

Conflict in the Somali World & How It Is Resolved Through The Use Of Proverb as an Artistic Discourse Strategy

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Abstract

There are many conflicts in the world and especially in Somalia and there are attempts on how to solve them. From the point of view our modern world, solutions to the conflicts are usually sought or left with the United Nations to put in place a peace keeping force or a modern super power state to build coalition of governments to bring a regime change. The study adopts a complete departure and tests a different approach so as to contribute to whatever existing knowledge we have on how to solve conflicts. The study examines the proverb as an artistic discourse strategy in conflict resolution among the Somalis. It explores ways elders use proverbs to hammer points during peace negotiation meetings. To achieve its objectives, the study adopts a composite approach combining Ethno-poetics and Semiotic theories. The study is about the Somali Proverb. The research is based on Northern Region of Kenya where the ethnic Somalis concentrate, however, materials were also collected from inside Somalia, along the Kenyan-Somali border. Thirty two men and twelve women, who are considered opinion leaders, were interviewed. Forty six proverbs were collected through field research and analysed. The researcher actively participated in peace meetings where live performances of the proverb were recorded. The results of the study reveal that the proverb is used to resolve conflicts. In other words, the study tests the role and significance of the Somali proverb in conflict resolution meetings. The study recommends that there is need for a more thorough socio-literacy methodology applied to analyse the functions style and performance of the proverb which include both verbal and non-verbal.

Key words: conflict, proverbs, resolution, functions

Introduction

Proverbs serve many functions and are used to achieve desired result in speech. African communities use proverbs in many of their day-to-day activities. (Achebe). The Somali community also employs this genre for conflict resolution among many other functions.

The researcher discovered that the community's oral tradition in general and the proverb in particular are very powerful instruments for acceptable resolution of some long standing clan feuds in larger Somali community and Somalia in particular.

Some of the Proverbs discussed in this study that outstandingly shine according to the researcher and with regard to persuading the warring clans to choose peace as an alternative to war include the following:

“Degaal wiil baa kudhintaa, wiilse kumadhasho”

(A conflict kills a son, but does not bear a son)

“Balayo kahortag bay leedahay ee kadabatag ma laha”

(Catastrophe can be prevented but cannot be reversed)

“Nin wixii joogo aan katalinin,wixii soo

(The person who cannot solve the present problem, cannot solve the future one)

The study may assist the UN, AU and others who are involved in the Somali peace initiative to give them an in depth insight into the ways the Somali traditional society solve conflicts by using oral literature.

Theoretical framework

While pointing out the limitations of some of the theoretical approaches to the study of oral literature, Finnegan (1970) observes that oral literature and its study is a complex and emotive undertaking, involving many conflicting assumptions. The implication here is that each approach discusses only one aspect of oral literature.

The researcher, therefore, adopts a composite approach combining Ethno-poetics and Semiotics theories.

These two pronged approaches treat a text simultaneously as linguistic utterances, social artifact and an expressive act both reflecting and satisfying deeply-felt emotional needs.

Ethno-poetics theoretical foundations and methodology lie in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, phenomenology ethno- methodology conversation analysis and the ethnography of speaking and performance approach of folklore studies (Anttonen 1994: 113).

The exponents of this theory, Dell Hymes (1982) and Dennis Tedlock (1983), however, advance the theory in two divergent but reconcilable ways. Through interaction with the informants, the researcher is able to identify details of performance including rises in voice, facial expressions, movements and gestures. Dell Hymes argues that, as far as ethno-poetics is concerned, close attention should be paid to the poetic texts themselves and the performer's input.

Therefore, enmeshing of the two seemingly opposing strands has been a great asset in this analysis of the Somali proverb and the conclusion that its artistic features help elders communicate peace message more effectively in peace negotiation hence helping resolve clan disputes.

Semiotics refers to "Science of Signs" that is systematic codes of representation. It emanates from the quest by the linguistics and literary scholars on how best a text can be interpreted. Here there were also some opposing critical approaches.

One of them was Author-oriented criticism whose concept of interpretation privileges the Author/composer of the text and argues that the composer's intention is the key to the meaning of the text. The principal advocate for this approach was Hirsch who argues that a word or image (the sign) comes in two parts: the sound it makes, the (signifier) and the mental image that the sound produces in the reader/viewer, the signified.

The basic tenet of this theory may be shared with the sociological literary interpretation is that texts are the products of specific social contexts and they are consumed in specific context.

