sayings reflect the rich historical experience of the people, ideas related to the works, life, and culture

of the people. This is why Dall (1980) is the walking mind of the people. The correct and appropriate use of proverbs and sayings gives speech a unique originality and special expressiveness. In any proverb, there is always a "pedagogical moment" - edification: as such, a proverb is understood as an apt figurative saying of an edifying nature, typifying the most diverse phenomena of life. This is because proverbs satisfy many spiritual needs of children in terms of the cognitive and intellectual (educational) as well as the aesthetic, moral needs. The special features embedded in them are what make proverbs persistent and necessary in everyday life and speech.

Proverbs are not antiquity and as such cannot be regarded as a thing of the past, but the living voice of the people, which the people retain in their memory that which they need not only today but will also need tomorrow. Proverbs are a widespread genre of oral art that have their roots in ancient times, deeply rooted in the centuries. The main feature of proverbs is their completeness and didactic content. It is very difficult to determine from what time proverbs began among the people, but one thing is indisputable: proverbs originated in separate antiquity and since then have accompanied the people throughout their history. Thus, when a proverb speaks of the past, it is evaluated from the point of view of the present and the future, depending on the extent to which the past is reflected in the aphorism corresponds to popular ideals, expectations, and aspirations. Since the proverb is created by all the people, it embraces the expressed collective opinion of the people, for it contains the people's assessment of life as well as the observation of the people's mind.

Etymologically, the term 'proverb' derives from the Latin word "*Proverbium*" which means a simple and concrete saying, popularly known and respected, that expresses a truth based on common sense or experience (Taylor, 2003). They are often metaphorical and are

regarded as the central source of knowledge acquisition in traditional African society. This enables humanity to have an insight into previous civilizations because a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation (Irabor, 2013). This implies that proverbs are often used metaphorically, and it is in understanding their metaphorical nature that a person can unravel their meaning. They function as “folk wisdom” because they contain advice or state a generally accepted truth and have been used in the dissemination of knowledge, wisdom, and truths about life since time immemorial. They have also been considered an important part in the fostering of children, as they signal moral values and exhort common behaviour.

Proverbs have poetic characteristics (Finnegan, 2012), setting them apart from other oratory devices. They contain cherished beliefs and truths. They are repositories of the rich memories and accumulative knowledge of a society that bears characteristics of their culture that may have evolved (Dipio, 2019). They depict the culturally-specific accepted truths about society’s accepted ways of living (Gyan et al., 2020). Proverbs are also used in embellishing speech and help in the acquisition of behavioural principles underpinned in traditional moral and wisdom expressions required for the growth and development of societies (Fayemi, 2009). They play a very significant role in the education and socialization of youths (Onofrei & Iancu, 2015), as they are used as a medium of interpreting the cultural beliefs and values in society.

Belonging to the traditional verbal folklore genres, the wisdom of proverbs has served as guidance for people worldwide in their social interaction throughout the ages. They are concise, easy to remember, and useful in every situation in life due to their content of everyday experiences. In traditional and modern African societies, proverbs are generally accepted as

quintessential in communicating ideas and ethics among both the old and the young. An authentic African does not conclude his speech without encapsulating his thoughts in a suitable and appropriate proverb, for they “serve as the acceptable medium of transmitting knowledge and convention from generation to generation” (Hussein, 2005: p.19). Thus, for Chiku & Rick (2004), African cultural heritage (proverbs, taboos, dirge, etc.), passed on from generation to generation, has been a source of guidance for African communities in times of peace, uncertainty, birth, life, and death. Proverb is therefore the basis of their self-identity, self-respect, and self-confidence, as it has enabled them to live in harmony with their physical, social, and spiritual environments. This heritage provides a foundation for leadership, guidance, problem-solving, decision-making, self-reliance, and development.

An interesting aspect of proverbs is the question: ‘How do proverbs perform these cultural functions?’ It is an exploration of the functionality of the proverb. The truth of this is that African proverbs are meaningful when verified from the situation they refer to. So, the negation of the actual situation, an African proverb seeks to explore raises the surprising agitations and objections about the philosophical character of African philosophy that is found in her culture and disseminated through proverbs. Significantly, proverbs are the expression of the character and manners of a nation, their specific way of thinking, seeing, and feeling. An important benefit of transmitting information via proverbs is that they refer to a core group of virtues and vices reflected in folk ritual and real-life situations, like the work-ethics etc. Such virtues operate in productive employment, which, according to circumstances, can help test a person’s moral character. Consequently, they can help decide when a moral issue is adjudged moral or immoral, or amoral. Generally, they can influence the work efficiency and overall morality of a society.

