

The Socio-didactic Function of Oral Literary Genres: A Paremiological Perspectivism of Selected Ethical Proverbs

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ABSTRACT

Literature is an art, a product of society which produces and mirrors society as it looks at human beings at various levels, social and cultural sides out weighing the rest. Through its generic forms, literature depicts the human beings and how they cope with life. It is a mirror through which people perceive their behaviours, ape and correct where necessary and reject what is not benefitting them. With this regard, this study explores the social and didactic functions of oral literary genres with particular interest in proverbs from four languages used and taught in Rwanda viz Kinyarwanda, English, French and Swahili. The choice of the four languages goes with the researchers' domains as language teachers in higher education in particular. The study is qualitative and bears literary analysis. Using paremiological perspectivism, the researchers throw light on proverbs as the tools for learning and teaching society; source of knowledge and ethical values for people to cope with life issues. It was demonstrated that most of the proverbs discussed are ethically and socially didactic as they warn, caution and teach about wisdom, respect, and various human values. Those oral literary genres are source of knowledge and wisdom which are pedagogical materials for human lives from generation to generation.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Literature appears in many forms proverbs included. According to Frye, literature is "the place where our imaginations find the ideal that they try to pass on to belief and action, where they find the vision which is the source of both the dignity and the joy of life." And the critical study of literature provides a basic way "to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in." (Bazimaziki, 2017). Ordinarily, literature is a multifunctional art as it is a tool for artistic expression in human society. Particularly, oral literature augurs critical knowledge and wisdom for both literate and non-literate societies. Through its oral genres like proverbs and many others, pre-literate societies could express human values and their life experiences until it is still useful among literate societies from generation to generation. In this connection, literature - oral literature, and proverbs specifically, is a means of communicating ideas and human experience with much emphasis on warning, correction, advice and instruction on what people should do and how they should do it to better their community. As forms of oral literature, proverbs

are pedagogical tools which serve to transmit knowledge and wisdom from a generation to another. That is, following Mieder (1997), proverbs are gems of generationally-tested wisdom which help us in our everyday life and communication to cope with the complexities of the modern human condition. Proverbial literary forms will reveal that literature and society cannot be disconnected as it is a product of society about society for society. Analysing literature and the authors of literature, be it written or oral, aims primarily at finding truth and human experience in the world since various literary genres have various functions (Bazimaziki, 2017). Oral literature is a receptacle of knowledge and wisdom and holds human life. It is richer and has wider audience than written literature as both literate and non-literate audience can enjoy it. Inherently, African oral literature is community property, simply emerging from communal consciousness whereby four components comprising an oral performance: the composition, the transmission, the audience and the context; play an important part (Muleka, 2014). In Africa, the oral tradition has played a vital role by not only helping Africans to sustain their culture and

identity but also empowering their wisdom, dignity, aesthetic and poetic attributes (Kizza, 2010). Proverbs are not exception. Most of studies conducted on these literary forms contend that they are multifunctional. Ordinarily, these are wise saying often time short. They are succinct oral literary forms which constitute a socio - cultural and didactic tool in different situations. People from different historical and physical settings often resort to such genres to give a pithy warning or caution, advice and/or correction to those with whom they live and cope with life together. They are literary forms which help people to sustain their culture especially values and wisdom. In the present study, most of the proverbs discussed are ethically didactic as they warn, caution and teach about wisdom, respect, and various human values. They are thus pedagogical tools which serve to transmit knowledge and wisdom from a generation to another.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While literature is concerned with human action and experience, in some African societies including Rwandan, the problem of illiteracy persists whereby many people are still unable to read books yet they are repositories or owners of wisdom. Their wise sayings are still relevant and didactic materials to the community in which they live, hence an inherent place that oral tradition still holds among African societies. While from time immemorial Rwanda has been distinguished by skillful and powerful oral expression in social scenes (Teta, 2016), the function of oral literary genres has not attracted attention of local researchers and has therefore been an under researched area. In this regard, this study sought to explore the socio-cultural and didactic function of oral literature in Rwandan context with particular interest in proverbs which teach unity, friendship, sharing and cooperation; patience and caution/ paying attention to different situations; right choice in life and respect; hardworking; saving and time management; among other ethical values. The researchers seek to answer the question about the socio cultural and didactic role that oral literature plays in Rwandan society having some people unable to read books yet they can teach others through wise mouth words. The researchers applied a paremiological approach framed on the belief that studies in proverbs are mainly concerned with addressing questions regarding the definition, form, structure, style, content, function, meaning and value of proverbs (Mieder,2004). More importantly, researchers consider the belief that oral literature cannot be distanced from society simply because it is a product of society which produces for society in turn.

