# YORUBA GREEN-PROVERBS IN ENGLISH: A GREEN STUDY OF NIYI OSUNDARE'S *MIDLIFE*

Fortress Isaiah Ayinuola (Ph.D)
College of Development Studies
Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria.
oviforts@yahoo.com.au, isaiah.fortress@covenantuniversity.edu.ng.
+2348033759546

Sub-theme: New Directions in African Poetry.

"A thousand books may not total one strand of the beard of a quiet proverb."
- Niyi Osundare -

### **Abstract**

In an attempt to promote African culture and tradition, current literary trends have been witnessing an increasing use of proverbs in African writing. This study of proverbs has application in a number of fields, especially in environmental studies and literature and those who study folklore and literature explore proverbs for its cultural and aesthetic values. Green/nature proverbs are becoming important literary resource tool today and thus our objective is to explore how Osundare employs nature proverbs derived from the Yoruba language and how he creatively deploys these to promote his poetic vision of the natural environment. Proverbs in *Midlife* are largely derived from Yoruba proverbs and Osundare being a nature poet undertakes a green inquiry into proverbs derived from Yoruba rhetoric and prosody. In this collection, we examine how the poet in question deplores proverbs that focus on fauna, flora and landscape and also how he employs nature images as metaphor to comment on social concerns.

## 1.1. Introduction

Proverbs are often metaphorical, short sayings that express some traditionally held truth. They are usually metaphorical and often, for the sake of remembrance, alliterative. Many proverbs in English are said to have been absorbed into English having been known earlier in other

languages. Wolfgang Mieder(1993). They are often metaphorical, short sayings that express some traditionally held truth. They are usually metaphorical and often, for the sake of remembrance, alliterative. Many proverbs in English are said to have been absorbed into English having been known earlier in other languages. A prominent proverb scholar defines the term proverbs as a short, generally known sentence of folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation(119). Stylistic features of proverbs include the use of alliteration, parallelism, rhyme and ellipsis.

Proverbs has been and remains a most powerful and effective instrument for transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people from one generation to another" (Akporobaro, 2003, 69). Proverb reveals the thought, wisdom and verbal techniques of the past and is a model of compressed or forceful language for the speaker and the verbal artist. Not only is it a technique of verbal expression, it also gives a certain amount of freshness to speech of accomplished speakers (70). Proverb is a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. "In terms of form, the proverb belongs to the wider category of figurative and aesthetically conceived forms of expressions like the metaphor, simile, hyperbole, wit and other anecdotal forms (71).

The Yoruba proverb and by implication eco-proverb in particularly, evolves and draws its aesthetic form and cultural relevance from the rich store house of the Yoruba oral tradition. Osundare contends that a poet must speak out: "To utter is to alter" because in a country like Nigeria a poet cannot afford not to be political. A poet must be a voice who "utters" in order to "alter" the destiny of the common people for good and by implication; proverb remains a potent forceful literary tool. The green-proverbial discourse in English is thus constructed to further impact the trajectory of the verbal arts in the Yoruba aesthetic- dialectics. In order to avoid openly criticizing a given authority or cultural pattern, writers or speakers take recourse to proverbial expressions which voice personal tensions in a tone of general consent. Thus personal involvement is linked with public opinion.

The study of proverbs has application in a number of fields. Those who study folklore and literature explore proverbs for its cultural themes; scholars from a variety of fields have profitably incorporated the study, using them to study abstract reasoning of children,

acculturation of immigrants, intelligence, the differing mental processes in mental illness, etc. proverbs have also been incorporated into the strategies of social workers, teachers, preachers, and even politicians.

### 2.1. Tenets of Green-criticism and Theoretical Framework

A green study is British version of American ecocriticism. It is an aspect of green-criticism which falls under the ambit of ecocriticism theory. It is the study of the natural environment and literature. According to Ursula Heise (1997), Green literary criticism or green criticism is an interdisciplinary field in literary and cultural studies. Ursula opines that this criticism "analyzes the role that the natural environment plays in the imagination of a cultural community at a specific historical moment, examining how the concept of "nature" is defined, what values are assigned to it or denied it" "More specifically", he went further that green studies "investigates how nature is used literally or metaphorically in certain literary or aesthetic genres and tropes, and what assumptions about nature underlie genres that may not address this topic directly."(4) "There was already in place a well established oral and performance tradition centered on the natural environment long before the first contact with the West" (Fortress, 2013:10). Proverbs in Yoruba tradition falls under Yoruba oral poetry and narration. Yoruba green-proverbs can be classified under two main categories: green-pejoratives and green-friendly, green-fauna and ecoflora and Proverbs that are minatory or disinterested but focuses on the nature of fauna, flora or landscape.

