

A pragmatic reading of Ahmed Yerima's proverbs in *Yemoja*, *Attahiru*, and *Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees*

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Abstract

Unlike earlier studies that have examined proverbs from the point of view of speech acts, the present article draws on the more recent perspective of pragmatic acts or pragmatic acting. It examines three recent dramas by Ahmed Yerima, the prominent Nigerian playwright and director of the Nigerian National Theatre. In these plays—Attahiru (1999), Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees (2001), and Yemoja (2002), African proverbs display all of the conventional structures and types as defined in the previous literature on proverbs. As Yerima uses proverbs primarily as communication tools within culturally defined contexts, a function-based, rather than a structure-based, approach must be taken to properly understand their role in the dramas. To this end, a modified model of pragmatics for understanding the role of the proverbs, based on Mey's 2001 model of a pragmeme, is offered.

It is demonstrated that Yerima's plays employ proverbs with topic-comment, fixed/non-fixed, and poetic/non-poetic structures, and that they include all three types of proverbs—weather, flora/fauna, and cultural—as identified in the literature. Most importantly, it is shown that the proverbs are sensitive to contexts of interaction. Through proverbs, the speakers in the dramas use pragmatic acts, or practs, to use Mey's (2001) term, which counsel, accuse, pronounce, and/or assure. The proverbial propositions are reformulated by the speaker to unveil their meanings, allowing readers, whether or not they are members of the culture, to fully access the dramas. This study on Yerima's plays aims to shift the literature on pragmatics forward while simultaneously providing new insights into contemporary African drama.

1. Introduction

There are numerous popular and academic definitions of proverbs, for example, those of Taylor (1994), Mieder and Dundes (1994), Bernhard

(1985), and Mieder (1985). While some of these are structure-based, others are function-based. In this paper, a function-based approach is preferred. As Firth (1926: 134) has rightly observed, “The essential thing about a proverb is its meaning. . . . The meaning of a proverb is made clear only when side by side with the translation is given a full account of the accompanying social situation—the reason for its use, its effects, and its significance in speech.” In accordance with this contextual property of proverbs, I shall adopt in this paper Yusuf and Methangwane’s (2003: 408) definition of proverbs as “relatively short expressions which are usually associated with wisdom and are used to perform a variety of social functions.”

Proverbs have been explored from the perspective of a wide variety of disciplines. These include anthropology (e.g., Mieder 1987), history (e.g., Alster 1993), literature (e.g., Barnes 1994), and linguistics (e.g., Seitel 1994). Within linguistics, proverbs have been examined in terms of semantics (e.g., Yusuf 2001), discourse analysis (e.g., Seitel 1994), and pragmatics (e.g., Norrick 1994). Many of these perspectives have focused on the contextual use of proverbs, thus studying conversations and literary texts, for example. While all genres of literature have been studied, prose and drama have been the predominant forms, given their closeness to the everyday language experience of the people. Abrahams and Babcock (1994: 415) have observed that while earlier studies on proverbs addressed annotations of proverbs in texts, “more recent publications address the problem of identification and interpretation of proverbial language in poetry, drama, and prose.”

The present article, unlike earlier studies on proverbs that consider pragmatics from the point of view of speech acts, draws on the more recent perspective of pragmatic acts or pragmatic acting (e.g., Mey 2001). It is the first attempt to examine proverbs as communication tools in the works of Ahmed Yerima, the prominent Nigerian playwright and incumbent director of the Nigerian National Theatre. This study’s exploration of pragmatic acting as employed by Yerima aims to shift the literature on pragmatics forward while simultaneously providing new insights into contemporary African drama.