### **Purpose of Research**

The study is seen as part of the struggle for the acceptance of proverbs as means of inculcating social and moral values in the people as it reflects a full respect for the value of human life where our aspiration and that of the writer is motivated not by the desire to speak the mind of the African dilemma but also to imbibe the African culture. The lesson inferred from the above stems from the fact that any examination of the relationship between oral literature and society without reference to the inherent proverbs that make up the culture of the people can hardly be regarded as a sufficient study, since that is what creativity is all about.

A literary work is more relevant if it dwells on the consciousness and experience of the people while reflecting on their dispositions, such as happiness, joy, sadness, condemnation, bitterness, and cravings for change. In dramatic history, evidence exists to indicate that the social forces of a particular time can indeed dictate style in creativity. Modernist playwrights therefore work on ideas which inform their plays and dictate their structures and the combination of purposeful behaviour and talks which gives the play some dazzling comic effects mixed with underlying serious messages of metaphysical context, all of which stems from the feeling that reflects a society dislocated from its cherished values.

Here, it is seen that the writers employ the device of oral literary form and the traditional performance mode in their plays not just for aesthetic effects but also to make progressive and ideological statements. This, according to Osofisan (1974), stems from the fact that they take legendary and mythical figures and bring them on stage, mostly to revive a tradition, identifying with a glorious part and reclaiming a heritage. Oral literature, therefore, provides ways in which the people's history, culture, and tradition are preserved. With them, the people understand their values and norms better and aim at building on the achievements of the past

rather than destroying them. And so, the literary work is built on Nigerians' history, songs, dreams, dances, proverbs, folktales, and so on, as well as mirrors the tradition, culture, and ways of life of the people as it captures the reality of their existence.

### **Methodology**

The study adopts the descriptive research methods and detailed analysis of the four selected plays from Osofisan, Ukala, Soyinka, and Clark, respectively. The plays serve as the primary data to interrogate their ideological commitment, social, political, and artistic visions as explored in the plays. The purposefully selected plays are Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*, Sam Ukala's *Akpakaland*, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, and J P Clark's *Ozidi*.

The secondary sources of data collection include works by previous researchers in textbooks, journals, published essays/articles, and relevant previous academic research works such as seminars, conferences, and public lectures. This study is metaphoric, and the playwrights are selected because of their rich socio-cultural backgrounds in addition to their profound knowledge of the oral narratives of their people as well as the African tradition.

### **The Pedagogy of Proverbs**

The research adopts a pedagogical theory which are connected with beliefs and value systems, concepts of man and society, and philosophies of knowledge and political interests. It deals with the nature and structure of educational action, teaching, and upbringing. It is thus concerned with the underlying values and principles that influence our approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment. Founded by Johann Friedrich Herbert, the theory breaks down the learning cycle into five domains or phases of instruction, such as "engage, explore, explain, elaborate, and evaluate".

The term pedagogy comes from the Greek word 'Paidagogos', a combination of 'Paidos' (child) and 'agogos' (leader), which describes the art of teaching and learning process. Dewey's pedagogical philosophy sees education and discipline as closely connected to the community and social life. To him, the learning process can only actually be useful when children are provided with sufficient learning opportunities to connect their prior experiences with their current knowledge. That is why to Dewey (2003), "education is not preparation for life, education is life itself".

Therefore, in any proverbs, there is always a pedagogical moment which represents an apt figurative saying of an edifying nature, typifying the most diverse phenomena of life. Here we see that the ultimate goal of proverbs has always been education; they have acted as pedagogical means since ancient times. On the one hand, they contain a pedagogical idea, on the other hand, they have an educational influence which carry educational functions that is, they tell about the means, methods of educational influence corresponding to the ideas of the people, give characterological assessments of the personality - positive and negative, which, defining in one way or another the goals of personality formation, contain a call for education, self-education and re-education, they condemn adults who neglect their sacred duties - pedagogical, etc.

