

African Research Review

An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 3 (3), April, 2009

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

Figures of Association and Sound in some Nigerian Proverbs: Examples from Ondo Culture

(Pp. 118-132)

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Abstract

Figures of Speech are expressions which depart from the acceptable literary sense that are employed to give particular emphasis to an idea or a sentiment in order to beautify a literary work such as poetry and proverbs. These devices occupy an important position in proverbs and they perform functions which make the proverbs what they are, that is pithy, metaphorical and spicy expressions with which sayings are embellished. Figures of Speech are used by proverb coiners to express succinctly a multi-faceted concept in order to make a point in a more powerful and emphatic way. They are used to make speeches very memorable, colourful and appealing in order to achieve some stylistic effect. This paper examines the various figures of speech that are prevalent in some Ondo proverbs. The proverbs are documented in the original, translated and then analysed, pointing out the various poetic devices in them.

Introduction

The significance of proverbs as a verbal form in an African community cannot be over-emphasized. This significance is not only inherent in their artistic value but also hinges on the use of language for expressiveness. There is no denying the fact that the use of language underlies the devices used in literature, either in oral or written form but the poetic qualities of African

proverbs in particular are striking and their relevance is made manifest by their social background. According to Akporobaro (2004):

the proverb belongs to the wider category of figurative and aesthetically conceived forms of expressions like the metaphor, simile, hyperbole, wit and other anecdotal forms (80).

Consequently, like any linguistic events, proverbs do not exist in isolation from other aspects of human social behaviour.

Considering the foregoing, this paper seeks to analyze the figures of speech in Nigerian proverbs with special emphasis on Ondo proverbs and also to portray some of the inherent qualities of the proverbs which give them their memorability and piquancy. Despite the fact that they are often subjected to modifications from time to time, proverbs still retain their flavour and memorability. For the purpose of clarity, all the proverbs used in this paper are taken from Akinmade (2005).

The term proverb is seen in various ways by different paraomniologists. Indeed, it is believed that there are as many definitions as there are proverb scholars. Quarcoopome (1987) notes that “a proverb is a short, well-known saying, expressing a truth or pointing out a moral”(31). Finnegan (1970) believes that a proverb must possess such qualities as “brevity or conciseness, sense, piquancy, or salt and popularity”. For Bland (1814), “ a proverb is a short figurative expression or sentence, currently used, commending or reproving the person or thing to which it is applied, and often containing some moral precepts, or rules for our conduct in life while the Oxford English Dictionary notes that a proverb is:

a short pithy saying in common and recognized use; a concise sentence often metaphorical or alliterative in form which is held to express some truth ascertained by experience of observation and familiar to all (i-ix).

It is pertinent to note that whatever proverbs or other types of literary expression do for communication and aesthetic effects, they are achieved through the use of creative language. Language, therefore, is the primary implement of literature, be it written or oral. Nketia (1958) described in a picturesque way that proverb is a model of compressed or forceful language

(390). Proverbs are known for their passion for imagistic symbols and other forms of figurative expressions.

Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a word or group of words employed to give special emphasis to a speech or an idea. This emphasis is usually achieved by the user's conscious or unconscious departure from the strict literal sense of the word. It is a means of expression in language which gives beauty, graphic and clear meaning to what is said or written. From time immemorial, African writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and others have employed these figurative expressions extensively in their writings to garnish their style of writing. Many figures of speech abound in the English language and also in Ondo dialect. Writers and proverb coiners often use them unconsciously to express themselves because the terms convey what they wish to express more vividly. These figures of speech are the devices which literary artists use in beautifying their work. These are very common in all the genres of literature but particularly so in poetry and proverbs. Dooga (2007) notes that 'writers use figures of speech to explain a point using a familiar concept; express succinctly a multi-faceted concept; make a point more powerful and emphatic and make the text more colorful and appealing' (85). It is important too, to note that since proverbs are used as part of the building blocks of some forms of poetry, these proverbs, especially African proverbs, share the same poetic qualities with poetry. These devices, which are also found in abundance in proverbs, are the ingredients which are added to verbal art to make it different, fascinating, colourful and memorable. They are the salt and spice that sweeten and embellish the proverbs. Buttressing the above view, MacLaren (1917) says that as the proverb should be striking in form; so as to be easily remembered...so should it strike the intelligence by its truth as much as the ear by its sound (33). Ogbalu and Emenyonu (1975) observe that 'perhaps (the) most important source of interest in proverbs at the literal level is that which contributes to their memorability' (192). Indeed, several scholars such as Thompson and Nwoga are certain that, as far as application of poetic devices is concerned, proverb serves the same function as a poem that is, uplifting the ordinary in such a forceful manner that it is seen in a new and clearer light. According to Thompson (1965): "the power of proverb over the minds of men is closely akin to that of the poem and that it frequently possesses this power by virtue of its use of poetic devices" (16). Furthermore, Finnegan (1970) opines that proverbs "depend for their impact

