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PROVERBS AS THEMATIC VEHICLE IN RECENT AFRICAN SHORT FICTION

Introduction: Proverbs and African Short Fiction

Some African scholars have rightly observed that folktales, proverbs, myths and legends, which are still part of the rich African folklore, are very much alive and are influencing modern African literature with motifs, themes, characters and techniques (Tanure Ojaide, 1996; Martin Trump, 1988). African short fiction, like the novel, drama and poetry, is greatly influenced by oral traditions – language, myths, legends, folktales, riddles and proverbs. In African short fiction, the proverb is not merely an adornment or a device to elicit humor for a good laugh, but it constitutes the “art” of the stories. It is not only a medium for aesthetic satisfaction but also a means for making fundamental philosophical statements about life (Odun Balogun, 1991; Richard Chenevix Trench, 2003). Trump (1988) aptly chronicles the reliance of contemporary African short fiction writers on oral traditions: “There is a clear line of continuity from the oral traditions of the pre-industrial black societies to the written works of later generations of black writers using English as their medium of communication” (34). To be specific, Emmanuel Obiechina (1993) comments thus: “in no aspect of its form is the African novel more ‘oral’ and ‘traditional’ than in its use of proverbs” (124). In African prose fiction, proverbs are used for diverse formal, thematic, cultural and aesthetic purposes.

In short stories are encapsulated the most vital elements of African cultural heritage, including proverbs (Olatunde Olatunji, 1987). Ironically, short fiction is an aspect of African literature that has suffered severe neglect at the hands of proverb scholars. An examination of its origin shows that short fiction existed much earlier than the emergence of the novel. In spite of its phenomenal growth, scholars in the dynamic field of proverbs have given little attention to short fiction in terms of scholarly exposition and criticism. On the other hand, much attention has been

given to the African novel. This neglect is partly responsible for the ignorance of most Africans of the use of proverbs as a thematic and aesthetic vehicle in African short fiction. It is therefore the responsibility of African proverb scholars to subject African short fiction to a more thorough academic enquiry so as to reveal the deployment of proverbs in it.

Based on the foregoing necessity, this paper is aimed at investigating the place of proverbs in recent African short fiction as a step towards a purposeful appreciation of the repertoire of proverbs in this sub-genre of African prose fiction. The use of proverbs in recent African short fiction is illustrated by citing twelve examples from Ernest Emenyonu's anthology of short stories titled *Tales of Our Motherland* (1999). In his stories, Emenyonu dwells on personal, regional, national and international issues. In the stories, he also freely draws from the body of African oral traditions, most especially proverbs. To a great extent, he has found an indispensable ally in African proverbs, which he has used to great advantage. To appreciate what he intends to pass to the reader, it is germane to fully understand his sources (including proverbs). Emenyonu is one of the few recent African short fiction writers such as Funso Aiyejina, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Femi Fatoba, Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo and others who owe the greatest debt to the ever-increasing repertoire of African proverbs.

In his stories, Emenyonu has shown that age-long proverbs can be translated to a new context. He has contributed immensely to the propagation and enrichment of African proverbs. The effective use of proverbs in Emenyonu's stories assists immensely in conjuring up the appropriate images in the mind of the reader. Proverbs feature prominently in his stories to present African postcolonial life from the inside. He delights the reader with his clever use of proverbs. If not carefully and creatively used, proverbs may be counter-productive. They may become boring and drab. However, Emenyonu has used proverbs in such a way that they throw new life on situations or on people's thoughts and motives. In fact, the stories are greatly enriched by proverbs. This brings to mind Taiwo Oladele's (1967) assertion that:

Proverbs deals with all aspects of life. They are used to emphasise the words of the wise and are stock-in-trade of old people, who use them to convey precise moral lessons, warnings and advice, since they make a greater impact on the mind than ordinary words (26).

Proverbs in Emenyonu's stories are not actually reproductions of the existing ones; rather they are artistic creations enacted to convey the feeling of lived reality and cultural dynamism. He is not contented with inartistic exploitation of existing proverbs; to a certain extent, he subjects them to creative reconstruction. Actually, the proverb is a key expressive device to unlocking the thematic preoccupations of Emenyonu's stories. It is a means by which the theme is revealed, the means by which the societal experience is revealed. Trump (1988) comments on this assertion thus:

The role of the traditional storyteller or poet as the community's spokesman and as a critical voice against social excesses and abuses of power has passed easily to modern black writers who have found themselves in a synonymous position to that of their non-literate bearers...*Indeed this view finds abundant support in the black short fiction itself.* (36, Emphasis mine).

