

Deconstructing the Proverbial Codes in Ahmed Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*

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Abstract

The study of proverbs in African drama as a phenomenon is a scholastic exercise. It registers the diverse as well as the intellectual depth of the continent's oral sophistication. With specific reference to this paper, the Benin people of the Edoid community in Southern Nigeria are disposed to using proverbs in their communications. It is our position in this study to unravel the mysticism in these proverbs as demonstrated in Ahmed Yerima's historical play: *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*. Using the concept of proverb as the theoretical background, we institute a thorough and analytical investigation into the play. We argue through critical analyses that the dramatist's use of proverbs does not only expose his mastery of the cultural and traditional sensibilities of the Benin people, but it is also deliberate to present the Benin worldview in the light of the British invasion of the revered kingdom in 1897.

Introduction/Historical Context

Ahmed Parker Yerima is a quintessential dramatist, playwright, and theatre director. He hails from Edo State in the South-South region of Nigeria. An academic of immense repute, he is Professor of Theatre and Performing Arts. Yerima served as Director-General of the Nigerian National Theatre as well as Director of the National Troupe. A prolific writer, he has to his credit over twenty dramatic works, which include *Attahiru*, *The Sisters*, *Yemoja*, *Heart of Stone*, and *The Wives*. In 2006, his drama piece *Hard Ground* won the Nigeria Prize for Literature. He lectures in the College of Humanities, Redeemer's University, Nigeria.

In February 1897, the British army invaded the Great Benin Kingdom. The invasion shook the socio-cultural and economic foundations of the kingdom. The events leading to the "Benin Massacre" is not without background information as enunciated by Alan Boisragon – who was among the entourage led by the Acting Consul-General Captain Philips of the "protectorate government" to the Benin kingdom. These lines from his narrative would suffice:

...[As] we were steaming down the Benin River, we met Chief Dore, the head Chief of the Benin River, in a canoe, with the messengers that had been sent to the King of Benin a few days before. They brought back the message... that the king of Benin was extremely grateful for the unexpected present he had received, but owing to the annual "customs" being in the process of celebration, he hoped the Consul-General would defer his visit for one or two months, until he (the King) sent to tell him that he was ready to receive him. (68)

The above extract registers the background knowledge of the punitive expedition by members of the British protectorate of the lower Niger into the Benin area through the “Benin River.” As a matter of fact, the above event took place on 2 January 1897 and demonstrates the willingness of the Benin Monarch to “receive” the Consul-General and his entourage. Yet, it is important to note that the message of the Benin Monarch to the Consul-General was clear as regards when and how the meeting could take place. The King in his message demonstrates a sense of gratitude to the Consul-General “for the unexpected present” given to him and no doubt took his gesture as a sign of respect for the Benin Crown. However, what is not ambiguous in the King’s message is the sense of dedication that the Benin people have towards cultural and trado-religious activities. There is evidence in the lines above that they hold their cultural sensibilities in high esteem and would not compromise their sense of religiosity or their “customs” for what could be considered as a mere “visit.” The fact that the Benin Monarch asks for “one or two months” so that he could complete the annual “customs” of the kingdom before he could receive the Consul-General should have sent signals to the British about the cultural and trado-religious mindset that dominated the Benin worldview.

Closely related to this is the further insistence by the Consul-General that “we [are] only going to Benin City to see the King in an entirely friendly way” (74). This correspondence is a follow up on the King’s reply and it is quite significant in the interpretation of the historical context of the “Benin Massacre.” As demonstrated later in Boisragon’s account, Captain Philips and his entourage proceed to enter Benin through “Gwatto” on 4th January 1897, meeting stiff resistance from Benin warriors that led to the fatalities of Captain Philips and many members of his entourage. As a result, a “punitive expedition” was organized “with the assistance of the

Niger Coast Protectorate force” (167). The expedition which was “entirely naval... took Benin City on 18 February 1897.” It lasted just five weeks (167).