2. Proverbs and literary studies

Scholarship on proverbs has generally dealt with their structures, types, and functions. Structurally speaking, proverbs reveal a quadripartite structure, show a topic-comment pattern, are oppositional/non-oppositional and fixed in shape, and may be poetic or non-poetic in form (Milner

1969; Dundes 1981; Norrick 1985; Mieder 1989; Seitel 1994). Milner (1969) has demonstrated the quadripartite structure of a proverb like "A rolling stone gathers no moss," which can be divided into four parts with each part assigned positive or negative values, such that there are "sixteen possible structural patterns" (Mieder 1989: 17). In a similar vein, Dundes (1981) claimed that a proverb basically composes a topic and a comment, implying that the basic form of a proverb can be divided into two parts. Dundes (1981) also examined the oppositional and non-oppositional patterns associated with complex proverbs. A point to note is that non-proverbial expressions can also meet Mieder and Dundes' claims about the structure of proverbs. This, however, does not seriously mar the workability of their proposals. Two features of proverbs that have not been challenged are their fixed form and their poetic nature. However, in Mieder's (1989: 17) words, "newer research is showing more and more that proverbs are being changed, don't need to quote the entire proverb, since often a mere allusion to it suffices to communicate its message effectively." The poetic qualities of proverbs have been shown to be projected through alliteration, parallelism, metaphor, personification, and hyperbole (Mieder 1989).

In Africa, as in many cultures of the world, proverbs are used in abundance. According to Finnegan (1994: 36), proverbs in African societies "occur on all occasions when language is used for communication either as art or as tool.... Proverbs are used in oratory, counseling, judging, embellishing speeches, and enriching conversations." Most of the time, proverbs are employed for their allusive, ironic, and sarcastic potential.

Three groups of proverbs have been identified in the literature, namely, legal proverbs, medical proverbs, and weather proverbs (Mieder 1989). Although these categories came from studying American proverbs, they are largely applicable to many cultures, including African ones. However, cultural differences and contextual factors may dictate peculiarities, some of which will emerge in the analysis below.

The occurrence of proverbs in literary texts is an inter-textual phenomenon, a "re-situation" that demands proverbs to adjust to and interact with their new environment. Identifying their roles and interpreting them in this environment thus requires a strictly context-based approach. That the proverb operates successfully within and without natural conversational situations shows that language typifies a sign system (Abrahams & Babcock 1994). Berger and Luckman (1967: 36) have observed that, "signs and sign systems are all characterized in terms of the degree to which they can be detached from face-to-face situations." According to Abrahams and Babcock (1994: 418), "Degree of detachability is often

determined by the medium into which the sign is translated; for some media such as theater and film obviously maintain a greater sense of scenic interaction than others.”

Therefore, Mieder’s (1974: 889) questions with respect to the intertextual occurrence of proverbs are important to this paper:

- (i) In what contexts do the proverbs appear?
- (ii) How do they function in the popular piece of literature?
- (iii) In what way do they offer new insights into the creative process of an author?

These questions imply that proverbs in literary texts must have contexts, functions, and contributions. Reflecting the issues raised in these questions, Agbada (1997: 250) notes that the African proverbs in Chinua Achebe’s novels serve as “thematic hints and reinforcement; satirical, ironical, and sarcastic quips; instruction and social control; characterization; and rhetorical tools.” Agbada (1997: 250) further correctly observes that the “functions of proverbs in Achebe’s novels not only advance his narrative, they authenticate their social and cultural setting.” In this paper, special attention will be paid to the first question about the contexts in which proverbs occur.

As noted above, the role of proverbs in dramatic texts does not vary greatly from that in prose texts. Seminal works that have discussed the role of proverbs in drama include Wilson (1994), Bryan (2002), and Monye (2002). Studying the use of proverbs in Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel*, for instance, Monye (2002: 334) observes that “Soyinka has borrowed extensively from Yoruba traditional proverbs to color and enrich the language of his presentation [and] has used the traditional wisdom of the elders to show how the Baroka won Lakunle in the fight for the hand of Sidi in marriage.”

In the present study, I shall attempt to answer Mieder’s questions with respect to three of Ahmed Yerima’s plays, applying the theory of pragmatic acts. The three dramas have been selected principally because they represent socio-cultural and ethnic experiences in Nigeria. For example, *Yemoja* (2002) represents the Yoruba socio-cultural setting, *Attahiru* (1999), the Hausa setting, and *Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees* (2001), the Igbo setting. Also, drawing from the depth of the peoples’ traditional experience, the plays engage relatively more proverbs than do others written by the same author.