Love for accessibility may have lured the contemporary African short fiction writers to find proverbs very expedient to employ. The use of the proverb may have interested recent African short fiction writers because of its capacity to drive home populist expressions known to be the common forte of contemporary African writers (J.O.J Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1991). The role of proverbs in Emenyonu's stories can only be appreciated in the light of the nature of the stories and the context in which they are used. The next segment of this paper is devoted to the examination of the reliance of Emenyonu on autochthonous proverbs through an analytical discussion of twelve selected adages from his *Tales of Our Motherland*. Each proverb brings something to the total meaning of the story in which it is used. They are used to clarify actions, sharpen characterization, elaborate themes, enrich the setting and environment of actions and define the epis-

temological order within the stories, that is, life and communally shared values (cf. Obiechina, 1993)

Examples from Emenyonu's *Tales of Our Motherland*

- a) **A girl is no more than a transit passenger in her father's house**
(from "My Sister's Daughter", pp 13-14)

The denotative meaning of this proverb suggests that it is a mere banal statement. It may be conceived as an axiomatic statement in Africa where the institution of marriage is seen as *sine qua non*, an obligatory custom. In African culture, the acts of celibacy and single parenthood are not socially approved. Therefore, marriage is a social necessity in African culture. However, a careful reading of the statement reveals that it is inherently sexist. It reveals the jaundiced portrayal of womenfolk in Africa - the insignificance of women and female children in comparison with men and male children. In the main, the aphorism implies that a female child is not as useful as her male siblings in the family. She is portrayed as just an appendage of another male child who will eventually be her husband. The image of womenfolk that the reader encounters in the adage is that of lost goods or itinerant objects.

The proverb gives an apt summary of the thematic preoccupation of Emenyonu in the story ("My Sister's Daughter") that dwells on the predicaments and woes of womenfolk in a patriarchal society. It also reminds us of another popular maxim, which goes thus: "Women are necessary evils." It presents a sexist stereotype of the social perception of the feminine sex. Therefore, it is perceived from the proverb, "A girl is no more than a transit passenger in her father's house", that Emenyonu's story thematizes gender dissonance or disequilibria. It is an apt adage used by the narrator to depict the ways the womenfolk is perceived in the society. The female sex is subsidiary and subordinate to the male folk in such a society. The proverb is used to capture the plight of womenfolk in a patriarchal culture where a male child is prioritized over his female counterparts. Male children are always desired in such a society to continue the lineage, and a woman's importance and stability in her husband's home is judged by the degree of her fertility, especially her ability to

bear sons. The proverb is a thematic vehicle for chronicling the disregard which plagues the female child from infancy to adulthood in a patriarchal society like Africa. It also shows that marriage, most especially the choice of spouse in the culture, is not always self-willed; rather it is a communal/family decision. For instance, the daughter of the narrator of the story is lured to marry Uzoeghulem in order to compensate his cousin, the village clown (Onacho). Moreover, the belief of most African fathers that female children should not be educated is revealed in the proverb. Ultimately, in the story, the daughter of the narrator is forced to quit school to wait for a suitor since “she is just a transit passenger in her father’s house.”

The proverb reveals that women in Africa are a prominent group among the classes of oppressed people. Therefore, to assist Emenyonu in putting across this “difficult” issue, a proverb comes in handy. Through the proverb, the reader is confronted with the tyranny of the male folk over women. The womenfolk are always portrayed with negative images and stereotypes. The proverb has thus helped the storyteller take a sociological look at the fictional society. Consequently, Emenyonu’s ideology, not his sex, helps determine the sexual images within the story.

- b) **The thieves have thirty-nine days, the owner of the house has only one day**
(from “The Last Laugh”, p 37).

This is Emenyonu’s version of the popular African adage “All days for the thief, but one day for the owner.” It is used to represent the idea of law of nemesis. That is, it is possible for somebody to be doing bad deeds for a long time uncaught, but one day, he/she will be unlucky. The proverb has its origin in a folktale about the Tortoise, a glutton, a clever being who is very skilful in devising strategies. According to an Igbo proverb, “If a tale is told without mention of the Tortoise, the tale is incomplete.” After his initial escapades to steal yams in another man’s farm, the Tortoise is finally caught and arrested. The king pronounced a sentence of death and execution on the Tortoise. Immediately, the executioner brought out the special sword and beheaded him.

