

AFRICA VIEWED THROUGH ITS PROVERBS AND LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper aims at demonstrating that a better and richer analysis of a literary work can be realized if a deep exam of the proverbs used is carried out. This work has a semiotic rather than a linguistic perspective as we try to throw light on the world-view of the people the literary text refers to.

The work is divided into two chapters. In Chapter 1 we give a bird's eye view of African proverbs and their use in African literature, and in Chapter 2 we focus on Chinua Achebe's masterpiece Things Fall Apart. We have adhered to Bhuvanewar's classification of proverbs into prototypical, vehicle and contextual so as to carry out a semiotic analysis of the proverbs used by Chinua Achebe.

Introduction

Proverbs have been used since the world began. It is possible to make this assertion, considering that the history of man is mostly signed by the history of oral cultures, and if we bear in mind that every society had its wise men who summarized the people's beliefs and customs in short sententious sayings. For example,

“The Book of Proverbs, in the Old Testament of the Bible, is a group of wisdom sayings, and longer connected poems from the 10th to the 4th century BC and finally collected about 300 BC. The sayings are either statements that provoke further thought or admonitions to behave in particular ways. The longer poems celebrate wisdom, encourage its observance, and personify it as a woman who at God's right hand assisted in creation. Egyptian wisdom is evident in Proverbs, making it possible to date the nucleus of the book to pre-exilic times. The book as a whole reflects the ideology of enterprising privileged classes and expresses a general confidence in the human capacity to act freely and wisely. Self-interest and religious devotion are shown to be congruent. Respect for women (31:10- 31) is encouraged. The book is conventionally attributed to Solomon as the prototype of Israelite wisdom, but many sages had a hand in composing and collecting the subsections; mentioned specifically are the term ‘men’ of Hezekiah” (<http://mb-soft.com/believe/txs/proverbs.htm>).

Well, what are proverbs? The Penguin English Dictionary, 2nd Edition, defines them as: “A brief pithy saying embodying a truth, a widely held belief, or a piece of advice” (p. 1121). Paul Hernadi and Francis Steen give the following definition: “Proverbs are brief, memorable, and intuitively convincing formulations of socially sanctioned advice” (p.1. “The Tropical Landscapes of Proverbia: A Cross-disciplinary Travelogue” apud [http://cogweb.ucla.edu/Culture/Hernadi Steen 99.html](http://cogweb.ucla.edu/Culture/Hernadi%20Steen%2099.html)). And the great North American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

“Proverbs, like the sacred books of each nation, are the sanctuary of the intuitions. That which the droning world, chained to appearances, will not allow the realist to say in his own words, it will suffer him in proverbs without contradictions. And this law of laws which the pulpit, the senate, and the college deny is hourly preached in all markets and workshops by flights of proverbs whose teaching is as true and omnipresent as that of birds and flies”. (“Compensation”, p. 7 apud [http://www.rwe.org/works/Essays-1st Series 03 compensation.htm](http://www.rwe.org/works/Essays-1st%20Series%2003%20compensation.htm)).

“The vulgar proverb, ‘I will get it from his purse or get it from his skin’, is sound philosophy” (ibid., p. 8).

Each of the three quotes above presents proverbs as an epitome of the objective and the subjective, and as messages of social behaviors. And Emerson went so far beyond as to brand them as “sacred books of each nation”.

In setting about doing this work, we defend the notion that ourproposed semiotic-paremiological probewould enable a deeper and pleasurable analysis of a literary work.

Proverbs and African literature

Both methodological and epistemological reasons could lead us to divide African literature into oral and written. African literature was mainly oral until the 20th century, yet, it is worth mentioning that oral traditions of mythological narratives, poetry and proverbs are still present and have an influence in contemporary writing. “The Lazy Rock-Rabbit” is an African oral-literature piece out of which came the proverb “The rock-rabbit lacked a tail by sending others”. In Chaka, Child of Sin, a novel by Thomas Mofolo, we find the proverb “Scandal is not like bread: there is never any shortage” (apud Drachler, Jacob, African Heritage, p. 67) to summarize the fix the main character Senzangakona was in for having had a son out of wedlock.