Section 3 below concerns the pragmatic acts theory and proverbs. Section 4 discusses Mey’s model of a pragmeme, which can be applied to the study of proverbs. Section 5 offers a modified model for examining the proverbs in Yerima’s plays, and section 6 locates the structures, types,

and functions of proverbs in these three plays, using the framework of pragmatic acts theory to emphasize the discourse value of the proverbs.

3. Pragmatic acts and proverbs

One of the weaknesses of speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) is its non-featuring of an action theory. According to Fairclough (1989: 9), the best way to conceive of speech act theory is to think of it atomistically, that is, as wholly emanating from the individual. This immediately renders it unsuitable for our present purpose, as proverbs, especially as captured in dramatic texts, can best be appreciated through a theory of action. Hence, the theory of pragmatic acts is central to the present study.

A pragmatic act is performed when we communicate implicitly. We may co-opt others, set them up, influence them through our conversations, deny certain claims, and so on, without betraying such acts through our lexical choices (Mey 2001). Although these manifestations of pragmatic acts share some similarities with indirect speech acts, they are different. According to Mey (2001: 216), while speech acts, uttered in contexts, can be pragmatic acts, pragmatic acts need not be speech acts.

In contrast to simple speech acts, pragmatic acts incorporate the notion of “common scene.” Mey’s main criticism of speech act theory is that speech acts, to be effective, must be situated, that is, “they both rely on, and actively create, the situation in which they are realized” (Mey 2001: 218). In short, “there are no speech acts, but only situated speech acts, or instantiated pragmatic acts.” As a consequence, the emphasis is not on conditions and rules for an individual speech act, but on characterizing a general situational prototype, capable of being executed in the situation—what Mey calls a “pragmeme.” Thus, the instantiated, individual pragmatic acts refer to a particular pragmeme for their realization. (More on pragmemes below.) In other words, a pragmatic act involves adapting oneself to a context, as well as adapting the context to oneself. This is why the pragmatic act approach works better in the analysis of Yerima’s proverbs. *Pragmatic acts are situation-derived and situation-constrained.*

Pragmatic acts can be viewed as comprising both agent and act. “As far as the individual agent is concerned, there are his or her class, gender, age, education, previous history, and so on” (Mey 2001: 214). At the center of the act is the language engaged in performing pragmatic acts. For these pragmatic acts, the perspective of the individual and the context are both important. The need exists to determine the language the individual needs to perform an act, and the language needed “to create the conditions [for him/her] to perform a pragmatic act” (Mey 2001: 214).

For the individual perspective, language adaptability may be invoked to generate meaning (Mey 2001: 214–215; Verschueren 1999: 147).

4. Mey's model of a pragmeme

Given that pragmatic acts' "focus is in the environment in which both speaker and hearer find their affordances, such that the entire situation is brought to bear on what can be said in the situation, as well as what is actually being said" (Mey 2001: 221), the central concept in the theory of pragmatic acts is the pragmeme. A pragmeme is a generalized pragmatic act; it is an abstraction. A pragmeme can be instantiated through individual pragmatic acts, which Mey calls "practs." Practs are the concrete occurrences of a pragmeme. The scheme below, taken from Mey (2001: 222), captures these relationships:

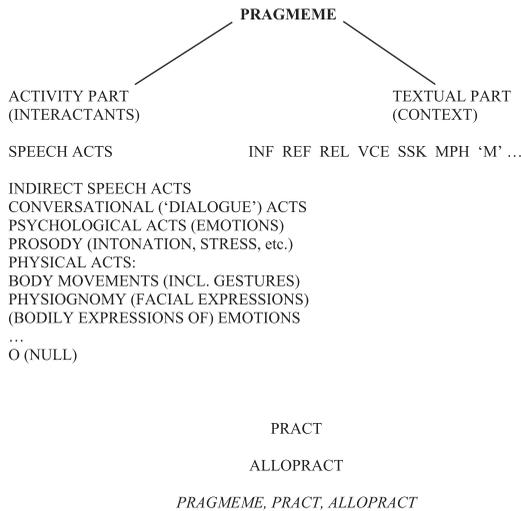


Figure 1. *A model of pragmatic acts (from Mey 2001: 222)*

The column to the left shows the options that are available to the language user in communication. The one to the right stands for contextual features that influence communication, where INF represents inference; REF, relevance; VCE, voice; SSK, shared situation knowledge; MPH, metaphor; and M, metapragmatic joker. Both the interactants and the contexts in which they operate are vital to our understanding of a pragmeme. In this paper, the focus will be on proverbs that are unique

pragmatic acts, because the pragmeme they refer to usually has only one instantiation. Consequently, it is not necessary to explain all the details in Mey's theory.

Given the following two reasons, it can be said that pragmatic acting is very relevant to the study of proverbs in drama texts. First, proverbs in drama, unlike those in prose (which are there largely used in the narrative), are uttered by the speaker to a hearer in particular interactional contexts. Second, a large percentage of the features of both the activity part and textual part, as shown in Figure 1, are engaged, resulting ultimately in implied meaning suited to the context of interaction.

5. A modified model of pragmatic acts for proverbs

My analysis of the use of proverbs in Yerima's plays will be based on the features identified below in a modified model of pragmatic acts:

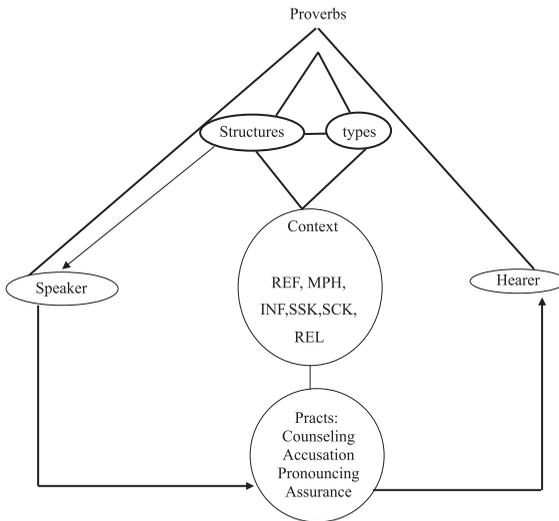


Figure 2. *Modified model of pragmatic acts for proverbs in Ahmed Yerima's plays*

This model is a modification of Mey's model of pragmatic acts shown in Figure 1, and incorporates features of proverbs already mentioned. The REF (reference), MPH (metaphor), INF (inference), SSK (shared situation knowledge), and REL (relevance) are borrowed from Mey (2001), but SCK (shared cultural knowledge) is operationally added, given the special attachment of proverbs to culture. The new model shows that

particular structures and types of proverbs are engaged in interaction between a speaker and a hearer. These structures and types are employed with consideration for the context of interaction (involving REF, MPH, INF, SSK, and REL), the knowledge of which is shared by the interactants. The use of proverbs in specific contexts ultimately produces certain practices, which are directed at the hearer. The social knowledge shared by interactants occurs at two levels; their shared cultural knowledge (SCK) and their shared situation knowledge (SSK). Interactants share a cultural background, which enables them to understand proverbs as used in specific situations.