3. AIMS OF THE STUDY

Every research project starts with an idea; something that the researcher is interested in knowing more about or is worried about; something that is perceived as a problem or as a knowledge gap that needs to be filled (Hewitt, qtd in Bazimaziki et.al., 2017). The aim of this study is three fold. First, we wanted to demonstrate that literature is an art that depicts humans at social and cultural levels. Following closely, researchers wished to identify the didactic function of oral literature with particular interest in proverbs, thus, throwing a light on Paremiological approach and apply it in the study of oral literary forms. Second, we wanted to show that short oral literary forms can depict the human behaviours in the world they live and lastly to critically examine contextual meaning and socio-didactic function of some selected proverbs often time used among Rwandans through four languages spoken there. The study will mainly have a two-fold significance namely for academic literature and social literature studies.

4. METHODOLOGY

Research conducted on proverbs posit that these literary forms are multifunctional. Proverbs are old or freshly coined shorter and more allusive aphorisms whose dynamics are not well known (Vansina, 1985) but are very vital to human community. In this regard, the researchers deem necessary to critically analyse selected proverbs using a paremiological approach. Not all proverbs can be studied in this single paper. Rather, researchers dealt with some ethical proverbs as selected taking into consideration the four languages used in Rwandan society such as Kinyarwanda, a common local language to Rwandan people and used as an official language besides English, French and Swahili (Bazimaziki, 2018). The study is concerned with qualitative analysis of selected proverbs from four languages used in Rwanda. Using Paremiological theory, the researchers look into the socio-cultural and didactic function of selected proverbs. Analysis is systematic in the sense that proverbs which are bound to the same ideals and values are discussed together. Paremiology is deemed relevant to spearhead this study since it is concerned with addressing questions concerning the definition, form, structure, style, content, function, meaning and value of proverbs (Mieder, 2004). Researchers in this study framed on its relevance and usefulness to cement the discussion and beckon analysis. Many of the proverbs involved were defined and possible meaning were ascribed to them while analysing them basing on their social and educational role to the community in/ to which they

are used. By and large, the methodology is mainly qualitative literary analysis.

5. DISCUSSION

Various forms of oral literary genres have various functions. Proverbs range among these literary forms and claim to hold important rooms to depict human life experience and convey vital messages. Through these pitchy and often time metaphoric statements, both pre-literate and literate African societies conveyed wise messages when they interacted verbally. These social interactions teach people of different categories from various parts of the globe including African children, young, adults and old people as well. In the words of Mieder (1997), the educational and communicative power of proverbs in African societies lies in their use as validators of traditional ethics, procedures, and beliefs in teaching children as well as adults. Through proverbs, thus far, people could teach, warn and caution their peers, mates and or descendants; hence the inherent role of proverbs as receptacle of wisdom. Proverbs are didactic tools whose embodiment of knowledge and cultural/human values are undeniable. In Dundee's view, a proverb sums up a situation, passes judgment on a past matter, or recommends a course of action for the future (Qtd in Mieder, 2007). In some societies, to cope with life challenges human beings should be patient and not cut moral. Thus, patience is a value that can help one perform well a toil work and achieve more in their life. Literature teaches a lot about these values particularly through various sayings. Mieder (1997) points out that proverbs contain much educational wisdom, and they have long been used as didactic tools in child rearing, in linguistic and religious instruction in schools, and in teaching about general human experiences. Saying for example "All things come to those who wait" reveals that a patient person will be satisfied in due time. It is similar to the common saying that "A watched pot never boils" which carries the idea that time feels longer when you're waiting for something to happen. Thus, being patient in any situation and wait the ripe time to get what is reserved to us is a golden key to opening a window to successful ends as Rwandese often time say that "Uwitonze akama ishashi" equivalent to the French sayings that "Tout vient à point qui sait attendre" and closely related in meaning to the Swahili speech community saying "Mchumia juani hulia kivulini" (both meaning 'Patience is a virtue'). The ideal is that the ability to wait for something without getting upset is a valuable quality in a person's life. Elsewhere, the saying in English "Don't cross the bridge till you come to it", adds more to the already mentioned point. It carries the meaning of not crying before you are hurt or not being upset about a bad thing that might happen; only

be upset when something bad really does happen. From this situation, getting discouraged before an event comes is a sign of weakness that people should try to avoid. In the similar vein, French ordinarily argue that "*Petit à petit l'oiseau fait son nid*" which can literally be translated as "Bit by bit a bird makes its nest". The meaning, according to the Swahili saying, is that "*Pole pole ndio mwendo*" (Slowly but sure) much as a step by step process of doing things leads to effective results. From these proverbs, it is understandable that generally patience and much caution leads to positive ends.

