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THE CHANGING FACE OF ORATURE IN POSTCOLONIAL
NIGERIA: PROVERBS IN EDDIE IROH'S *WITHOUT A
SILVER SPOON AND BANANA LEAVES*

Abstract: The coming into being of creative writing in English in post-colonial Nigeria since independence and the eminence attained in it as an expressive form by Achebe, Soyinka, Clark, Okigbo and many others, is a cultural revolution. This Cultural Revolution has affected oral tradition in many ways, including a symbiotic relationship with the new forms of creative expression through incorporation, translation and appropriation. Orature has also been affected by new technological forms such as the radio, television, mobile phones, and the internet. The focus of this paper is on the written and we stress that the postcolonial writers continue to incorporate, in varying degrees, orature elements such as tales, myths, legends, riddles and proverbs in their works. The presence of the oral in the works of Achebe, Kunene, P'Bitek, Awoonor, Soyinka and others, has consequently ensured the continuity and dynamism of the genre in Africa. In this context, this paper examines Eddie Iroh's *Without a Silver Spoon* and *Banana Leaves* to show how the use of proverbs has enriched the two novels in terms of their narrative structure, thematic development, characterization and embellishment of language. The two novels deal with the growth and experiences of Chokwe in the village where he attends primary school, and in the city where he lives with his uncle, Ikenna. The contexts within which proverbs are used in the two novels are in tandem with their usage in face-to-face discourse. We therefore conclude that Iroh has guaranteed that all children who read the two novels, will, like Chokwe, come to know the proverbs and their value and also use them in appropriate contexts. There is therefore an envisioned dialectics of the oral moving to the written and at the same time giving birth to the oral.

Keywords: Orature, Proverbs, Contexts, Literary, Use/Usage, Chokwe, Dede, Uncle Ikenna, Poverty, Honesty.

Orature and Creative Writing in Changing Contexts

Scholars of the Evolutionary School such as Edward Burnett Tylor and R. Sutherland Rattray see orature as belonging to the early stages of man and hence to simple aesthetic forms which may exist in developed societies as mere residues of a primitive, savage and pristine era. This view does not therefore see orature as a dynamic, complex and aesthetically appealing and functional genre that it is. On the contrary, the Evolutionary School perceives orature elements as dying out and losing their relevance the more advanced a society becomes. Ruth Finnegan affirms that in the 1960s critics doubted the relevance of orature in modern society and that most anthropologists of that period never saw orature as worthy of serious intellectual study. Her words:

There was still a widespread assumption that studies of what could be called 'folklore' or the 'philological' collecting of texts were really more appropriate to nineteenth century antiquarianism than modern sophisticated scholarship. At best, it was often assumed, one might take some marginal account of structure or as emanations of man's mythic symbolism but not as something to be studied as literature in its own terms. (275)

This observation has equally been cogently captured by Alan Dundes who points out that some scholars considered orature materials as belonging to the past and consequently as being of no relevance to the present, modern experience. Dundes states:

It is still mistakenly thought that the only people who study folklore are antiquarian types, devotees of ballads which are no longer sung and collectors of quaint customs which are no longer practiced. Folklore in this false view is being equated with survivals from an age past, survivals which are doomed not to survive. Folklore is gradually dying out, we are told. Moreover, since folklore is defined as error, it is thought by some educators to be a good thing that folklore is dying out. In fact it has been argued that one of the purposes of education is to help stamp out folklore. As humans evolve, they leave folklore behind such that the truly civilized human is conceived to be folkloreless. (56-57)

Nelson O. Fashina (2011) also notes generally that historically literary criticism seems to undervalue works of previous writers or schools, to always categorise works in terms of a binary oppositions such as high/low, modern/primitive or past/present. He states: "Virtually all theories of literature attempt to demystify and inferiorize earlier ones. This frame of value-reading in literature assumes phenomenal significance with the incredible conception of oral lore as unworthy products of untutored minds whose nature and form abused the demands of New-Critical and later aesthetics for the unity and centrality of a work of art" (42).

This paper acknowledges that with societal advancement in all spheres of human endeavour, including information technology, and coupled with rural-urban drift, there has been a steady transformation of the nature of orature. The threat to the death of many African languages by the adoption of the languages of the colonizers has equally meant the gradual abandoning of verbal aesthetics by the people. The socio-economic dislocation of Nigerians has compelled a migration pattern that is largely from rural to urban and from the major custodians of orature to a more complicated socio-linguistic and cultural situation that distances people from traditional cultural forms. Ademola O.Dasylva notes that modern youths in particular have become disinterested in orature because of the changing realities of the times. He states that:

The fact that children are hardly interested in traditional festivals, or in oral literature performance, or in taking over their parents' traditional professions as entertainers, priests or cult heads, is a further threat to the continuity of orality and a matter for concern. Their adventurous minds broadened further by their exposure to western education have made the children's desires for advancement to modernity insatiable. This reality is a serious threat to the continuity of oral literary performance. (186)

However, most of the orature items have merely changed their settings and expressive structures because, in the new, modern societies they are spoken/performed in both the old and the new languages and through the radio, the television, video forms or on the internet. Many people today watch traditional oral forms such as storytelling, carnivals and other traditional festivals on the television or listen to them on the radio. Other aspects of verbal arts such as

songs and proverbs are incorporated into such literary texts as plays, poems and prose fiction. Certainly, some elements of the oral performance are lost in the new media but the point is that the kernel, the essence of the proverbs, songs and tales, are kept alive and rendered useful to the contemporary users, including the children.