The Proverb as a Concept

The idea of the proverb has attracted diverse scholarly attention. Certainly the durability and relevance of its socio-linguistic and cultural significance demands consideration. We choose to start our investigation into the concept by looking at it from the perspective of Wolfgang Mieder. He points out that “a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed from generation to generation.” (3)

It is important to point out here that Mieder’s thought provides a foundational insight into proverbs as a folkloric element that exudes “wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views....” The critic’s view reflects an international standard of proverbial recognition as well as strengthens our understanding of other sub-continental views on the folkloric element. As a result, it is crucial that we recognize the significance of the African perspective of the proverb as part of this study’s background. Isidore Okpewho captures this perspective in his assertion that

A proverb may be defined as a piece of folk wisdom expressed with terseness and charm. The “terseness” implies a certain economy in the choice of words and a sharpness of focus, while the “charm” conveys the touch of literary or poetic beauty in the expression.... Proverbs are the products of intelligent reflection... since they reflect a general truth by reference to a specific phenomenon or experience. (226-7)

The strength of Okpewho's suggestion rests on the relationship between proverbs and the "wisdom" of a people. It is suggested here that proverb(s) is/are associated with the idea of "wisdom." By implication, proverbs are the oral codes that evoke the properties of wisdom. A further reading of the critic's idea here reveals the striking qualities of the proverb. In the first place, proverbs are grounded on witticism, laced with a strong allegiance to the economic use of words. This presupposes that proverbs are short and witty expressions specifically directed towards a certain "focus." It is the "sharpness of focus" that elevates its relevance in socio-traditional and cultural situations. Moreover, it could be inferred here that the underlying factor in the "sharpness of focus" is the moral strength embedded in proverbs.

In the second place, it Okpewho's opinion that the proverb possesses a certain kind of "charm." The implication of his thought here points to the aesthetic and artistic qualities of proverbs, evoking the significance of "poetic beauty." At the same time, it should be noted from the above excerpt that proverbs possess alluring and attractive variables that ignite our sensibilities towards their inherent ability to communicate wise thoughts in a poetic and arresting manner.

A further reading of Okpewho's thoughts underscores the relationship between proverbs and human intelligence. In fact, it is suggested here that proverbs are the results of a brilliant, prudent, and analytical "reflection" on the exegesis of social interactions. In this connection, there is a nexus between proverbs and "general truths." It is the mirror-like reference of proverbs that espouses both the "specific" and "general" properties of socio-geographical and traditional codes, especially within the context of "specific phenomenon or experience."

In his *Introduction to African Oral Literature*, F.B.O Akporobaro shares similar sentiments about the concept of proverb. His thoughts go thus:

The proverb is a graphical statement that expresses a truth of 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 the proverb is not a logical, a priori or intuitive truth; it is often an empirical fact based upon and derived from the people's experience of life, human relationship and interaction with the world of nature. (71)

Here again the fundamental oral quality of proverbs is underscored. One is indeed amazed that the content of a proverb cannot be separated from "a truth of experience," bringing our attention to the pragmatic role of proverbs in our daily lives. From the point of view of the critic, the proverb is a vivid picture of words that evokes the practical experience of an "incontrovertible truth." This strength of the proverb seems to lie on its pragmatic qualities of human experience and social interaction. It strikes the imagination that the "graphic" expression of a proverb is not only a source of "beauty" and "delight," but also is a powerful tool that "readily" stimulates the human imagination on universal truths. By extension, it is the critic's suggestion here that proverbs possess a rare quality that appeals to our sensibilities and stimulates our acceptance of their universal value of truth.

The rare attribute of proverbial truth is also critically considered in Akporobaro's suggestion above. The inherent truth embedded in proverbs is presented in such a way as to transcend the reasonable or sensible dimension of "intuitive" communication. This indirect or paradoxical means of transporting "incontrovertible truth" is often codified and it is one of those things that elevates the status of the proverb in communication. Nonetheless, the wisdom

encased in a proverb is based on empirical “evidence” drawn “from the people’s experience of life” (71). This presupposes that proverbs derive from the socio-geographical and cultural understanding of a people. The source of wisdom is tied to not just “human relationship,” but also to the appreciation of human “interaction with the world of nature” (71). In this connection, trees, grasses, animals, climatic factors, water (rivers), stones, the sun, the moon, and all the cosmic powers are instrumental to proverbial speech. It is our understanding and decodification of “the world of nature” that enhance our appreciation of the concept of proverb.