This is why to Komensky (2000), "A proverb or proverb is a short and clever statement in which one thing is said and another is implied, that is, the words speak of some external physical, familiar object, but hint at something internal, spiritual, less familiar". This statement contains recognition of the pedagogical functions of proverbs and takes into account the fact that proverbs act as a means of influencing the consciousness of the educated and that learning goes from the known to the unknown, where a familiar object generates an unfamiliar thought. From a pedagogical point of view, instructions of the three categories include: teachings,

instructing children and youth in good morals, including the rules of good manners; teachings calling adults to decent behavior, and, finally, instructions of a special kind containing pedagogical advice stating the results of education, which is a kind of generalization of pedagogical experience. They contain a huge educational and educational material on the issues of child upbringing.

Hence, the proverbs reflect pedagogical ideas concerning the birth of children, their place in the life of the people, the goals, means, and methods of education, encouragement and punishment, the content of education, labor and moral education, etc. The education of an African child, like every other child all over the world, usually begins at home. For instance, parents sometimes use proverbs, taboos, and folklore to educate their children at home. These cultural resources are used to draw attention to the consequences (s) of bad conduct. African parents do not spare their children when they are involved in misconduct. There are lessons to be learnt from folklore, proverbs, and taboos, especially when elders often organize moonlight stories where folktales are told and interpreted by young children. In schools, a teacher may use proverbs to caution his/her pupils/students against bad conduct. When the need arises, a teacher may use the proverb to perform some cautionary roles by: (a) warning students of the consequences of wrongdoing, and (b) deterring them from engaging in social vices.

The moral values embodied in this proverb are expected to moderate the students' conduct and behaviour. The pedagogical view of the people, therefore, is a collection of the collective experience of the masses accumulated over the centuries for the education and training of the young generation, brilliantly embodied in various monuments of oral arts. Thus, proverbs are expected to provide a theoretical framework for championing (i) the virtue of patience, (ii) the notion of prudence in anything a person does, and (iii) the use of rational enquiry in conjunction with prudence where one is faced with choice-making. Therefore, it is



useful and valuable for African scholars to explore and exploit valuable oral traditions such as proverbs to revisit the past and their cultures. This is because past cultures have shaped present cultures, which is why we have, at the same time, elements of the primordial and civic competing within the same space. African culture can fill in the ethical and spiritual gap left open by the craze for materialistic development.

### **Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun***

In *Morountodun*, the preoccupation of playwright is on the ability to use powerful expressions manifesting in the deployment of proverbs to instantiate the way they are used to depict the dynamism of mankind to showcase the orientation that they portray. When a proverb is deployed in a particular situation, such is usually embedded with meanings, and it takes only the analytical minds to decode what is being said. Rather than use direct and somewhat dry expressions, the proper deployment of proverbs became a marker of soundness, profundity, and a deep understanding of the subject being discussed. Arguably, one of the elements that adds colour to language use in the play is proverbs, and they are not merely selected to add colour but also to express the people's beliefs, acting as a vehicle for the transmission of culture (Nhlekisana 2009). Corroborating this fact, Dogbevi (2007) argues that proverbs are the foundation of social and cultural wisdom and therefore serve as the basis for formulating concepts that govern social relations.

Since African proverbs are considered as the most ubiquitous genre of folklore and instructional vehicles through which the cultural values in African societies are imparted to generations, the play *Morountodun* interprets Yoruba proverbs as Indigenous knowledge enshrined in the cultural practices of indigenous Yoruba people based on their life experiences and observations in their natural environment (Kim et al., 2017). The validity of the knowledge

is based on the successes in its application passed on orally from the older generation to the younger generation (Adom, 2016).

### **Proverbs in *Morountodun***

The play employs a lot of proverbs which are used to bring out the cultural quality of the play. Amongst the proverbs used in the play are those used by both Titubi and the Superintendent.

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Titubi:         | Don't think you're clever. Every cobra is poisonous, whatever its gloss.  |
| Superintendent: | The hunter brings home a grass cutter and beats its chest. What will happen to the elephant killer?   |
| Titubi:         | The shoulder is not smaller is it, simply because it has chosen to wear a low necked blouse?  |
| Superintendent: | Oh the cat has claws. The tiger has claws. But what feat of courage is it when the tiger goes up to the cat and says: hm, your anus is smelling? ( <i>Morountodun</i> , p.13) |

In the proverbs above, after Titubi threatens the Superintendent that if he lays his fingers on her to arrest her that his whole family will pay for his actions, the Superintendent tells her through the proverb that she cannot do anything because she is nothing and no body compared to him either in age or in position.