on the aptness with which they are applied in a particular circumstance especially on the style and form of words in which they are adorned” (399).

Poetic Devices

A pre-eminent characteristic of proverbs is the employment of wide-ranging figurative language to convey their message in a way that makes it aesthetically attractive and socially relevant to the hearers. These rich varieties of poetic devices enhance the flavour that makes proverbs a vital spicing ingredient in a conversation. Consequently, there exists in proverbs a creative interplay of figures of speech in its different forms. It should be noted here that figures of speech or poetic devices can be divided into four categories which are:

1. Figures of Association: examples of these are simile, metaphor, personification, and apostrophe. All these are figures that deal with association or the comparison of two things.
2. Figures of Contrast: examples of which are irony, sarcasm and antithesis.
3. Figures of Sound refer to figures of speech that are capable of introducing some sound flavour to a poem but in this case, proverbs. They provide sound effect and examples of this are alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia.
4. Figures of emphases, which are used for the purpose of stress. Some examples include repetition and rhetorical question.

In this paper, our aim is to examine some figures of speech in Ondo proverbs. However, the main thrust of this paper is on figures of association and figures of sound. A follow up paper will examine the other poetic devices that have not been discussed here. Before we go into the analysis of this first part, we shall give a brief historical background of the Ondo people.

Ondo is one of the Yoruba speaking ethnic groups in the Southwestern part of Nigeria. It is located in the tropical rain forest belt of Nigeria . The people share quite a number of the Yoruba proverbs but expressed in the Ondo dialect. The mainstay of the people is agriculture. They believe that proverbs are a rich resource of imagery and succinct expression from which more

elaborate forms can be derived. This ancient view of the Ondos is shared by Ruth Finnegan (1970:389).

Figures of Association in Ondo Proverbs

Our approach in this section shall be, first, to identify the particular device; secondly render the proverb in the original, that is vernacular and then the literal translation shall follow. After this, we shall give the contextual usage of the proverb and finally show the elements that constitute the devices used in the text.

Simile

Baldick (1990) defines simile as “an explicit comparison between two different things, actions or feelings, using the words “as” or “like”. This figure of speech occurs very frequently in Ondo proverbs and it is noticeable by “*bi*” (“like” or “as”). This is typical of the Ondo linguistic nuances.

D’omoiton ba a n’aso bi s’agba, e le n’akisa bi s’agba.

If a child has as many attires/ clothes as an adult, he cannot have as many rags as the adult.

This proverb is used to chastise a young man or woman who may want to disrespect an elder because he/she finds himself/herself in a similar social status as the elder. They may be social mates but which does not compare with the experiences age may have bestowed on the elder.

In the above proverb, the two things compared are “adult’s clothes” and “child’s clothes”. Here, the proverb emphasizes implicitly the importance of experience and stresses that no matter how affluent a youth may be, he can never be as experienced as an elderly one. So, the youth must respect the elder most especially his views and experiences. It is interesting to note also that in this same proverb, we observe a beautiful display of a figure of speech called figure of emphasis. This is shown in the repetition of the word “*agba*” which occurs twice in the proverb.