A critical reader of *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* (henceforth *The Trials*) would notice the use of proverbs as decorative agents in mobile dialogues. From line to line the dramatist’s understanding of the Benin worldview is laid bare through the skillful injection of proverbs. The proverbs open our eyes to the traditional, cultural, and political values of the Benin people. They strengthen our conception of their sensibilities, the god-image of the Oba of Benin as well as the royal institution of palace chiefs.

Literature Review

The Trials by Yerima has attracted vast critical attention. For instance, Israel Meriomame Wekpe and Alero Uwawah’s critical attention is on the “(Re-)imag(in)ing of the Oba of Benin in Nigerian Dramatic Literature and its Implication in Indigenous Studies”(88-105). Ernest Agoba examines “set design process” in *The Trials* (167-178). Ifeanyi Ugwu and Aloysius Orjinta concentrate on the “deconstructionist interpretations of Rotimi’s *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and Yerima’s *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*” (167-178). In a similar comparative perspective, Sam Ukala investigates the characterization of Ovonramwen in Ola Rotimi and Ahmed Yerima’s dramaturgy (1-28). Yet again, Taiwo Osanyemi *et al* look at the “nightmares and burden of

imperialism in two plays – *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen and Ameh Oboni the Great*” (54-66). Moreover, it is the view of Benedict Binebai and Sunday Abraye that *The Trials...* is one of the dramatic texts that explicates the idea of “agent and agency of dislocation” (77-85). Harry Olufunwa beams his critical searchlight on “resident Aliens” in *The Trials* (127-152), while Victoria Adeniyi’s critical insight is on a “Comparative study of Rotimi’s *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and Yerima’s *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*” (97-109). Kayode-Iyasere, and Emmanuel Okey Okwechime explore “the communication of power in Ahmed Yerima’s *The Trials* (n.p) and Rasheed Abiodun Musa explores various playtexts that examine the character of Ovonramwen to reflect on the “historical reconstruction in the Nigerian theatre” (153-171). Finally, Affiong Effiong’s analysis of *The Trials...* is on the violence of the British Nigerian Midwest (300-306).

It is evident from the above that many critics have made valid statements on *The Trials...* However, none of them has delved into deconstructing the proverbs in the drama to enhance critical understanding of the British expedition cum invasion of the revered kingdom. The goals in this essay are the deconstruction of proverbial codes in *The Trials* in order to demonstrate how they contribute to our understanding of the Benin people and their worldview in general.

Analysis of the Proverbial Codes in *The Trials...*

The first proverb that commands our attention in *The Trials* is spoken by Ovonramwen himself in a dialogue with Ologbose. Hear him:

OVONRAMWEN: When rain begins to fall, the little child plays free and naked. But when the child begins to sneeze and feel giddy with cold, he runs home to his mother. Ologbose, are you home for me? (24)

In this proverb, Ovonramwen delves into the world of “rain,” “children,” and “cold” to indicate the relationship between himself and his son-in-law. Suffice it to say that Ologbose is the husband of the King’s daughter Evbakhobokun. The proverb reveals the role of the child-parent relationship and it raises questions about Ologbose’s visit to the palace. In addition, there is a supposition of protection built into the proverb, an insight suggested by the “mother” image. The proverb thus implies that Ovonramwen is skeptical about the visit, suspecting that something could be amiss.

