

ALAGO PROVERBS AS EFFECTIVE INDIGENOUS DISCOURSE TOOL FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Proverbs are ready to use, impersonal linguistic tools for interpersonal and social interaction. Alago Proverbs are rhetoric arsenals in a compact and condensed form employed by the Alago people in everyday conversation to advise, warn, criticize, incite, strategize, sue for peace, recount experiences amongst other things. On the other hand, a critical look at paremiological and paremiographical efforts in Nigeria reveals a neglect of proverbs from minority cultures like the Alago. The paper therefore examines the contextual performance of Alago proverb as rhetoric and as an indigenous discourse tool for conflict management and resolution in the society. The data for the paper was collected through participant -observation method which involved recoding, documenting and translating the recoded context to English. It adopts an eclectic approach for analysis; a combination of Mey's Pragmatic Act theory and Functionalist theory. The findings reveal that proverb meaning among the Alago is largely dependent on context and participants as one proverb can have different meanings depending on the context and participants, thus a proverb without a context is "like sesame seed lying in wait for the early rain to sprout". The paper therefore concludes that Alago proverbs are situation bound utterances, useful in conflict resolution, crisis management and in fostering harmonious co-existence.

Keywords: Alago, Proverb, Conflict resolution, Pragmatics and Indigenous.

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs may be considered among the oldest forms of communication in human interaction. The earliest proverb collections stem from the third millennium B.C, inscribed on Sumerian cuneiform tablets as common-sensical codes of conduct and everyday observation of human nature (Mieder *Proverb* xii). Proverbs are coined from everyday experiences and

thus contain common experiences expressed in brief, concise and formulaic language which makes it easy to remember and ready to be used as instant effective rhetorical tools in oral or written communication. They have garnered significant attention from psychologists and psychiatrists as a diagnostic tool for assessing intelligence, attitude, aptitude, and mental health conditions. The Gorham Proverb Test, developed by Donald R. Gorham in 1956, is a notable example. Psycholinguists also utilize proverbs to study children's cognitive development, focusing on aspects like comprehension, communication, and metaphorical understanding (See Gorham; Honeck; Mieder). Beyond psychology, proverbs play a substantial role in the arts and media, featuring in cartoons, advertising slogans, films, and music. Moreover, proverbs serve as valuable educational tools, imparting moral values, social skills, and life lessons in various settings, including child rearing, language instruction, and religious education (See Mieder; Stanciu; Boateng).

They serve people well in oral communication as well as in written form; they come to mind impulsively for speakers who are familiar with proverbs as ready-made rhetorical tools although the frequency of its use varies amongst individuals, people and context. Proverbs are significant in various modes of communication which include friendly chats, kindred meetings, lyrical poetry, traditional judicial sessions, etc.

Most significantly proverbs have been used as pedagogical tools for teaching moral values and social skills. They contain much educational wisdom and have long been used as didactic tools in child rearing, linguistic and religious instructions in schools and in teaching about general human experience (See Mieder *Handbook* 142; Nwachukwu- Agbada 57; Stanciu 158; Boateng 110; Ose-Agbo 76). In Africa, proverbs are significant for several reasons. They serve philosophical purposes, as tools for socialization and social control, vehicle for communication and as index of a person's intelligence. As Aloysius Lugira aptly observes:

Most African languages are rich with proverbs. In many cases failure to grasp an African proverb is considered to be tantamount to failure to grasp the subtleties, the nuances, and the didactic finesse of African wisdom. For besides being a didactic saying, a proverb is a store-house of wisdom and philosophy which is fraught with wit, rhetoric, humour and poetic values. (55)

However, a critical look at paremiological and paremiographical efforts in Africa, especially in Nigeria reveals a neglect of proverbs from minority cultures. In Nigeria for instance, the large corpus of paremiological researches is focused on major cultures while little or no effort is geared towards the study of proverbs from less populated cultures like Alago. This paper will pay attention to the utilitarian value of Alago proverb lore as indigenous tool for conflict resolution.