The proverb is an apt summary of the thematic preoccupation of Emenyonu in his highly didactic tale titled “The Last

Laugh”. The story promises to teach the reader to be of good behavior at all times, because if one engages in vices, one day will come when one will be caught red handed and face the wrath of the laws and the people of his/her society. For instance, the anti-hero of the story, Commissioner for Human Resources, Fiscal Planning and Urban Development, is an archetype of Nigerian neocolonial rulers who are notorious for their social vices, including bribery and corruption, embezzlement of public funds, nepotism and the like. They have always caused the nation to be inundated with a lot of problems like a plundered economy, failed democracy, inefficient social amenities, etc. After his many successful escapades in plundering the economy of the nation, which have contributed a lot to the impoverishment of the masses, who languish in tattered penury and abject poverty, there is a revolution from the pauperized masses. The Commissioner is tortured, humiliated and beaten to a state of coma by the revolting masses. Also his office and personal property are looted. Therefore, the day of the revolt is that of “the owner” (the masses), that is, the day of reckoning. The proverb is thus used to warn the wrong doers in societies to be careful, unless they want the wrath of God and men. The corrupt commissioner has been caught in his own tricks. Initially, he was able to survive his maneuvers, but finally he brings dishonor and suffering to himself. The core message in the proverb is that in any experiential domain, there is an allowable limit to which manipulation of people can take place.

c) **You can sense the nature of shit by the smell of fart**

(from “The last Laugh”, p 43).

This proverb reminds one of many other wise sayings of Africans which connote similar meanings, among which are the following: “Show me your friend and I will easily know your character”, “Like teachers, like pupils”, “Like parents, like children”, “Like masters, like servants “, etc. Literally, the proverb, “You can sense the nature of shit by the smell of fart”, means that from the surface or physical appearance of a thing or person, one can predict what the inside of it/him will be – a sort of metonymous relationship.

In the story titled “The Last Laugh”, the proverb is used to reveal the moral laxity in the society portrayed. The society is one that is plagued with an epidemic of social ills, which cut across the rank and file of the government agencies and every nook and cranny of the society. Through the proverb, the reader is informed that character, like smoke, cannot be concealed. In fact, it is always easy to observe human vices. Therefore, the proverb suggests that corruption and other social vices in Nigeria are not secrets to the mass media, the masses, various Non-Governmental Agencies (N.G.Os), human rights’ activists, the police, other law enforcement agencies, and the society at large. From the corrupt practices of the security guard, who collects a bribe of five Naira from the narrator of the story, one can easily predict the true character of his boss, the Commissioner of Human Resources, Fiscal Planning and Urban Development. The reader first observes the ugly practice of the people in the society from the actions and behavior of the security guard and those of the Secretary to the Commissioner. Predictably, the guard and the Secretary (metaphorically, the smell of fart) are as corrupt as their boss, the Commissioner (metaphorically, the shit). Thus, the narrator retorts: “Indeed, by their guard we shall know them” (p 43), which accurately gives the meaning of the proverb “You can sense the nature of shit by the smell of fart.”

- d) **Give a leper a handshake and he wants an embrace the next moment**
(from “The Trial”, p 112).

This is a proverb usually used for admonition. That is, it is a statement used by elders to advise and warn the youths to be always careful and diplomatic in their deeds. Specifically, it is employed to check people who are not always tactful in their relationships with other people. This is because social psychology reveals that if an undeserving person is given a favor or privilege, there is a great tendency that he/she will abuse the advantage and ask for a greater favor. This is also the contention of economists that human needs are insatiable. Like “Oliver Twist”, the famous eponymous character of Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, human beings have the tendency to always “ask for more” favors.