Research Hypothesis

This study is guided by the following premises:

1. There is no relationship between the functions of the Somali proverb and its utilization as a conflict resolution tool by the community.
2. Proverbs are casually used by the negotiators during peace negotiations, therefore, have got no significant impact to persuade the warring sides to agree.

Research Methodology

In a cultural study like this one, the researcher heavily depended on the community for the text to be studied and analyzed; this was a general data collecting strategy that I used for a number of reasons; firstly, data was needed for building the theory that I used in the study.

In view of the foregoing, I undertook library research at Kenyatta University, University of Nairobi library, Kenya National Library at Garissa, Kenya National Archives, American cultural center in Nairobi, Kenya National Museum in Nairobi.

Field Research

I managed to attend five (5) peace negotiations among some warring Somali clans in North Eastern Kenya (where Somali ethnic community inhabit) and across the border into Somalia.

Since I am an adult member of this community and know rules governing such negotiations I, from time to time, got actively involved in the negotiations.

Since the opinion leaders I interviewed were from the six (6) different clans that make up the Somali community I realized their views represented the popular views. For the purpose of this study, I interviewed two women who are considered opinion leaders from each of the six main clans.

This process continued until I arrived at the figure twelve (12), representing two women from each of the six main clans. Like the male opinion leaders the twelve women opinion leaders represented the views of the other women in the six main clans.

Functions of the Proverb

Although it would be interesting for the reader to get details of these functions, they are, however, not the focus of my study and the reader would be advised to read about them in general text books on the folklore of the Somali.

The focus in this study is on how the Somali use the proverb as a conflict resolution tool. Details on content of the proverb, where and how proverbs are used in peace negotiating meetings are outlined and discussed. The discussion begins by looking at how conflicts are solved traditionally.

Traditional Approaches to Solving Conflicts

There are various approaches and attempts by the Kenyan Somalis to solve conflicts. The following approaches which include both verbal and action oriented measures were observed during peace meetings:

- Negotiation
- Religious perspective
- Blood compensation
- Tying of the culprit to a tree
- Ostracization

Negotiation

The willingness of the elders from the two warring clans to sit together and negotiate is one of the major approaches to solving conflicts. It is always believed that negotiations between the elders would bring positive results. The proverb below brings out this:

“Hadal Daawaayuu Keenaa, Ee Dab ma kiciyo.”
(Negotiation brings solution; it does not light up a fire).

The proverb is, may be, an equivalent of the English saying: let us talk means let us agree. In fact in all the peace meetings I attended, positive results were achieved through negotiation.

Negotiators are the clan elders and orators. People who understand the depth and cause of the conflict.

Men who can draw comparison from the past events and the history of their clan and who can abundantly use proverbs to drive home the points they are making.

It is generally believed in this community that an elder who quotes many proverbs would most likely stand a better chance of being understood better, than the one who uses plain language:

Proverbs are used to achieve these six purposes:

- To prepare the audience
- To establish linkage between past and present
- To summarize or conclude the speech
- To embellish the speech
- To add weight (wisdom) to the argument/proposal
- For comic relief

Its, for example, common in the meetings for an elder negotiator to stand up, when he is given chance to talk, clear his throat, and start with a proverb that clears the way for what he is going to say. An elder negotiator, for example, may stand up and start his contribution with the following proverb:

Waxaa La yiri, “Nin Weer Gaabaniyo Waranba Wey Degdegaan”
It was said, (A short-sighted man and a spear (thrown) both hurry up)

From the surface meaning, the speaker in this proverb is saying that he is not an intelligent man and that is why he is in a hurry to talk before the more intelligent members of the community articulate their views and shame him. Look at this proverb:

“Hadal Haan, ma Buuxso”
(Speech does not Fill, Haan (a wooden vessel))

The proverb means empty rhetoric cannot resolve conflicts.

As a way of preparing their colleagues in the meeting, speakers open their speech with a proverb whose meaning could be construed to mean that neither those who talked briefly nor the ones who gave lengthy speeches, have tackled the subject matter adequately. The speaker, for example, opens his address with the following proverb:

Waxaa la yiri “Hadal Nin Badiyey ma Dhamaynin, Nin
Gaabiyayna ma Hambaynin”.
It is said; (A talkative person did not ground the issue, neither did the brief one leave anything “for other speakers”)

The proverb means that neither lengthy speeches, nor brief ones may adequately tackle the subject of discussion.