Our focus in this paper is on the literary use of proverbs suggestive of an interface between the world of the oral and the written. From the 1960s to date Africa has witnessed a phenomenal rise in the number of writers and of books. In spite of this burgeoning of the written tradition, it has not been able to erase the oral. On the contrary, as Emmanuel Obiechina argues, the written becomes enriched by the oral.

Oral culture does not immediately disappear by the mere fact of its being in contact with writing, nor does the literature of the oral society disappear because of the introduction of written literature. Rather, a synthesis takes place in which characteristics of the oral culture survive and are absorbed, assimilated, extended, and even recognized within a new cultural literature. Also, vital aspects of the oral literature are absorbed into an emerging written literature of greatly invigorated form infused with vernacular energy through metaphors, images and symbols, more complex plots and diversified structures of meaning. (197)

Sade Omokore also argues that literary texts embody orature forms as writers try to explore their cultural landscape so that readers will still have a grasp on their traditional heritage. She states that "African writers have been greatly influenced by the artistic verbal composition of their people, and this is evident, in varying degrees in their work" (283). This view agrees with that of Tanure Ojaide who urges critics of African literature to familiarize themselves with orature so that they will better comprehend the subtexts of modern African writers. Ojaide adds that "African oral literature ... brings out formal, structural, and stylistic features and devices that many modern African writers borrow from the indigenous oral traditions in their literary works, which are often a blend of learned and borrowed Western and acquired indigenous African features" (2).

Perhaps more than any other orature form, the proverb finds itself interlaced into the structure of literary works. This has been so since the time of Homer, Sophocles, Virgil and Chaucer. Most of

the plays of Shakespeare are infused with proverbs or proverbial utterances and the Bible is generally also laced with proverbs, apart from the Book of Proverbs.

The marriage of orature and the written tradition is very much marked in the works of African writers. J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada sees Chinua Achebe as a pioneer in the use of proverbs in African fiction. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *Anthills of the Savannah* are modern fictive works that integrate traditional proverbs into their matrixes. In *The Wizard of the Crow* Ngugi wa Thiongo equally displays the integration of the oral and the written just as Wole Soyinka does in most of his plays, and Okot P'Bitek and Mazisi Kunene do in their poetry. The tradition continues in the works of writers such as Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, and Tanure Ojaide. Abiola Irele highlights the function of orature as an imaginative recreation of society and its world view and as an expression of social experience. He speaks at length of its appropriation by modern African writers when he says that:

[I]n trying to formulate the state of disjunction between an old order of being and a new mode of existence, literary artists in modern Africa have been forced to a reconsideration of their expressive medium, of their means of address. In the quest for a grounded authenticity of expression and vision, the best among our modern African writers have had to undertake a resourcing of their material and their modes of expression in the traditional culture. Because the traditional culture has been able to maintain itself as a living resource, the modern literature strives to establish and strengthen its connection with a legacy that, though associated with the past, remains available as a constant reference for the African imagination. The oral tradition has thus come to be implicated in the process of transformation of the function of literature and in the preoccupation with the formal means of giving voice to the African assertion. (78)

African writers use proverbs in their literary works for the purpose of embellishment, thematic concretization, character delineation, and enforcement of social control, among others. Nwachukwu-Agbada quotes Achebe as saying:

A proverb is both a functional means of communication and also a very elegant and artistic performance itself. I think that proverbs are both utilitarian and little vignettes of art. So when I use those 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. This is what proverbs are supposed to do. (180-181)

Elena Zubkava Bertoncini sees the value of proverbs in fictional dialogues as that of making the narrative come closer to the actual social context. The proverb is an economic way of expressing ideas and of depicting a character. Bertoncini states that “proverbs in written prose fiction are always aesthetically appealing... probably the reason is that the proverbs themselves are beautiful: most of them contain in a nutshell a profound wisdom cast in a refined poetic language”. He adds that “a shallow narrative may improve with an appropriate use of proverbs, since the proverbs are expressed in metaphors, playing in this regard a role similar to other forms of figurative speech” (18).