Proverbs, as a sample of African oral traditions, constitute a literary resource and a literary potential that carry values, beliefs, customs; in a nutshell, the world-view of African cultures. Metaphor, wisdom, sarcasm, happiness, schooling, humor, tenderness, ethics, disappointment, praise, etiquette, friendship, enmity, religion, human ways of communication and war are- among others- matters which are conveyed through African proverbs. The importance Africans attach to proverbs is illustrated in a Nigerian Yoruba proverb going like this, “A proverb is like the horse which can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas “. The Yoruba proverbs are currently being used to express modern messages, so much so that former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used one to title a book she wrote which focuses on the community’s importance in transmitting values to children, It takes a village to raise a child. For the African continent, which has always been said by the white man to be devoid of culture, proverbs are cultural vehicles and windows through which it is possible to cast a look at the Africans’ world-view. It was not in vain (we are of the opinion that African proverbs should be included in every collection of African literature) that Jacob Drachler included “Ten Proverbs from Liberia” in his African-literature anthology African Heritage, being cautious to warn that “to use them as valuable clues to ways of thinking and feeling, we must know how they are employed, in what situations and with what intent? (p. 44). Behold the proverbs:

“When it rains, the roof always drips the same way”.

This is a comment on the immutability of certain laws. Whenever there is rain, the roof will drip, and always drip downward, no matter how the roof is placed or from what direction the rain is hitting it. The proverb also has implications like our ‘As ye sow, so shall ye reap’. The following illustration was given: ‘we and the people of Fishtown agreed that we would not fight any more’. In making this agreement we called upon God. If one of the parties breaks an agreement like this, he is bound to lose. The Fishtown people broke the agreement and so we won the war.

“We climb the hill before we recognize the land”.

This is used also as an honorary title on the horn. The title belonged to a public speaker of Nimiah, now dead. The office of the speaker is to set the matter before the assembly as objectively as he can, introducing the arguments of both sides without taking a stand of his own. His penetration and elocution elevate the average man to a clear, broad view of the issue, such as a person gains by climbing a hill.

“One doesn’t throw the stick after the snake has gone”.

This can be applied to suggest that a passing opportunity may not return; quick action and decision are often imperative.

Whenever a snake is found to be in a Jabo village, the village seems to become transformed into a disturbed ant heap; everybody shouts and runs, but nobody is overanxious to get close to the spot where the snake is supposed to be hiding. Some men finally gather courage and begin to beat about the place, usually hitting anything but the snake, which is most likely to have disappeared by that time. Still, as the hopes of killing it diminish, the number of our dauntless hunters increases, while the women pour forth a generous supply of mocking and teasing remarks until the affair finally dissolves amid general laughter.

“You kill the snake with whatever may be in your hand”.

This was applied in a rather characteristic manner. On one occasion three men came to visit the house, and as they prepared to leave they were presented with a leaf of tobacco. Two of the visitors felt that one leaf was hardly enough for three people, but the third guest had more discretion and evinced it by quoting the proverb.

“He acts like a dog who drives the flies away from food it has spurned”.

The proverb embodies a criticism of hypocrisy. It is used in questioning the sincerity of someone who seems too particular about something for which he professes to care nothing. For example, if a mother scolds a child of about six or seven years of age about something, the child may become very angry and wish to make his mother feel the intensity of his anger by refusing disdainfully whatever she offers him. But should the child interfere when his brother or another member of the family accepts the offer, the proverb is acceptable.

If someone says he dislikes a certain girl and yet watches her constantly, the girl herself or any other person who suspects him of dissembling may say to him, ‘You behave like a dog who drives the flies away from the food it has spurned’.

A man may have publicly divorced his wife but objects to her going with another man. The woman may rebuke her former husband with the proverb.

A man may openly declare that he is not connected with a project which other men are about to undertake. At the same time he appears quite anxious to give advice. Those who question his attitude will say to him, ‘Why do you act like a dog who drives the flies away from food it has spurned?’

The proverb is also used in law proceedings. If two tribes enter a dispute, one of them may be made to cede its rights to a tract of land in favour of the other. The land offered may not seem fully satisfactory to the second tribe, which would definitely refuse it. The court, however, would make it understood that no further land is forthcoming, that it must accept what is offered and make the best use of it. If the tribe still would not touch the land but would not let anyone else touch it either, the proverb could be quoted.

To recap, this proverb is equivalent to the English-language one: “He is a dog in the manger” (Notice made by the author of this paper).

“The dog’s nose is cold”.

