

Proverbs as Aesthetics of Meaning in Osundare's Poetry

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Abstract

Proverb incorporation, proverb reformulation and manipulation are Osundare's rhetorical forte. Critical analysis that carries an in-depth focus has not been paid to proverbs as trope and aesthetic of meaning in Osundare's poetry, except in passing. This may be due to the assumption in written modern African literature that proverbs, being anonymously existing metaspeech texts, need no critical stylistics examination other than the observation of its presence for text identity and meaning representation. What dominates has mainly been examination of proverbial Textuality in prose and drama genres. I go further than this to provide an exemplar of proverbs as trope of poetic meaning in Osundare's oeuvre. In doing so I engage in interpretive analysis of Osundare's poetic use of proverbs, including the patterns and processes of reformulation and transfer from Yoruba into English expression, and most importantly the thematic orientation of identified proverbs as they impact our understanding of Osundare's socio-political messages.

Proverb as Metaspeech

The relevance of proverbs as a speech genre in Africa cannot be overemphasized. Proverbs are products of oral culture of Africa and when harvested into the creative literary form, its pragmatic essences of meaning energize and amplify the meaning frontiers of the written literature. Although the proverb is a second order pre-existing text, its harvest into creative composition is a second level reconfiguration that respond to the rhetoric of literature. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi, Niyi Osundare, and Femi Osofisan who write in English have made a virtue of proverbs in their works. One immediate benefit of oral-written contact is the preservation of the tradition of the oral culture, both in its 'pastness' and progression into the future, serving as an attraction and a bridge into the written format. Raji-Oyelade (1999:74) has observed that "There is virtually no substantial controversy about the value of proverbs in culture, and the significance of proverbs in Yoruba traditional societies as repository and verbal effulgence of wisdom is indeed proverbial". In Yoruba 'socio-semio-linguistic life' for example, one's eloquence in proverbs represents a linguistic wherewithal, astute deep knowledge and wisdom. Achebe's (1980:5) "Among the Ibo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" underscores the stylistic import of proverbs as quintessence of speech making and ordinary conversation in African socio-linguistic culture.

Proverbs are figural and signifying acts of meaning that mediate interpretation and negotiate pragmatic signification at linguistic, philosophical and cultural levels. The depth of proverbs as metaspeech and verbal strategy in Yoruba rhetoric culture, albeit most of Africa, can be understood in the metaproverb: *Owe lesin orò, orò lesin owe, bi orò ba sonù, owe la fi i nwa-* the proverb is the horse of the word, the word is the horse of proverb, when the word is lost, it is the proverb we use for finding it (Osundare's translation). This idea suggests that the proverb is the template for clear verbal elocution

into which the listener/reader is invited to enter and share in the thoughts and beliefs of the encoder. Proverbs provide an interpretive window for Yoruba's world view and socio-cultural realities of traditional ethos of human behaviors and interaction, social conduct, honesty and truthfulness, destiny and fate, relationships, families, neighbors, the community, friends and acquaintances (Owomoyela; 2005). Thus, the ontological spectrum of "vehicles", "horse" and "palm-oil" (proverbs as vehicle, horse and palm-oil of discourse) point toward the conceptual pragmatic function of proverbs in African semiotic milieu. Given a rhetorical context of literary situation, a proverb can provide a template in which linguistic, philosophical, psychological and cosmological ideas and messages can be communicated. For example, proverbs can perform a pragmatic function of warning, persuading, encouraging, scolding, etc. For illustration, *Awolu mate, o mo iwon ara re ni* (One who remains within his bounds negotiates his/her way out of trouble or disgrace). This is a proverb that incites caution with an undercurrent effect of warning and the possibility of the negative consequence of ignoring such wisdom of self-caution.

A large number of works have been written about the sociology and use of proverbs in African writing generally, especially proverbs as conveyance of meaning in prose and dramatic genres. However, its theoretical and rhetorical import in African written literature, particularly in poetry has been under examined. Critical examination of proverbs as a creative premise of meaning in Osundare's poetry, as far as I know, enjoys mostly cursory mention (See Brown 2003; Ojaide et al 2002; and Obiechina 1990). In consequence of this lip service, (Adeeko 1998:28) aptly makes similar observation:

Postcolonial criticism, the main metropolitan category in which African literature fits today, has been able to show the dominance of allegory in postcolonial writing but has never considered the conspicuous presence of the proverb to be of any theoretical value.

For example, Brown (2003:99) observes, without substantiation, "Even for the reader without knowledge of Yoruba proverbs, much of Osundare's work bears the cast of proverbial utterance¹". According to Brown, "Indeed some of the more obvious echoes are from proverbs that exist in English". This statement, as true as it may appear to be, attests to some of the misinterpretations by western criticisms of African literature, by which they perceive meaning in African literature on the thesis of western idioms known to such critics, and which they wrongly think "echoes" western worldviews. I will think that the creative ability of Osundare at manipulating Yoruba idiom into English expression for the understanding of non-Yoruba English readers may have informed this erroneous point of view.

What is lacking, in the case of Osundare criticism, is the understanding of the stylistic depth of the deployment of the proverb in terms of its literary and linguistic manipulations as a poetic agency of style that institutes poetic meaning and themes. Accordingly, African writers who engage in embedding proverbs into the fabric of their works are 'bilingual writers' and would be assumed to have facilities in both African languages and adopted European languages. The versatility of such writers will reflect in their creative virtuosity of being able to create the felicitous template for the proverbs they have harvested from African languages into English as medium of literary

expression.