Roger D. Abrahams and Barbara Babcock point out that in literary texts proverbs appear in the social discourse of the characters – the speaker-hearer relationship, and that such proverbs enrich the speech of characters and of the readers who see proverbs in ‘action’ as should be used in ordinary discourse. They stress that writing is capable of capturing the nuances of verbal discourse since the written is based on the spoken. In their view:

All dialogue is reported speech; but proverbs, along with footnotes and epigraphs, are reportings of reportings, or special kinds of quotations which function reflexively as a form of fictive self-commentary, as embedded devices reminding the reader of the authorial presence. Thus, proverbs may simultaneously be a device characterizing the speaker and a reminder to the reader of the author’s guiding hand. (430)

Proverbs thus serve various functions in literary texts but essentially they become carriers of the norms, values, and aspirations of the society. As Roumyana Petrova puts it, proverbs reveal to us the life of a people:

If we need to find out more about what kind of values this people hold in esteem, or what shortcomings, or vices, it deems unacceptable, then we have to explore their connotative meanings. Simply stated, what a proverb ridicules, mocks or denies is considered bad, negative, unacceptable, while what a proverb recommends, advises or stresses, is considered good and positive by this people. (338)

Oluwole Coker and Adesina Coker also stress the importance of proverbs in expressing a people's epistemology and philosophy and consequently as an agent of culture. They argue that "a people's art is a direct representation of their cultural understanding of the issues and events around them. Furthermore, verbal resources serve satirical ends. Hence, an artist is the harbinger of hope and by extension, 'righter' of social wrongs" (8). The proverbs consequently enrich the meanings of written texts and, because of their structure, serve as mnemonic devices to the readers. Recalling a proverb used in a written work triggers up memory of the surrounding, situational contexts from which the proverb arose.

Our study of the literary use of proverbs in Iroh's two books will, of necessity, be based on the contextualists' approach to paremiology. This is the view advocated by scholars such as Wilfred Van Damme, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Peter Seitel, Nwan-chukwu-Agbada, Kwesi Yankah and many others who feel that proverbs are by nature figurative and consequently polythematic. In order that we understand the meaning of a proverb we need to weigh the interaction situation in which it has been uttered. We need to know who is speaking to whom, where, when and with whom. The social situation is as important as the gestures or facial expression of the speakers. We need to know whether a speaker uses a proverb in an ironic, sarcastic manner or whether he wants to caution or stress a point. These concerns are true of proverbs in the oral, face-to face interaction and in written texts.

Analysis of Eddie Iroh's Without a Silver Spoon and Banana Leaves

Eddie Iroh has written *Toads of War* and *Twenty-Eight Guns for the General* both of which are novels that focus on the tragedy of the Nigerian civil-war. However, his *Without a Silver Spoon* and *Banana Leaves* fall within the genre of children literature as their

appeal is largely to children of primary and secondary schools. The two works have moral value, social relevance and are aesthetically engaging. The profundity of the two works are partly due to the author's use of proverbs, those tested words of wisdom that foreground language, encapsulate a people's world view and concretise the speaker's/writer's message.

Without a Sliver Spoon is the story of Ure Chokwe who grows up in a poor but honest and proud village family. The family's poverty almost makes Chokwe to abandon his education but the situation is saved when Teacher Steve takes him as his houseboy and pays his school fees. It is a typical story of children growing up and facing the various challenges in the society and in their primary schools, but the writer here highlights the themes of honesty, hard work and perseverance. Man's dignity and self-pride, the novel stresses, lie in being truthful in all his dealings. Iroh renders these concerns through a discourse that is loaded with proverbs.

Most of the proverbs in the novel are uttered by Dede, Chokwe's father, and this is largely when he is speaking to his children. This agrees with the practice in most traditional African societies where elders are the main speakers of proverbs as they are the custodians of the lores, mores and wisdom of the society. Chokwe acknowledges his father's profuse use of proverbs in conversation and states:

That was my father. He always talked in proverbs. For many years it was very hard for me to understand what he really meant. But in time, I found out that he did not really speak in proverbs as the Bible spoke in parables. Rather he used proverbs to explain more clearly what he was saying. As he once said, "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". (11)

Iroh uses Dede to illustrate the power of oral tradition in society, for Dede is a griot who knows a lot about the origin and lore of his people. He is considered as the family's oracle because of his ability to recollect past deeds. Inevitably Dede is considered wise and people consult him on various social issues. Also, Dede's historical/mythical narratives and his use of proverbs to his school-going children ensure the continuity of tradition in the modern literate age. Helen Oranga A. Mwanzi notes that throughout the ages, mankind has used its creative power to invest in youths values that

will help them survive meaningfully in the community. She adds that “the challenges of globalization will be best met with a society whose children are indelibly marked as belonging to particular families that embrace certain values inherited from certain fore-parents of virtue and varlour” (49). Iroh consequently appropriates traditional, imaginative expressions to convey traditional values that assist in the cultural growth of children. In Mwanzi’s words, he places the community’s stamp on the young and thereby gives them a definite sense of direction.