With a strategic use of words of wisdom, Ologbose’s response to the king suggests his own ability to use proverbial codes. He says here:

OLOGBOSE: The red-necked lizard climbs the wall of the house freely, assuming always that the walls were built there for his sake. Do I assume too much, my lord? (25)

Thus Ologbose leaves the world of “rain,” “children,” and “cold,” slipping into the world of animals to affirm that he feels free to visit his father-in-law without distrust. In a way, one could infer that the son-in-law is using a proverb to register his absolute loyalty to the king. To have a proper understanding of the proverb, the reader has to visualize the image. The picture painted in the proverb evokes the freedom of action and choice demonstrated by the *agama* lizard in its habitat. Moreover, the idea of assumption infused in the proverb elucidates a sense of innocence codified in the words of wisdom. It is in this area that the child-like consciousness of Ologbose before his father-in-law is noticed. Thus, the critical reader of the proverb is not surprised by the question in the concluding clause. The expression reinforces Ologbose’s attitude before the king as well as reveals the paternal status of the Oba dictated by the Benin worldview. It is no wonder then, that the succeeding dialogue strengthens our conception of Ologbose’s

“total allegiance to the king,” and the king’s subsequent conferring of blessings on him: “Rise, Son you shall live long” (25).

In another scene in the palace, there is an exchange of proverbial codes between Ovonramwen and Eyebokan (an Itsekiri man as well as friend of the Oba). Eyebokan grew up in the palace and is a very loyal subject of the king. He calls himself “the king’s shadow” in reference to his total allegiance to the success of the Benin throne (35). In this scene, his visit to the palace is based on his discussion with Captain Philips (the white man) concerning his insistence on seeing the king. The following dialogue will suffice:

EYEBOKAN: That is why I am here to tell him [the king] that the full moon is up, the rain wants to fall, and the wind is blowing, so the river cannot refuse to receive the rains.

[...]

OVONRAMWEN: ... Your proverbs make sense to me. Eyebokan, friend of the throne, talk to us. Speak plainly, there are men here who do not and who cannot pick lice safely from the head of an old man, without drawing blood. (35)

In the above extract, the proverb of Eyebokan hinges on a looming catastrophe. To dress his ideas, he uses proverbial codes. He exposes the disaster looming over the Benin kingdom through codes extracted from the world of celestial bodies, geography, and water. The insight generated by the image of a “full moon” is that the time set by the gods for the invasion of the Benin kingdom was already fully developed. It is important to understand that Eyebokan is being prophetic here. The Oba’s friend’s further observation of the movement of the wind and rain-filled clouds lends credence to the idea of an impending storm that will overtake the Oba and the kingdom. Eyebokan’s insistence on seeing the king and his message that the “river cannot refuse

to receive the rains“ stands as a coded message concerning the inevitability of the Benin massacre.

As the dialogue continues, the response of Ovonramwen reveals the fact that “the river” did indeed “receive the rains.” The acknowledgement of the king shows his wisdom in the decodification and deconstruction of proverbial codes. However, for the sake of the unwise men around them, he instructs “the friend of the throne” to “speak plainly” so they could understand. At this point, the Oba elevates the discourse to a proverbial height of mockery on those who cannot decode proverbs. The language of the king says so much about his estimation of such individuals. Without a doubt, the critical reader could sense the immaturity in those “men” whose sense of quick thinking and sharp insight laced with penetrating comprehension is weak. The analogy is drawn from traditional African society where the practice of picking “lice” from hair is relevant. The point is that children “cannot pick lice safely from the hair of an old man without drawing blood.” By implication, the proverb is a sarcastic exposition of “men” who cannot decipher the wisdom in proverbs.

In the succeeding dialogue, the exposition of the play continues with proverbial repartee between Ovoramwen and Eyebokan. Hear them:

OVONRAMWEN: ...When a piece of meat sticks between the teeth while eating, you must remove the piece before continuing. Eyebokan, what news do you have for the ears of the prepared? Speak plainly, friend.

EYEBOKAN: Plainly shall I speak, wise one. The Whitemen approach Benin.

[...]

OVONRAMWEN: when the eye of the cat takes the colour of what it stares, we call it a frightful creature. Yet the gods adorn it with slow deliberate patience. caution, spirit. (36-7)

In the first excerpt, the proverbial wisdom of Ovonramwen is again recognized. This time, his focus is to demystify Eyebokans's proverb for his chiefs. One must acknowledge that the monarch's verbal skill and artistry is tied to his royalty. The proverb in this instance is drawn from the imaginary scene of "a piece of meat (that) sticks between the teeth while eating." The image suggests the mental struggle for understanding that chiefs such as Obakhavbaye, Uso, Uwangué, Ologbose, and Obaradesagbon are undergoing in the midst of the dialogue. The situation must be corrected before any progress can be made. He feels that the progress of the dialogue is anchored in mutual understanding among all the characters in the scene. It is no wonder then that he nudges his "friend" to continue the discourse, but this time, to "speak plainly" so that "the ears of the prepared" will understand.