The use of the following proverb in peace negotiations suggests that if the clan had fought bitterly during the previous conflict (which they did not), the present conflict would not have come:

“Haddii Eygaygii Horeaanka Dagaalamo, Keyga Dambe la ma Dileen”
 (“If I were to fight when my earlier Dog was killed , the present one would have been safe”)

The proverb means the present aggression has roots in the past.

The use of the following proverb in peace negotiations suggests that if the clan had fought bitterly during the previous conflict (which they did not), the present conflict would not have come. The speaker often uses the following proverb;

Waxaa la yiri; “Saddex kaama Tagaan.”	It is said; “Three will never leave you alone;
“Maral Mawdog.”	(Disease that knows Death)
“Gaajo guri og”	(Hunger that knows Home)(devoid of food)
“Gardarro Guri og”	(Aggression that knows supporter)

The proverbial summary could be uttered by either the elder (chairman) of the meeting after he listens to all the speakers, or alternatively an elder would talk for a long time then, as a way of summing up or concluding his speech, cites one or two proverbs which are relevant to the points he made. As a way of concluding, he usually utters the following proverb:

“Oodda Qaadid iyo Jiidid, waa isla Gurigeyn.”
“To lift the ‘thorny branch(used to fence animals) or drag it is just the same, so long as you are taking it home”.

The proverb means achieving the goal is the most important thing, no matter which way you adopt to achieve it.

In many occasions it is also observed the Somali speakers using the proverb to embellish or beautify their speech.

According to my analysis and as it is believed, speeches that contain many proverbs tend to be deemed authentic and attractive to the audience.

The effect of the embellishment is felt immediately by the audience who murmur or sometimes yell out and engage in noisy discussions when a speaker uses a series of proverbs to embellish his speech. Let us examine the following proverbs which, apart from their sagacity (wisdom), are mainly used for speech embellishment;

“Madax meel kasareysa, oo la salaaxo maleh.” (No part of human body is above the head)
“Maroodi Takarta Saaran ma Arko” (An Elephant does not feel the Flees on Him)
“Shimbir Duulduul Badan, AfLibaax Bay shab Tiraahdaa.” (A bird that flies frequently, Lands in a Lion’s Mouth).

The second proverb means a fool, however big in body wise, never recognizes his weaknesses.

Likewise, it seems the listeners would understand the issue better and take the speaker seriously when he supports his argument with proverbs. The Host is called: the owner of the Gogosha literally meaning: the one who spreads the “beddings” for the guests. The hosting elder has to provide the participants with meals, especially plenty of tea.

During long peace meetings, it is natural for people to get tired or visibly lose interest in some topics, arguments or proposals.

Religious Perspective

Religious sentiments expressed through proverbs are used to sensitize the meetings into bringing positive results, peace meetings are started with a prayer.

Proverbs feature promptly, mainly as a way to support the agendas of meeting and to convince the negotiators to agree. Some of the common prayer proverbs include:

“Ilaah ha nagayeelo “Xabbaddii kal iyo Mooyo dhexdooda ka baxday”
(May Allah make us “like the grain that escaped the crash of the Kal¹ and Moyo²).

Waxaa la yiri “Muslim u taameeyoow, Allah ha kuu Tabiineeyo” (It is said, “assist Muslims, God will Assist you)

The meaning of the proverbs is as follows;

First proverb prays for the clan to escape from all catastrophes like the case of that piece of the grain that we sometimes find save and intact after all other grains were crashed. The prayer is said by the most elderly and religious person in the meeting. Some of the peace meetings start with a short and precise sermon from an elderly Islamic scholar.

However, in the introductory sermon, the preacher refers to proverbs that have got religious sentiments which urge Muslims to resolve their conflicts peacefully. The following proverbs usually featured in the preaching sessions of the peace meetings:

Waxaa la Yiri “Ninki Muslim Dariqa ka gooya, Ilaah baa dariiqiisa gooya”
It is said; (Whoever blocks the ways of the Muslims, Allah blocks his way”)

Waxaa la yiri; “Boholo Hadimo ha qodin, haddaad qoddana ha dheerayn, kudhici doontaana ma ogide”
It is said; (Don’t dig trenches for others, but if you must dig, don’t make them too deep; you don’t know whether it will be you who will fall in.)

The meaning in the first proverb is whoever robs Muslims, God will punish him. The second proverb means don’t sabotage humanity, it may turn against you.

¹ Strong stick used for bounding the grain.

² Wooden container used for bounding the grain.