Proverb in the Eye of Osundare

How does Osundare perceive the proverb as a poetic device? Without the proverb, a gulf exists between the word and the meaning it conveys, including the degree and impact of communication. The proverb, as the extract below suggests, is the element that bridges that gulf between the word and meaning, and how meaning is perceived in a discourse:

Sometimes a proverb breaks within my grasp
Like the chapter of an ill-remembered dream
Other times a happy phrase throbs in my hand
Like the clay of a pulsing idiom

Bridge now
Gulf thereafter (*Word: 23*).

A more explicative context to answer the question above is the poem “Who is Afraid of the Proverb” (Osundare; Memory: 100-1). A close reading of its syntactic and metaphorical effects show the rhetorical value Osundare associates with proverbs. “Who is Afraid of the Proverb?” has its meaning mantra in combative rhetorical interrogative structure. This perception is cued by the repetitive hype of “who is afraid of the proverb?” at the beginning of every stanza, and it imbues a sustained semantic orientation of *challenge* to a crescendo level of double parallel interrogative clauses- S/V/O-S/V/O (subject/verb/object); simple sentence structural formulaic (in rhetorical questions), which by their illocutionary force are declarative *assertive* clauses:

Who’s afraid of the proverb?
Who’s afraid of m-e-m-o-r-y?

The juxtapositional implication suggests that “the proverb” is “m-e-m-o-r-y” and by conceptual mapping implication “THE PROVERB” IS HISTORY; repository, memory being a signification and collocation of history. The hyphenation in “memory” is a gesture for focus and emphasis, a ‘last word’ annotative communicative act of assertiveness on the pragmatic tentacles of “the proverb” in the last stanza of the poem. The phrase “who is afraid of the proverb?” is used to engage what the proverb is and its meta-philosophical, timeless rendition of acute truth and penetrating meaning. This is the resonating spectrum of the various metaphors deployed in the poem to espouse proverbs as a temple of pragmatic meaning. First, the stable aspect of syntactic construction of meaning in the poem:

Who’s afraid of the proverb?
Of the eloquent kernel in the pod
Of silent moons

Who’s afraid of the proverb?
Of the kola in mouth of the mountain
Giant udder of the cow of the sky

Each stanza is a modified simple sentence converted into interrogative sentence. Each stanza in this first part has the same structural arrangement of [interrogative frame]:S→(relative interrogative pronoun)/V→(experiential verb)/C→(phrasal verb)/ and [meaning of poetry frame]: O→(nominal group) with the structure *mhq* thus:

The → *m* (modifier)

Proverb→ *h* (headword) *of the eloquent kernel in the pod of silent moons*→ *q* (qualifier), with multiple rankshifted nominal groups.

The determiner in “*the proverb*” is not fortuitous; it is a reference to proverbs as metaspeech or ‘metameaning’. The nominal group at object (O) slot yields multiple rankshifting situations; there are three rankshifted noun phrases (NPs) within the structure of the qualifier (*q*): “the eloquent kernel”, “the pod of silent moons” and “silent moons”. The rankshifted NPs in adverbial modifiers ascribe meaning to (H) headword “proverb”, in a braid-like structuring. All the stanzas possess this structural pattern, except the last stanza:

Who’s afraid of the proverb?

Who’s afraid of

m-e-m-o-r-y?

It is composed of two parallel interrogative structures (as analyzed above) in which the ‘O’ element NP→ *mh* for “the proverb” and ‘*h*’ for “m-e-m-o-r-y” are the same, instituting that “proverb”, as noted earlier, as memory, that is, is a repository of history which embodies the wisdom of the present. Stanzas (8 and 9), differentiated by adjectival relative clause engage both “the proverb” and the generic referent of “who is afraid of the proverb” in the poem thus:

Who’s afraid of the proverb

Who so fat on the lactogen of the moment

Has lost all hint of the milk of dawn

Who’s afraid of the proverb

Who so drunk on the cant of imported parrots

Has no ear for the dialect of the drum

In which case stanza (8), the one who is “fat on the lactogen of the moment”, is the one who lacks the knowledge of proverbs and loses the value- “the milk of dawn”- “the proverb”-, which the proverb affords. In stanza (9) “the cant of imported parrots” (rankshifted NP); metaphorical reference to imitated western literary style, is a negative reference to the generic subject of the pronoun “who” contrasted with the positive orientation of “the dialect of the drum” (rankshifted NP) of “the proverb”, which “lactogen of the moment” and “cant of imported parrots” (rankshifted negative NPs) seem to blur.

This braid-like syntactic pattern, by the welter of descriptive information directed at the headword (proverbs), seems to establish a semantic centrality with anaphoric effect to the headword “the proverb”, on the basis of the range of ideas inherent in them. A further significance is the expressive power of the braided descriptive adverbial phrases

within which the rankshifted NPs make their meaning. I will illustrate the dominant braiding as below for clarity, using stanzas (3 and 5):

(3):

Who's afraid of the proverb?

Of the drum which left its echoes
In the auricles of leaping streets

Thus:

The proverb:

Of the drum (rankshifted NP)
Which left it echoes (rankshifted clause)
In auricles (rankshifted NP)
Of leaping streets (rankshifted NP)

This will read thus: the proverb *of* the drum, the drum *which* left its echoes *in* auricles, the auricles *of* leaping streets.

(5):

Who's afraid of the proverb?

Of the sonic feathers of metaphors in flight
The lift and thrust of impossible fancies

Thus the proverb is mapped as:

Of the sonic feathers (rankshifted NP).
of metaphors in flight (rankshifted NP).
[*of*] the lift and thrust (rankshifted NP).
of impossible fancies (rankshifted NP).

This will read thus: the proverb *of* the sonic feathers, the feathers *of* metaphors in flight, [the flight *of*] the lift and thrust, lift and thrust *of* impossible fancies.