It must be stated that the plain language of Eyebokan's response, quoted above, contributes greatly to the exposition of the play. The understanding of the Chiefs present is enriched and the proverbial code of "the full moon is up" becomes clear to them. Another critical point reinforced by Eyebokan's plain expression is the looming danger involved in the approach of the "white men." Suffice it to say that the ritual activities requiring the exclusion of outsiders, the Ague Ceremony, was and is sacred to the people and kingdom of Benin. At this point, the intensity of the play's exposition gathers momentum as the dialogue heightens the call for conflict and resistance against the white men's demonstration of impatience and lack of respect for the kingdom and its customs and traditions.

In the heat of the intense debate and protestations by the Chiefs, Ovonramwen takes recourse to proverbs to reassert royal wisdom. This time, the king takes us into the world of the

Felis Catus to codify his proverb. In his wisdom, he maintains that the protests by his chiefs and the call for outright confrontation with and resistance against the white man is unwise. Ovonramwen communicates this insight through his observation of the visual senses of a “cat” assuming “the colour of what it stares at.” The commentary is actually satirical and lampooning. Ovonramwen is covertly condemning his chiefs for their violent response towards the uncivilized actions of the white man. The king’s subtle interpretation reveals that the attitude of the chiefs is in no way different from the white man’s. At the same time, our understanding of the proverbial code brings us closer to the king’s wisdom, that one does not respond in like manner to an adversary in conflicting situations. In the mind of the king, there must be a deliberate effort to demonstrate “patience” and “caution” as these are among the characteristics that separate gods from men.

The above exchange is skillfully crafted by the author to dramatize the lack of understanding between “the white man” and the palace Chiefs. It is this chasm that culminates in the invasion of the Benin kingdom and the massacre of its people. It is important to state here that the wisdom of Ovonramwen calling for “patience” and “caution” from his Chiefs to avoid confrontation with “the white men” was subtly unacknowledged. This is not unconnected to the complexities surrounding the ideas that “the chiefs of Benin Empire,... hold the customs and traditions of the Benin people together” (39). Besides, there is also the unacknowledged fear within the camp of the palace chiefs that “word will go out throughout Bini that we, all of us here, destroyed the age long Ague tradition” (40).

The delicate situation therefore calls for discretion as subtly put by Chief Uso

USO: ... We must remember the saying that when a slave is sent a message, he must deliver it, like a son, with some discretion. The Oba has spoken, we now like slaves must carry out his wish like sons. What would sons do? I ask you all? (40).

In our reading of the play, it must be acknowledged that we consider the above proverb as probably the most iconic of the proverbs deployed in the dramatic masterpiece. The complexities built into the codes of the proverb is quite tasking. At this point, we must recognize that the Chiefs are faced with the dilemma of allegiance to the Oba's command as well as the preservation of Benin customs and traditions. The questions in the statements of Chief Uso hold the key to our decodification of the proverb. They register our understanding of the actions of the Chiefs amidst the fact enunciated by the Oracle through Obiro (the Seer) that the complex situation is "set by our forefathers for the growth of the Bini people and now, there is no escape." Again, he goes on to say that "Nothing. No matter what [can be done] to stop [the Benin massacre]." He further admonished through the proverb, "the dew must fall each morning," the inevitability of the situation (52).

With a skilful use of dramatic brilliance, the play's climatic status ascends further to show that "the full moon" has come to fruition through the intricate manipulation of the gods. The revelation given to the king about the killing of "the white men" by Ologbose and others angered the king, whose instructions have obviously been flouted.