The next proverb compares an ingrate and a thief. In Yoruba culture, if an individual receives help from another, it is expected that the person who receives the help shows some appreciation. If this is not done, the individual is rebuked and castigated with this proverb:

Onen yi a se oiye ko de dupe, bi si gi l’osa gbe eun iaye lo e i.

He who does not show appreciation for a good deed done to him is like a thief who has made away with one's goods.

The word like in the proverb shows the lucid comparison.

The following proverb:

Bi s'owe bi s'owe e lu ulu ogidigbo i, ologban e jo un i, omaran e mon i.

Like proverb like proverb, one beats the *ogidigbo drum*, it is only the wise that can dance it and only the adept (in wisdom) can interpret it.

The two things compared in the above proverb are *owe* and *ogidigbo drum*. The similarity between the two lies in the fact that they require knowledge and wisdom in order to be able to interpret the music which comes from them. It must also be pointed out here that this proverb is also alliterative by nature of the repetition of 'b' twice and 's' twice. The adjoining proverb:

Oiho buuk'e ka koolo bi s'upekun da le ma.

An unlucky head does not curve like a cutlass for one to be able to identify it.

This proverb is similar in content with Duncan's speech in *Macbeth* (1996) which says "there is no art to find the mind's construction in the face" (Act 1 Scene 4, 861). Indeed it is not possible to know what goes on in the human heart by merely looking at the face. So it is with somebody who is unlucky. This cannot be detected by merely looking at the person's head. The two things juxtaposed in the proverb are the "unlucky head" and the "curved cutlass". This means that appearance is deceptive.

The following is another lucid example of a simile:

A duun se bi si uun Olo'on fe, a soo ise bi si uun Olo'on fe.

As easy to carry out as what God desires or approves and as difficult to carry out as what God does not permit or approve of.

The above proverb has a harvest of figurative expressions. Firstly, there is simile represented by 'bi' (as), secondly the proverb is alliterative. This can be seen in 'se', 'se' 'si' 'soo' 'si' and thirdly the word *Olo'on* is repeated twice, giving us a good example of repetition.

The following are a few examples of simile from Tiv, Hausa, Kanuri and Nupe cultures in Nigeria:

1. *Kwaghfan ngu voughur er mcambem ma sha ishwa nahan; wanye kpa ka nana fa civin nan dugh.*
Wisdom is like little tilapia cooked in benniseed sauce; a small child who knows how to dip his hand well in the sauce can fetch some (322).
2. *Namiji barkono ne, sai an tauna za a san yajinsa.*
A man is like pepper, until you chew it you do not know how hot it can be (281).
3. A woman is like a horse, he who can drive her is her master (180).
4. A child is like a carmel's neck, it goes where it pleases (181).

The above proverbs are some examples of simile from Tiv and Hausa cultures in Nigeria.

Metaphor

Metaphor is regarded as the most important and wide spread figure of speech in poetry and proverbs. It is an imaginary comparison of one thing or idea or action rather than direct statement. Indeed paramiographers believe that all proverbs are metaphorical.

According to Oni (1982) a metaphor is a complete replacement of one thing by another thing. Even though they are different generally, they are said to be exactly the same thing as simile. Of course there is one special area of similarity between the subject that is being compared (tenor) and the object that is being compared with (vehicle) as we have in simile. This is why a metaphor is also regarded as condensed kind of simile. The difference lies in the fact that simile says it is only "like" that thing but metaphor says it is "exactly" that thing. For example: He is the pillar of the team. Lending credence to Oni's definition, Emeaba (quoted in Bello) notes that metaphor is a figure of speech in which a descriptive term is applied to an object which does not apply in the usual sense. It is an implied poetic comparison of two apparently unlike things to suggest a resemblance, an implied analogy in which one object is imaginatively identified with another and the qualities of the first attributed to the second.

Even though all proverbs are said to be metaphorical, the next set of proverbs bring out cogent examples that fit into the above description of Oni and Emeaba.