In Africa, the use of proverbs basically entails a giving and receiving of meaning which is the significance of human communication, among the Alago, proverbs are equally regarded as effective tool capable of stating one's position without appearing too involved. The Alago proverb, *Asusesosa* is "the brother of speech...which gives it power / strength", it is "the horse that carries discourse" ...making it "your talk even though it is not yours" (Ose-Agbo 4). This description simply put, means your speech or position which precedes you. This description draws attention to the indirection and impersonal nature Alago proverb. It also captures one of the essences of the Alago proverb; its fluid nature as a particular proverb once spoken is capable

of generating diverse meanings and interpretations depending on the situation. To illustrate this, the proverb “*Ikpo k’adagba ya kigyi bua*” meaning “the elephant’s footprints cover the hare’s”. This proverb could be an advice or a blatant boast depend on the participants and context.

Alago proverbs possess the capacity to bring a conversation to life by colouring it with vivid images and comparison. They are effective in the art of persuasion and indirection. “They are employed in communication for the purpose of embellishment and reinforcing the power of argument” (Egudu 106). Having established the utilitarian purpose of the proverb, this article focuses on how the indirect, fluid and impersonal nature of Alago proverbs and its ability to generate diverse meanings and interpretations depending on the situation makes it an effective indigenous discourse tool for conflict management and resolution.

ALAGO PROVERBLORE, RHETORICS AND PRAGMATICS

The Alago of Nasarawa State like other ethnic groups in the north central region have a peculiar history. Scholars have argued that the Alago originated from the Jukun of modern Wukari division, North of the middle Benue plain, a considerable distance from their present home land while oral account maintains that the Alago people migrated to Nigeria from the Middle East together with the Jukun, Igala, Goma and Idoma and they formed the famous Kwararafa Empire (Ose- Agbo 26). Nasarawa State has thirteen Local Government Areas and shares boundary with Kaduna State in the North, Plateau in the East, Benue in the South while Kogi State and F.C.T. bounded the state in the West.

The Alago is found in eight Local Government Areas and Development Areas of Nasarawa State. Alago land is bounded to the South by Benue State, to the South East by Taraba State, to the North East by Plateau State, North West by Akwanga and Nasarawa local government area. The Alago language belongs to the Niger- Congo family which European linguists classified as the *kwa* group. The language has two major dialectal variations; the eastern and western variations of which this study adopts the former.

Alago proverb lore serves as signpost of authority, education, image making and socialization. They also function as dynamic communication strategy during varying occasions such as traditional engagement and marriage rites, traditional burial rites, traditional worship, libations, peace mediation, clan meeting and even friendly chats. Proverbs also play rhetoric role as language of diplomacy and presentation of argument during traditional judicial sessions and other crisis situations. The proverb enjoys patronage and acceptance among the people as it is regarded as the embodiment of a people’s wisdom, philosophy, beliefs, experiences, world views and taboos.

Rhetoric according to Merriam-Webster, is “the art of speaking or writing effectively” that involves the study of principles and rules of composition to persuade or communicate effectively. This definition highlights the importance of understanding the audience, context, and purpose of communication, it therefore entails that rhetorics is a means of communication for persuasion. Kenneth Burke, on the other hand, avers that rhetorics is “rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols”(43) This definition by Burke, emphasises the role of language in shaping human

behaviour and inducing cooperation through symbolic interaction' enabling speakers appeal to their audience's opinions and ideals to persuade them.

Rhetoric in the context of this paper covers the art of speaking with propriety, elegance and force. It is the art of fine language whether in spoken or written forms; it also includes the ability to persuade. Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as "a faculty of observing [discovering] in any given case the available[appropriate] means of persuasion in any subject" (*The Rhetoric Tradition* 160) suits this study well. The rhetorical value of proverbs is apparent as it serves as essential and ready-made communicative tool in adjudicating justice, resolving conflict, cueing for peace or even stating a position.

Pragmatics on the other hand is concerned with understanding and meaning of language (text) in a context situation. Pragmatics pays attention to the meaning of what is spoken in relation to the speaker(s), the addressee, audience, the setting and the situation at hand. It focuses on the social, economic and sometimes the religious relationship between the participants, time and situation which are factors that affect the function or value of what is said. Alago proverbs are situation bound and often used in an impersonal and concise manner to express an opinion or position.