What is the stylistic impact or relevance of this? First, the style allows for the accumulation and piling of discrete meaning anaphorically to the referent of the description, which is "the proverb". This suggests that the meaning of the headword (the proverb) is, by implication, the sum of the meanings of the NPs braided into the qualifying elements in the clauses of the poem. The second possible stylistic import of the pattern, similar to that which (Cummings et al 1983:113) observes in Jack Kerouac's *Doctor Sax*, is the "listing effect" of each meaning in the qualifying NPs. According to Cummings, "this is a situation based on nominal group structures, both as lists of nominal group [braided] and as lists at the modifier and qualifier elements of nominal groups [illustrated above]" (113). The qualifier elements are complex because of the overlapping rankshifting pattern, with adverbs-, prepositions- and relative pronouns-headed qualifiers within which the NPs are embedded to produce the "listing effect". The listing therefore, by its arrangement, becomes poetic trope of meaning as analyzed.

To achieve a depth of semantic intensity and a vivid evocation of "the proverb" as a significant metaspeech in creative and ordinary discourse, the meaning mantra that the syntax has instituted is further explained and instituted by different levels of the NPs as metaphors. The metaphorical sense is achieved by what (Traugott et al 1980:207) described as foregrounding by anomalous construction:

Anomaly provides the basis for one of the most versatile and widely used foregrounding devices, metaphor... This is because, when our knowledge of language and the world will not let us take a meaning literally, we do not give up, but rather “make sense” of the anomalies by allowing certain features to override others in the particular context.

What bring about this anomaly for focus are the personification and the absurdity in the collocation within the NPs in relation to the headword NP (the proverb). I list few examples for close analysis:

The proverb is: -

Eloquent kernel pod in the pod of silent moons:

“The proverb” entails fluency of expression- quality of human- juxtaposed with the metaphor/personification “silent moons” to emphasize the “eloquence”

-kola in the mouth of the mountain:

“The proverb” juxtaposed with “kola” evokes the proverb *Enu agba ni obi ti ngbo* “Kola nut is sweetest in the mount of elders”- elders have the audacity of discourse, where others may fear to make meaning openly. In other words “the proverb” metaphorically has audacity of meaning in discourse.

-the drum which left its echoes in the auricles of leaping streets:

“The proverb” imitates and elicits sound/echoes of drum with an ontology that suggests ‘memorability’ and ‘long lasting’ and ‘effectiveness’ of meaning couched in proverbs.

-the shortest distance between many truths:

“The proverb” as a pungent means/ medium of providing prompt truth and meaning in a short span of a discourse. That is, saying much with small number of words.

-the dialect of the drum:

“the proverb” implies a language, a means of communication, metaphorically perceived in two popular Yoruba drums, *gangan* and *agidigbo* which are used literally in talking/making meaning in performance with semiotic import, requiring pragmatic interpretation . For example, as we have in Fagunwa/Soyinka (1982:1): “My friends all, like the sonorous proverb do we drum the *agidigbo*; it is the wise who dance to it, and the learned who understand its language”.

-silent salt in the feast of delicious words:

“The proverb” is conceived within the domain of food, whereby the proverb-as-salt metaphor sweetens words-as-food metaphor. In simple terms, the metaphor suggests the elegance and aesthetic and communicative value of proverbs in speech or discourse, and as the proverb goes, “proverb is the vehicle of discourse” or as Achebe puts it “proverb is the oil with which words are eaten”.

The syntactic braiding of ordinarily unrelated qualifying NPs provides the relations of different suggestive semantic intensity. The metaphor on the other hand, parallel to the syntactic pattern, maps the ontology of other ordinary experiences (eloquence, kola, sound of drum, food, etc), inciting us to reason and characterize “the proverb” as a correspondence of those experiences. This analysis of the justification of Osundare’s

poetic explication of the pragmatic and aesthetic qualities of “the proverb” is premised on MacCormac’s (1972:60) submission that “When we do recognize a strange juxtaposition of words as a metaphor we do so not only because it is different from ordinary language but also because the metaphor suggests a new meaning to us that is intelligible”.

Osundare rhetorically employs proverbs in four major ways: 1) proverbs as reiterative or annotative commentary, where a proverb is used in a variety of patterns, 2) yarning tale from proverbs to reformulate another second order text, 3) reformulating proverbs in the flux of poetic composition as premise of subject matter and 4) composing poetic idiom as parallels of proverbial figuration. The fourth pattern is embedded within the first three frames, as I will show in the analyses that follow.

Proverb as Reiterative Commentary of Meaning

This first frame relates to Osundare’s compositional structure of proverbs in the continuum of artistic creation technique in which proverbs serve as ‘chorus’, reiterative commentary with illocutionary effects. What I mean by this is the stylistic application in which proverbs are used to echo, support, authenticate or give authoritative appeal to a point of view. There are three patterns in this frame. The first one is a pattern in which a proverb ends a composition. There are instances of this in (*Nib*: 1983), (*Village*: 1984) and (*Word*: 1999). I will use two examples for my analysis. The second pattern is that in which proverbs are used as opening and closing remarks as found, for examples, in “Listen, Book Wizards”, “unequal Fingers” (*Village*: 58, 60-61) and “When We Write the Epitaph of Apartheid” (*Nib*: 43). One example in each case will serve my analysis. The third is that in which proverbs are incorporated in alternate fashion within stanzas of poems as I will show in “I Will Eat in the Fold” (*Nib*: 17-18), “The One Who Departed” (*Memory*: 5-18) and (*Midlife*: 56-59). For ease of identification, italics are used for focus on lines in which proverbs appear.