6. *Yerima's use of proverbs in Yemoja, Attahiru, and Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees*

Yerima's three texts are set in traditional literary African spatial contexts. *Yemoja* delves into the Yoruba legend of the goddess of the sea, Yemoja, and her movement between the sea and her vacation in the human world. Blending traditional historical elements with art, Yerima traces this vacation to Yemoja's infidelity with the god of Creation, Obatala, a mischievous act engineered by Esu, a failed suitor. Not wanting to be humiliated by the sure defeat of her lover, Ogun, in a duel with Sango, Obatala's mercenary, Yemoja withdraws into the sea, obeying the divine call to take a place of leadership among the aquatic creatures. In *Attahiru*, Yerima artistically recounts the violence that attended Caliph Attahiru's ascension to the throne in the Sokoto Caliphate in November 1902, which led to his retreat into exile. While in exile, Attahiru fought the British captain, Frederick Lugard, and his men courageously on the flag of Islam, losing his life in the process. *Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees* tells the story of the troubles of the newly enthroned Onogie (the king of the land), the fictional counterpart of Attahiru. The Onogie must contend with the worry that he may have to die early for the desecration of the shrine of Olokun and the cutting of the sacred Ukan trees. The death of the desecrator, Esonghan, is not enough to cleanse the land of the crime. The Onogie's or another life must go. The slave, Ulolo, offers his life to save the Onogie. However, by a twist of fate, Ulolo gets a replacement in Odio, and gains freedom from death and lineage slavery.

Four proverb structures occur in the plays, namely: topic-comment, fixed/non-fixed, poetic/non-poetic, and anecdotal. Also, the three proverb types are prominent in the texts: weather, flora/fauna, and cultural. The functions of all these proverbs are to counsel (advise, warn or threaten), to accuse, to pronounce, and to assure.

In *Dry Leaves*, the slaves Ulolo and Okeke are discussing the air of death blowing through the town and the danger they are in by virtue of their low status. Okeke draws on a weather/cultural proverb with a topic-comment structure to underscore his point.

- (1) Okeke: We are nothing. So nothing can come of our nothing.
Rains always beat the parents first.
(*Dry Leaves*, p. 13)

The proverb here is a very short one, basically featuring a topic, “rains” and a comment, “beat the parents.” The protection offered children by parents in African culture is exploited. Here, in a reformulated manner, Okeke adds, “The children are often shaded in their shadows,” which explains the meaning of the proverb. The knowledge shared between Ulolo and Okeke is both cultural and situational and the relevance use of the proverb reinforces Ulolo’s understanding. The metaphorical implication of the proverb constitutes no hurdle to Ulolo. He understands, by inference, that Okeke means to *assure* him that their superiors are at greater risk than they. The pragmatic effect Okeke’s proverb achieves is evident in Ulolo’s response: “It is true. It is the Onogie that I worry for.”

Norrick has observed that proverbs naturally go with certain perlocutions, being “inventorized linguistic units based on traditional folklore,” [a fact that] “has consequences for their status as speech acts” (Norrick 1994: 144, 147). In other words, when we consider the interaction between Okeke and Ulolo, Ulolo’s reaction is expected, given the nature of proverbs. The same reaction holds explicitly or implicitly across the texts. This derives from the fact that the use and recognition of the proverb respectively establish a bond between the speaker and the hearer. So, proverbs lead to “bonding behaviour just like jokes, especially inside jokes, allusions, certain quotes and ways of speaking generally” (Norrick 1994).

In a conversation between the Onogie and his advisor, Iyase, another proverb refers to the talking drum, a cultural preserve of Africans:

- (2) Onogie: Haa, Iyase my trusted pillar . . .
the huge talking drum is torn
and you ask for the
message to the people
Iyase: Easy my king, easy.
Does the hunter sit alone,
waiting for his trap?
No, he finds this one.
(*Dry Leaves*, p. 30)

The Onogie reports to Iyase, through the proverb, “the huge talking drum is torn,” the desecration of the shrine of Olokun, whose perpetrator has just been disclosed through divination. No overt reference is made to the crime or the criminal, but given SCK and SSK, Iyase understands. The Onogie makes an *accusation* that a grave crime has been committed. Correctly inferring the Onogie’s meaning, Iyase replies with another cultural proverb: “Does the hunter sit alone waiting for his trap?” Here, Iyase alludes to the hunting expedition common in African culture and *reassures* the Onogie that the culprit will be found.