### **Ukala's *Akpakaland***

To Ukala, today's proverbs are at risk of becoming extinct because of the rapid changes in the natural environment and the fast pace of economic, political, and cultural changes. As a social form of knowledge of a society's cultural history, the proverb genre is communicated orally and risks disappearing once the older generation passes away (Dutta, 2019). This would eventually lead to the loss of cultural heritage, practices, and genres such as proverbs cherished as ancestral knowledge in Africa. There have been great concerns about paying attention to the

preservation of proverbs for posterity among scholars recently. In the play *Akpakaland* the proverb is used as an integral part of folk literature. They were used to preserve cultural memories and indigenous knowledge systems in many ways, chiefly through oratory, music, and dance, while acting as products of individual and collective spoken memory

### **Proverbs in *Akpakaland***

Some of the proverbs employed in *Akpakaland* are,

- Unata: Please, ignore her. She's young and has a heart that foams, that's all.  
Fulama: Let it continue to foam. One of these days it will foam like the saliva of the snail in which the snail cooks itself. The wood pecker that pecks a stone will lose its beak... (*Akpakaland*, p.40).  
Fulama: When rubbish is too much in the soup, the blind one notices it.  
Unata: When one sees a weakling, does he not hunger for a fight (*Akpakaland*, pp.14,17).

The above represents a conversation between Unata and Fulama while referring to Iyebi, who is angry with Unata for allowing her enemy, Fulama' to visit her in her sick bed all in the bid to mock Unata's condition. Another is that between Idemudia and Enwe,

- Idemudia: The animal that befriends the monkey must fold its thumb.  
Enwe: Or the monkey will break it off. (*Akpakaland*, pp.19-20)  
The child who swears to starve its mother of sleep  
Will, all night, slumber in wakefulness (*Akpakaland*, p.23).

These are among the conversations that took place between Idemudia, Unata's father, and Enwe, the medicine man, when they came to him for help to return Unata's tail to the sender.

### **Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman***

Proverbs are popular sayings that contain words of advice or warning. This is the reason Obiechina (1972, p.52) defines it as "the kernel which contains the traditional wisdom of traditional people...the philosophical and moral expression shrunk to few words". They are normally used by old men to bring out the meaning of obscure points in discrete answers and comments. Soyinka believes that the Africans "use proverbs as satires of the contemporary African society, developed through life experiences, histories, values, and worldviews, and used to impart knowledge, wisdom, moral values, and teachings to younger generations.

To him, they also help in the acquisition of behavioural principles underpinned by

traditional moral and wisdom experiences required for the growth and development of society. The moral imperatives of the lessons included in the proverbs used in *Death and the King's horseman*, speaks of the common human desires for kinship, friendship, moral conduct and cultural respect because they are expressions and wise sayings that form some of the integral strongholds of traditional African drama which are great in morals and are used to instruct, teach and correct the younger generations.

Acting as philosophical and moral expressions shrunk into a few words and as metaphysical citation that gives credence to traditional truths and wisdom, Soyinka's proverbs are "basically used by the elders to bring out the meaning of obscure points in conversations or arguments" (Taiwo, 1985, p.26). Hence the use of proverbs in the play provides a whole spectrum of oral tradition from which the Yoruba history can be drawn. Thus, besides their literary value, the proverbs also convey historical information, which gives insight into the dominant socio-political and economic conduct of the people.

### **Proverbs in *Death and the King's Horseman***

Elesin and the Praise-singer's dialogue in the introduction shows a lot in riddles, which are used to paint the picture of a true African society in the play. Here, we witness Elesin recounting the story of the 'Not I Bird',

Death came calling.  
Who does not know his rasp of reeds?  
A twilight whisper in the leaves before  
The great Araba Falls? Did you hear it?  
Not I! swears the farmer. He snaps his fingers round his head,  
abandons a hard-worn harvest, and begins  
a rapid discussion with his legs (DKH, p.11)  
The riddle is Soyinka's way of saying that the farmer in his fright abandoned his farming

tools and "took to his heels", a picture of an African saying. Also, Elesin and Iyaloja use riddles

in the play to communicate. Iyaloja speaks in riddles to mystify Pilkings while communicating with Elesin. In one of her speeches, she says,

Iyaloja:       Not yet, it drags me on the slow, weary feet of women  
                    Slow as it is Elesin, it has long overtaken you  
                    It rides ahead of your laggard will (DKH, p.71)

In the riddle above, Iyajola is talking about the corpse of Olunde being brought forward by the women to Elesin for him to utter the final words before he is laid to rest. Her choice of riddle is well understood by Elesin, but leaves Pilkings in total confusion about what has been said. Hence, Pilkings exclaims,

Pilkings:       What is she saying now? Christ.  
                    Must you people forever speak in riddles? (DKH, p.71).