“Atewolara” (*Nib*: 15) illustrates the first pattern thus:

Reared as we are
To take life
As a knotty theorem
Of unarguable givens

And cry the people:
Who shall save us?

Then Came a whisper
Urgent like Harmattan finger
Prompting like a prick:

Wake you up
And befriend your mind
You will see the answers
Permanenced in the lines
Of your palm

The proverb is reworded and reformulated as a prime order text in the last stanza of this poem, while a second order reformulated text of the proverb forms the thesis (title). In

Yoruba; *Atelewo eni ki-i tan ni je or Atewolara*- literally: our palm never deceives us (one achieves success with certainty of one's effort not trusting/relying on someone else's, but one's self). The poem suggests the unreliability of asking and getting help based on one's belief in religions (stanzas 1 and 2)- "desert temples", "mystery mosques" and "shrinking shrines" to overcome the "knotty theorem of unarguable givens"- problems and difficulties of life. The modifiers "desert", "mystery" and "shrinking", by their semantic content of negativity, conceptualized the futility of the various religions, embodied in "temples", "mosques" and shrines". The proverb helps to incite this truth of relying on self- certainty of one's handiwork rather than the expectation from somewhere else, in which one may be disappointed. In an extended interpretation, it may mean an indictment of over reliance of African governments on Western nations for all sorts of assistance, and this has not obviously served Africa well.

In another poem, "Promise Land" (*Nib*: 32-3), the proverb implicates the unreliability of promises of the political class thus:

Should we should we not pray
For them who thunder promises
From prefab podiums
Feeding famished ears with vows
Of promise lands

...them who banish thought
From action Murder reason, exile hope
Hang poets for their dreams

Arise With long knives and guns
You for so long slaughtered
At the alter of profit Baals

*We shall reach the Promised Land
Through the tracks of our palm.*

The proverb is creatively flushed into the composition, manipulated from its original structure and metaphorically made parallel to the 'reaching'- moving/traveling to the promise land through the tracks (marks on the palm) - road of the palm, which, again, implicates the idea of the people- "we"- being reminded and mobilized to rely on what they, the people, are able to do for themselves, and indeed that they (the people) should rely on themselves to mobilize against tyranny. The metonymic "palm" is a reference to self, instituting self-effort and, perhaps, mass action against culpable power. The proverb in the last stanza of "Sleeping, at Five and Twenty" (*Village*: 11-12) is didactic and it is used to echo the intolerable lazy behavior and traces of lack of wisdom in younger people in the cultural polity, which is the theme of the poem. For example in the following lines:

At five and twenty
There you are No farms no barns
No wives no children

Visiting relatives only

Your palms thick like hippo skin
 Your mates wrestle in the village square
 You grapple massive morsels
 In your neighbor's kitchen
 Where a bowl of *iyam*
 Puts you flat on your slothful back Living each day

Till the sun goes down
 Behind the trees
 You will never hear the whizzzzzz
 When the world races your sleeping ears

*We say a child is foolish
 His mother says "As long as he doesn't die"
 What death kills a child faster
 Than arrant folly?*

Lack of wisdom or sign of laziness in youths is considered more dangerous than death in the culture. A proverb akin to this is *akunkun'bi san ju radarada*- it is better for one not to be born than be born and messed up. Consequently, a lazy or foolish child is of no use and not much better than a dead child. Here we see a single proverb manipulated in different ways to convey different levels of message: between western nations and Africa, between despot-rulers and the large oppressed society, and within self or mass of the people for personal success.

For the second pattern of the first proverbial frame identified earlier these extracts:

1. *Let no one mistake*
2. *the slowness of the cat*
3. *for a flash of fear*
4. *when it is pouncing time*
5. *the speed of the paw*
6. *will surprise the mouse's impertinence*
7. Listen you book wizards
8. your pens are spears
9. in the eye of this land
10. your ink the stench
11. coursing through gutters
12. and government offices
13. carrying debris of rot
14. from the stagnant pond
15. of legislative houses
16. We know it all
17. for with all these long throats
18. who still seeks magic

19. in the disappearance of food?
20. *Let no-one mistake our sleep*
21. *For a stupor of death*
22. *The slowness of the cat*
23. *Is skill* 24. *Not a lack*
25. *Of will*

A close examination shows that there are a number of creative adjustments made to the proverb in the process of composition. The original in Yoruba is *Yiyo kelekele ekun, bi t'ajo kó, ohun tí yo (pa) je ní nwa*- the leopard's measured slowness is not a sign of cowardice/fear, it is simply looking out, strategizing for a prey (prime order translation). First, Osundare replaces 'leopard' (*ekun*) with "cat" (*ologini*) and such an exchange is common in the use of this particular proverb in Yoruba semiotics. Secondly, Osundare provides a semantic and structural parallel phrases to the proverb (lines 20-21), frame (4), embedded, as I have noted, into the other three frames to connect the pragmatic import of the proverb to the semantics of the subject matter. Thirdly, Osundare sticks to the second order meaning in the first part of the proverb- *Yiyo kelekele ologini*- "the slowness of the cat"- but implicates the pragmatic meaning of the second part of the proverb at prime order level interpretation in two ways (lines 4-6; stanza one and 23-25; last stanza); which simply means 'being wise' and 'being strategic', as further suggested by the parallel drawn with the proverb in lines (20-21), as against the second order translation - *ohun ti yó (pa) je ni nwa*- prime order translation as 'looking for what (to kill) to eat'.