Efifi uwa e i, da ka da ugba apee bo a ru jade, meaning

Character is smoke, even if it is covered with two hundred baskets,
it will ooze out.

In the above proverb, character is imaginatively likened to smoke. Just as it is impossible to hide smoke, so it is one's character. The proverb frowns at pretentious behaviour. The next proverb too is another good example of metaphor:

Eghen l'oun, do ba a ti jab o e du se e.

Words (utterances) are eggs, once they fall and break (are spoken)
they cannot be put together again.

In the proverb, the egg that is broken is identified with spoken words because they share the same delicacy. In this case, the delicate nature of an egg is compared with utterances or words. Although words and egg do not look alike physically but they have the same characteristic because they are both very delicate. If an egg falls, it is impossible to put it together. In like manner, once an utterance is made, it is impossible to withdraw or retrieve it. Hence the proverb warns that one should be discreet in whatever one says.

The next proverb:

Omi l'enijan, de ba a san pade n'oke a san pade n'odo.

Human beings are water, if we do not flow into each other upstream,
we will flow into each other downstream.

Human beings are likened to water. However we know that human beings are not water. Water flows and this is similar to the movement of human beings from place to place. As noted out by Emeaba, we have an implied analogy here in which human beings are imaginatively identified with water and the qualities applied to the flowing of water to the movement of humans. It sounds a note of warning to people who have the tendency of maltreating fellow human beings that they or their relations may meet at one point or the other in life. So, it is advisable for one to be careful so as not to strain relationships.

Similarly, we have examples from Igbo, Hausa and other cultures.

1. Life is salt (167).
2. *Ido mudu ne*, which means the eye is a vessel of measure (263).
3. Woman is fire: if you must take some, take a little (178).

Personification

Personification is a figure of speech in which reference is made to inanimate objects as if they were humans. In personification, life is attributed to lifeless objects. There are quite a number of examples of this aesthetic device in Ondo proverbs. For example:

Omi e e ghan ghan d'ale ma i mon.

Water cannot be so scarce that the ground would not have some to drink.

The human characteristic of 'drinking' is given to the ground. This proverb talks about the need to be optimistic, have a strong faith and trust in the providence of God. In other words, God will always provide for His own creation. Or whatever it is, there is always a way out.

The following proverb:

Sokoto ti nsise aran oko ni ngbe.

The trouser that works for the money with which to buy an expensive textile (aran), lives on the farm.

In the above proverb, human attribute of 'working' and 'living' are given to a pair of trousers which is an inanimate thing. We all know that trousers cannot work but it is figuratively applied to beautify the proverb and show the importance of hard-work.

The adjoining proverb:

Di maimasigidi ba a fe i te, a fi da gbe un s'ojo.

If a mud-statue wants to be disgraced, it would request that it should be left in the rain.

Certainly we all know that statues cannot talk. Hence, the fact that 'talking or requesting' is attributed to *maimasigidi* (statue) makes the proverb a beautiful example of personification. The proverb rebukes pride, warning that pride goes before a fall. Similarly, a mud-statue placed in the rain will inevitably absorb water, deteriorate and eventually collapse. Another case of personification is given below:

Inon ukoko didun oun eko fifun ti jade i.

White corn paste comes out from a black pot.

In this proverb, corn paste is given human attribute of 'coming out'. The proverb is a confirmation of the statement that good things are not the exclusive preserve of affluent people. The proverb teaches humility; that is, one should not look down on anybody.

In the next proverb, death and disease are given the human attribute of "giving an appointment".

Uku e d'oyo, a'on e d'osun.

Death does not announce any day and disease does not announce any month before they strike.

In other words both death and disease come unannounced when they attack its victim or how long their victims may or dwell in their victims. There is an intricate linkage of death with a day and disease with a month in order to portray the reality of these two unpredictable phenomena. Death operates within a day while a disease may linger for months. The proverb warns a person against procrastination. Applied to the Christian faith, the proverb admonishes Christians to be ready and always be in a state of grace so that when death comes, they can enjoy eternity with Christ in heaven.