This shows he is at a loss about what is being said, as he cannot comprehend the message. Soyinka's use of proverbs in the play is very profound and helps serve as a trademark of the play as African literature. To the Yoruba, proverbs are "the horses of speech" through which communication is found. In the play, Iyaloja uses proverbs a lot. She used it to scold Elesin for his cowardice in defiling the rituals of his suicide. She says,

Iyaloja:       How boldly the lizard struts before the pigeon when it was the  
                    Eagle itself she would confront (DKH, p.67).

In this proverb, Iyaloja mocks and scolds him for remaining at the prison yard of Pilkings rather than perform the ritual that will ensure the continuity of his community.

### **Clark's *Ozidi***

According to Akpobobaro (2012, p.78), proverbs are "essential ingredients in African speech and culture", for they are powerful carriers of traditional wisdom and social mores. They are therefore effective means for moral education of all members of the society as they

are humorous, delightful, and aesthetically pleasing to the hearer and express the truths of African personal and social experience. This is why the use of proverbs by Clark in oral tradition not only illustrates the power of the spoken word but also serves as an educational tool which emerges as a narrative strategy centered on the functional, collective, and committed attributes of the oral art.

In *Ozidi*, Clark shows the tremendous benefits of preserving and promoting African proverbs to ensure the credibility and validity of meanings assigned to the African proverbs. This is because it gives the situational aspects of the proverbs by showcasing their cultural and historical contexts.

### **Proverbs in *Ozidi***

In *Ozidi*, proverbs are well used. For instance, Oreame uses proverbs a lot in the play to spur Ozidi to wake up to his call to avenge his father and not bring shame to her person as the highest of witches. She says to him,

Oreame:        Hold it, hold it, my son, hold it,  
                     has the back of the cat ever touched mud  
                     although you throw him to the ceiling top?  
                     Does the soldier ant slip on the field  
                     Though caught in a stampede?  
                     I say hold it, will you shame me?  
                     Hold it i say? (*Ozidi*, p.51)

In another instance, she says to Temugedege,

Oreame:        Surely, Temugedege, a young woman like that,  
                     did you expect she will stay up as a plantain stem in the open country  
                     and no cock coming to top her tassel! (*Ozidi*, p.59)

The above proverb interprets that Orea (Ozidi's mother), a young woman, will not stay without being adored by the male folks. It is also emphasized in the discussions between the elders,

First Citizen: How shall we stop the leopard's left paw from falling on our necks?  
How shall we dam his rush? Here, the elders were discussing on  
how to contain Senior Ozidi's power, especially with his brother now  
their king (*Ozidi*, p.12)

## **Conclusion**

The origin of any proverb has usually been a concise, brief or figurative statement from speeches of a wise or elderly man, in a particular situation or context. Some arise from simple apothegms and platitudes, which over time are elevated to the status of a proverb. Others emerge from the symbolic or metaphoric use of an incident; some are based on a story or fable, while others are simply variations on existing proverbs. In all, proverbs with moral significance become fashionable and popular and are adopted into the social ethics of the people.

In other words, proverbs are the simple truths of life that contain the ethical, moral values of a society (Taylor, 2003). They rank equal with myth, folklore, song, dance, and divination as cultural elements and means of knowing in traditional African society. Aside from the aesthetic and figurative value in proverbs, it presents a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. Its beauty and some delight is that what it says is readily perceived and accepted as an incontrovertible truth which may inspire further reflection, serve as a warning in areas of human activities, disclose how to treat or relate with people, criticize, praise, advice, or teach the populace.

In essence, proverbs constitute a larger part of the logical, critical, and coherent mode of reasoning that is prerequisite to the formation of a philosophic system. Therefore, it is advised that the humanities must search for African proverbs in Africa and not anywhere else, as it has become evident that proverbs are an integral part of most African societies and form

an essential component of the total achievement of the society or the people. This is because it is composed of ingredients that are embedded in the culture of the society or the people, and is a revelation of the philosophy of the people and the moral values that the society holds on to. It is regarded as a system that educates the people and guides them for their future life, for it constantly serves as a reference point to their philosophy of life.

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