Yoruba proverbs are as old as the users of the language itself. Its foundation is embedded in the moral wisdom of the Yoruba culture and world view. In fact, proverbs are the vehicle for understanding the depth of the language. In an interview with Osundare, David Shooks (2007) observes that nothing defines a culture as distinctly as its language, and the element of language that best encapsulates a society's values and beliefs is its proverbs. Proverbs has remained relevant in Yoruba traditional rhetoric and prosody through the ages and survived the trials of extinction. Significantly, it has remained a potent literary force not only in oral tradition, oral narration and poetry, it as continued to remain relevant in African writings today and thus, giving African writing its uniqueness and legitimacy. Notable Nigerian African writers like Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan have considerable number of elements of nature-proverbs in their *Things Fall Apart*(1958), *Kunrunmi*(1971), *The gods are not to blame*(1975) *Chattering and the Song*(1977) respectively.

# 3.1. Eco-proverbs in *Midlife*

Eco-proverbs derived from Yoruba proverbs in *Midlife* are flora, fauna or landscape.

On page eleven, Osundare describes the agrarian, rocky landscape of Ikere-Ekiti environment.

Whoever craves the blue legend of Ikere skies, Let him turn his neck like a barber's chair, For here the rock is earth, the rock is sky; Squatters we all on the loamy mercy Of generous stones

He compares Ikere-Ekiti rock with an elephant. There is here a juxtaposition of eco-landscape with eco-fauna:

The elephant rock which sleeps In the eastern sky; Its snores in showers.

I am child of the rock
Too high for the legs of the eye;
For the elephant is feast for any sight
Ah! The elephant is feast;
Whoever takes the jungle's giant
For a passing glance
Craves trampling mortals in his tender farm,
The elephant is feast for any sight (11).

This poetic rendition is a derivative of a Yoruba proverb complementing the fauna elephant:

'Ajanaku kojaa morinkon firi': "The elephant is feast for any sight"...

The poem is a crafty representation of an elegiac-proverb to the elephant-rock transferred into the nature of elephant rock. Osundare also deploys a chain of green-proverbs to conjure images of fauna like millipede, snakes and how they are limited or endowed by nature's selective grace:

If speed were a function of legs
The millipede would have no rival
In the race of the forest;
If wisdom were a direct offspring of the magnitude
Of the head,
No beast would challenge the buffalo
In the discourse of the grassland;
If cunning could bestow a towering height
The snake would be the hissing Kilimanjaro
Of the shrub (41).

There is also a green-proverb that represents the persona who witnesses a scene of violence rendered in fauna-proverbial slant of 'the hawk', 'the hen', 'the arogidigba'(a large, greedy fish) and 'the minnows':

I was there when the hawk swooped at dusk And the hen's joys disappeared between its claws I was there when arogidigba heaved open its funeral jaws And a tribe of minnows became a tale (42).

Osundare uses proverb-focused allusions, imagery and compact metaphor in his references to the history of literary heroes that cut across races, space and time but whose literary-parts meet and also part ways in similar fate and circumstances, "parting in wandering jungles" (44):

Sing to us about the antelope which brightens The forest with its handsome leaps Sing to us about paths which meet and part, part and meet in wandering jungles Sing to us about the glow-worm's treason In the darkdom of night (44)

Sing to us about Soyinka, Guillen, Brathwaite, Neto, Walcott, Ai Qing, Heaney, Mayakovsky, Okigbo, U Tamsi, Okot p' Bitek; About Neruda, bard of Chile, father of songs, About Whitman who wrapped the world In leaves of eloquent grass (44).

The above poem is akin to reference to spacio-temporal realms of poets in John Keats poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" where Keats refers to "realms of gold: where "Homer ruled as his demesne... and where Chapman speaks out loud and bold" (Gittings, 1978: 25).

In another poetic construction of a flora-proverb Osundare writes: "When cutting a tree, it is only the wise/Who watch out for the destination of the leaves" (53) is a poem that reconstructs the Yoruba proverb: 'Ti omode ban gegi nigbo, agbalagba lomo bi toma wosi' i.e. 'When a child cuts a tree in the forest, it is the elder that knows the direction of its fall'.

Osundare, in his *Midlife* also explores proverbs that express the significance of knowing and maintaining your place of calling in order to remain relevant:

The star finds its name in the galaxy of night the fish spells its face in the book of fugitive shoals. The snake which roams the wild in the company Of its skin Soon finds its head under the hunter's club().

There is in the above poem, reference to skyscape like 'the star' and 'galaxy of night' in the first line and green-fauna like 'fish' and 'snake' in the second and the third lines.

