

Exploration of Proverb as a Crucial Device in Tunde Kelani's *Saworoide*

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Abstract

This treatise explores Tunde Kelani's movie *Saworoide* (1999), with a view to examining the functions of proverbs in movie production. A textual analysis of some selected proverbs in the movie was carried out to demonstrate the implications of this phenomenon in an attempt by the producer to project the themes of political legitimacy, accountability and institutional checks on corruption in a changing socio-political structure. The study highlighted the importance of proverbs in films, and showcased how proverbs serve as a crucial device of story-telling in the re-creation of a genuine and believable Nigerian democratic story. The study revealed that proverbs in the movie serve as material resources in generating the plot development, criticizing actors' actions, depicting, transmitting and preserving the Yoruba culture, and projecting the moral and thematic purposes of the movie

Key words: proverbs, *Saworoide*, movie production, socio-political

1. Introduction

Over the years, proverb serves as one of the key elements of African oral traditions, and has played several significant roles for movie (script) writers and directors who chose to blend their works with the touch of African oral tradition and stamp of uniqueness, authenticity, and identity as they reflect and project their culture, tradition and outlook. Proverb has come to mean a lot, and occupy a worthwhile position as a means of interpreting several phenomena and events in the society. In this regard, therefore, irrespective of the level of sophistication, modernity and technological growth witnessed all around us today, proverb continues to play prominent roles in debates, arguments and speeches, in sacred and secular events of people - both the literate and non-literate alike.

Several scholars have attempted to define proverbs from different dimensions and viewpoints; a situation that has given rise to the bulk of definitions of proverbs found in many scholarly publications. Donatus Nwoga sees proverb as “a terse statement which figuratively gives expression to the point of traditional wisdom relevant to a given situation” (16). Chinua Achebe views it as “the palm oil with which words are eaten” (183). Similarly, Emmanuel Obiechina perceives of proverb as:

the kernel which contains the wisdom of traditional people. They are philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words, and they form a mnemonic device in societies in which everything worth knowing and relevant to day-to-day life has to be committed to memory (156).

Onuekwuso Jasper sums up these definitions by looking at proverb from its major characteristics. He believes proverbs are popular, common and numerous. They are pleasant expressions which adorn the rhetoric of a people. They constitute a part of the oral tradition of a people, which is unconsciously acquired from generation to generation. In his words:

A proverb is a philosophical, allusive and metaphorical citation that gives credence to traditional truth and wisdom. It is allusive and metaphorical because it refers to some truth outside itself. It is philosophical because it is a product of a long period of reasoning and observation which expresses some timeless truth (17).

These definitions are very vital in illuminating the nature of proverbs in the human society. They incorporate several key words and features which at all time will continue to reflect and define proverbs. These include proverbs’ terseness, tacit nature, philosophical and high moral expositions and their oral nature as part of the inherited tradition of a people.

The history of the use of proverbs in Nigerian movies could be traced to the period when movie productions started over fifty years ago, with the likes of Latola Films (1962) and Calpeny Nigeria Ltd (1970). Historically, Latola Films was one of the first and earlier film production companies in Nigeria. It started movie production as far back as 1962 (Laura 1993). Equally, according to Pierre Barrot (2013), the golden age of Yoruba Travelling Theatre Group, which had the likes of Ola Balogun, Late Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, Oyin Adejobi, Adeyemi Afolayan (a.k.a Ade Love), Moses Olaiya (a.k.a. Baba Sala) Adebayo Salami, Afolabi Adesanya and others pioneered the earliest movie in Nigeria. Kenneth Nnebue was the first to spearhead the production of movie in Nigeria, when films were shot with Video Home System (VHS) cameras, and edited in television studios using a couple of video cassette recorder (VCR) machines (Usman *et al* 239). These men pioneered the production of movies like *Kongi's Harvest* in 1971, *Daughter of the River* in 1977, *Cry Freedom* in 1982, and so on. The early nineties brought *Circle of Doom*, *Glamour Girls* and *Living in Bondage* which actually gave life to movie production in Nigeria. Though, they were about Christian influence, politics, laziness, hard work etc., most of them were laced with poetry, incantations and proverbs. This is also evidenced in movie such as *Palmwine Drinkard* (1952), *Oba Koso* (The King Did Not Hang, 1963), *Yoruba Ronu* (Yorubas, Think, 1964), *Kongi's Harvest* (1970), etc. Proverbs have been used in these works to justify the actions of characters, criticize bad ethical and immoral behaviours in them. Despite referring to these works as mediocre, by many critics, they to a large extent express the wealth of philosophy; wisdom and perception of life as they affect and control their communities.