The proverb conjures an image often seen in West Africa: the man reclining comfortably in his low chair. Suddenly the dog comes up to him unnoticed and, nudging him, touches his body with its cold nose. The man yells at it, but he has had his unpleasant shock. The proverb serves to express ill bodings or as a warning against the doubtful wisdom of a plan. It may point out that a person in trouble should have foreseen the effects of his ill-advised action. It was recorded as a title praising a man on the horn. The title praises the warrior for his undaunted bravery. Or it may sound a warning to the hero who does not consider any risk. Finally, the cold shock at the touch of the dog’s nose is symbolic of the uncomfortable feelings arising in the warrior’s enemies whenever they think of him or confront him.

“There is no wealth where there are no children”.

There is true happiness only where there are children. But children are not only a source of happiness. They are a great help to their parents. When parents become too old to provide for themselves, they pass into the care of their children and are provided for by them. Thus, children are a source of wealth to their parents and a valuable investment.

In the native community, married people are most unhappy if they should have no children of their own, and steps are taken to correct the situation. If, upon examination, it is thought that the husband is sterile, another man is substituted until a child is born to the woman. If the woman is thought sterile, the misfortune is no so great since the husband's other wives may bear him children. If everything should fail, the couple try to adopt children.

If a person boasts copiously of the great things he has done for which the whole tribe praises him, some of his fellows may become annoyed. In their jealousy they would rebuke him, saying, 'Keep quiet; you are worrying us too much for what little you have accomplished!' The man could reply in self-defence; "Yes, but there is no wealth where there are no children. In other words, 'I have good reason to be proud, for I have done something'.

Again, if a person is accused of witchcraft, he is given sasswood poison to prove his innocence. If, after the struggle, he expels the poison from his system and is given the freedom to celebrate his liberation, some unsympathetic individual may remark with sarcasm on the exuberance with which the man enjoys his release. A more sympathetic individual may reply with the proverb.

"Children are the wisdom of the nation".

In travelling from village to village the native visitor will almost invariably make it his business to ask the children whom he is certain to find playing below the village, 'Well, children, what is the news of the city?' Without any suspicion or fear the children will tell him the most important of the latest news. If the stranger should find it not expedient to enter the village because the news indicates that his tribe had become involved in some trouble with it, he would turn back at once. The children would calmly resume their play with the feeling that they had done their duty by giving the man the information he desired. The lives of many who were wise enough to trust the knowledge of children have been saved this way. Thus the proverb recognises that children generally know some facts, and, if properly approached, will tell the truth to any who should desire it; they are frank, trusting and friendly.

The proverb is, in the first place, applicable if the testimony of a child is needed badly, and there are still some who tend to make light of the validity of such testimony. In that case, anybody who favours the testimony of the child may say to objectors, "Do not worry, for children are the wisdom of the nation".

The mother of a child may become imbued with the fear that the child is growing too imaginative in his world of fancies to be depended upon for telling the truth. If she wishes to impress upon the child the danger of becoming a habitual liar, and how detestable a creature a liar is, she will say to him, 'Son, it seems you cannot tell the truth about anything lately! You must stop this practice, for it is often said that children are the wisdom of the nation. Let it be said of you that you belong to the group which really constitutes the wisdom of this nation'.

"A child saw a war that destroyed a city".

The implication being that even a child has had experience and has seen events. The proverb may have originated from a story. It was quoted when people of Upper Nimiah discussed the grave illness of a boy in Lower Nimiah. Like any other case of illness or death, this was supposed to have been caused by witchcraft. The consensus of opinion in Upper Nimiah was that the people of Lower Nimiah did not act with sufficient zeal to trace the witch in good time. In this matter, as in many others, the town felt that the lower town did not always use good judgement. The lowertown, situated on the seashore, on the road between civilized Liberian towns, was more exposed to Western influences. More used to confronting unforeseen situations, it represented the less conservative element of the tribe. It did not always feel that it had at its disposal the time necessary to observe the formalities prescribed

by tradition. The more conservative upper town regarded this laxity as childish, hasty, and haphazard. ‘Nevertheless’, to quote the comments of the Upper Nimiah people on the sickness, ‘although the people of the Lower Nimiah are like children, we look upon them with hopes since we could not accomplish anything without them’. Then the proverb was quoted. The inhabitants of the lower town are looked upon and referred to as children of the upper town because their settlement is more recent.

“One who loves the children of his fellow will surely love his own children”.

