"The Horse on which Words Ride": Proverbial Narrative in Toyin Falola's *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*

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Abstract

Literature and oral tradition share a symbiotic relationship. Toyin Falola the author of *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* has produced a highly engaging memoir. The text is set in Ibadan, Ode Aje and Ilorin. We find a rich and knowledgeable exploitation of oral forms which the author uses within the frame of the biographical genre. Through the use of proverbial narration, Falola presents a tale replete with magic, religion, divination, spirituality and various folklore elements. The oral forms Falola has used in the text come from the oral character of everyday life, prose narratives, songs, proverbs and proverb-like expressions while exploring the themes of innocence, curiosity and growth. This stylistic feature of narration is common in African story telling sessions. In both the traditional and modern context, the African proverb fulfils its social and communicative function in various forms. Falola presents an inseparable relationship of mutual exchange between the oral and written traditions. However, our point of emphasis is to evaluate the context and usage of the proverbial narration with a restriction to proverbs which deal with animals. The qualities attributed to animals in the proverbs and sayings figuratively and metaphorically describe people's appearance, characteristics and deeds.

Introduction

The use of folklore devices to write modern novels is one of the trends dominating the African literary scene. African writers blend proverbs from their tradition using English to communicate them effectively. In Bernth Lindfors' (1973) observation:

Not every African writer yielded so completely to foreign or indigenous literary influence. Some tried to combine the two traditional artistically, welding European form to African matter so skillfully that no one could tell without careful inspection precisely how or where they had been joined. Those were writers who began to contribute something new to world literature, for they were foregoing genuine links between the two disparate cultures Africans had inherited, one by birth, the other by education.

African writers find the proverb very valuable. E. Obiechina (1975) opines "The West African phenomenon is of the nature of super imposition rather than a transition, so that we have a composite rather than unified picture; elements of the old traditional culture exist side by side with those of the modern industrial culture the oral tradition with the literary".

Abiola Irele (2007) asserts:

the literature in the European languages is now generally recognized in its formal significance as an effort to approximate to the oral model albeit with a literature tradition taken from the west; it is this feature that took the most important African writing of contemporary times. The point that emerges here is that two channels, the oral tradition continues to function as a fundamental reference of African expression, as the matrix of the African imagination.

Bernth Lindfors (1979) in commemoration of African literature and folklore adds that many Nigerian authors have been spectacularly successful in remoulding oral arts into literary ... The most creative Nigerian writers have been those who have united the oral and literary "traditions" available to them.

According to Charles Nnolim (1999) "The folk tradition in African literature has thus become part of the essential qualities of its literary expression... And judicious use of the folk tradition is at the root of the appeal of much of the literature emanating from black Africa. This is in consonance with E. Emenyonu's (1978) views that "African oral and written literatures are but two sides of a value. Both are for instruction, for aesthetic pleasure, for culture preservation and for self realization. Both are therefore complementary except

perhaps that oral literature is the spring board of written literature. Some studies on Toyin Falola's *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt* (2004) have been carried out in Niyi Afolabi ed.(2010) by Bessie House-Soremekun, Ademola Dasylva, Tosin Abiodun, Kayode Animashaun, Aaron Reynolds, Segun Obasa, Oliver Tchouaffe, Ikhide Ikheola, and Adetayo Alabi who examined various aspects of the memoir. The novelty of this paper is that it makes a case for the exploration of Yoruba proverbs with animal components or biological creatures and their context of usage in the text.

Notions of Proverbs and Animal Imagery

According to Mieder (2004), "a proverb is a simple concrete and popular saying, which expresses the truth, the wisdom, moral lessons and traditional norms based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity". Roger Abrahams (1968) is of the view that proverbs may "handle problems in various ways, depending upon whether the question is being faced immediately or whether the crises has already passed but left a residual feeling of dis-orientation. To Ruth Finnegan (2012) proverbs are consciously used not only to make effective points but also to embellish speeches in a way admired and appreciated by their audience/listeners. She is of the view that proverb seems to occur in almost everywhere in Africa and in rich profusion and to her proverb is 'a saying in more or less its fixed form marked by shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it'.

Jasper Onwuekwusi (2001) asserts "a proverb is a philosophical, allusive and metaphorical citation that gives credence to traditional truth and wisdom. It is allusive and metaphorical because it refers to some truth outside itself. It is philosophical because it is a product of a long period of reasoning and observation which expresses some timeless truth. Similarly, Ojo Arewa and Alan Dundes (1964) explain that "Like other terms of folklore, proverbs may serve as impersonal vehicle for personal communication.