In the story, “The Trial”, Barrister Ufoma’s unruly behavior at the meeting of Alenyi Progressive Union (A.P.U) informs this aphorism. Despite the seriousness of the gathering – to try Mrs. Onyekwere of a charge of adultery – Barrister Ufoma, the acknowledged village buffoon Number One is recognized by the chairman to make his contribution. Because of this undeserving advantage, he keeps on disrupting the deliberation incessantly. The author probably uses the proverb to comment that some people in society always abuse the opportunities they have. This is the case of most neocolonial African rulers who often misuse the social contract (governance) given to them by the masses, the electorates. They use their opportunities to loot treasuries, oppress the governed and trample on other people’s rights and privileges. Worse still, like the proverbial leper, neocolonial African rulers habitually attempt to become life presidents. They always want to stay put in offices and therefore make peaceful change of leadership impossible. They are like “lepers” who have been given a handshake (elected into various offices) and subsequently want an embrace (perpetuate themselves in the offices).

The author also uses the proverb to propound his socialist realist ideology. He admonishes the masses to always fight for their rights; they should not keep silence in the face of tyranny. If the masses tolerate oppression and misrule from their rulers, the government will continue to roll out other forms of woes on the already pauperized masses. Therefore, it is wise to reject oppression. If not, the dictators will become tougher tyrants.

- e) **He who brings home ant-ridden faggots must be ready for the visit of lizards**
(from “The Trial”, p 113).

This proverb is akin to another one, which says: “He who sows the wind must be ready to reap the whirl wind”. It is regularly used for warning people against bad deeds and carelessness. It means that one will reap as one sows. If one keeps on misbehaving perpetually, one will consequently see the repercussions. The Yoruba people of Western Nigeria have a comparable saying: “One who excretes on the road will find flies when he returns”. In the story titled “The Trial”, the proverb “He who brings home ant-ridden faggots must be ready for the visit of liz-

ards” is used with perceptiveness to rebuke the President-General of Alenyi Progressive Union (A.P.U) for allowing a clown (Barrister Osondu Ufoma) to hijack the proceeding of the meeting from him. The members of the gathering believe that since the president has mistakenly allowed Ufoma to contribute to the serious discussion, he has therefore embarrassed, scorned, mocked and fooled himself. The clown keeps on embarrassing the president in the presence of his subjects. Since the president has allowed the clown to enjoy his inalienable right to participate in the discussion, the gathering believes that he should be ready to face the humiliation. Emenyonu’s comment on the limitation of democracy in this story does not elude my observation. He wants to comment that no society, however advanced or retrogressive, can practise true democracy. There should be checks and balances. If not, democracy may lead to anarchy. Human nature needs adequate control; hence democracy does not imply lawlessness and extreme freedom.

Again, the author wants to advise African rulers to be more tactful in their governance. It is apparent that the president of Alenyi Progressive Union is an archetypal African neocolonial ruler. He lacks requisite leadership qualities. He is not tactful, pragmatic, brilliant, wise and meticulous. That is why he finds it difficult to control the gathering. To scorn him for his inability to rule well, the proverb “He who brings home ant-ridden faggots must be ready for the visit of lizards” is used.

- f) **The proverbial dog that stooped down to eat its own vomit**
(from “The Trial”, p 113)

This is a proverb commonly used to mock and rebuke a person who makes a firm resolution against an act but later goes back to it again due to his/her lack of determination and indecision. In every human society, there are people who are not firm. They do not usually maintain their promise. This usually leads them to have problems in life. Some people even go to the extent of renouncing their bad deeds, including fornication, adultery, alcoholism, gambling, stealing, lying, back biting, and the like in their churches or mosques. However, because of their lack of self-control, they still go back to the already forsaken vices. This is the case of Mrs. Ugonna Onyekwere who is caught in the act

of adultery against her marital vows, which include renunciation of any act of infidelity. During her wedding rites, she made a vow that she would never have any clandestine dealing with any other man apart from her husband (Ikenna Onyekwere). However, like “The proverbial dog that stooped down to eat its own vomit”, she goes back to the act of adultery. She is found committing adultery with her husband’s half brother (Maduka). This despicable act makes her lose all her pride and fame.

The proverb, apart from its mocking intent, also has a didactic undertone. It teaches people to always be resolute. It also warns people against infidelity and other social vices. Since Mrs. Onyekwere suffers humiliation as a result of her infidelity, the storyteller makes use of the proverb to acquaint the reader with the repercussions of social vices.

g) **The toad does not run in the daytime for nothing**
(from “The Trial”, p 123)

This is another version of the proverb that goes thus: “We do not normally see the big rat in the daytime”. It is a philosophical statement that reveals an African worldview about the phenomenon of cause and effect. Through the observation of the lives and behaviors of animals, plants, rivers, mountains and others, Africans usually comment on human behaviors and aspirations. It is observed that a toad, like the big rat, is a nocturnal animal, therefore, it does not naturally come out from its habitat in daytime. To see a big rat or a toad running in daytime suggests that there is a danger it wants to avoid.