In the context of the poem, the proverb implicates the prime order interpretive meaning of 'do not mistake gentleness/patience of people for spinelessness'. This has a pragmatic force of *warning* to misuse of power (lines 7-15), graft and corruption (lines 16-19), for a possible people's uprising against culpable power and mis- governance. Furthermore, these lines (*Nib* 44-45):

1. *Time it may take*
2. *The stammerer will call*
3. *His father's name*
4. *Time it may take*
5. *The sun will rise*
6. *Above the trees.*
7. Let them keep their lockless keys
8. Let their smiths forge more spikes
9. For steel walls
10. Let jackboots pound the laager
11. With heels of Hitler's children
12. ...
13. We will see you
14. From the seeding of our
15. Dream
16. To the germination of our
17. Hopes

18. Watered by the
19. Sweat
20. And
21. Tears
22. And
23. Blood
24. ...when in lurid colours
25. We write
26. The epitaph of apartheid

27. *For*
28. *Time it may take*
29. *The stammerer will call*
30. *His father's name*
31. *Time it may take*
32. *The sun will rise*
33. *Above the trees.*

The proverb in this extract has the force of *patience* and *perseverance* for its pragmatic interpretation. It is a prime order translation of the Yoruba original- *ojo lo le pe, akololo a pe baba*. For reformulation, Osundare replaces “*baba*” (father) with “father’s name” (lines 3 and 30) to (at prime order level)- ‘time it may take a stammerer will pronounce (articulate) father (baba)’. Again, Osundare provides a similar prime order parallel semantic and structural phrase (lines 4-6 and 31-33) (embedded frame 4) to connect readers, who may not share the meaning of the proverb in stanza one. The same proverb appears in two other poems- “Not Standing Still” (*Nib*: 12) and “Noon Yet” (*Nib*: 19). In the former, the proverb is incorporated with a parallel prime order phrase as in:

The circle which has a beginning
 Also has an end
A little patience is what it needs
The stammerer will call
His father's name

The latter is constructed as an abstraction of the proverb without the inclusion of the actual proverb in the composition as in the following lines:

Time it may take
The raw yam will turn
A smiling morsel
 But not too much time
 So it doesn't turn
 A crawling mash.

This instance also projects the idea of *patience* with *perseverance*. While the opening provides an anticipatory apprehension of the subject matter, the same proverb, in its variants, provides both a sustained reiterative or echo and closure of the implied meaning in the poems in which this pattern is deployed.

Regarding the third pattern, (in frame one still), Osundare provides a repetitive alternation of proverbs within stanzas, making the deployed proverbs to demand attention to the gestures of meaning which constitute the locus of the poetic composition. For example, in “I Will Eat in the Fold” (*Nib*: 17-18), out of the seven stanzas, a repeated proverb constitutes three stanzas in alternation. Similarly, in “The One Who Departed” (*Memory*: 5-18), the proverbs “The cock has Crowed Behind the Man” and “The Matchet is the Man” are, alternately within stanzas, repeated six and eight times, respectively in the poem. Equally is some portions of “Human in Every Sense”, section three of (*Midlife*: 56-59), where Osundare engages in the fusion of interlingual transfer and translation, a style which has increasingly become idiosyncratic to Osundare’s poetic lore. I will pursue my analysis in this regard with the first and the last examples I have identified. The first will be so examined for its metaphoric manipulative dimension and the last for the dimension of interlingual transfer. The first:

I have showered the dew
Of dawn, chaste
Seen my cleansing
In the mirroring globule
On the brow of grass

*I have washed my hands
In the spring of wisdom
I will eat in the fold*

I have minted my mouth
With the maiden droops
Of upland springs
Fished fancy from free falls
And seen through the mist
Of gentle cataracts

*I have washed my hands
In the spring of wisdom I will eat in the fold*

I am a hen Strut safely through
A bramble of leeches
My plumbed pride unhooked
By a colony of blood merchants

*I have washed my hands
In the spring of wisdom
I will eat in the fold*

The clay which goes through fire
Grows too hard for
For the softening worms of decay.

The poetic persona gives a catalogue of experiences, metaphorically, which make the persona wiser, putting him in a good stead of becoming “The clay hard for worms to incite decay”. This poem implicates the well known concept that ‘wisdom comes with experience and experience comes with age’, but in addition, in Yoruba semiotic world, wisdom also comes with patient interaction with *awon agba*- the elderly ones: *Omode to ba mo owo we, a ba agba jeun*- prime order translation; the youth who washes his hands clean enough will dine with the elder. The proverb infers that wisdom acquisition is through cultural tutelage of (*awon*) *agba* - the elderly ones being the custodians of culture and wisdom. Thus to gain entry into that knowledge, a linguistic cultural rite of passage into discourse and climbing the ‘wisdom hierarchy’, the youth will have to interact, with patience and respect for the elders, with the custodians of the knowledge- the elders. The pragmatics of the proverb also implicates its didactic function, reminding us of one of the tenets of the traditional education, whereby, as (Lawal et al 1997:637) observed:

Proverbs are thus employed to reinforce and sustain the traditional respect for elders, [...] it also serves as a potent means of social control[...] settling quarrels and disputes... and for the younger generation, [...] level-headed youths crave the company of elders so that they can glean linguistic, cultural and historical information usually conveyed in elders’ speeches [...] are full of appropriate proverbs.