J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada (2002) opines the relevance of a true understanding of proverb referents has to do with the socio-cultural significance of metaphors not only within the larger cultural setting, but even within a particular subculture, since not all cultural symbols have a uniform essence throughout a macro-culture. As in other Nigerian communities, the store of Yoruba proverbs covers the whole spectrum of life. "The proverbs of a people would provide valuable clue about their character and culture and open paths of communication" (Webster, 1982). Also, F.B.O. Akporobaro (2012) rightly states many of the proverbs are profound in their philosophical and moralistic formulations of the realities of the life of man. A major aesthetic quality

of proverbs is their poetic language and imagery. These reflect very often the features of domestic animals, hunting activities, social institutions, folklore and religious beliefs, and forms of natural life and object. Seitel (1976) has also highlighted the importance of proverb study as it serves a social purpose and gives an insight to metaphorical reasoning while Bernth Lindfors (1973) writes that the Yoruba, like any other people, command a whole stable of gnomish horses and groom them to serve a variety of rhetorical purposes. It should be noted that animals are a huge part of human life and often feature in proverbs. Lakoff and Turner (1989) present the different metaphorical schemas that show how we conceive animals and how we apply this folk knowledge to the construction of metaphorical schemas. According to them "the domain of animal life is one of the most elaborate ones, which we use to understand the human domain". In a similar vein, Rodriguez (2009) observes that animals have been used as conversational tools for "the great flexibility they provide with regard to metaphoric construction and the same animal can be used in a variety of ways...usually five basic parameters, namely habitat, size, appearance, behavior and the relation of the animal to people". A large portion of the proverbs in Toyin Falola's *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* contain images of animals with a range of possibilities about the nature of social life. Besides representing animals as images for some characters, the narrator also represents them as symbols for events in the memoir.

Animal proverbs in *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* and their context of usage

From the beginning of the memoir to the end, Toyin Falola espouses a tremendous attention to the use of proverbs. What is depicted in the text is a rich vigorous indigenization of language and oratorical display. The focus of the proverbs in this paper are those dealing with animals which express human emotions, thoughts and attitudes following the way they have been used in the narrative. The narrator discusses the concept of African traditional time tied to seasons and events as distinct from the Western one which is often dated and documented. In the proverb, "**When a lion becomes old he is a toy for little flies**" (18) The narrator alludes to when his memory would no longer be relied upon and when he will not have ready answers to a lot of questions. When a wild animal becomes old it becomes powerless and can be dared by smaller animals which would have been unable to do so when it was agile and active.

The speaker depicts Ibadan and the events which took place in his youthful days. The unforgettable experience in the hands of Yusuf's mother is expressed. "**Whoever attempts to catch a cricket must move slowly and that**

even fools do not try to eat chicken before it is cooked" (29) This proverb is given in the context of the narrator bidding his time to arrive at an expected end. A cricket though not big requires a lot of art and patience before it can be caught and a however foolish a person is, he or she knows a chicken ought to be properly cooked before consumption. An answer to a question posed is answered without raising any form of argument reason being that. **"The patient dog enjoying the fattest bone offer the fellow dogs, so much in a hurry to eat, had run away with the small bone with little meat"** (29) When one applies patience in doing things better results are achieved than when done in a hurry. This act is likened to the patience of the narrator who was not in a hurry to respond to questioning till the interrogator eventually finds out the answers by herself. The soil is a very familiar terrain to the squirrel and it knows the soil better than animals in the sea and birds that fly and in order to familiarize oneself with a particular issue one has to go to the source of the matter. The narrator in this case had to behave like an indigene of his environment in order to get at the root of his subject on enquiry. **"To know about the soil, you must speak with a squirrel."** (31)

What started as a game among three friends, Yussuf, Phillip and the narrator ends up with so many catastrophes, the loss of an eye, family conflict and so much pain and embarrassment for the narrator. The beatings received by the narrator are so much that in the confusion, he held unto those rendering the blows to his body. **"A drowning man in the sea would clutch anything to survive, even a serpent or a hungry whale"** (33) Ordinarily Yussuf's mother would have been kind to his son's friend but on that fateful day, her sting was displayed in form of merciless beatings of the narrator. **"A bee with honey in its mouth has a sting in the tail"** (33) This proverb speaks on the truth which indicates bitterness can be gotten from what appears sweet. The narrator was useful after the severe beating by leading Yussuf's parents to Phillip's place of abode. Being presented as guilty, he had no nerve to protest. **"It is the last camel that gets the beating so as to drive the caravan"** (33) It is easier for a shepherd to beat the camel at the rear which is nearest to him in order to enforce quick movement.

The warring years of Ibadan came to an end in the twentieth century and the warriors had to find other forms of occupation if they must survive and remain relevant in the society. Some went into cocoa cultivation; others went to school to be given Western education which had Christian religion tied to it. Despite the situation, the characteristic of ethnic intelligence 'mesiogo' is peculiar to the indigenes **"The twig can try, try as it will to lie in water for as many year as possible, it will never turn into a crocodile"** (42) The art of 'Mesiogo' can hardly be emulated by the indigenes of other communities in Nigeria.