In the story titled “The Trial”, the proverb “The toad does not run in the daytime for nothing” is used to assert that one does not embark on a stressful, dangerous, burdensome and uncomfortable project without unjust reasons. This is the plight of Mr. Ikenna Onyekwere, Ugonma’s husband who dares not comment in public on the adulterous practice of his wife due to his natural disability – impotence. He turns down the opportunity given to him to testify against his erring wife. His wife is not at fault; she takes to adultery with her husband’s half brother because of the impotence of her husband. Therefore, he “swallows his own phlegm” (124). For a man to keep silent in such a situation means that there must be a very serious reason behind it; there is a secret behind his keeping mute at a time when his kith and kin

expect him to contribute meaningfully to the humiliation of his adulterous wife. Due to his impotence, which is a skeleton in his cupboard, a loophole in his life, he remains silent throughout the proceeding.

Actually, a man who is expected to be the head of his home has no courage and temerity to accuse his wife of adultery because of his own physical incapacity that causes the wife's unexpected behavior. Thus, Mr. Onyekwere's silence in the face of betrayal is akin to "the toad which runs in the daytime." The proverb also admonishes people to look beyond the surface of a case. They should try to investigate a matter thoroughly in order to get a better understanding of it. If the people of Alenyi have known that the impotence of Onyekwere is the cause of his wife's adulterous practice, they would not have put all the blame on her. This makes it expedient for neo-colonial rulers to periodically examine their lives and rules in a bid to ascertain whether or not they are judging offenders objectively. Actually, Mrs. Onyekwere's toad does not run out in the daytime for nothing – her adulterous practice is inadvertent.

- h) **A man who says nothing to his accusers leaves half of the by-standers with the belief that he may after all be guilty**
(from "The Trial", p 123).

This proverb is similar to another one which says: "Silence means yes". It connotes that anybody who keeps silent to an accusation indirectly agrees that he is guilty. If one fails to deny an allegation, one is ultimately affirming it. In the story titled "The Trial", Mr. Onyekwere's silence during the trial of his wife lays credence to the rumor that is rife in the community, that is, he is impotent.

With the proverb, Emenyonu is also admonishing people to be politically active. They should not be docile and passive in the activities of their society. They should not keep silent in the face of tyranny; they should be ready at all time to fight against oppression and other forms of misrule. This is one of the problems of the masses in neocolonial African nations. They are always politically docile and passive. They do not fight for their rights, thereby allowing the tyrannical rulers to keep on misruling them.

Even if the masses know that the rulers are corrupt and oppressive, they are often not bold enough to confront the rulers.

i) **You can lead a horse to the river but you cannot force it to drink**

(from “The Night Before the Election”, p 140)

This proverb is used for warning and advising people. It is informed by African elders’ observation of animal behaviors. That is, even the horse, an ordinary animal, has a way of rejecting persistent oppression and victimization. The proverb suggests that there is a limitation to human endurance. A person cannot be coerced to do what he/she does not want to do. In this story, it is used to advise and warn the politicians to rule well. For instance, it is not possible to force the electorates to vote for a contestant they do not like, even if there are persistent attempts to lure them with money or other attractive materials. Therefore, in any democratic setting, the electorates possess the inalienable rights to reject unpopular candidates at the polls. Some contestants may try to bribe them to sell their conscience, but that is just a step not the end of the road. Since the voting in some democratic nations is always through secret balloting, the electorates have the opportunity to exercise their voting right as they deem fit. Therefore, incumbent rulers are reminded to perform creditably well in order to get people’s votes during subsequent elections. If not, they may try later to lure the voters to vote during another election, but they cannot force them to vote for their parties again.