Many of the fixed/non-fixed proverb structures in the plays correspond to the flora/fauna type of proverb:

- (3) Yemoja: The whole town is singing that Yemoja
Has put her leg in the bush
 (*Yemoja*, p. 46)
- (4) Onogie: **Does a man carry the porcupine
 on his head, not minding the spikes
 all because he killed it with a stone?**
 (*Dry Leaves*, p. 14)

Examples 3 and 4 are invariably proverbial, given the content, use, and context. “Bush” and “porcupine” point to the flora and fauna of the Yoruba and Igbo communities. Through these proverbial utterances, and many others not cited here, the users in Yerima’s plays *accuse*, *pronounce*, and *counsel*. In the interaction between Yemoja and the sky god, Orunmila, part of which is extracted in (3), Yemoja employs SCK and SSK to inform Orunmila of the community’s *accusation* of infidelity. Of course, “putting her leg in the bush” implies playing games, and in this context, being unfaithful.

The conversation between Okeke and Ulolo, partly quoted in (4), shows a subtle pract of *counseling*. Okeke’s intention in using the rhetorical proverb is to condemn Ulolo’s undue servile attitude and altruism. To do this, he draws on the imagery of the porcupine, which is available in his traditional proverbial pool. He advises his friend that just because one has possession of the animal, after being “killed with a stone,” does not mean that one should carry it about with the spikes pricking one’s head. Okeke uses the proverb as a powerful oratorical tool to liberate Ulolo from his rigid subservience to the Onogie. A longer excerpt makes this clear:

- (5) Ulolo: My fault?
 Do you blame me?
 Was I not born to be his forebearer?
 Am I not destined to die minutes after him?
 Am I not to accompany him to the great beyond?

- Okeke: Yes, but where does it say
that you must lick his
bottom which you already
scrub and pamper each day?
**Does a man carry the porcupine on his head, not minding the
spikes
all because he killed it with a stone?**
- Ulolo: Okay Okeke, I agree.
(*Dry Leaves*, pp. 13–14)

The proverb succeeds in convincing Ulolo not to give his life for the king. With the imagery of the porcupine, coupled with Okeke's initial observance of the politeness maxim of agreement, "Yes, but . . .," which acknowledges Ulolo's view, Ulolo reaches the interpretation intended by Okeke: "There is a limit to which one can carry another man's burden." Okeke has thus succeeded in *counseling* (and simultaneously *warning*) Ulolo regarding the bounds of his duties and concerns. The proverb, as used by Okeke in the conversation, instantiates a situation whereby an utterance is employed to persuade a hearer to reconsider a position on an issue. As noted by Finnegan (1994: 30), proverbs that comment or persuade can sometimes appear in a specialized or extreme form, as found here in Yerima's metaphorical use of the porcupine. This is their oblique and suggestive character.

Two of Yerima's plays, *Attahiru* and *Dry Leaves*, feature in abundance proverbs with poetic structures. This proverb structure applies only to weather and flora/fauna proverb types. Sometimes, however, there are instances of weather and flora/fauna proverbs with no poetic structure. Let us consider, first, proverbs with poetic structure. Two examples should suffice here:

- (6) Ulolo: My friend I worry.
Soon . . .
- Okeke: Soon? Worry . . . about what
- Ulolo: I worry friend
Why my existence is shrouded in
Misery . . . I also wonder **why
the eagle is always eager too too
eager to outlive the vulture in
order to find the mystery of
burning embers.**
- Okeke: You speak in riddles friend.
Only a man . . .
(*Dry Leaves*, p. 12)

The proverbial utterance, “why the eagle is . . . embers,” though non-fixed in structure, has a poetic pattern. Apart from the metaphor that permeates it, there are also the poetically effective repetitions of “eager” and “too,” which together with the assonance in eagle/eager, render the lines musical. Faunal exploration is evident in the images of the eagle and vulture. Since the SCK does not provide enough background for the interpretation of the proverb, Okeke finds it initially hard to crack. However, with SSK, supported by hints from SCK, and other elements of co-text, Okeke makes the appropriate inferences. In fact, Ulolo intends to *pronounce* on the death-like atmosphere of the town. Both participants’ cultural background and understanding of the context of use are essential to the understanding of the proverb. In this connection, Arewa and Dundes’ (1964: 71) observation is relevant: “One needs to ask not only for proverbs and what counts as proverbs, but also for information as to the other components of the situations in which proverbs are used what are the rules governing who can use proverbs, or particular proverbs and to whom? Upon what occasions? In what place? With what other person present or absent?”