The proverb as used in this context suggests the persona’s position of impregnability- “I am a hen/ Strut safely through/A bramble of leeches/My plumed pride unhooked/By a colony of blood merchants”, a result of the persona’s learning and tested experience, having “washed [his] hands in the spring of wisdom”. This conceptualization, in an extended sense, indirectly functions as a *warning* for condescending power, which may want to underrate the collective consciousness and the resolve to displace the tyranny of the ruling few. This projection has its semantic and structural character in Yoruba incantatory second order discourse. Osundare creatively manipulates the proverb into a metaphor, hence *SPRING OF WISDOM IS ELDERS* and *THE FOLD IS KNOWLEDGE* and therefore, from that experience, *THE PERSONA IS HARD CLAY* defying worms of decay, in which sense *TYRANNICAL POWER IS WORMS OF DECAY*, which the persona, as a representation of the masses, has the immunity of experience to withstand and overcome, prevailing. It is useful to refer to another poem, for comparison, in which this proverb conceptualizes a similar idea of knowledge. I am referring to “Midlife”, section (VI) of (*Midlife*: 93):

My continent is a sky ripped apart by clever crows,
Awaiting the suturing of a new, unfailing Thunder

But tell me, Africa,
Tell me more about this eternal childhood.
I have washed my hands in rivers
Of many seasons:
I can now share the feast of ancient wisdoms
I have cut my teeth in forests of sturdy ivory,

Ripening cornfields drive no fear into my jaws.

The persona seeks to find the cause of the problems afflicting Africa, with trepidation of wonderment why the continent's problem- "eternal childhood"- seems to defy every solution, but will have to await an "unfailing thunder"- a metaphor for a revolution. Thus for the persona, experience- "[...] washed my hands in river of many seasons" embodies the authority to cast a backward glance into "ancient wisdoms" to find the cause and solution to Africa's many afflictions. Again, Osundare manipulates the structure of the proverb and provides a defining parallel phrase to the semantic and structure of the proverb- "I have cut my teeth in the forests of sturdy ivory/Ripening cornfields drive no fear into my jaws".

My second example for this pattern is metaphorically constructed in the semiotics thus: *Omi ni enia* (HUMANS ARE STREAMS), *to ba san si iwaju, a tun san si eyin* (they flow forth and flow back) and like tributaries that join into a river- *ti a ba pade loke a pade ni isale* (we somehow flow into one another- encounter each other in life). The proverb, *Omi l'enia*, Osundare's composition, appears six times alternately in the poem to incite the sense in which humans and elements will inevitably have to encounter one another and cohabit. The following are extracts from Osundare's creation, providing the Yoruba version, translation and interpretation in a poetic composition to engage meaning:

1. *Omi l'enia*Humanity is river
2. *Omi l'enia* Humanity is river
3. *To ba san wa* When it flows forth
4. *A tun san pada* It also flows back
5. *Omi l'enia* Humanity is a river
6. Those who passed have not parted
7. Those who passed have not parted
8. Their footprints settle the crest of every wave...
9. They are the fragrant armpit of the seasons
10. April's prickly showers...
11. *Omi l'enia*.
12. A long, wide river we all are...
13. Together we chase the waiting sea
14. *Omi l'enia*
15. *If we do not meet in the rapid mountains*
16. *We strike a tryst in the gentle plains*
17. *Omi l'enia*
18. The snake which roams the wild in the company
19. Of its skin 20. Soon finds its head under the hunter's club
21. Pebbles which join heads will form a rock
22. Tree which share branches will form a forest

23. Whose tribe is memory of a sole finger?

24. *Omi l'enia*

25. One broomstick cannot sweep the street

26. *Omi l'enia*

27. And Mississippi joins the Niger

28. In a many-fingered pledge before the sea...

29. *Omi l'enia*

a. I am the ubiquitous *and* in the broken

b. Scene-tax of a stammering discourse,

c. The *but* which tempers the flame

d. Of volcanic clauses...

e. *Omi l'enia* (Midlife: 56-59).

I will think that lines (1-5), which is the proverb, is not for fancy of translation, it is so composed, inclusive of the prime order translation, for the purpose of sharing the content of the semiotics with the non-Yoruba speaking wider audience. The interesting thing about this poem is that Osundare creatively provides other proverbs (lines 18-20, 27 and 25-26) and proverbial phrases (lines 21, 22, 27-28 and 30-33) whose universal truth-content substantiate and justify the signification of the meaning being communicated by the proverb- *Omi l'enia* - in the poem. Essentially, human solidarity, cohabitation, cooperation and, necessarily, inevitability of needing one another, naturally, are mediated by this poem. The proverb conceptualizes the idea that humans are mobile/nomads, and we do not know where each of us will encounter one another in the future unknown, and that knowledge suggests the possibility of humans coming across and needing one another (lines 15-16), again, inevitably. The repetitive *Omi l'enia* proverb incites an awe of the humans, metaphorically interpretive of the elements always encountering one another. The idea implicates an ideological impulse of Osundare's conceptualization of human fellowship and dependency, suppressing isolationism of the individual or groups in an age where human interaction is mediated by nuclear threat, terrorism, global aggression and brutal technological dominance, including repression of freedom and liberty.

Oral Tale-Proverb Making and Meaning

The second frame of Osundare's proverbial device is yarning tales to implicate the content of a proverb or composing tales from a proverb as its elucidation. Thus a tale is told with the anticipatory hindsight of a proverb's pragmatic meaning or its figural representation. Oral narrative telling is common in 'traditional' homes, schools and small gatherings for conflicts resolution in Yoruba 'socio-semio-linguistic life', and they are part of the tradition that regulate and hold the society together. Such tales apprehend misbehaviors that contradict acceptable moral and social conducts, highlight communal ethics and practices and teach them, as precepts for private and public conducts, leadership and followership. It is therefore a stroke of literary ingenuity to conduct proverbs and tale making, two culturally embedded meaning devices in the semiotics, in an overlapping manner, where one explains the other and vice versa, as a poetic rendition of meaning.