Excessive rigging, coercion of electorates, gerrymandering, bribery and violence, mar elections in most neocolonial African nations. However, the electorates still have the last say in the democratic process. The attempts of politicians to manipulate the voters can be thwarted by the voters if they are resolute. The irony of the matter is that African masses are often ignorant of their rights and privileges. Therefore, more often than not, the neocolonial politicians succeed in “leading the voters to the river” (that is, luring them to vote) and subsequently “forcing them to drink” (that is, buying their votes for wrong candidates).

j) **What is good for the goose may not always be good for the gander**

(in “The Night Before the Election”, p 141).

This is a proverb rendered creatively by the storyteller. The proverb, as used in this story, is an attempt by the author to refine a popular proverb. The popular version of it is in positive affirmation. By rendering the proverb in the negative form, Emenyonu is able to twist and problematize an aged adage. He has been able to ridicule the illusion of the naivety of a conservative saying. By recontextualizing the commonplace saying of Africans, Emenyonu has also reversed the normal wit and therefore made an important ideological point. However, as a thematic vehicle for the story, Emenyonu uses it to depict a milieu that is neither just nor egalitarian. It is a sexist or phallogocentric society, replete with gender inequality, dishonesty, partiality and their side effects like dysfunctionality and stasis. It is obvious that postcolonial African nations are plagued with the problems of skewed relationships – ethnicity, racism, class war, sexism, etc. Thus, in this story, the proverb under consideration is used for satirical ends. A saying of pristine and mundane value is inverted to become a negation or exclusion - an element, which enhances its rhetorical impact in the context of the story.

In the story titled “The Night Before the Election”, the proverb is used by the presidential candidate of PNP to justify his party’s political ideology that the intervention of the military in the governance of African nations is not all that retrogressive, rather it has contributed immensely to the development of the nations. Therefore, to the party, the military can interfere in the governance of the African nations. This is because, the party believes that what is plausible in a country may not be tenable in another country. Unlike in advanced nations where the military is normally used for security purposes, the PNP believes that in African nations military and civilian rules are two sides of the same coin. They are both infested with the vices of corruption, bribery, misrule, nepotism, inefficiency, kleptomania, sadism, gluttony, etc. Therefore, democracy/civil rule, which is worthwhile in the first-world countries, may not be valuable in the developing nations. Thus, the party believes that Africans should continue to wallow in poverty, penury and ignorance because

democracy which is good for the people of advanced nations is not good for the people of African nations. Although there are certain phenomena, which can be classified under the class of cultural relativism, there are still some that are universal. Therefore, misgovernance, poverty, low per capital income, illiteracy, etc are not God ordained for the African masses.

k) **Give the devil his due when he has earned it**
(from “Welcome to Our Motherland”, p 158)

This is a proverb used to instruct people to be diplomatic, impartial and tactful. It has a biblical version which goes thus: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). Ideas of religion, morality and courtesy are woven into the proverb. To avoid trouble and enmity, it is wise to give people what rightly belongs to them. The proverb is also relevant for world politics. To have national, international and global peace, we need to have tolerance and mutual respect for one another. Objectivity should be the watchword for the rulers and the governed. In the story titled “Welcome to Our Motherland”, the proverb is used to advise Nigerians to be patriotic and objective in their criticisms of their rulers.

The storyteller wants to advise Nigerians to love their fatherland. Although the nation is bedeviled with lots of socio-political and economic woes, the citizens should try to praise their leaders whenever they achieve any success. By doing this, the rulers will be motivated to perform better. This advice is mostly relevant for the Nigerian press, non-governmental agencies, opposition political parties and foreign media. Yellow journalism should be avoided. That is, the idea that nothing good can come from Nigeria should be avoided. Critics of Nigerian rulers should stop orchestrating their pessimistic idea. They should not believe that Africa, Africans and their rulers are incapable of doing positive and progressive things. Instead, when they see their rulers performing creditably well, they should be commended.

l) **He who laughs last laughs best**
(from “The Night Before Election”, p 151)

Literally, the proverb denotes that it is better to suffer early and enjoy later than enjoying early and suffering later. It is al-

ways the prayer of African elders that their old age should be more enjoyable than their childhood. A person may suffer in his youth period and enjoy his later years on earth.