A lot of the proverbs deal with poverty or the economy. Chokwe informs his father that Onye Ara, the village mad man who goes around seeking for a toad, did not come to their own house as feared, and Dede replies with a proverb: “You do not ask a toad to give you a chair when you can see that he is squatting” (11). This implies that Onye Ara is aware of their poverty and knows that he cannot get anything if he comes. The proverb is metaphorical and shows that even mad people are perceptive and know the state of things in society. Dede equally acknowledges the poverty of his family, the proverbial squatting toad. This same proverb sinks a lesson into the mind of Chokwe as he becomes reflective, wondering whether or not to broach the issue of his school fees with his father. He accepts that it would be foolish of him to ask his father in view of the proverbial wisdom he has just gained – the poverty of the family.

Dede attributes his poverty to change in the national economy from the traditional sale of palm oil to the new oil business that has rendered many people helpless. Since Shell Oil is the new god, agricultural products have lost their value. Dede then quotes a proverb to buttress his point: “Our people say that when a woman marries two husbands, she is in a position to choose the better of the two. Our people have chosen Shell Oil” (13). In this proverb Iroh hits at the neo-colonial Nigerian economy that has led to the neglect of agriculture and consequently ensured the poverty of the majority of the populace. When Dede says, “our people” he is citing authority and putting a traditional stamp on the utterance as the voice of wisdom and truth. A traditional proverb is brought out to highlight the cause of modern tragedy.

Also on poverty is the proverb, “What the eyes do not see, the mouth does not water for” (16) which Dede utters to express the need for contentment with one’s situation in life. People should not

long for what is far away from them and this makes Dede to take his fate without complaining since he knows that there is no money for his wife to buy soup ingredients that would make the soup more appetising. It appears a fatalistic, submissive philosophy but the significance of the proverb lies in the fact that Dede, as a character, is honest, teaches honesty to his children and would not tolerate theft. It is better for his children to be content with what they have than to engage in stealing. Incidentally, the incident that gives birth to the proverb becomes a good lesson to Chokwe who feels that if his father “could eat watery soup in silence, then it was a lesson for me to bear my caning at school in silence, too” (16). The caning is of course due to lack of payment of school fees.

In another situation Chokwe wonders why his school mate, Erugo, should steal money from his rich father, but remembers his father’s proverb that, “What the eyes do not see, the mouth does not water for”. Since Erugo sees a lot of money with his father he has developed the love for money and is therefore ‘justified’ in stealing it. This is the logic of the proverb but Chokwe however knows that his father will frown at any child that steals his father’s property. Chokwe reflects: “But was it not the same Dede who warned that a child learns to be a rogue by stealing his father’s property? Sometimes Dede confused me!” (36). Chokwe thus finds it bewildering that a person will utter a proverb and at the same time a counter to it. The point, however, is that the two situations are different and the proverb does not actually contradict itself. As Yankah points out, “the proverb as a cultural fact or truism ... is liable to contradiction” but “in contextual usage the truth ... is irrelevant” (127-128). Stealing is opposed to contentment and therefore if the spirit of the first utterance is negated in the second context, the subject will develop a negative capability, as Erugo has. It is hence ironic, in the context of the story that Erugo, who is born with a silver spoon in his mouth, learns to steal his father’s money and grows into a rogue while Chokwe, who is poor, learns to be contented and becomes honest. The ancient proverb, applied in modern context is actually expressive of the malaise of modernity: money and wealth in general degrade human beings. Chokwe’s meditation on his father’s insistence that a child should not steal his father’s property is an implied lesson in modesty and life-sustaining virtues.

Poverty does not mean losing one’s sense of responsibility. When Chokwe tries to persuade his father to allow him to live with

Teacher Steve so that his father would be relieved of the burden of paying school fees, Dede replies with the proverb: "The god that gives a man a large farm land also gives a hoe and the strength to till the land. I do not have more children than a hen, yet a hen manages to feed her chicks. Am I going to sell my sons into slavery in order to feed them?" (40). Dede implies that man should take care of his family and that having got a family we should use our skills in taking care of the members. Within the larger context of an oil economy that has rendered farming a fruitless venture, Dede uses the proverb just as a face-saving tool for, while the gods might have given one a family, one has to wrestle with the new multinational gods that are so oppressive and exploitative and who ensure that the chicks are scattered from the hen.

Chokwe however argues against his father's idea knowing fully well that Dede will not be able to pay his school fees. His persistence makes Dede to conclude that Chokwe must have thought deeply on the matter of staying with Teacher Steve. He tells Chokwe the next day: "My father once said that the thoughts that lead a person to take an important step do not come to his mind in a single day" (42) and therefore acknowledges that Chokwe must have weighed all the angles before arriving at the decision to leave the family. The proverb implies that all important thoughts, choices, decisions are cultivated over a long period of time and not rashly done. Dede consequently sees Chokwe as a perceptive child who is aware of the surrounding poverty and conscious of the need to provide a solution. Dede states: "It makes me happy to know that at your age you are able to think of the problems in my house. I must therefore encourage you..." (44).