More so, in a well built and united society, values such as making friend and holding together, doing well and comforting in case of trouble are, among other things, important factors for a more successful life. Various proverbs are at the center of these values. Saying for instance, "*Inshuti nyayo iboneka mu byago*" (A friend in need is a friend indeed) reflects that coming to one's help in any trouble holds a lot as regard human values. This is similar to a common Swahili saying "*Akufaaye kwa dhiki ndiye rafiki*" (A true friend is known in trouble). In fact, a trouble shared is solved in half and sharing the ups and downs among community members is what makes them hold together to cope with life hurdles. Elsewhere, Mieder(1997), one of the leading paremiologists, contends that proverbs continue to play a major role as a pedagogical tool in modern societies, especially among family members and at school. To illustrate, the Kinyarwanda saying that "*Inkingi imwe ntigera inzu*" (No man is an island) and the French that "*Les petits ruisseaux font de grandes rivières*" translated literally as "*The small streams make long rivers*" convey the message that union bears power as "*two heads are better than one*", hence united people can stand firm and achieve a lot unlike divided ones whose scattered efforts can lead to failure. This is not distanced from doing well among peers and/or community members as the Kinyarwanda saying goes that "*Gira so yiturwa indi*" (one good turn deserves another) which implies mutual help and love reflected in lavishing give and take services among people.

Proverbs are important tools which admit various interpretations as they transmit social ideals and define standards and deviations from the [social] norms (Mieder, 2009); serve as repositories of wisdom and knowledge for many traditions that are mostly and predominantly oral. Saying "*Akebo ni geramo*" (One good turn deserves another) teaches much about a give and take situation which is an important value among human community. The saying expounds the idea of coping with selfishness among community members and teaches them that the culture of sharing can make society prosper. In

other words, something given in return for an item of equivalent value - like tit for tat is a sign that there is harmony and mutual understanding. Doubtlessly, this builds a well-made and inclusive society where people act as one by holding together.

Making the right choice in life is a way to success while wrong choice leads to serious effects. Choosing requires a critical thinking about what is beneficial and what is not. In other words, good choice makes human beings prosper while bad ones make them fall into serious losses and failures. Along the same line of interpretation, "The French statement that *"Pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse"* (A rolling stone gathers no moss) propagates that someone who does not settle in one place rarely prospers. This proverb refers metaphorically to what is well known about mosses and lichens - that they are slow-growing organisms that don't thrive on disturbance. In that regard, a sure way to prevent a colony of moss from growing on a stone is to move it about. A 'rolling stone' refers literally to a wanderer, unable to settle to any job or lifestyle and therefore characterised as unreliable and unproductive. Thus, stability and sticking to a choice is what makes one stand and cope with hurdles. This idea is echoed in *"Tout ce qui brille n'est pas de l'or"* (All that glitters is not gold) meaning that not everything that is shiny and superficially attractive is valuable. In many cases, people fall victims of external judgement of things and feel attracted by the outer parts which leads to further serious effects due to lack of deep analysis of the status of the things. Matching this is another good French saying *"L'habit ne fait pas la moine"* or Kinyarwanda statement that *"Babona ishya itamba bagata urwo bari bambaye"* or the Swahili proverb going this way: *"Usiache mbachao kwa msala upitao"* approximately meaning *"All that shines is not gold"*. In fact, the tool that has been being used for long may be more important and harder than the newer that is often fragile and cannot last for long. From this situation, one can learn that we should not rely on appearances because they are sometimes deceptive. Rather, the quality of a tool is determined by its worth but not how it appears at its first sight. Elsewhere, the similar saying goes that *"You should not judge the book by its cover"*. *Half a loaf is better than no bread*: Something, even if it isn't what you ideally would prefer, is better than nothing. Still in the same connection, *"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet"* meaning that what matters is what something is, not what it is called. In most of cases, appearances are deceptive and at first sight, one may be mistaken that something is good and s/he feels attracted yet it is the case of *"All that shines is not gold"*.