Two major features of this proverbial tale rendering are identifiable: 1) one in which the content engages and involves human participant-metaphors and 2) one in which non-human phenomena are used as character-metaphors and transferred to human agency by the fact of engaging them in human-associated activities. In both cases, observable characteristics, either in manner of attitude or physiological make up associated with them, are used as pragmatic, sometimes, satirical motivation for meaning. For my analysis, to explicate the highlighted observations, I will use two of the following selections as examples: “Killing Without a Sword”, “Chicken Story”, “Eating with all the Fingers”, “Eating Tomorrow’s Yam”, “Search for a Wife” (Village: 13, 14, 15, 16 and 18):

Chicken Story

Who does the chicken think

It is deceiving?

It eats pebbles

And swallows sands

Yet complains of toothlessness

The goat which has teeth

The dog which fortifies its mouth

With the strongest ivory

Dare they eat pebbles in the morning

And still walk about at noon?

Let the ear sift

What the mouth says

The mills inside all men

Do not grind with equal force. (Village: 14)

Here a non-human element (bird) has been given human quality of speech making, in which it is able to argue a point of view on the level of humans. The chicken story smacks of deception from a seemingly true physiological make-up, in the projection of the alibi to suggest the incapability of performing a certain task that appears to be obvious. While the chicken story of incapacitation may elicit empathy, the proverbial phrase warns of its pretentiousness, and as it were, we are invited to wonder how then the metaphor-character does what it seems incapable of doing, given its ilk who possess what it lacks and yet unable to do what it does. The story therefore is a proverbial tale of deception with the implication to take human’s claim with a doubtful close scrutiny, given that it’s impossible to know what someone may have in mind. This conceptualization is effected as a force of *caution* in taking and accepting claims, not until a close appreciation of such claims. The proverbial phrase is a reformulation of two other proverbs in the semiotics: 1) *Awo fele bo inu, ko je ka ri iku, asebi-* the thin skin covering on the stomach prevents us from seeing the inside of the evildoer, with the pragmatic interpretation; it is difficult to decipher good or bad people by mere looking at them, it requires close scrutiny- “Let the ear sift /What the mouth says”- which is what the story implicates. Else where, in “The Politician’s Mouths” (Village: 57), the proverb implicates a similar thesis:

Is it not the politician

Who sees a snake
 And hails an earthworm?
 He prostrates for a vote
 But his mind squats like a hungry dog

*Alas, a thin membrane covers the belly
 We cannot see the inside of a lying wolf*

When the man of power
 Tells you his tale ask him to wait till
 You bring a sieve

Here, deceit and double talk- “the politician has two mouths/both sharp like the white man’s razor” are suggested to implicate political fraud. For the second proverb- *Gbogbo alangba lo da ikun dele, a o mo eyi ti inu n’run-* all lizards have their bellies on the ground, we cannot tell which one suffers from belly ache (since it is common to relieve belly ache by lying belly down); meaning that it is difficult to unveil what lies or concealed inside anyone by mere looking. Following this, the proverbial phrase “*The mills inside all men/Do not grind with equal force*” is suggestive of the different attitudes concealed in individual’s mind and that this awareness should invite our caution and scrutiny to detect deception and, possibly, fraud.

My second example, “Search for a Wife” is a story that borders on manner and civility. Again it is a story rooted in Yoruba nuptial semiotics. It is common in the culture, when two people are proposing to be in wedlock, for the parents/relatives of either would-be groom or bride to secretly do a check on each other’s background. The result of the findings sometimes determine the direction of the relationship, negative findings can jeopardize it. Such is the story in this poem, which the proverb is deployed to validate.

Idowu goes out in search of a wife
 At one score and ten years it is time
 To have somebody to lay one’s food
 On the table, decked with Beautiful antimacassar k

“you are a good-looking young man”,
 Said his mother-in-law to be,
 “well-mannered and strong-armed,
*But the fault is not the hunchback’s
 But that of his hunch: your mother
 Is a great curser”*

Idowu tears across three street
 His head a dome of rage
 Disciplining fury into words,
 He informs his mother:
 “I went visiting a young woman
 Today, mother, but her mother vows

Her daughter will never be wife
 To a curser's child"
 "Whoever says I am a curser,
 May he see his own ears
 Without a mirror, may *Saponna*
 Turn his house into a furnace, May *Sango*..."

Now mother,
 I can see what liars
 Anke's people are. (Village: 18).

The proverb suggests that the fact of the would-be's relations' fault makes the would-be groom culpable and does not immune the relationship from collapse for the reason that both the would-be groom and his relations are one and the same. The "hunch" is the mother and the carrier of the "hunch" is "idowu" ("hunchback") - the metaphoric suitor, would-be groom. In another sense *kokoro to n'jefo idi efo lo wa*- the insect that feeds on the vegetable has the vegetable as its habitation, that is, "Idowu's" problem lies with him, someone closest to him- his mother. Of course, the metaphoric mother is the culprit, her civility is questionable and she is later to confirm this uncivil behavior (stanza 4). In another sense, the metaphoric mother's response invites another proverb- *O so pe o ki i ja'le, o si ngbe omo eran jo*- you claim innocence in thievery, yet you are always found with a (stolen) baby-goat. Heuristically, the claim is false in view of the apparently stolen element always found with the persona. In other words, the behavior contradicts the claim and implies that the character is, indeed, a thief. Thus, in the story, when "idowu's" mother is confronted with the allegation of "cursing", being why her son lost a proposed maiden for a wife, she replied by cursing (stanza 4), which explicates the invited proverb and "Idowu's" response in the last stanza, as a confirmation of Idowu's mother incivility.