The proverbial utterances of Dede help in moulding the character of Chokwe even when he leaves his poor family to live with Teacher Steve. Chokwe is conscious of his roots and does not reject it. To the gladness of his family he comes back home during vacations and the father states: "I know you are still my child, wherever you go. The chicken does not forget the road to its hut" (56). He is proud of Chokwe and the proverb he utters is an advice to Chokwe to maintain his self-dignity and not to look down on the family. The proverb has a wider cultural implication within the context of the modern Nigerian state for it suggests that despite modernization and globalization one should not throw away one's heritage. We should not alienate ourselves from our socio-cultural roots however far we

may embrace the wider world. In the novel *Iroh* affirms Mwanzi's significant statement that:

[T]here is a thread linking the concerns of both oral composers and authors of children literature across cultures and climes. This thread is the need to use the pleasurable experience of literature to pass salient messages of great social importance to children in order to influence their world-view, intellectual growth and taste. (50)

Chokwe examines his relationship with Erugo who deceives and steals his father's money. Having taken proverbial lessons from his father he uses one in order to caution himself against associating with Erugo. He states: "If a good goat goes about with a bad goat that eats people's yam tuber, the good goat soon learns to eat yam tuber" (61). He consequently decides to tell Erugo that their friendship is over. Chokwe equally recalls a modern, synonymous proverb used by their Primary Four teacher: "Show me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are" (61-62). The voice of the past is echoed in the present to warn the young ones. This equally indicates that modernization or education has not put an end to the use of proverbs. Toyin Falola has observed generally that the "past, in all its complications, remains relevant to Africa's present and to its future. Past cultures have shaped present cultures, which is why we have, at the same time, elements of the primordial and the civic competing within the same space" (160-161).

Another proverb that cautions youth arises when Teacher Steve loses his money and suspects Chokwe of stealing it. Chokwe becomes disturbed because he is sure of his innocence and wonders how the problem could be solved. He is confident however that if he tells his parents, they will believe him and this confidence is based on his recollection of a proverb his father once said: "The child who lies to his parents is a child who denies himself" (79). The father had then asked his children never to hesitate in telling him the truth, whatever happened outside the home. The proverb in context stresses the need for truth, honesty and confidence. This is in tandem with the didacticism that permeates children's literature in general. It is also at the heart of the thematic explorations of *Iroh* in this novel. The proverb thus enables Chokwe to take the right line of action by telling his father the truth of the matter.

Dede becomes disturbed over the issue and tries to go to a fortune teller in order to unravel the mystery of Teacher Steve's lost money. Chokwe however tells him that as a Christian he should not go to a fortune-teller. Dede then confronts him as to how he thinks the problem could be solved and Chokwe replies with a proverb that his father once told him when a parcel was misplaced by his mother: "Whatever is not stolen must someday be found where it has been misplaced" (84). This is a simple, plain proverb which Chokwe uses to buttress his belief that the money would be found one day. The proverb is used here as a means of assurance, of providing hope in a tight situation. After the utterance, Dede can only feel gratitude at having a perceptive son like Chokwe.

Poverty leads Chokwe to stay with Teacher Steve and the same poor family background makes Teacher Steve suspect Chokwe of stealing his money. When Teacher Steve finally gets his misplaced money in the drawer of his table he goes to Dede to seek for forgiveness. Dede responds with the proverb: "As you know, because all lizards lie on their stomach, we do not know which one has a stomach ache. It is not easy for us to know that most people in this village are poor" (105). Dede feels that the poverty of his own family has been exposed simply because he sends his children to school where school fees have to be paid. He is sad that because they are poor their children are considered to be culprits whenever anything is missing. Dede however acknowledges that members of his family do not steal: "It has never happened in this family and that is more important to us than being rich" (105). The proverb cautions people to avoid making hasty conclusions as external reality may hide certain inner qualities. The external similarity of lizards does not mean that there aren't differences among them. This metaphor from tradition is thus a very apt description of certain situations in the modern Nigerian state. The past still speaks with resonance to the present.