The following gives another example of personification where the human attribute of 'drinking water' is given to the ground.

E e mon omi da ma ghan'le mon

One cannot drink water without giving some to the ground to drink.

The above proverb also gives us an example of repetition. The word *mon* is repeated twice.

The subsequent proverb:

Oun pele o yo obi n'apo, oun lile o yo uda n'ako.

A gentle voice approach brings out kola-nut from the pocket while a harsh/ rude approach brings out a sword from its sheath.

In the above proverb there is the figurative device called vowel alliteration. That is *o* with which five of the words begin- *oun, o, obi, oun o*. The proverb advises that one should apply wisdom in whatever one says. This proverb is another apt example of personification. "Utterance" (*oun*) is given the human attribute of 'removing' kola from the pocket and a sword from its sheath.

Figures of Sound

A figure of sound is another category of figures of speech. This achieves emphasis by the repetition of sounds. Alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia are examples of this category of figures of speech. Ondo proverbs as in other Yoruba proverbs are very rich in these poetic devices.

Alliteration

Alliteration (also known as “head rhyme” or “initial rhyme” is prevalent in Ondo proverbs. Articulating the importance of alliteration in any piece of art, Oni (1982) points out that:

Alliteration gives some melody or musicality to the ear when we listen to a poem (proverb). This is because you hear the sound over and over as we usually have in most songs. It can also attract attention to certain important thoughts in a passage either of a poem or a prose. With this attention, such words or thoughts tend to receive greater emphasis than all other words or thoughts that go with them (19).

Looking at the above definition of alliteration, two categories of alliteration can be identified. They are consonantal and vowel alliteration. Consonantal Alliteration is the type in which consonants especially at the beginning of the words are reiterated. For example:

O so si ko du ka, o wo si ko du se e.

It fruits where it cannot be plucked; it falls where it cannot be picked up.

This proverb, which presents an enigmatic situation, a situation that defies solution, gives a good example of alliteration. The alliterative ‘s’, ‘k’ and ‘d’ which are repeated four times, three times and two times respectively, can be observed at the initial letters of each of the words ‘so’, ‘si’, ‘se e’, ‘ko’, ‘ka’ ‘ko’ and ‘du’, ‘du’. The musicality produced by this proverb cannot but attract attention.

As pointed out earlier in this paper, the next proverb gives an example of labio-velar plosive, which is another example of consonantal alliteration.

Gb’ola ma gbin, o gb’eiya gbin do do.

One who lifts wealth without breathing heavily (but) lifts an ant panting heavily.

The alliterative effect of “gb” renders a very deep and onomatopoeic sound of the proverb, provides a musical effect on the hearer.

Vowel alliteration refers predominantly to the repetition of the vowel sound at the beginning of the words. The following are a few of the examples in Ondo proverbs.

L’oho i i oun agidi agba, iwofa ii oun a r’eyin gba kumon, onen o fei la’ja i i noun ale bi su’en.

The wealthy man says he is stubborn, the poor says his back is ready to absorb the club while the peacemaker says he is as hard (difficult) as a piece of iron.

The above proverb presents a harvest of poetic devices. Firstly, there exists the repetition of the vowels in ‘i’ in the words *ii, iwofa, iin, i* and *iin* and also ‘a’ in *agidi, agba, a* and *ale*. Furthermore we have ‘o’ in *oho, oun, o,* and *oun*. These are beautiful examples of vowel alliteration. Secondly, the proverb gives us an example of Wellerism, which is defined by Brunvand as “a saying in the form of a quotation followed by a phrase ascribing the quotation to someone who had done something humorous and appropriate.” And thirdly, there is an evidence of a climax in the proverb. This shows the arrangement of ideas, events and items in ascending order, starting from the least. This will be dealt with in the second part of this paper.

The second example of vowel alliteration is:

Oho obi, obi oho

Money is *kola*, *kola* is money.

The alliterative vowel is conspicuously displayed in the above proverb in the repetition of ‘o’ at the beginning of every word in the proverb. The proverb also presents an example of the poetic device known as Chiasmus, which we shall discuss in detail in the second part of this paper.