Saving and good time management are other important factors among those affecting human life and can change it in one way or another. Human beings are then warned and taught about the two through oral literary genres. Proverbs are good genres to convey these messages. Saying for example, *"A stitch in time saves nine"* implies that time effectively used is very beneficial. The saying brings out the essence of doing the working time rather than postponing it for later. From this situation, it is important to know that one stitch at the right time saves nine or more others that one would be forced to stitch if they hadn't done it at the expected time. Similarly, the Swahili saying *"Chelewa chelewa utamkuta mtoto si wako"* or the Kinyarwanda that *"urabangira ikaguruka"* (time and tide wait for no man) or the French saying that *"Les retardateurs ne trouvent que les os"* equivalent to *"late comers eat bones"* carry the same meaning implying that time well used is oftentimes fruitful. These proverbs are actually relevant to people in terms of teaching them that they should not waste their time or delay to doing things. In fact, how one manages his/her time affects greatly them in what they are doing. Here, the reduplicated stem, chelewa chelewa, (being late and late again) implies that there is something wrong with time management which can impede or affect one's goal achievement. A similar proverb is *"Time is money"* which carries the idea of expecting a positive end when one manages well their time. We know that money holds an important part in the human lives and equating it to time effectively used means that the more you save time the less you run risks of not achieving what is targeted. In the same token, it is often said that *"A penny earned is a penny saved"*. Such saying is teaching how to save, not only time but also money as it is an important weapon to solving human needs, 'a good servant but also bad master', thus, say, a 'golden key that can open many if not any door'. Without money, life can be affected and jeopardized in one way or another as it is central tool that helps human beings cope with life difficulties as, to quote Ayn Rand, "it is only a tool which will take you wherever you wish, but it will not replace you as the driver."

There is no doubt that proverbs are gems of generationally-tested wisdom which help us in our everyday life and communication to cope with the complexities of the modern human condition (Mieder, 1997). In everyday life, for example, human beings are supposed to be held accountable and be responsible for the task they are assigned. In this regard, paying attention to what one is doing can serve as a weapon to carry it out in the best possible way and in case of failure, they should primarily lay

blame not only on the tool used and other external factors regardless of their role as performers. Some proverbs put it simple. Saying for example, “A *bad workman blames his tools*”, one literally means that when someone performs a task unsuccessfully, the blame is always laid on the quality of their equipment, or other external factors, rather than take responsibility for their own failure. As such, it is important to be responsible or held accountable in case one fails to fulfill a task assigned pretending that all is due to the materials used. Inherently, when one says in Kinyarwanda “Imbwa yarihuse ibyara ibihumye” or in French that “Rien ne sert de courir, il faut partir à point” (*Haste makes waste*), the idea is that rushing into a decision may cause mistakes that waste more time than would have been taken by proceeding more carefully. The idea is that we should be more cautious and pay much more attention before taking any decision which is more often than not affective in one way or another.

Additionally, Paremiologists acknowledge the general or universal truths and values embodied in proverbs as they convey messages about the world view about how human beings should behave and act among themselves. When one says “*Il ne faut pas vendre la peau de l’ours avant de l’avoir tué*” or “*Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched*”, there is a lot to learn from what is meant. Actually, in their daily life, human beings consider that the future will spring from the present and start planning for the future income. In this context, the core advice is not to be hasty in evaluating one’s assets. Ordinarily, chickens are products from eggs laid and hatched by a hen during twenty one days. Notwithstanding the context, one may have a hen that is set to hatch with, let’s say, eighteen eggs and feels that all will come out well. They will therefore start counting and hope to have in the end eighteen chickens while some eggs may actually be broken down or fail to be hatched or get spoiled or none at all will be hatched as all depends on the hen’s habit and other factors. This is a similar situation to starting enjoying the fruits of a work not done yet or an opportunity or a promise not delivered yet or celebrating an important day or event before it takes place. From this case, such proverb is didactic in that it teaches that it is better to wait for results before one can enjoy what they don’t already have. Waiting for a ripe time is what benefits more than anticipating with what one does not have in hand. In the same light, saying in French “*Un tiers que tu as vaut mieux deux que tu auras*” “*A bird in hands is worth two in the bush*” will reveal that what you have is better than what you intend to have as the hand is nearer than the bush that is far. Catching a bird in the bush will take much more time than making use of what one already holds at hands. Thus, it’s better to

have the certainty of a small thing than the possibility of a greater one which may come to nothing. This warns against taking unnecessary risks - it is better to keep what you have (a bird) than to risk getting more and ending with nothing (two birds out of your reach). This saying coheres with a Kinyarwanda and a Swahili sayings that “*Amavuta y’ umugabo ni amuraye ku munwa*”/ *Chako ni ulichokula, kinachobaki ni cha mucimba kaburi* (One’s ice or meal is the one s/he has already eaten) or more simply one’s expectations are what s/he already has at hands now rather than what they expect to have further . In fact, having consumed is better than waiting to consume. It is thus important to seize a chance or an opportunity at a ripe time before it fails us or is lost.