Alago proverbs are flux in nature, this means that depending on the situation and event, the speaker of a proverb can alter it to suit the expected role of the proverb for the situation/context without the proverb losing its original essence. For instance, the Alago proverb "*Owoni kwimi ka rigushu oya wefu igbe ipa*" translated as: "if you defecate lazily, you will clean your anus twice". This can be rendered as "*O kwimi ka rigushi O na wefu igbe ipa*", which is translated in English as "He has defecated lazily, let him clean his anus twice" or "*Owoni obi kwimi k'arigushi lo obi ya wefu igbe ipa?*" ("if he had not defecated lazily, will he have cleaned his anus twice?"). In the first instance, it is just a warning to be diligent and do whatever you are doing correctly; it is used pre-emptively as a warning to do what is right. In the second form, the person referred to had already taken a wrong action and he is encouraged to bear the consequences of his action. The third variant is a form of rebuke, blaming someone as the cause of his own misfortune, like washing your hands off someone. This form is usually sarcastic, and is aimed at mocking the person; in this situation the person referred to is already condemned probably because of his or her obstinacy.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Two theories are employed in this article. Functionalism and the Pragmatic act theory. Functionalism as a literary theory focuses on the roles performed by social structures within the society. It was popularized by the English philosopher, biologist and sociological functionalist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Functionalists argues that different parts of the society are inter-related just like the human body, so a change in one part of the society will lead to changes in other parts too. Functionalists sees the society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote stability. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) building on Spencer's ideas maintains that, society is held in place by "Collective Consciousness"- a set of communal norms and tradition and attitude which serves as a unifying force within the society. For Durkheim, every part of the social structure must work for the stability of the whole, when one part of the system is dysfunctional, it affects all other part and creates social problems. Durkheim goes on, that punishment for deviance will affirm established cultural [national]

values and norms. (Introduction to Sociology 93). This approach is suitable for this paper as it provides the premise for its argument that, “the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average member of a society forms a determinate system with a life on its own”, the proverb is therefore one of such components.

In corroborating the utilitarian value of African Oral Literature, Ruth Finnegan in her seminal work *Oral Literature in Africa* highlights the importance of oral literature in African cultures, emphasizing its role in shaping identity, community, and social values. According to Finnegan, oral literature in African societies serves various social functions, such as social cohesion, cultural transmission, education, entertainment, and political commentary. African paremiologists have also studied the various utilitarian values of proverbs from diverse African cultures (See Nwachukwu-Agbada; Boateng; Yankah; Ojoade; Adegoju; Ose-Agbo)

For this paper, Spencer and Durkheim’s perspective on functionalism is suitable for its emphasis on the function the component structures within the society play towards maintaining social stability. This perspective therefore gives framework for considering proverb and Alago proverbs in particular as a social aspect of the society capable of functioning to educate, to give authority to positions, to socialize and to serve as a potent indigenous tool for resolving conflicts and managing crisis.

Jacob Mey’s Pragmatic Act Theory which evolved as an alternative to Speech Act Theory. It focuses on the relationship between a situated speech act, the context (society) and meaning. It pays attention to how people use language to perform actions and achieve goals in interpersonal and other forms of social interaction. The Pragmatic Act Theory takes into cognisance what is said and what is left unsaid to determine the meaning of an utterance, based on the socio- cultural interactional perspective on pragmatics (Verschuere, 1990; Mey 2001 and 2006). This perspective emerged in opposition to the component approach to pragmatics of the Speech Act Theory. Mey’s Pragmatic Act Theory emphasizes “the priority of socio-cultural and societal factors in meaning construction and comprehension... [He goes on to say that] ...indirect speech act derives their force, not from their lexico-semantic build up, but instead from the situation in which they are appropriately uttered” (*Pragmatics*, 214). Kecskes collaborating Mey’s position affirms that, Mey is right in emphasizing the importance of situation, environment and extra linguistic factors in meaning construction and comprehension. However, he maintains that the “wordings” of linguistic expression are also as important in shaping meaning as the situation. (Kecskes, 423). The proponents of Pragmatic Act Theory views communication as a dynamic interaction which involve the speaker(s) and the listener(s). It acknowledges the that communication can be implied, indirect and that often times meaning is suggested instead of using direct statements. PAT also recognises the importance of power dynamics and social relationships in shaping meaning in communication; for them communication is not just about conveying meaning rather it also involves a negotiation of social relation and maintaining and sustaining social order.