Assonance

This device is the repetition of vowel sounds. It is described as a partial rhyme in which the stressed vowel sounds may be different. Assonance is very common in Ondo proverbs like other tribes. Below are a few examples:

Onen o mon omi Onen, o mon ‘Jesa, onen o mon omi ‘Luwa, ugba omi ghon mon n’uli ‘Doko i.

He who drinks water from *Oni River*, drinks water from Ijesa but he who drinks water from 'Luwa, drinks water from two hundred sources of water in Idoko's house.

The repetition of vowel sounds in this proverb cannot be overlooked. The assonantal sound in *onen, o, omi, onen, o, mon, onen o, mon, omi, ghon, mon*, give the proverb memorability. The next example is:

Alagba a ma mero, baba ole

A powerful but thoughtless man is the father of laziness.

Again, the repetitive sound *a* in this proverb gives it aesthetic beauty.

Onomatopoeia/Onomatopoeic Ideophone

In this section of the paper, we shall discuss two figures of speech as one. Onomatopoeia is a figure of speech, often found in poetry and sometimes in prose. It is the use of words which echoes the natural sound made by a thing or an animal in real life. In the case of ideophone, Kunene (1965) describes ideophone as:

The speaker-turned-actor represents to, or recreates or dramatizes for, his audiences, by means of either ideophone alone (i.e linguistically) or of ideophone and gesture (linguistically and imitation simultaneously or by gesture alone, the event or situation which he wishes to observe... (Thus) the ideophone is a dramatization of actions (20).

Indeed, there exists also what can be termed onomatopoeic-ideophone in Ondo proverbs and this normally serves the purpose of emphasis. The following are a few of the many examples in Ondo proverbs:

A gbe Igbia le keke i in e en do'un te penpen.

An Igbira (man) is given a ride on a bicycle he complains that he has not been allowed to press the horn (penpen).

The above proverb, which rebukes ingratitude, gives us an example of what Ruth Finnegan describes as onomatopoeic ideophone. It is onomatopoeic because the word *penpen* echoes the real sound of the horn of a bicycle or a vehicle and it is ideophonic because the idea described is more than the echo

of the sound of the horn. Facial expressions and also hand gesture could be employed in order to drive home the effect and musicality of the proverb.

The next proverb:

Bata omaiton iin kia kia, bata agbalagba iin ke e pe, ke e pe.

The shoes of a youth sounds *kia kia*(quick, quick) while those of an elder sound *ke e pe, ke e pe* (live long, live long).

presents another example of onomatopoeic *kia kia* and *ke e pe, ke e pe* which reflect or illustrate the sounds made by a youth's shoes and the slippers of an elder or a senior citizen respectively. It should be noted that young men and women are fond of wearing covered shoes with hard sole and high-heeled shoes which produce quick sounds while they walk. On the other hand, the elderly usually puts on slippers which drag on the floor and flap on the soles of their legs, producing the sound *ke e pe, ke e pe*. The youth also walk briskly as they are full of life while the elders count their steps. The proverb is also an example of ideophone because of the gesture employed while demonstrating the sounds.

Last but not the least; the following proverb describes onomatopoeia picturesquely.

E ti k'ose kan s'omi, akee pohohoiho.

One has hardly put a leg in water when the frog (toad) begins to croak loudly (*pohohoiho*).

This sound *pohohoiho* represents the croaking of the frog. The proverb is used to rebuke both intolerance and impatience.

Conclusion

In this present paper, we have discussed the significance of proverb as a verbal art in Ondo community. It has also been established that figurative language perform the same aesthetic function in proverbs as it does in poems, giving memorability piquancy and adornment to them. Furthermore, we have also established that there are a lot of figurative expressions in Ondo proverbs, which are unconsciously employed to add beauty to the proverbs. Bearing in mind the fact that all the figurative expressions cannot be discussed in this paper, we have limited our discussion to just the figures of association and figures of sound. Other devices will be discussed in subsequent papers.

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