Later on, with the involvement of directors like Amaka Igwe and Tade Ogidan, the stigma of mediocrity began to wear off. It was during this period that Tunde Kelani, the director of *Saworoide* also started directing. Yet it was largely through his collaborations with the actors from the old theatre companies that Kelani, trained as a cinematographer, transformed into a director. For instance, he began to collaborate with the Yoruba playwright, Akinwumi Isola, whose plays were once adapted for the stage by the Ishola Ogunsola Theatre Group. It is the collaboration that gives Kelani's work a stamp of literariness and also a providential one for the fortunes of Yoruba culture (Adesokan 607). The result of the collaboration is a kind of neo-traditional cinema which seeks to emphasize the film maker's respectful allegiance to the Yoruba culture, and *Saworoide* may yet be the best result of the collaboration.

Tunde Kelani may have produced a lot of films such as *Ti Oluwani Ile* Parts 1, 2 & 3 (1993), *Saworoide* (1999), *Agogo Eewoo* (2002), *White Handkerchief* (2000), *Thunderbolt: Magun* (2001), *Arugba* (2008) etc., *Saworoide* stands out because it employs an allegorical approach of the Yoruba traditions in addressing politics and democracy in Nigeria.

Despite the fact that no or little critical works exist on the use of proverbs in contemporary Nigerian movies, some Nigerian writers such as Tunde Kelani, Amaka Igwe, Lancelot Imaseun, Jeta Amata, Obi Emelonye, Mahmood Ali Balogun, Niji Akanni, Kunle Afolayan etc. continue to lace their works with African oral varieties. While proverbs have been used as creative and imaginative expressions in Nigerian movies, a sustained critical examination of it, as will be shown soon, is lacking. The proverbs used in the movie do not occur simply by accident; rather they are incorporated for the significant roles which they play, in the Yoruba worldview. It is in this regard that this paper attempts to highlight the roles and importance of proverbs in Tunde Kelani's (henceforth, **TK**) *Saworoide* (1999), and to showcase how they serve as significant tool of story-telling in the re-creation of a genuine and believable Nigerian story.

2. *Saworoide*: Summary of Plot

Saworoide written by Akinwunmi Ishola and directed by **TK** is set in the rustic fictional Nigerian town of Jogbo, against the backdrop of a Yoruba community seeking to create checks and balances in order to prevent the excesses of the king and his aides. It is the story of the pact between Jogbo and the kings that rule over it. The film centers on Lapite who is billed to ascend the throne of Jogboland. He sends one of his aides to find out why all the kings who had previously ruled over the land never prospered, financially. He is later informed that the incision rites and oath-taking associated with the kingship preclude the king from financial affluence. Lapite at the coronation rites thus refuses incision and oath taking, threatens the palace ritualists with a gun, before leaving their presence. However, the story takes a new turn when he is later told of the repercussion of his action; he cannot wear *Ade-Ide*, the brass-crown, which is the symbol of his authority and the zenith of his rulership. Daring to wear the crown attracts death if *Saworoide* (the drum with the brass bells) is beaten by Ayangalu - the official custodian and the initiated drummer of the drum. Not fully completing the coronation rites also portends that another man is likely to share the throne with the incumbent king.

To avert the catalogue of misfortunes, assassins are sent to murder Adebomi, a rival prince, and to abduct Ayangalu and his mysterious ‘Saworoide’ drum. Adebomi is murdered along with his wife but the assassins spare his son Adebola and Ayangalu goes into self-exile from the town to for a distant jungle. The kingdom groans under the rule of Lapite who harnesses the land’s wealth for himself and his chiefs. Logging business which is the major source of the town’s economy is chiefly controlled by the king and his foreign multinationals. The foreign multinationals, with the help of Lapite, continues to rule with iron hand by destroying and cutting down timbers indiscriminately without any form of replacement, leaving the posterity of Jogbo, in jeopardy. Consequently, the youths decide to team up to refute this reign of total misrule. They engage in militant activities that frustrate the business of the foreign multinationals, and eventually invade the venue of the ceremony of 15-year anniversary of Lapite’s reign, and cart away the *Ade-Ide* (the brass crown), which according to custom must not leave the palace for more than 21 days, or else the king will either be exiled or be requested to commit suicide. The search for *Ade-Ide* brings in Lagata, a military officer, to head the king’s special military squad. The youths are overpowered by Lagata’s army, but trouble rages on. Lagata got interested in Jogbo’s kingship and eventually stage a military coup which results in the death of Lapite. That marked the start of another reign of terror in Jogbo, as Lagata upped the ante of iron ruler-ship. However, deliverance came the way of the culture of Jogboland when Ayanniyi, the son of Ayangalu, the official custodian and drummer of the *Saworoide* played the drum during Lagata’s coronation, while he was donning the *Ade-Ide*. Because he was an illegitimate king, he died of enormous headache in the process of adorning the crown.