Abstract images, phrases and comments on wisdom, unity, collaboration and mutual respect for one another among human specie are symbolically and metaphorically represented in concrete nature images like 'pebbles', 'rocks', 'trees' and 'forest':

"Pebbles which join heads will form a rock, trees which share branches will form a forest. What name do we call it, that hand Whose tribe is memory of a sole finger? Omi l'enia (57).

The poem ends with a Yoruba saying: 'Omi l'enia'. A phrase which is derived from the Yoruba metaphoric wise saying: 'omi l'enia' (man is a river). This is constructed into the first four lines that bear landscape and flora items mentioned earlier.

Using images in nature of the 'sky' and 'crows' to make a political statement, Osundare asks a pertinent question about African continent's pathetic socio-political state, he contents that: "My continent is a sky ripped apart by clever crows,/awaiting the suturing temper of a new, unfailing Thunder" (93). He goes on to lament the consequences of this wanton exploitation and waste:

The lion has lost its claws To cheetahs of other forests; What use, the magnificent mane Of emasculated tantrums (93).

He deploys fauna-images of 'cheetahs', (still playing on the sound word 'cheaters') and 'lion' (king of the forest) to represent exploiters of the continent and Africa respectively. He continues in this line of thought by playing on the Yoruba proverb: 'enilori onifila, enini filaolori' literarily meaning: 'He that has a cap has no head and he that has head has no cap'. Emphasizing on the question of value and the inequality that beset human existence, Osundare contents that:

They who have heads have no caps

Those who have caps are in need of heads (93).

Conclusion

Proverb remains an oral form with constant relevance to modern man. It is a powerful and

effective instrument for transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people

from one generation to another. Proverb is a graphic statement that expresses a truth of

experience, gives freshness to speech, reveals the verbal techniques of the past and is a model of

compressed or forceful language for the speaker and the verbal artist. The form of the proverb is

akin to the category of figurative and aesthetically conceived forms of expressions like the

metaphor, simile, hyperbole, wit, etc. This paper explores proverbs in the African context with

specific examples from Osundare's collection in *Midlife*. The poet deploys items of nature like

fauna, flora and landscape to promote his social and aesthetic vision of the natural environment.

It is note worthy also to appreciate how he contextually re-conceptualizes and craftily transfers

nature-Yoruba proverbs into English. His use of lexical compounding is the sustaining poetic

nerve on which metaphorization animates and runs through the vein of the entire poem.

**Works Cited** 

Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart. UK. Heinemann. 1958, 17.

Aparobaro, FBO. Introduction to African Oral Literature. Lagos. Printon. 2006, 69-71

Barry, Peter. "Ecocriticism" Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural

Theory. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 1995, 213, 264.

Chinese sayings: best Chinese proverbs (http://www.chinese-sayings.com)

Fortress, Isaiah. The Natural Environment in the Selected Poems of John Keats and Niyi

Osundare: An Eco-critical Perspective. Covenant University, Ota. Thesis. 2013, 10.

7

Gittings, Robert. *Selected Poems and Letters of John Keats*. London. Heinemann. 1978, 25, 124-128.

Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs http://www.colloquium-proverbs.org

Mieder, Wolfgang. *Proverbs in Nazi Germany: The Promulgation of Anti-Semitism and Stereotypes Through Folklore*. The Journal of American Folklore 95, No. 378, 1982, 435-464.

-----. *International Proverb Scholarship*: An Annotated Bibliography, with New York: Garland Publishing. 1993.

-----. Wise Words. Essays on the Proverb. New York: Garland. 1994.

Nussbaum, Stan. *The Wisdom of African Proverbs* (CD-ROM). Colorado Spring: Global Mapping International. 1998.

Obeng, S. G. *The Proverb as a Mitigating and Political Strategy in Akan Discourse*. Anthropological Linguistic. 1996, 38(3), 521-549.

Osofisan, Femi. The Chattering and the Songs. Ibadan. Ibadan University Press. 1977, 36.

Osundare, Niyi. Midlife

Pritchard, James. *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 2. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1958.

Raymond, Joseph. "Tension in Proverbs: More Light on International Understanding". *Western Folklore*. 1956, 15.3153-158.

Retrieved from "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proverb"

Retrieved from "English Proverbs: http://www.praise.org.uk/meanings/proverbs.

Retrieved from "Nigerian Proverbs (in English) http://www.nairaland.com/nigeria.

Rotimi, Ola. The gods are not to blame. Ibadan. Ibadan University Press. 1975, 26.

-----. Kunrunmi. Akure. Ibadan University press. 1971, 21,36.

Ursula K. Heise "Science and Ecocriticism" *The American Book Review*, 18.5 (July-August), 1997, 4.

Shook, David. World Literature Today, An Interview With Niyi Osundare. Retrieved: Article: World Literature Today. 22 December, 2010.

Wilde, Oscar. The Picture of Dorian Grey. London. Penguin Books. 1977, 6.