This kind of short sermon is meant to solemnize the meeting and remind negotiators of their religious obligations to reconcile the warring clans and finish disputes in an amicable way.

Blood Compensation

Another effective way of settling clan conflicts among the Somalis is through paying blood compensation or Mag as it called in the local vernacular. This method is usually utilized effectively when murder is committed. When a member of a certain clan kills a member of another clan, the affected clans negotiate for compensation of the blood of the deceased. The protocol followed in this exercise is clearly defined in the customary law as well in the Islamic Sharia.

The process starts with what is known as sabeenxir (Apology) which is in the form of a very small amount of money (as little as 20 shillings) or a sheep paid out by the aggressor. This is followed by Xabaalqodde (Burial expense) as estimated by the elders and depending on who was killed. This is paid by the family of the killer to that of the deceased. After that the closest kinsmen of the person who actually delivered the fatal blow, who are known as “Die-paying group” or in the local language Magwadaag are supposed to pay 40 camels to the Magwadaag of the deceased. This process is known as Rafisa literally meaning “Wallowing” symbolizing the act of rolling on the ground by the deceased when he /she was struck by the killer. Finally, the process of the compensation is completed with the payment of 60 camels known as Magdheer literally meaning “long compensation” by the killer clan to the bereaved clan. This amount of compensation is, however, only applicable where the victim is male. The blood compensation for a man is 100 camels while for a woman it is 50 camels. This arrangement for blood compensation is what the Islamic Sharia ordains. The argument is: men die in conflicts more than women. To discourage this, Islam raises the blood compensation of men to 100 camels.

According to Islamic teachings, man is responsible for feeding his family. Therefore, the killing of the breadwinner is more devastating and expensive than the killing of the partner (woman) who is a dependent. In other words, the family would suffer more when the husband is killed and for that reason his blood compensation is double that of his wife.

There are, of course, dissenting voices to this blood compensation arrangement. The non-Islamists and modern ideologues see this as an outright violation of women’s rights.

There are also other lesser compensations, which the community recognizes for solving clan conflicts. For example, someone wounded by an enemy spear has to get one she-camel. This is known as Qaalinbireed, literally meaning “the she-camel of the iron (the spear).”

Rape is regarded as serious as killing. However, when rape happens within the clan the punishment is lenient. The rapist is supposed to pay four head of cattle only. This is drawn from the marriage contract of “Nikah” or “Meher” which according to Somali context is usually four head of cattle. The implication here is that the copulation is four head of cattle.

These blood compensations are, however, selectively used depending on who the offender is. If, for example, members of same clan kill one another the compensation is a very lenient one.

Tying of the Culprit to a Tree

Although state law discourages this method of punishment, it is sad that the practice, at this day and age persists among the Somalis albeit in decreasing frequency. The following proverbs are good examples:

“Waxaa la yiri “Qaniinja, Qariinja kaa bujisa.”	It is said; (Biting relieves biting)
Waxaa La Yiri; “Dab ninkii ku Gubtaa, dambaskiisa ka leexda”	It is said; (He/she who got burnt in fire, runs away from its ashes)

The first proverb means a culprit is dealt with according to the crime he committed. The second proverb means once a culprit is punished, it is unlikely for him to repeat the same crime.

Ostracization

The last recognizable method, but not the least used by the Somalis to solve clan conflicts, according to my research, is ostracization of the clan or individuals who have shown bad conduct or behaved in a manner that had breached the prevailing peace. Let us consider the following proverb;

“Takoor Talo ma leh” (An outcast has no advice to offer)

The proverb means a disgraced member of the society has no voice in the community affairs.

Consolidation and Implementation of Peace Resolutions

Generally, there are six major ways to consolidate and/or implement resolutions that are reached in the Somali peace meetings:

- Cease- fire truce
- Combined committee of elders from the warring clans and also related clans.
- Swearing (both religious and customary)
- Cursing
- Punishment
- Accord

Ceasefire (Truce)

The peace meeting announces the cease-fire once agreed upon and it takes effect immediately and is spread very fast through word of mouth.

Combined Committee of Elders from Warring and Related Clans

In many peace meetings, when negotiations are over and peace accord is endorsed, a combined committee of the elders are formed and given the mandate to oversee the implementation and enforcement of the resolutions.