In essence, the thematic foci of the movie are drawn from Yoruba’s resort to oath-taking as an agency of accountability and good governance. One of the ways he is able to achieve this is by employing different Yoruba oral traditions such as songs, dance, proverbs, festivals etc. The paper therefore seeks to highlight the roles and significance of proverbs as one the oral traditions in the movie. The paper analyses selected proverbs in the film under four analytical categories: proverbs as plot generator, proverbs as tool of criticism, proverbs as instrument for cultural awareness and preservation, and proverbs as narrative device for moral and thematic purposes.

3. Proverbs as Plot Generator

Plot is the skeletal framework of a story, the backbone of any given creative work of art. It is the arrangement of actions and events, in a logical manner according to cause and effect, with each event leading to another. In the movie, it is apparently glaring that some proverbs help develop, generate, build and strengthen the plot of the movie. Others anticipate the plot and future events, all leading to the inevitable but desired end of the movie. First, let us look at the proverb made by Lagbayi, one of the multinationals during his visit to Lapite to discuss the need to readdress the new unfavourable laws bidding the business of the multinationals. He says:

Bi omi ba po j'oka lo, a ma di koko

(Too much of water in pap will turn the pap into lumps)

Context: The above proverb explains the need by Lapite to forget the yearnings of the youth if the King hopes to become rich from the logging business. The youths and farmers complained that the multinationals are destroying their farmlands, and are not replacing the timbers. Lagbayi is of the opinion that the new laws which include: planting of new trees, no logging in sacred groves and no damage to crops, will cost more money, thereby reducing the profit meant for the King. Consequently, this leads to lots of bizarre sequence of events in the movie. First, the King reverses the laws; secondly, it leads to the youth uprising, which eventually leads to the arrest of many youths and farmers. These were actions made possible with the use of the proverb. As a result of these actions, a consequential proverb is said by Lapite when the youths and farmers came to his palace, protesting due to the decision of the King to reverse the laws. The movie gets Lapite angry, and he says:

Idi odan ni y'ara obo, ewon si ni ileke idi re

(*Odan* tree's base is the homestead of a monkey, and metal-chains remain the monkey's bum-beads)

Context: In the Yoruba traditional society, *Odan* is a very common immense tree that provides shade from scorching sun. Due to its immenseness, its base also serves as the homestead of a monkey, while the metal-chains are used for curtailing monkeys' movements. Hence, *Odan* tree in this context is taken to mean prison, and the proverb serves as a warning and a caution to the irate youths and farmers that prison terms await those who want to disrupt the king's reign. The youths and farmers leave angrily and decide to take laws into their hands by staging series of assaults on the multinationals and their workmen. Consequently, the proverb becomes looming

as a lot of youths and farmers are arrested and detained. The last example we shall consider is the proverb uttered by Lagata during his conversation with his assistant:

Ohun owo mi o to, ma fi gogo fa

(What my hand cannot reach, I'll use a sickle to draw it down)

Context: The import of this proverb is akin to the Nicollo Machiavellian's principle of 'the end justifies the means', i.e. I won't mind to attain my goal through whatever (all) means. In the movie, the youths invade the venue of the ceremony of 15-year anniversary of Lapite's reign, and cart away the *Ade-Ide*, which according to custom must not leave the palace for more than 21 days, or else the king will either be exiled or be requested to commit suicide. The search for the *Ade-Ide* brings in Lagata, the head of the king's army, to recover the crown. Lagata secures the *Ade-Ide*, as promised, but the feat however sees Lagata takes interest in the kingship of Jogbo. He calls his assistant to discuss the wretched state of Jogbo, the need for change, and his desire to rule, even though he has no constitutional and traditional rights to do so. However, the only way to achieve that is through force. Lagata eventually uses the opportunity to stage a military coup which results in the death of Lapite. This proverb not only foreshadows the ensuing bloody take-over of power, but also justifies the forceful nature and the action of the military. Hence, through these proverbs, **TK** is able to come to his desired end of the movie.