Literature involves people’s experiences in the world and this is depicted through different literary genres (Bazimaziki, 2017) be they oral or written. Among other genres, proverbs reflect human behaviours in some circumstances including difficult or times of hurdles. The above stand is congruent with another saying that “*Lorsqu’on a pas ce qu’on veut, on se contente de ce qu’on a*” (*when you don’t get what you wanted, you better feel content with what you have*) or more clearly “*Necessity is the mother of invention*” which conveys the message that once man in nature is at stake or is in a situation where there is no adequate solution to a problem they face, it is worth using the available means to cope with it. In the same token, people often say “*He is poor who does not feel content*” and much can be learnt from this saying. Human beings are always in need of goods and services. The one who has is the one who wants more as the saying goes that “*The more you have, the more you want.*” The question that one would ask is probably to know whether there are on earth many people who confirm that they are “satisfied”. A millionaire would like to become a billionaire; the owner of a cattle wishes to have two much as the bus owner would like to have the second while the house owner would be happy if he builds another or more. Despite these wishes of ‘the haves’, there might be some ‘havenots’ who are contented with a very little thing they might get. The whole situation teach people to feel content although it is not easy to feel satisfied with what they have. All depends largely on human nature where the thirst of riches is never quenched.

More importantly, among the things proverbs are concerned with, motivating people to work hard holds another important place. Saying in French « *Comme on fait son lit, on se couche* (*As you sow so shall you reap*) serves as illustration of this point. In most of cases, one’s deeds, good or bad, will repay

them in kind. Similarly, “*Early to bed and early to rise makes man healthy, wealthy and wise*” implies that working hard bears fruits of what we have done as time well managed is more beneficial and fruitful. Elsewhere, the Kinyarwanda common saying that “*Isazi y’ubute ntirya igisebe*” (*The early bird catches the worm*) which succinctly means success comes to those who prepare well and put in efforts; is another saying which motivates people to work for effective ends. In similar context, “*Il faut battre le fer quand il est encore chaud*” (*strike the iron while it is hot*) teaches to act decisively and take opportunities when they arise. One can learn a lesson of not wasting the ripe and convenient time of doing things. The pragmatic allusion in this proverb is actually the blacksmith at his forge. Generally, when a farrier delays in shaping the iron when it is hot, a pliable metal soon cools and hardens and the opportunity is lost. The idea is that any delay in doing what one is supposed to do bears bad consequences as those resulted from a cool iron which is not easy to shape. “*No pain no gain*” or Kinyarwanda statemnet “*Imbuto y’umugisha yera ku giti cy’umuruho* (*There is no sweet without sweat*) similar to French proverb “*Aide-toi le ciel t’aidera*” (*God helps those who help themselves*) are also pedagogical tools to enliven courage and aspirations into people and call them to work hard for a positive result before hoping and waiting for assistance without playing their part. Elsewhere, saying in French “*Vouloir c’est pouvoir*” (*where there is a will, there is a way*) conveys the message that when committed and determined, one can achieve what they wanted whatsoever. Put another way, commitment and determination are key to success in what one has undertaken. From all these proverbs, humans can learn to endure pain and sorrow or to resist hardship and /or suffering without quitting.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The oral tradition can still be put to great use in the 21st century and even beyond (Kizza, 2010) although many societies have advanced with alphabetization, there are still people who are unable to read black on white yet they hold a lot about oral tradition including wisdom and knowledge embodied in their wise sayings known as proverbs, genres which play a vital role to people and those whom they live and cope with life together. They are literary forms that help people to sustain their culture especially values and wisdom. Most of the proverbs discussed are bound to social function and are ethically didactic as they warn, caution and teach about wisdom, respect, thus define and convey various human values and general truths about how human being should act and behave in various situations. The teaching they offer

is thus a guidance to humans in the world they live. They give a pithy warning, correct and advise the community members how to cope with life and endure pain and sorrow or to last through hardship and /or suffering without quitting. Notwithstanding the discussion, we believe that this study is not exhaustive since studies on proverbs can outweigh the perspective used in the present. As proverbs have contextual application in that if they are applicable in one context, they may be inappropriate in another, we would recommend that the gaps in the current study be bridged by exploring proverbs using a contrastive analysis or contextual approach.

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