Hence most of the proverbs in *Without a Silver Spoon* hinge on the issue of poverty but, as Dede states, poverty is not the same with moral perversion. Indeed, the novel tries to show that it is the rich class that produces morally decadent children like Erugo, while the children of the poor, like Chokwe, are morally upright. The proverbs function like a chorus in the novel as they comment, criticize, caution, warn and assure in the various contexts of the story. They are very much part of the structure of the novel and are veritable instruments of characterization and thematization. They equally

embellish the discourse with their figurative, emblematic nature. Iroh continues to use proverbs for various purposes in his sequel to *Without a Silver Spoon, Banana leaves*

Banana Leaves continues with the story of Chokwe who, having completed his primary school is forced to move to the city to live with Uncle Ikenna who works in a cinema house. Uncle Ikenna soon turns Chokwe into a trader and refuses to send him to a secondary school on the pretence that the times are hard. Chokwe joins a gang of ruffians who ultimately engage in robbery and drug addiction. The theme of poverty and honesty which we encounter in *Without a Silver Spoon* is also found here but now we also have the corruptive influence of the city on innocent children like Chokwe. As in *Without a Silver Spoon*, proverbs punctuate the story. The proverbs are either uttered by Chokwe who recollects his parents' sayings or by Uncle Ikenna who still possesses the traditional wisdom of the people despite his city life. *Banana Leaves* reveals to us therefore that in spite of modernity aspects of orature are still in use by the people. However, as if to stress the evil, exploitative and oppressive nature of modern city life, we see, through Uncle Ikenna's discourse, the manipulation of proverbs for selfish, exploitative reasons.

The first part of the book deals with Chokwe in the village after he has finished primary school and wondering how he will get into secondary school in view of his parents' poverty. The proverbs in this section therefore focus on the father's attempt to mould Chokwe into a morally upright child who, despite his low social background, will be honest and maintain his dignity. As in *Without a Silver Spoon* the importance of material things or money is down played in favour of moral rectitude.

Having completed his primary school and with Teacher Steve gone, Chokwe tries to discuss the family's loss of source of livelihood with his father. Meditating on the idea, however, he predicts that his father may likely respond to him with a proverb that, "The man who had a good child was better off than the one who had pots of money but whose children were vagabonds" (36). This indeed is a consolatory proverb that would have been meant to placate Chokwe. It is a philosophical proverb which stresses the value of self-dignity, honour and righteousness over that of wealth. Though Teacher Steve is gone and the family has lost the valuable material

assistance that he used to give, the fact that Chokwe is a good son is quite comforting to the family.

Tied up to the issue of preference for moral goodness and the rejection of materialism is that of greed. Chokwe reports that whenever he or any of his brothers or sisters find lost money and bring it home to their father, Dede would always admonish them and say: "Anyone who hungers for what he does not own is training himself to become a thief...I have no taste for what I cannot afford; neither should my children" (37). The lesson here is for one to be satisfied with one's station in life and to shun avarice and materialism since the fact that one is poor does not mean that one should be greedy and dishonest. In the postcolonial, highly materialistic and corrupt Nigerian society, this proverb is apt in instilling moral discipline among our dispossessed and socially traumatized youth. The present thus appropriates succinct lessons from the past and this affirms the dynamic, transformative nature of proverbs.

Dede actually perceives poverty as a test of one's integrity and as a temptation to be withstood. He tells his children to be firm and to uphold the virtues of truth and honesty and warns them not to be proud of being morally upright until time has tried them. He ends his sermon with the proverb "Don't believe the man who boasts that his house is built on solid ground until it has withstood a storm" (37). There is therefore the need for caution and for perseverance in maintaining one's self-worth. The warning proves true in the case of Chokwe who towards the end of the story falls into bad company and engages in robbery. The proverb recalls Sophocles' immortal words in *King Oedipus*: "And none can be called happy until that day when he carries/His happiness down to the grave in peace" (68). The proverb thus is equally a call for humility, for unpretentiousness in this unpredictable world of denied needs and human suffering. It equally recalls Christ's allegorical teaching on building a solid house in Matthew 7: 24-27.

Part one of the story concludes on a note of uncertainty for Chokwe who will be going to Port Harcourt to stay with Uncle Ikenna. While discussing his departure, nobody talks about whether he will attend the Stella Maris Secondary School in Port Harcourt. Chokwe feels a sense of deprivation and disillusionment which he expresses in a proverbial statement: "It was like a thirsty man standing by the stream but unable to reach the fresh water to drink" (50). When he broaches the issue of schooling with them, Uncle Ikenna

utters the proverb: "Our people say that you do not count your chickens before the eggs are hatched by the mother hen" (51). Chokwe is being asked not to be in a hurry or to anticipate the future in the present. Patience is required of him. In the context of the story the proverb is used by Ikenna to forestall any promise of sending Chokwe to school in Port Harcourt. In the light of what happens later, it is a misuse of the proverb for selfish and wicked reasons. Hence a proverb can be used for a good or bad cause depending on the context. Chokwe already feels doomed on hearing this proverb which turns out to be a gloomy prelude to the sad reality that he will experience in the city.