4. Proverbs as Tool of Criticism

This section argues that the movie uses proverbs to criticize and condemn the characters when they deserve condemnation. This argument stems from the fact that proverbs, more than spoken words, carry more weight and potency than ordinary speech. An idea expressed naturally could be more impacting and appreciated when it is concise and expressed with a proverb. The reason is because proverb is highly respected and valued ,among the Yoruba people, as not reflecting the immediate time but reflecting the wisdom and world view of our forefathers and ancestors in the time past (Adesokan, 609). This is why proverbs are more valued than ordinary speech, and are easily appreciated and hearkened to, because they do not express our wisdom but that of our forefathers. Proverbs do not belong to us; they belong to our forefathers – our ancestors, in the time past. Thus, proverbs express the wisdom and thoughts of our forefathers, and when applied for criticism, they serve a vital purpose of striking the culprits at the heart, in order to propel

them to change their action and attitude. No wonder, Lapite is found of using proverbs to criticize his chiefs, people and security personnel for letting him down. Here is an example:

A fi won j'oye awodi, won ko lee gb'adie

(They are elected the chief eagle, but are incapable of snatching a chicken)

Context: In the society, eagles are the chief predators of chickens, and there is a common perception that when someone fails, in an assignment, he/she is likened to an eagle that is incapable of snatching a chicken. In the movie, when the youths are still disturbing the operations of the multinationals, Lapite states that the sector heads have not been doing their jobs despite all the money he sends to them, and in the process summoned them. At the palace and prior to the utterance of the proverb, he had said: “so these are the idiot entrusted with the management of the country side...most of you were liberated slaves, hardened criminals and ex-convict”. He thought he had given them the chance for reformation and, as a result, he expects good job from them. He is however disappointed in them and uttered the proverb to lampoon their inability to ensure safety and peace in their various wards. Another example is seen in Lapite’s admonishing of Baba Amawo:

Asebaje se bi t'oun l'an wi, aseburu, e ku arafu

(The evil doer is uncomfortable with our comments; the wicked is full of suspicion)

Here, Lapite accuses Baba Amawo of conniving with the youth. In an attempt to ensure that Lapite is dethroned, the youths attack the venue of Lapite’s 15th year anniversary, and steal the crown in the process. The crown must be returned within twenty-one days; else the king must either go on exile or commit suicide. Lapite seeks for the advice of Baba Amawo, who informs him that the *Saworoide* drum is the only solution to locating the *Ade-Ide*. Ayangalu then informs Lapite that the drum is at large, as Lapite is responsible for the disappearance of Ayangalu, who still possesses the *Saworoide* drum. Lapite is not happy with the accusation, and quickly reprimands Baba Amawo of being in league with Ayangalu, using the proverbs in quick succession. To support the proverbs, he calls Amawo a “sneaky and dishonest man”.

In the movie, Baba Oplanba, the palace wit, is someone who understands Jogbo more than any other person, and, in most cases, his words are laced with songs, proverbs and traditional wits

that even the modern Yoruba person brought up in the city may have to depend on the English subtitles to decode them. This is because, in Yoruba traditional society, an elder does not speak in plain language, but revels in the use of proverbs and idioms (Adesokan, 609). The majority of Baba Opalanba's expressions are through songs, but there are times he makes use of proverbs to criticize the chiefs and the king for their stupidity and lack of vision. Here is one proverb:

Ole ni ohun yo ba o tun ilekun ile re se, o si n yo, o si fu'ra

(A bugler offers to fix your doors, and you are not suspicious)

This proverb criticizes the actions of Lapite and his chiefs who are desperately seeking the help of the multinationals and their militia to help bring the *Ade-Ide* back to the palace. One of the multinationals had brought Lagata, a military man to help Lapite return the stolen crown. Baba Opalanba therefore uses the proverb to admonish Seriki, one of Lapite's chiefs, on the prospects and dangers of seeking help from an outsider. This proverb however becomes ominous, as Lagata eventually kills Lapite, and takes the crown after he has returned the crown to him, as promised. Consequently, Lagata takes over power and this leaves the chiefs accusing one another for condemning Lapite too much, thereby prompting the bloody takeover by Lagata. Balogun says:

A k'adie ta, a fi owo ra awo

(We sold chickens and purchased Guinea-fowls)

while Seriki says:

Aja n lo so, a re ra obo

(The dog stoops, and we went to buy a monkey).

These proverbs are expressive of the total regret that explains Jogbo's new pitiable situation' as Lagata's alternative government does not differ from Lapite's abandoned one.

In essence, these proverbs are used by the writer to criticize, mock and reprimand his characters. By so doing, his proverbs have helped to fulfil part of the unique functions of proverbs in the Yoruba community, in the movie.