The consequent proverbial exchanges between Ovonramwen and Iyase (the leader of the chiefs sent by the king to bring the white men) – attest to the impending war that the king wants avoided. The dialogue goes this way:

OVONRAMWEN: Ha ha! The favourite cooking pot of the new wife burns her first meal, she sobs that it was the fire. Who lit the fire? Who kept adding wood and oil to make the fire burn? Who burnt the meal? Ologbose, who?

IYASE: My lord sometimes it is better to scrape one's tongue of a sour taste than to merely wash it. What Ologbose and the others have done is to scrape the tongue for the last time. (47)

The exclamation of the Monarch stresses his mixed feelings with the announcement he just received from his son-in-law (Ologbose). What is even more fascinating is that his son-in-law, whom he expects to uphold his interests before the other Chiefs, is the announcer of the horrible news. The astonished Monarch resorts to proverbs to espouse his displeasure with the actions of his son-in-law. The reader should appreciate the proverbial codes of irresponsibility encapsulated in the statement. One could tell that Ovonramwen is disturbed by Ologbose's demonstration of irresponsibility towards the royal family and the kingdom, especially as this seems to be his "first" assignment for him. To further emphasize the king's displeasure with the son-in-law and the Chiefs, there is the release of a series of questions to Ologbose to underpin the idea of irresponsibility and blame.

However, the response of Iyase (the leader of the king's delegation) gives us further insight into the reasoning of the Chiefs. One could grasp from the words in his proverb that their actions are deliberate and for the good of the kingdom. The idea is to put an end to the dilemma of the king so that the kingdom can move ahead with its Ague festivities as well as protect the image of the customs and traditions of the Benin people. A further insightful evaluation of the proverb suggests that the Chiefs' action is aimed at satisfying the Monarch and the peoples of

the kingdom. To them, the “scraping of the tongue” will put an end to the uncertainties plaguing the kingdom “for the last time.”

In a clear departure from Iyase’s reasoning, Ovonramwen upbraids him and his colleagues with a highly philosophical and proverbial intuition. Hear him:

OVONRAMWEN: Yes! Scrape the tongue, not cut it off! I hear the big bell sound out our fall. I did not send you. Suddenly, the blinkers fall from my eyes. I did not send you.... From now on, we walk at the edge. From now on, we sleep no more. Let us go home and await the white man’s visit. The Cobra ready to strike pulls back its head, and like little children we think we have gained some space, so we move closer for the strike. Go home, all of you. Tonight, you tilt my crown for blood to flow. (47-8)

The above excerpt reminds us of the king’s earlier call for “caution” in the midst of the complex situation with the British. One could perceive his innocence in the repetition of the lines “I did not send you.” By implication, his strategy was to “scrape the tongue” with “caution” and “not cut it off.” The privileged insight of Ovonramwen saw the “cobra” image of the British invaders and made frantic efforts to avoid its “strike.” It is however unfortunate that the child-like disposition of the Chiefs draws the Benin kingdom “closer for the [Cobra’s] strike” and “tilt [the] crown for blood to flow.”

Conclusion

In this essay, we have concentrated on the deconstruction of proverbial codes in *The Trials*. The critical reader of the drama piece will agree that the author uses proverbs in dialogues to codify as well as develop the exposition of the play. The analysis of these proverbs thus

enables us to capture in a critical manner the dispositions of Ovonramwen as well as the palace chiefs in the events leading up to the “Benin Massacre” and the trials of Oba Ovonramwen in 1897.

It is noticed that the proverbial codes contribute to our knowledge of the Benin worldview concerning the Monarchy, its customs and traditions as well as its sense of dignity and respect. Perhaps what is most striking in our deconstruction of the proverbial codes is the inevitability of the “Benin Massacre” as a result of the manipulative actions of the gods and ancestors. Moreover, we are also privileged to notice that the Benins are prone to proverbial exchanges in their discourses, communications and dialogues. This point grants us further insight into their values, ethics, and sensibilities. What is not doubtful though is that Yerima’s crafting of *The Trials* elevates his dramatic skills and registers his place as an iconic representative of the Edo people in general and the revered Benin Monarchy in particular.

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