Perhaps the truest test of love is to love sincerely that which is not one’s own, whereas it is common and easy for a man to love or value the things that are closely related to him or are actually his own. Thus, a father who has love for another father’s children will surely be able to love his own. Furthermore, through his experience with other children he will be better equipped to take care of his own.

The question may arise in the assembly whether one’s tribe should treat another tribe with toleration. If opinion seems to be divided, the side which is for toleration may quote the proverb to plead for indulgence. People who are unkind to children are often rebuked with the proverb.

People may object bitterly if members of another tribe come to hunt in the forest owned by their tribe. If someone thinks that the objection is ungenerous, he will quote the proverb (ibid., p. 45-50).

It is worth remarking that out of these ten Liberian proverbs, four have to do with children, and they do so in such a way that kids are associated with happiness and welfare at home, with national wisdom, and also with the significance of loving not only one’s children but other people’s as well. These four proverbs throw light on this particular value and feeling of the Liberian people’s world-view, a value and a feeling that do not seem to be observed in the Igbo society, as portrayed by Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart.

Proverbs Their use in Things Fall Apart

“Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences with proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe, Chinua, op.cit., p. 6).

This paragraph lets us know- from the outset of the novel- the role proverbs play both in the Ibo culture and in this literary work. Achebe is quick to convey this feature of his idiolect and of Ibo good talkers’ idiolect by means of a character, Okoye, who is said to have uttered six sentences in proverbs, and in the narrator’s voice, who likens proverbs to an important Nigerian crop.

Achebe’s use of proverbs along the novel substantiates our statement made in Chapter I concerning the overlapping between African oral traditions and African written literature, as well as brings out the novelist’s notion that the “English of Africa will have to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (<http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landlow/post/achebe/jura01.html>).

Proverbs A categorization

The Umuofia society is achievement-oriented: “Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered” (Achebe, Chinua, op. cit, p. 6). This idea is summarized in proverbs like “If a child washed his hands, he could eat with kings”, (loc. cit.) and “You can tell a ripe corn by its look” (ibid., p. 17), the former denoting how hard Okonkwo worked for success, what made him quite worthy of admiration by the community leaders, and the latter being the opposite side of the Anglophone sayings “Do not judge a book by its cover” and “Never judge from appearances”. And the importance attached to achievement is contained in these ones as well: “Looking at a king’s mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother’s breast” (ibid., p. 20). These words were stated by an old man in reference to

Okonkwo, who had started from scratch and become wealthy all of a sudden; and “A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride” (ibid. p 19). These words of wisdom are said by Unoka- in the dusk of his life- to Okonkwo after a very bad harvest, “ the worst year in living memory” (p.18). A translation of the contextual meaning of this African proverb into Western plain English could give us something like: “Come on, you’re a die hard. Every cloud has a silver lining”.

The “chi” or personal spirit is a recurrent topic in the book. It has been compared with the daemon of Socrates, and people believe Okonkwo has a strong “chi”. When Okonkwo endeavored to be well- to-do his chi supported him. Notwithstanding, when he became aggressive his chi helped him no more and he came from bad to worse. This Ibo’s attachment to religious values is summed up in the proverb “When a man says yes, his “chi” says yes also (ibid., p. 20). Okonkwo’s bad end makes this proverb contradictory, a peculiarity which is present in many proverbs, that is, Okonkwo’s assertion was contested by his chi’s denial.

Likewise, another proverb shows Ibo’s particular beliefs, “If a man kills the sacred python in the secrecy of his hut, the matter lies between him and his God” (p. 117). The python was the most revered animal in this culture. “It was addressed as ‘Our Father’ “(p. 116) and anybody killing it by accident was punished. Thus, when rulers and elders meet to decide what to do with the snake killer, someone comes up with this adage, and adds: “If we put ourselves between the god and his victim we may receive blows intended for the offender (ibid., p. 117).

The importance of women in the Ibo society reaches its climax when Okonkwo is deported to his motherland. Uchendu, his uncle, says: “A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland” (ibid. p. 98). Hence the proverb “Mother is supreme” (loc. cit.), which expresses an Ibo’s standpoint of their society, where mothers are conceded respect. Another proverb about women is said, especially about old women. This is a humorous proverb in its ‘prototypical meaning’, and it is laughing stock in its ‘vehicle’ and ‘contextual’ interpretations (cf. Bhuvanewar, Chilukuri, “Exploring Semantics. Proverbs as Metaphors as Proverbs: Rethinking SFL as Ka:rmik SFL”). For a better understanding of this point, here is an excerpt of the conversation:

“I have heard that many years ago, when his father had not dead very long, he had gone to consult the Oracle. The Oracle said to him, “Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him. “ Do you know what he told the oracle? He said, “Ask my father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive. “Everybody laughed heartily except Okonkwo, who laughed uneasily because as the saying goes, an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb. Okonkwo remembered his own father”.