5. Proverbs as Instrument for Cultural Awareness and Preservation

Proverbs in the *Saworoide* also give a stamp of identity, cultural superiority and uniqueness to the movie. Proverbs constitute one of the ways in which African writers showcase their rich African cultural heritages, uniqueness and superiority over all other communities. Chinua Achebe for one is reputed to have taken it upon himself to write *Things Fall Apart* in order to prove that we (Africans) did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans, and his use of Igbo proverbs, in English medium, manifests this fact. In *Saworoide*, proverbs also revitalize and project the importance of Yoruba culture as part of preserving the unique lore of its people. In this regard, proverbs are used to achieve an oratory disposition and proof that the actors are unique and distinguished. Therefore, proverbs offer importance, aura, flavour, significance and authenticity to the actors' speeches, and by so doing; they are given unique identities and personalities that reflect the Yoruba community. It is assumed that Yoruba people respect anyone that uses proverbs, and uses them correctly in oral speech. Thus, the use of proverbs by some actors in the movie help project the quality of their oration. Examples of this abound in the movie:

Bi a je elubo, bi elubo ni a ri o, e ni ti o mu obo, yi o se bi obo

(He who wants to catch a monkey must act like one)

A fi won j'oye awodi, won ko lee gb'adie

(They are elected the chief eagle, but are incapable of snatching a chick)

Omo osan lo n ko ponpo ba iya

(It's the Orange that allows its mother (i.e. the tree) to be beaten)

Eni ti o bere ti n de iho okete, ko mop e oba oke o de idi iho ti e na ni eyin

(He that stoops to hunt rabbit holes forgets that his own rear is exposed)

Tu la si ni a n fi feran Sango

(We embrace Sango (the god of thunder) by force)

These proverbs are used for different purposes, but what unite them is their authenticity and identity within the Yoruba culture and traditions. Words like; *elubo* (yam flour), *obo* (monkey), *awodi* (eagle or hawk), *adie* (fowl), *osan* (orange), *ponpo* (stick), *okete* (bush-rat), *oba* (king), *Sango* (Yoruba god of thunder) are words particular to the Yoruba community only, and will be easily understood by anyone from that community. Also, the speeches of Baba Opalanba (Palace wit), Ayangalu (Chief drummer), Lapite (King), Jogbo chiefs and few others, are replete with proverbs; thus highlighting their traditional roles in the movie, and making them stand out as unique personalities who have not lost touch with their culture.

6. Proverbs as Narrative Device for Moral and Thematic Purpose

Every movie has a message, an idea which the writer hopes to pass across to the audience, which in the end becomes the thematic and moralistic message of the work. Certain proverbs are incorporated to enforce the thematic purpose of the movie and project the morals which ought to guide people and society for a more harmonious, codified and idyllic society. Such proverbs reflect the thematic purpose of the movie which is the transformation of a social structure through the twin undemocratic regimes of global neo-liberalism and military rule in Nigeria. Though the movie is concerned with democracy or governance in Nigeria, it differs quite significantly in the ways it approaches the topic. It adopts an allegorical approach and the Yoruba traditions in addressing political legitimacy and institutional checks on corruption; an approach which is self-consciously cinematic. Hence, proverbs prove to be one of the major tools that help project the thematic concerns in the movie. These include corruption, neo-colonialism, military incursion, greed, the need for equity, fairness, justice and love in society. Examples of these proverbs are:

A fi won j'oye awodi, won ko lee gb'adie
(they are elected the chief eagle, but are incapable of snatching a chicken)

Ole ni ohun yo ba o tun ilekun ile re se, o si n yo, o sifu'ra
(A bugler offers to fix your doors and you are not suspicious)

Ohun owo mi o to, ma fi gogo fa
(What my hand cannot reach, I'll use a sickle to draw it down/bring it down/to reach it)

Tu la si ni a n fi feran Sango, tipa tipa ni a fi fe eni tio ba juni lo

(We embrace Sango (the god of thunder) by force, we love a mightier person by force)

The first proverb is an indication of failure of politicians to deliver when elected into offices. The second proverb reflects caution and the implications of overt greed. The third and last proverbs echo the act of force employed by the military in the movie, which is an emblem of military's several incursions into Nigerian politics in the 80s. Hence, these and many other proverbs help to project the thematic concerns and moral lessons of the movie.

7. Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have seen how proverbs have come to be a crucial element of storytelling. Proverbs used in Nigerian movies do not occur by accident; rather they serve specific roles and functions. This study has demonstrated how proverbs have been used as one of the effective tools and ingredients that make the movie pleasing and of great interest to the audience. Proverbs serve many purposes: to build and strengthen the plot; to preserve the culture and tradition of the people and project their individual uniqueness above others, and finally to reinforce the movie's thematic concern and moral issues, thus placing proverbs at the very centre of Nollywood in the bid to recreate a true African picture, and tell a genuine Nigerian side of the story, in the whole framework of democracy and power.

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