Another interesting instance of poetic proverbial usage is found in Caliph Attahiru’s speech when he considers Prince Muhammed al-Tahir Aliyu’s (his brother’s) acceptance of the offer of the throne by the Lugard administration. In his utterance, which reflects his frame of mind, Attahiru says:

- (7) Attahiru: Mallam Musa, the Emir of Burmi tells me that my brother Prince Muhammad al-Tahir Aliyu climbs the throne as the new Caliph. I wish him luck with his infidel friends. But he must remember that **there is only one moon at a time, one sun at a time. No two moons shine at a time.** Muhammad al-Tahir Aliyu must know this.
(*Attahiru*, p. 61)

What makes the proverb strikingly poetic are the ellipses of the coordinating conjunction “but” and the existential “there is,” which render the proverb rhythmical. The repetitions of the adverbial phrase “at a time” and the noun phrases “one moon/two moons” also give a hand in the enterprise. Allusions to the moon and the sun reverberate with Attahiru’s *reassertion* of his leadership and absolute rejection of Muhammad’s enthronement. Attahiru implicitly *advises* that the new caliph, knowing that no two caliphs can reign at once, should vacate the throne. Not only does Attahiru’s proverb make his point, it also enriches (and adorns) his speech. Chinua Achebe does the same with proverbs in his novels. According to Achebe (cited in Ogbaa 1981: 5): “A proverb is both a

functional means of communication and also a very elegant and artistic performance itself. . . . So, when I use these forms in my novels, they both serve a utilitarian purpose; which is to re-enact the life of the people that I am describing and also delight through elegance and aptness of imagery.”

Some instances of proverbs, such as those found on page 32 of *Attahiru* and page 25 of *Dry Leaves*, while non-poetic in structure, also explore the flora and faunal resources of the environment. Three instances of this proverb type occur on page 25 of *Attahiru* alone, but one will suffice as an example here. Caliph Attahiru and his advisors are brainstorming about Captain Lugard's letter to establish friendly relations with the Sokoto Caliphate. Ubandoma, one of the officials, says:

- (8) Ubandoma: . . . when the Emir of Zazzau sent to us to help it was in this very palace that we decided not to interfere. The Emir of Zazzau was forced to call the Whiteman, who helped him chase away Ibrahim, a fellow Muslim and now the Whiteman have [*sic*] refused to leave. **They have become the egrets who help to pick out bad worms and flies, but also peck at the wounds of the cows which sometimes kill the cows.**
(*Attahiru*, p. 32)

In this example, the imagery evokes the parasitic tendencies of the egret, which, in accepting the invitation of the cow to rid her of pests, actually contributes to her death. The SSK forms the background for the proverb, and softens its strong message. Through the proverb, Ubandoma *warns* the caliphate to be wary of friendship with the white man. Given their SSK, the members of the gathering also reach Ubandoma's intended meaning; hence, they exclaim in pragmatic response, “Allahu–Akbar.”

In *Dry Leaves*, the Queen mother is determined to protect her son, the Onogie, against an early death, which hangs over him as a result of the desecration of Olokun's shrine by another. To declare her resolve, she employs the proverb:

- (9) Queen mother: **To unseat the crocodile in the swamp is easy, but first,
You have to catch it**
(*Dry Leaves*, p. 25).

Through this proverb, the Queen *pronounces* her resolve to see her son remain on the throne, a position that is reformulated in subsequent lines: “I sit tight in my palace, and my son shall reign, until his grey hair falls, and

his wisdom lapses into the valley of forgetfulness. No one shall unseat him, no one (p. 25).”