Ibo men’s outlook on the bringing up of children is also present in the book. Okonkwo and his friend Oberika are arguing about the former’s hand in killing Ikemefuma, what the latter does not agree with. Okonkwo replies:

“The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger [...] A child’s fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm” (ibid, p.49).

This proverb is somewhat tantamount to “Spare the rod and spoil the child”. However, we should not overlook the virile denotation of the signifier “hot yam”. The yam is by itself a sign of manhood in Ibo culture, but- to boost- it is about a ‘hot yam’ which would not harm the kid’s hand; its positive effect is implicit.

Trinidadian-American dancer Pearl Primus went to Africa several times to do research on African culture and dance. In her essay “African Dance” (apud Drachler, Jacob, op.cit.), she states:

“African Dance is basic, vital! For me it is the source, the well from which I draw inspiration for my work. African dance is complete...”

“It is hard for me to think of Africa without hearing again the great drums [...]. I must pause in the writing to quiet that part of me which cries out. Dance” (p. 173).

“Dance was still and still is of vital importance in the life of the African people” (ibid, p. 174).

In a culture so fond of proverbs, and belonging to such a musical and dancing-loving continent it is expected to encounter proverbs dealing with such amusing activities.

After Mr. Brown- the British missionary- died, he was succeeded by a very tough one, Reverend James Smith, for whom “black was evil” (Achebe, Chinua, op. cit., p. 134). And this time it is the narrator who tells us about a saying in Umuofia which goes like this: “As a man danced so the drums were beaten for him”. Mr. Smith danced a furious step and so the drums went mad” (ibid, p. 135).

We can say this proverb is message-equivalent to “As you sow, so you shall reap”.

The remaining category of proverbs used in the novel pertains to nature, that is to say, Ibo’s relation to fauna, flora, the stars, and other components of the external world.

In Chapter 1, Okoye, a very successful man, visits Unoka so that this one gave him back the two hundred cowries he had lent him two years before. Unoka tells him:

“You see, I owe that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it. I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them” (ibid, p. 6).

This character was a loafer, he was a failure according to every index of the Ibo society and, nevertheless, he spoke about dignity: he would not kneel; he would keep his chin up inasmuch as in so doing he would be privileged by the sun.

“If one finger brought oil it soiled the others” (p. 91). This proverb is uttered by the narrator when telling about Obierika, who....

“remembered his wife’s twin children whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offence in the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender (loc. cit.).

The ‘oil’ alludes to the palm tree, from which it is extracted, and the palm- tree oil is a very important crop in the Ibo society.

When Okonkwo’s seven year “sentence” comes to an end in his motherland, he decides to give a great farewell feast to his mother’s kinsmen who had been so good to him. Upon his wife Ekwefi’s protesting that two goats sufficed for the feast, he tells her: “I am calling a feast because I have the wherewithal. I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle”. My mother’s people have been good to me and I must show my gratitude” (p. 121). In other words, he could not be mean, close-fisted, as he had the “wherewithal”; he had plenty of water in the river, how come he was going to ‘wash his hands with spittle?’

The signified of this proverb is similar to that of another African proverb: “A barber does not shave himself”, and to that of an Anglophone one,” The tailor’s wife is the best clad”.

And within the category of nature, there are also proverbs specifically related to animals, out of which we will pick one:

“A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very first day it hatches”.

Meanings in metaphorical proverbs

A classification of the meanings in metaphorical proverbs distinguishes into (See Bhuvaneshwar, Chilukuri, Exploding Semantics, Proverbs as Metaphors as Proverbs: Rethinking SFL as Karmik SFL):

The referential meaning as given by the expression (vehicle interpretation).

The prototypical meaning (focus interpretation or literal meaning).

The contextual meaning (the complex of focus and vehicle interpretation).

The meaning of a proverb in a context depends on both the referential or figurative meaning and the prototypical meaning. The former can fit two different contexts and the latter works as a model and categorizes the action of the context.

We intend to illustrate the classification above by examining some proverbs from Things Fall Apart.