Leaving the village and entering the city marks a turning point in the story and in the type of proverbs being used. In Port Harcourt Chokwe is not enrolled in school but rather kept to do domestic work for Ikenna. One day Ikenna talks to him and begins with a proverb: "You do not need to tell a deaf person that there is a stampede in the market place" (70), by which he wants to tell Chokwe that life is difficult for him and that Chokwe will have to help him in upsetting the cost of living by selling goods in the cinema hall. Ikenna thus uses the proverb to entrap Chokwe into work and, as it soon manifests itself, into a form of exploitation. It is a clear case of using traditional wisdom for a selfish reason. The issue of Chokwe's schooling is cast aside.

At a point Ikenna realizes that Chokwe is thinking about going to school and he comes out with another proverb that is aimed at persuading Chokwe to understand that hunger, not education, is their primary enemy. He says, "I know you may be thinking of school... But if we are not beaten by the sun or the rain, we will be beaten by hunger, as our people say" (72). Ikenna once more uses a proverb to make his victim acquiesce in his oppression, exploitation and deprivation. To him hunger, not schooling, is what they need to combat.

When Chokwe persists and wants to know if when their economic fortunes advance he will be sent to school, Ikenna, again, uses the force of traditional authority to drum his point: "You do not give a child a name when it is still in the womb" (72), and so Chokwe should wait for that indefinite time of self-sufficiency. This is another case of a proverb used with a negative, exploitative intent, as later events in the story reveal. The three proverbs above are used by Ikenna in order to forestall conflict with Chokwe. It is a means of

silencing Chokwe psychologically and therefore of ensuring a harmonious existence between them. Fountaine's argument on the use of proverbs for social control is pertinent here:

The stimulus for proverb performance is usually some human action, especially one capable of straining the social structure of the group, and one which might be interpreted in several ways. The user of the saying, or source, restores human harmony by categorising the situation and imposing order. This is accomplished by correlating the topic and comment of the item cited with the various elements or actors in the social situation, and asserting a correspondence (hence a 'similitude') between the two. (404-405)

In this case however, Chokwe, the addressee, is aware of the folly, deception and selfishness behind the utterance of the proverb. The authoritative nature of the proverb gets additional force from the fact that it is being uttered by an elder to a boy. Chokwe is not in a position to argue what he knows is wrong, particularly as traditional society frowns at a young person hurling a counter proverb to an elder. Ikenna might have silenced Chokwe with his proverb but Chokwe who is fully aware of Ikenna's sinister motives behind the utterances, psychologically lives in tension and apprehension.

The very first night Chokwe starts selling goods in the cinema hall a boy blows smoke into his face and he coughs. The tray falls from his hands and some of the contents are crushed. When later his Uncle accuses him for the crushed goods he defends himself but Ikenna calls him a liar. Chokwe asserts his innocence by saying that they don't tell lies in their family. Out of fury Ikenna says: "Everybody knows your father is an honest man, but you are not your father," and adds the proverb: "The monkey and the gorilla may claim to be relatives, but the monkey is a monkey and the gorilla is a gorilla" (79). Ikenna uses the proverb to show truth but in this case it is not really appropriate as readers attest to Chokwe's honesty. The proverb is negatively used here for a condemnatory purpose.

A similar proverb is used in a positive way by Uncle Diki who comes to settle the quarrel between Ikenna and Chokwe. After listening to the cause of provocation, Uncle Diki tells Ikenna that it is not good to ask Chokwe to sell cigarettes as it can make him develop a bad habit. When Ikenna defends his action by saying that other children are engaged in such business, Uncle Diki tells him that

people are not the same and that he has noticed that Chokwe is an intelligent boy that needs to be in school. He ends with the proverb, "The cat may look like the lion, but that does not make it a lion" (84). Chokwe is here portrayed as a good boy and he, Chokwe, is glad to hear the proverb thrown at his Uncle. He says: "To hear Mr. Dikibo throw my uncle's kind of wicked proverb back at him cheered me up and reduced my pain" (84). A proverb or synonymous proverb could thus be used either positively or negatively, depending on the social context. As Yankah points out, a proverb user is guided by the social situation and by "his choice of proverb, by his known position or attitude in the discourse interaction, what literal statements precede his proverb citation or statements he utters after the proverb he quotes" (136).

The last part of the book deals with Chokwe's realisation that nothing good will come out of his stay with Uncle Ikenna in terms of his burning ambition to be educated. He consequently begins to contemplate the way out, feeling that it would be foolish of him to allow himself to be oppressed and exploited again. He recalls a proverbial utterance of his father: "If a dog bites you the first time, it is the dog's fault; but if it bites you a second time, it is your fault" (85). The voice of the ancient comes to the aid of a modern child in the city. The dog's image as a metaphor for his uncle is appropriate in view of Ikenna's callous and exploitative nature. The proverb warns Chokwe to avoid the snares of his uncle.

Chokwe is however cautious in planning to run away and hopes to at least make amends with his uncle before he takes leave. This is because he realizes that, "It is only a stupid dog that barks at a lion" (86). Tact is therefore needed in dealing with someone that is very powerful. Once more a proverb gives him the wisdom to deal with situations in the city.