Anecdotal proverbs are also featured at various points in the three plays (e.g., page 18 of *Yemoja*, page 32 of *Attahiru*, page 30 of *Dry Leaves*). Most of these fit within the flora/faunal category. Two of these can be considered. In the first, in *Yemoja*, the drummer, Ayan, informs Ogun of an imminent war on their village mounted by the people of Ijase Oke:

- (10) Ogun: I greet you too, Ayan.
 (The drum beats “Ogun there is war”)
 Ogun: War? Where?
 (The drum beats “Ijase”)
 Ogun: Haa! So the people of Ijase
 Oke have not stopped molesting
 our people? Ha a, odara!
**It takes three days for the
 puff-adder to digest a chicken,
 but on the day of its death, it
 gets greedy and kills two chickens
 and attempts to swallow them
 forgetting that they will take
 longer days to digest and it
 will also get easily killed by
 wandering boys.**
 (*Yemoja*, p. 18)

The puff-adder’s preying on a chicken, which takes three days to digest, takes a new turn when greed prompts the snake attempt to swallow two chickens, an act that would expose it to the danger of death from “wandering boys,” since an even longer digestive period would be required. Though the proverb relies on SCK for referents and background, it depends for its meaning strictly on SSK. To understand the proverb, one needs to know that the village has suffered frequent onslaughts from Ijase Oke as well as that Ogun has the power to rise to defend his people. One needs to match the referents—that is, Ijase Oke to the puff-adder, Ogun’s village to the chicken(s) (and or the onslaughts), and Ogun to the wandering boys, perhaps—in order to correctly interpret the anecdotal proverb as intended by Ogun, that is: “The people of Ijase-odo would be defeated in the Ogun-led war owing to their ill-considered and mindless attack.”

In *Dry Leaves*, the Onogie threatens to become violent with the desecrator of the shrine of Olokun, whose action has caused the danger of death to hang over his head. His threat is issued in the following proverb:

- (11) Onogie: **The python can live in your house quiet and friendly,
Putting a mark on each one to avoid crushing
even the infant with its weight. But the day you
step on his tail, the line is drawn.**
(*Dry Leaves*, p. 30)

In this proverb, the Onogie deliberately selects the image of the venomous python to underscore the degree to which he would go to defend himself. The SCK already gives the audience access to the *modus operandus* of the python. This is complemented by SSK, which now puts the python garb on the hitherto peaceful Onogie. Given the audience's cultural knowledge of the almost endless sphere of the Onogie's power, the proverb is understood. The hearer in the drama, Ijase, then responds, calming the outraged Onogie:

- (12) Ijase: Easy my king, easy.
**Does the hunter sit alone,
waiting for his trap?**
(*Dry Leaves*, p. 30).

7. Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that Yerima's plays *Yemoja*, *Attahiru*, and *Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees* employ proverbs with topic-comment, fixed/non-fixed, and poetic/non-poetic structures, as well as weather, flora/fauna, and cultural types. The proverbs are used by the speaker for the purposes of counseling, accusing, pronouncing, and assuring the hearer. A modified model of pragmatic acts, based on Mey 2001, has been proposed for visualizing the operation of proverbs in literary contexts. In general, Yerima's use of proverbs shows sensitivity to contexts of interaction. Apart from the relevance of the proverbs to discourse subjects, there are also the characteristic reformulations of proverbial propositions by the users to unveil the meanings of the proverbs. This strategy performs the artistic function of clarifying users' intentions within the plays, thus giving direction to conversations. It also affords readers access to the interpretations of the proverbs without necessarily being members of the culture or to possess prior knowledge of them.

In addition, Yerima exploits the pragmatic act potentials of the proverbs, which further elucidate the users' intentions and reinforce the readers' understanding of the texts. His style of handling proverbs makes his texts accessible to readers, indigenous or foreign, who desire to learn

more about Nigerian culture and tradition through the proverbs. Finally, Yerima's plays provide indispensable corpora for research on proverbs.

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