“An old woman is always uneasy when bones are mentioned in a proverb”.

In this case the prototypical meaning is that of an old woman, and her mental unease when she hears people talking about bones. The referent of the proverb, however, can be any old person- regardless of gender- to whom ‘the cap fits’. In the context in question, Okonkwo felt quite embarrassed as he associated this proverb with his own father.

“When mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth”. Here, ‘mother-cow’ is a metaphor for mother or father, the act of chewing grass stands for anything done by parents and the ‘young ones’ are the children.

Obierika is told by his elder brother: “You were very much like that yourself” (op. cit, p. 51), and then he enlivens his words with that proverb.

Thus, in this situation Obierika was ‘mother-cow’, his son Maduka was ‘its young one’, and Maduka’s always running instead of walking was the act of chewing grass. To sum up, as the English saying goes, ‘They were cut from the same cloth’.

“I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle”.

Never Okonkwo lived on the bank of a river nor- we feel- he would be capable of washing his hands with spittle.

We think the general referent in this saying is the confrontation between abundance and austerity, especially a critical remark against stingy people. Okonkwo uses it to stop his wife Ekwefi short. As he said to her: “I am calling a feast because I have the wherewithal...” (ibid., p. 121).

“As a man dances so the drums are beaten for him”.

The vehicle interpretation here is the same as “As you sow, so you shall reap”. The message denoted is like that of giving somebody their due.

The man referred to by the proverb in the scene in question was Reverend James Smith, who “saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in moral conflict with the sons of darkness” (ibid, p. 134).

“There was a saying in Umuofia that as a man danced so the drums were beaten for him. Mr. Smith danced a furious step and so the drums went mad” (ibid., p.135).

“You can tell a ripe corn by its fruit”.

“A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very same day it hatches”.

We have wanted to examine these two proverbs together.

The prototypical meaning in the former refers to a food which is ready to be eaten. It is ripe and you can say so just by looking at it. The prototypical meaning in the latter makes a distinction between a chick (standing for a baby boy) and a cock (which embodies an adult male).

We feel, however, that in order to discern the referential meaning of the former we need to know the context in which it was said.

“I can trust you. I know it as I look at you. As our fathers said, you can tell a ripe corn by its look” (ibid,p. 17).

Thus, Okonkwo was the ‘ripe corn’. This is the vehicle interpretation of the proverb, and the context was all the more necessary- in this case- to decode the referential meaning.

Nevertheless, it seems to us that the other proverb would have fitted this context as well. In other words, Nwakibie could have said... “I know it as I look at you. As our fathers said, a chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches”.

Okonkwo would then have been the 'cock', the same as he was the 'ripe corn'. As to the situation in which the second proverb is used in the novel, we can say that the first proverb might also have been suitable: "Nwoye is old enough to impregnate a woman. At his age I was already fending for myself. No, my friend, he is not too young. You can tell a ripe corn by its look.

Yet, we should remark the better suitability of the second proverb in that context than that of the first proverb in the second situation. Because for Okonkwo his son was not a 'ripe corn' despite being 'not too young'.

We want to conclude this chapter by stating that no matter how important the vehicle interpretation of a proverb is for decoding its denotation, the context is of paramount importance for the reader to grasp the right denotation, and even the connotation of proverbs.

Conclusions

We think the idea defended and mentioned in the Introduction has been validated. Chinua Achebe is a 'realist who spoke in his own words' and in proverbs. Because his own words are proverbs, because his own words are those of his people.

Examining the proverbs used in Things Fall Apart is like watching an exhibition of African visual arts. Proverbs are a treasure in Nigeria, a treasure shared by the rich and the poor- maybe the only such valued treasure shared by both social layers.

The three pillars present in every people's identity, according to Senegalese anthropologist Cheik Anta Diop, can be found in the proverbs of the Ibo society.

The analysis of a literary work should be a root-and-branch one, and this is the idea behind the semiotic-paremiological perspective proposed. Taking a look at the tropes, no matter how deep it might be, at the characters, setting and plot does not suffice. The semiotic approach we suggest allows the reader cast a look at the extra-linguistic reality to which the text belongs and at people's worldview as well.

This paper is also a way to honor Chinua Achebe, no doubt a great of contemporary world literature. He was 'a chick that grew into a cock', into a well-singing and virile cock. And for that singing and that proverbial African virility, Thank you, Achebe!

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