The implication of the above on the Alago proverb as a situation bound utterance is that the real meaning and function of a particular proverb cannot be fully constructed nor comprehended in isolation. This is because whenever a proverb is spoken there is usually more than one meaning: the lexico-semantic and pragmatic meaning which draws a relationship between two situations being compared i.e. “the proverb statement and its referent in the social

context. It is this connectedness between the human experience and another which gives proverbs their relevance” (Adegoju 60). It also brings to the fore other factors which determines proverb meaning among the Alago which include the age and social status of the participants (speaker(s) and listener(s) alike), the context and then the issue at hand. It is in the light of the above that this paper draws attention to one of the fundamental roles of the Alago proverb as a potent indigenous tool for crisis management and conflict resolution.

ALAGO PROVERBS AS TOOL FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

For this paper, a total of twenty (20) proverbs were used in the two (2) proverb performance context understudy.

Context 1

Nature of Communication: A peace meeting at the instance of the Adoo Fulani for reconciliation after a violent crisis between some Fulani and Alago youths.

Participants: An Alago elder (who lost his grand-child during the conflict) and Adoo Fulani Keana

Audience: A Keana Prince, few Alago and Fulani elders, all from Keana and the Reseacher.

Setting: Keana Village.

A group of Fulani men led by the Adoo Fulani Keana visited the Alago elder at his residence, to console him over the death of his grand-child; who had died as a result of violent attack and counter attack between the Fulani and the Alago in Keana.

The Adoo started his speech with the proverb “One who is purging never gets tired of going to the toilet” (AP 1), this is in lieu of the frequency of their (the Adoo and some Fulani elders) visit to the man’s house after the clash and the subsequent death of the young boy. In appealing to the man’s emotion, the Adoo continued with “both the right and left hand are attached to the chest” (AP 2) and followed it up with “the breast and chest are also kinsmen even though one is flat and the other a mould” (AP 3) to remind the man of their long standing friendship. By making reference to the chest and the breast in his third proverb, the Adoo acknowledges their different social status, the Alago as ‘indigene’ and the Fulani ‘settler’ status, in spite of this he calls for good neighbourliness. With the next proverb “it is foolishness for the one carrying the soup not to be careful; where the one carrying the food has stumbled”. (AP 4). The Adoo assures the man and the audience that whether as indigenes or settlers, they should look out for each other. The Adoo concludes his speech with an ‘indictment’, a resolve to make amends with the following proverbs; “the mouth has eaten and the eye is left with shame” (AP 5) and “the fish must be bent now that it is fresh (AP 6). With this he insists that the perpetrators (though his kinsmen) will be brought to book to forestall future occurrences.

In his response to the Adoo, the bereaved elder started “we must kill this Iguana that has entered our water before it becomes a crocodile” (AP 7). This shows his agreement with the Adoo, that conflict and violence between the two groups should be nipped at the bud. He challenges the Adoo to ensure that justice is served with “it is only a person who is familiar with a dog that can catch it” (AP 8) and “the one that sleeps in a room that knows where it leaks” (AP 9) to ensure that those responsible for the crisis and the subsequent death of his grand- child are brought to justice.

In appreciation of the Adoo’s efforts, the Alago elder continued “now that you have eaten your roasted rat with the tail”, (AP 10) “do not hold unto the cloth of the sacrificial goat” (AP 11)

he congratulated his visitors on a mission accomplished. In accepting his friend's decision, the Adoo concurred with this proverb: "what is left of the dog that has bitten the king if not shame" (AP 12), an indication that he has accepted the blame and consequences of the actions of his people. In this context, the proverbs used by the speakers are context relevant and because of the shared knowledge between the participants, these proverbs serve as effective impersonal rhetoric tools to resolve the conflict.

Context 2

Nature of communication: A family meeting to settle conflict between two warring brothers.

Participants: Mr. A, Mr. B, and their uncle.

Audience: Their sons (one of each of them), the researcher (their uncle is one of the researchers collaborators) and a witness (their uncle's friend).

Setting: Oleye, Agwatashi town

The speaker in the next context, by an art of fine language successfully disabused the minds of two estranged and warring kinsmen and opened their eyes to what their real problems are. In calling the truce, the speaker employed few proverbs in order not to sound personal or too involved while successfully resolving the conflict.