In the story titled “The Night Before Election”, the proverb is used to recount a slice of Nigerian history, one of the nation’s trying and agonizing periods – the annulment of June 12, 1993 election in the country. Through the use of the proverb, the writer is able to reveal a plausible reason for the annulment of the fairest election in the political history of the country. Despite the bad qualities of P.N.P leaders and the vacuity of ideas of its presidential flag bearer (Alhaji Sarkin Wafia), as revealed in his press conference, the all-male assembly of village heads and central executive presidents decided for the village that Alhaji Wafia should be voted for during the presidential election the next day. This is the case of Nigerian elders and elites who decided to support the presidential candidate of Nigerian Republican Convention (N.R.C) in 1993, against the popular choice of the women-folk, the masses and the youth (Social Democratic Party). Because of their numerical strength, the women put their feminine solidarity to action in order to counter the earlier patriarchal decision. They mobilized their colleagues and the youth to come out and vote for the candidate of S.D.P. There were massive turnouts at all polling stations with women numbering more than 70% of the voters waiting in the queues. Therefore, Alhaji Idowu of S.D.P won the election.

However, the coalition of the soldiers and elite men who were not happy that they were losing the respect of their wives contrived the strategies to annul the election. Unfortunately, the election into which the nation had sunk millions of human and financial resources was thus annulled. The male folk and the elites have therefore had the last laugh! In such a patriarchal world, women may often have their say, but men would always have their ways.

Conclusion

The foregoing analyses of the selected proverbs in Emenyonu’s short stories has revealed that the predominance of the traditional form of proverbs in Emenyonu’s collection of short stories does not only illustrate the power of the spoken word but serves as an educational tool and emerges as a narrative strategy

in the stories. Proverbs are used in the short stories to “further a social end” (Yisa K. Yusuf, 1998:63). He is not content with merely replicating existing proverbs but rather he problematizes them. Common proverbs are retuned and re-orchestrated in Emenyonu’s stories. They are augmented with strategies and concepts from the writer’s indigenous (Igbo) language and literatures. Also, didacticism, moral intention, runs through his stories. He sees himself as someone who must teach and impart moral lessons. Therefore, he employs proverbs to propagate some virtues and condemn the vices in human societies. The place of proverbs in acculturation and enculturation of the people in any society has been recognized by critics (J.O Ajibola, 1979; Ayo Bamgbose, 1968; Obiechina, 1993; Olatunji, 1984; A Sobande, 1967; Archer Taylor, 1996; and Yusuf, 1998). To Olatunde Olatunji (1984), African proverbs are like a social charter used to praise what the society considers to be virtues and condemn bad practices.

To a great extent, proverbs in Emenyonu’s stories have been used for ‘prescriptive’ functions. They are used to outline a role of conduct in human milieu, and they lay down conditions for certain actions and attitudes. They also define situations and state what should or should not be done in such situations. Taylor (1996:9) dwells on this importance of proverbs: “Proverbs give us as clear an idea as we can hope to get about the forces that influence [people] and the ideals that they hold...In difficult situations [people] turn to proverbs for answers, and they find them there.” Ruth Finnegan also supports this view by saying that “proverbs in Africa are effective in a whole range of ways in life and in literature” (1970:424). Sources of Emenyonu’s repertoire of proverbs include observations of human behavior, the ways of animals, other things in the natural environment, historical events and well-known tales. The proverbs are judiciously used as a vehicle for various thematic preoccupations of hospitality, bravery, caution, change of fortune, warning, and the like. They are creatively employed to speed up communication, convey weighty messages, deliver light-hearted jests, sharpen arguments, for blunt criticism, clarify difficult ideas and disguise simple ones beyond easy recognition (Bernt Lindfors, cited in Patrick Ebewo, 1991).

Emenyonu does not use proverbs with embarrassing regularity in his stories. He does not pile on several proverbs because he seems to believe that only one will be sufficient at a particular context. He artistically makes use of proverbs to capture a kind of reality impossible through the use of mere words, that is, to make a point with extra forcefulness (Ruth Finnegan, 1970). His stories lean towards the fusion of traditional modes of storytelling with modern narrative strategies to achieve a special blend that is invigorating, fresh and original in its style. In fact, in Emenyonu's stories the reader has witnessed a new deployment of proverbs to fresh and exciting ends.

It is convenient to conclude this discussion by asserting that African proverbs should continue to be of interest not only for literary artists, critics and cultural researchers, but also for sociologists, anthropologists and all those with an interest in the African past and present. This is because proverbs are replete with wit, wisdom, imagination, amusement, instruction and insights (Richard Chenevix Trench, 2003).

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