Proverbial Flux of Poetic Composition

The third frame of proverbs which I have described in my introduction as proverbial flux of poetic composition is characterized by either a reformulation or the absence of the actual proverb but, present in both its copy of structure and semantic conceptualization in the selected poems. The following are examples in the collections: "Awoyoyo (2)" (*Word*: 72), "Like the Bee", "Unmasking Wind" (*Nib*: 11-12, 14), "Human in Every Sense", "Midlife" (*Midlife*: Section III, VI; 52-53, 93). I will use two examples in the selections: "Awóyoyo" and "Midlife":

Like the noun
 Which looks back
 To a retinue of adjectives
 My voice swells, each day,
 With the flourish
 Of a willing chorus
 I am a masquerader
 Who plies the streets?
 With a throng of singers (Word: 72).

Osundare has variously been described as “The People’s Poet”, and I hasten to add, a ‘Public Poet’. Indeed a collection of critical essays, edited by Na’Allah (2003) carries that name. This suggests that he is a populist poet whose work appeals to a broad range of people beyond his primary domain of the academia. Osundare’s poetic syntax, diction, and semiotics are simple and yet deep, ‘strange’ and yet familiar with a conviviality of newness highly accessible to all. Osundare is about the only and most performing poet coming yet from Africa. Osundare, like the *Akewi* in Yoruba poetic tradition, ‘plies the streets’ of the world, peddling and lending the sensibilities of his art, his root, his socio-political ideology of human dignity and just society based on liberty, freedom and good governance. This observation is the sense in which the two proverbs invited by the poem above can be explicated. The first is that which suggests: *Eeyan laso eèyàn, bí mo bá bojú w’ehin, ti mo ri eni mi, inu mi a dun ara mi a ya gaga-* people are people’s clothes, whenever I glance back and I see my people, I am always full of happiness and good health- meaning: people are antidote and succor for one another, with people behind one, one is always rest-assured to overcome obstacles and achieve great or impossible feats. Thus the persona in this poem has people behind him metaphorically encoded in these phrases: “retinue of adjectives”, “willing chorus” and “throng of singers”. The people’s support, as it were, is like a talisman, which spins the persona into great achievement and overcoming. For this, the second proverb applies: *Bi egun eni ba jo re, ori a ya ni-* when one’s masquerade dances well, one’s head is bound to swell and do a spin- meaning: a good deed attracts support and encouragement (Fagunwa/Soyinka 1982: 7).

Consequently, the proverbs and their interpretations interplay one another in a cause-effect manner. We can take it that because the persona-masquerader has people behind him (“willing chorus”), his head swells and he does well (“My voice swells”), and because he does well, he has more supporter-followers (“throng of singers”). Reflectively, given Osundare as “The People’s Poet”, it seems to me, this semiotic interpretation draws Osundare as a masquerade-singer-poet into the context rather than distances him. I think the poem, in the interpretation of the proverbs, is a conceptualization of the poet as being able to reach a large audience across cultural and linguistic boundaries of Yoruba and English users.

The aghast and pains of self-inflicted stagnation, with a reflective proverbial lamentation is the subject matter of “Midlife”. The referent of this impulse is Africa. Osundare pensively think about Africa’s inertia. Africa suffers in spite of her abundant natural and human resources. The poet is flabbergasted:

Then in a continent repressed into dire childhood
 Like *Sogolo’s* child, crawling at eighty;
 Still struggling to count her fingers’
 Her grey gums toothless with tardy vowels,
 Her dark silence, her verbless eruptions,
 Her blanched rainbows, her truncated dreams
 And the winds whispering through the trees,
 Their cheeks whip-marked and utterly sad;
 And the storms mangling the dunes,
 The sahara one ocean of weeping sands,
 And mountains, pledging ancient peaks,

To indulgent clouds, so scared of roaring plains.
 Nights swap garment with days,
 The sun staggers with days,
 The sun staggers into the parlour of an overripe morning,
 Having slept too long in the chambers
 Of clever clouds.

The lion has lost its claws
 To cheetahs of other forests;
 What use, the magnificent mane
 Of emasculated tantrums

*They who have heads have no caps
 Those who have caps are in need of heads*

The figuration of Africa into “childhood”, an adult “at eighty” with childish behaviors, and ‘clawless lion’ expresses the lethargy of the powerlessness of Africa, having “slept too long” – colonized- “in the chambers of clever clouds”- colonizing western powers. This poem can also be seen as a reflective outburst of the consequences of the catastrophic colonial past and the deluge of the scandalous mediocrity of the present. The political behavior in Africa as dictated by the apron string and permanent interests of the West is clearly one of the consequences of this political idiocy. The metaphorical planetary evocation of meaning, where “nights swap garment with days” and “the sun staggers with days” and into “the parlour of an overripe morning” resonates and recasts a relationship of self-surrender and self-ceding, jeopardizing Africa’s sovereignty. For the poetic persona, the damage has already been done- “what use, the magnificent mane of emasculated tantrums”- by “cheetahs of other forests”- the West. Consequently, the proverb has an emotional rendering and a consolatory philosophical reflection by the pragmatics of its semiotics. In Yoruba: *Eni tó ní orí ò ní filà; eni tó ni fila o lori*- one who has a head has no cap; one who has a cap has no head (prime order translation), meaning: contradiction that what one needs does not tally with what one has and that no one has everything. In the poem, Osundare renders the proverb at second order translation by replacing “those who have caps have no heads” with “those who have caps are in need of heads” in the poetic context. As the hermeneutic of the proverb shows, its deployment in the context of the poem is more of a self-consolatory empathy than bitter scolding of the culpable rulership, and possibly followership.

Osundare interplays Yoruba semiotics and events of history, including the prevailing socio-political economic happenings to constitute his poetics and poetic ideas. The platform of proverbs serves Osundare’s imagination in reaching this rhetorical purpose, as my analyses of the poet’s deployment of proverbs have illustrated.

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