The two men are cousins; their late fathers' share the same parents. Mr. A, is the son of the eldest son while Mr. B, is the son of the third son. The dispute is over a parcel of farmland but the immediate cause of the crisis is the unfounded allegation that Mr. B. is a wizard and has pledged his nephew (the other man's only son who is sick) as a ransom/ sacrifice in their covenant. The architect of the rumour is another man in the compound who claims to be in solidarity with Mr. A. Although the man claims not to be a wizard, he said he was reliably told that Mr. B is the one snuffing life out of his nephew through remote and diabolic means.

This particular context is one of the ones that the researcher was present and recorded the performance. The uncle of the two men, who is also one of the researcher's Alago collaborator and informant, invited the researcher to witness the case. The speaker used five proverbs the course of his speech. He used the first proverb to sort of woo both parties by acknowledging that they have the right to make their grievances known and commended them by slightly altering the original proverb, "the angry man should beat his chest" (AP 13). However, in his subsequent statement he puts a limit to what their behaviour should be with the second proverb "the teeth and the tongue in the mouth do also quarrel" (AP 14) which shows what is expected of the brothers, that even though they quarrel it should be settled within the home.

But in their case, it was different. Instead of resolving it themselves within the family, they had involved outsiders whom the speaker refers to as thieves and geckos in the third and fourth proverbs respectively "the thief says it is cloudy when theft is discussed" (AP 15) and "it is when the wall cracks that the gecko enters" (AP 16). Using the third proverb, he opens their eyes to the problem – the outsiders – who are misleading them by using diversionary tactics. Proverb four reiterates the third one; the outsiders distract both of them and benefit from what is rightfully theirs. The speaker uses the fifth proverb to conclude what he set out to do from the beginning which is to convince them to change their view stating that "a potter should not cook with a potsherd" (AP 17). For him, the best way to end the strife is for them to find out what is medically wrong with the sick young, so the outsiders will stop taking advantage of them. This context demonstrates the importance of understanding the audience, context, and

purpose of communication and lends credence to Burke's emphasises on the role of language in shaping and reshaping human behaviour. From the two contexts used for this paper, the Alago proverb is seen as a context bound utterance whose values is brought to the fore in content specific situation and a potent indigenous tool for managing crisis, resolving conflicts and promoting harmonious co-existence.

CONCLUSION

This paper considered selected Alago proverbs performances in context to establish Alago proverbs as effective indigenous tools for conflict resolution and crisis management, thereby reinforcing the utilitarian value of proverbs particularly Alago proverbs. It has also lent credence to Mey's Pragmatic Act Theory, the proverb performance contexts above have shown that communication can be implied, indirect and that meaning can be suggested rather than explicitly stating them. It has also demonstrated the importance of power dynamics in shaping meaning as seen in the first context. The proverb uses in the two contexts reaffirm that conveying meaning is not the only role of speech acts; they are also used in negotiating social relation and maintaining social order.

From the foregoing, Alago proverbs used in this paper demonstrate the potentials and efficacy of Alago proverb lore as reservoir of handy 'local' arsenal for conflict resolution. It also important to note that not all Alago proverbs can fit into context in conflict resolution situations however, the selected proverbs considered in this paper have established the potency and efficacy of the Alago proverb as indigenous tool for conflict resolution which is the consensus of authors of this paper.

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Appendix

Alago Proverbs used in the paper in order of appearance

1. Oshipu a mwow eya lo
2. Abwo ore kwu otu, Abwo oshe kwu otu
3. Ame kpo otu wo ayine
4. Ikawu sho ob'ona, ob'oho na gbera
5. Okunu ro oza, iweyi yayi iyi
6. Aba kho ebe khinyi ishi o owo meme ni la
7. Obe ghi nyi, oti'ikpi kpo kpanu la lo apyi'ikwu
8. Ogyi iwo lo, a kwi iwo lo
9. Aseni ya ky'oda ni pini gyo ebeni inu ya nu nila
10. Ogyo ipwi, iyu, a ho khe'we wa
11. Oyi ikpowu da eka, kha yob wo byo'gbogbo lo
12. Iwo ni fo Ose ahanu I iweyi wo akhanu
13. Okyanya yabo kwa otu
14. Ahanu kpo igbenu b'okunu dudu aba fiyiwa
15. Aba kh'ela kho'wyiyi owiyi mo owuso
16. Akyada ya pini bwawule abwa la
17. Ome'yi nakha sola khoza a khagyo lo