Swearing (Both Religious and Customary)

Swearing in of the elders representing the warring clans before they leave the negotiation venue is another method employed by the Somali society to make sure that all what has been agreed upon is implemented. Another form of oath taking include: an open and loud pronouncement by the swearers that “if the peace resolutions are broken with their full consent and knowledge then all their wives will automatically become divorcees”. Someone taking oath may also utter:

“Qodhey iyo xerada” (I take oath at the pain of losing my manhood and property.)

This means that the oath taker is saying if he does not fulfill what he promise, the clan can castrate him or take away all his property. It also means saying “I may have no regret if Allah takes away my manhood and property”.

Alternatively, the person taking the oath may pronounce,

Aabbahay Gadaashii bayaan calool Galalay (I am a child born out of wedlock.)

The meaning here is that if the swearer violates the peace, then the clan should consider him like a bastard and never entrust him with any other clan issues.

Cursing

Another method used to safeguard the peace resolutions is cursing whoever breaks the peace agreement. Cursing, among the Somali, is believed to have serious consequences on the person cursed. In fact, if a member of the community is befallen by a misfortune, people first consider the misfortune as a curse. Proverbs reveal this fear. Below is an example:

“Nin Habaar Qaba, Ma Hodma” (A cursed person will never succeed.)

The proverb means God will not elevate the cursed to prosperity.

For example, one person, usually the eldest, leads the gathering in cursing whoever might dare break the truce and the chorus continuously chants the word Amin or InshaAllah.

Punishment

Peace resolutions are also protected by way of agreeing on a certain type of punishment for the violators. Punishments vary. Some of the common ones include punishing the peace violators by slaughtering their most important and cherished livestock among their animals.

Another method of punishment that is meted out to the peace violators is to force them to pay double the amount of the normal blood compensation. If, for example the mag of a man killed was 100 camels (as is normal), whoever re-ignites the clashes after peace resolutions would pay 200 camels for a man killed and 100 camels for a woman.

Accords

Peace accords reached in the negotiation venues are themselves used as strategy for implementation and guarding the peace resolution against violation.

The peace accord is usually strongly worded and is shrouded in such metaphorical allusions to mean symbolically none is expected to violate it. The peace accord is sometimes declared as Ballan, which roughly means (to promise) and literally suggesting an agreement that no one can violate. The Ballan has also a religious meaning in Islam that anyone who violates it has gone astray and stands condemned on religious grounds. The community, through proverbs, acknowledges the religious symbolism in the word "Ballan".

See the following proverb;

“Ballan Darro, waa diin Darro” (A person who violates accord, is like an unbeliever)
The proverb means who does not respect what is agreed upon is somebody who does not believe in Islam.

On the other hand, elders are required by the society's customary laws to keep their promises and never violate any accord of peace that is reached under the "Tree". In the following proverb, it comes out that once an elder reaches an agreement or enters Ballan with others, it is final and irreversible.

Qowl Nin weyn ka dhacay, waa qolof geed ka dhacday”
(An agreement between elders is irreversible, like a tree cannot repossess the leaf it has shed). The proverb means peace accords are final and no one should dare to violate them.

Summary

This study, which focused on the Somali proverb, had the following sole objective:

- (i) To analyze the content and functions of the Somali Proverb in relation to conflict resolution and specifically show how it helps communicate messages during the inter clan peace negotiations.

Thus, the results I present in this study come from a synthesis of data from a variety of sources: library sources, interviews with respected Somali men and women, observation of live performances from respected Somali proverb performers, field notes, still pictures and video pictures and my own reading and interpretation of the Somali proverb.

The results reveal that the proverb serves the following functions/roles in this community:

1. Resolving conflicts
2. Informing and educating
3. Warning against evils

The findings of this study challenge the validity of the research hypothesis that there is no relationship between the function of the Kenyan Somali Proverb and conflict resolution in this community. The study thoroughly examines the relationship between the function of the proverb and conflict resolution in the community. The study has proved that conflict resolution is one of the major functions of the Kenyan Somali Proverb.

Conclusion and Recommendation

A broader sample of analysis of the Somali proverb extended over a wider area than that covered by this research would no doubt help to refine the function of the proverb as suggested in the study, and would also reveal aspects of the stylistic devices.

It is particularly desirable to further investigate how the socio-cultural activities influence the un-known composer to actually compose the proverb and how also the aesthetic qualities of the proverb in turn impacts on socio-cultural attitudes and activities.

I also recommend a more proper recording of future studies of this discipline with more sophisticated equipment like cinematographic cameras and other electronic instruments.

Lastly, I suggest that future research should endeavor to situate the proverb within the whole corpus of Kenyan Somali folklore.

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