In the two novels, Iroh has employed traditional wisdom as a prop to his narrative structure. Apart from sustaining the plots of the novels the proverbs help readers in understanding the nature and world views of the principal characters – Dede, Chokwe and Ikenna. While Dede's use of proverbs portray him as the repository of traditional wisdom, the voice of truth, a man that possesses self-dignity and as a veritable custodian of traditional values, Ikenna is, on the contrary, emblematic of the distortion or manipulation of traditional values for selfish, individualistic purposes. He exploits the ambiguous nature of proverbs and flings them at Chokwe from

the position of power. Iroh implies that language, particularly rhetorical language of which proverbs are a part, is subject to manipulation as users try to persuade their listeners. Ikenna's use of proverbs demonstrates Fashina's argument that proverbs strategically deflect, diffuse and distract "from the pseudo-temporal nature of language". Fashina adds that

Proverbs impose affective discourse meaning; and strategically they persuade the hearer to succumb to their meta-functional logic. Indeed, proverbs are verbal nuclear disarmament. They detonate the inner conviction of the hearer. They physically mesmerise him/her thereby making the proverb speaker to earn some kind of compelling respect for his seeming inviolate wisdom and psychic energy of archetypal nature. (261)

Despite this all-powerful and conquering image of the proverb, however, submissiveness to it depends on the listener who may decide to throw in a counter proverb. In the context of Iroh's *Banana Leaves* Chokwe is indeed enraptured by his father's use of proverbs but completely averse to Ikenna's usage mainly because he knows that Ikenna uses the proverbs in order to keep him in a position of servitude. Hence though he listens to his uncle's proverbs without complaints he does not adhere to their logic. His inner conviction, inner truth is not 'detonated' by Ikenna's proverbs neither is he mesmerised by them. Ikenna's life is generally moulded by his father's use of proverbs and, as a keen learner of oral lore, he appropriates and uses the proverbs either in his meditations or when conversing with his friends.

Iroh uses some markers to set out the proverbs in the two novels. Most of the proverbs are set out in quotation marks but some of Chokwe's meditations are simply italicised or left unmarked but for the opening or concluding statements. Some of the opening or concluding formulas used by the speakers include: "As our people say", "our people say that", "but as the saying goes", "Dede would reply wisely", "but as my father would reply", "as Dede would say", "but as my father would say", "he replied with a proverb", "he concluded with another proverb" and others. The use of these opening or closing formulas is to confer authority on the proverb as a time-tested truth, the wisdom of the ancients that should be adhered to. Inevitably most of the proverbs are used in

situations of dialogue as is usually the case in real, oral situation. In the two novels we have the added advantage of 'listening' to proverbs being used reflectively in the interior monologues of Chokwe. In reality of course, people may ponder on certain issues which may lead to the recollection of proverbs or proverbial utterances that are appropriate to the circumstances, either by way of justification, evaluation or self-consolation. The only thing is that we cannot have access to such meditations.

As a realist, Iroh's proverbial store contains items from the traditional past and those that are obviously modern or non-African. Such proverbs include, "Show me who your friends are and I will show you who you are" (WASS. 61-62), "Wishes were not horses" (BL.48), "Do not count your chickens before the eggs are hatched by the mother hen" (BL.51), and the biblical "Man does not live by bread alone" (BL. 102). There is also a modern Nigerian proverbial utterance rendered in pidgin: "If man no die, man no go rotten" (BL.114). The title of the first novel, *Without a Silver Spoon*, is itself proverbial as it originates from the English idiomatic expression "to be born *with a silver spoon*". Hence, as society moves, so do proverbs.

Conclusion

Eddie Iroh's two novels are primarily addressed to youth, those who are generally felt to be out of touch with traditional African values such as orature items. That he has incorporated orature elements, particularly the proverb, into the texture of his works, is significant. Literature generally entertains but equally edifies, and much as the proverbs in the two novels are aesthetically appealing and persuasive, they also teach the young readers the wisdom of yore which is still relevant today. Within the context of the two novels Chokwe's use of proverbs, both in the village and in the city, is Iroh's testament that orature items are very much alive, relevant and vibrant. That Chokwe is a child also suggests that there is continuity in the use of traditional oral expressive forms. It is hoped that the proverbs in the two novels will become familiar to all readers who will again use them in their day to day conversations. Just as most of us have come to know and use proverbs and idiomatic expressions from other lands through reading their literature, readers of Iroh's works would hopefully use the proverbs they read in the novels. In this way, the dynamic nature of proverbs reveals itself.

Orature has been appropriated in the written form and the written form gives birth to orature. Ironically therefore, secondary orality can be a source of primary orality. Such indeed is the miracle of transformation as it affects a precious gem whose usage ensures its indestructibility.

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