The human population consists of both good and bad characters. Those in a particular community may exhibit good behavior and traits of neighborliness which becomes absent as one goes further away from one's communal dwelling hence when an individual thinks everyone in his vicinity is good, is an indication that the person is only exposed to a small circle of people. **"The small egg that waits many months just to give birth to a large bird"** (45) The proverb alludes to patience as a virtue which must be cultivated by a 'Mesio' in listening to a story by a visitor. **"I have never seen a chicken which uses its two legs to scratch the soil at the same time"** (46) The idea presented is to flatter the story teller that the 'Mesio' has been found worthy of trust hence the visitor has chosen to confide in him. In the same vein a message is also being sent to him that he ought not to put all his hope in one person as a solution to his challenges. **"Not about to become the eager antelope with the elephant shoes who can no longer run fast enough to discourage being killed by a hunter"** (46) The 'Mesio' here refuses to lend his visitor money but gives a wrong impression by offering a long and unnecessary explanation as to why he is unable to part with money.

Reference is made to the Ibadan king and a friend of the narrator who seeks to become an honorary chief. The king has a lot of responsibilities which requires money to take care of. A rich person who is willing to part with money in exchange for a title can be subjected to exploitation. Both seem to be tortoises, one is royal but lacks money while the other has money but requires the help of royalty to have a title and so is eager to give what he has to get what he wants. **"Only a tortoise knows where to bite another tortoise, if the crab tries it only bites the shell"** (49)

The narrator's friend learns a lesson that he has been denied being made a chief for making inadequate material contribution and the king's excuse for excluding him from a list of those to be made chiefs was a lame one. **"Only the fool visits the house of the goat to beg for lessons on wisdom"** (51) A proverb advocates collaboration. In the past the only known way of getting rid of lice was by picking. This can only be done with two fingers. **"One finger cannot remove lice from the head"** (51) The proverb used here indicates the need for the narrator's friend to seek cooperation of others in order to achieve his ambition of becoming a chief depicted in the fingers joining together to remove the lice from an afflicted head.

The narrator having heard so much about the dynamics of a locomotive train is eager to satisfy his curiosity. **"To look for one's black goat, one must begin the search in day light"** (61) This urge to see the train is carried out with far reaching consequences. The anxiety by the narrator to be led to a train station leads him into forfeiting his midday meals to older boys. Going hungry for days is a sacrifice he is prepared to make but his anxiety leads to

further exploitation. In order to satisfy his curiosity, the narrator must set aside his anxieties and fears of going beyond the train station at Ibadan. **"The mongoose that wants to catch a chicken must not be afraid of the dew"** (64)

"I sent the monkey on an errand, and the monkey instructed its tail to do the work" (90) This proverb is in reference to situations where the big mamas would send the younger mamas on errands. The latter would often resent the narrator to run errands by proxy.

Mama Ade goes against the traditional rule of according a mother-in-law respect. Mama Ade is spoiling for a fight with the mother-in-law out of provocation but the elderly woman appears would have eaten the poor food presented to her rather than bear all the insults. **"A bird was now flying over her head, and all she could do was prevent it from nesting there"** (96) Mama Ade's insults were ignored by the mother-in-law preferring not to let the awkward nagging situation degenerate to physical fight.. Mama Ade and Big mama have no option but to dwell together in spite of the incessant domestic conflicts. **"Becoming like a cow without a tail, mocked by flies, the wise chicken who became a fool on reaching the cooking pot"** (98) In the presence of the big mamas, the small mamas have no voice of authority. They were subject to their whims and caprices. The big mamas wielded their authority like judges in a court of law and often intimidated the small mamas and the latter had to behave if they do not want to get into trouble.

In a polygamous household, there are bound to be loop holes in terms of coordinating domestic activities. The narrator looks out for opportunities that would be beneficial to him. When such a chance comes his way, he ends up eating from more than one mama. **"When a crack appears in a wall the lizard finds opportunity to enter"** (99) Sometimes the narrator gets away with eating meals from more than one person but when news goes around that he has been fed, his game of eating more than a meal at a time is not successful. **"Even the best hunter never goes home with game every day"** (100) The narrator knows the household of mamas who were generous, where he can derive benefits and the ones who lacked generosity. **"A crab is aware of only two types of water – where it lives and where it is boiled"** (100)

Age is supposed to be a source of respect but wealth often supersedes longevity. A man of means may be more influential despite the fact that he is young. The narrator's father is able to command respect and attain a position of power in his family by virtue of his material wealth. **"The elderly man who shouts in the compound without a penny to his name is like a barking dog"** (103). It has been observed stealing never brings satisfaction to a thief and he often continues to indulge in this habit. The thief finds it easier to cart away moveable things unlike lands and houses. When the narrator's father passed away, a lot of material things could not be accounted for, probably stolen by

relations who were privy to where valuable things were kept. **"He who steals and eats a prawn is not satisfied with one and no matter how strong a thief is he cannot carry land or a house (105)**

In the chapter "Big Daddy in the Jungle" the narrator is taken to a new home at Ode Aje where he observes the attitude of greedy relations when there is a loss in a family. **"Lizards lie on the stomachs all the time, but no one knows those among them with mild or serious stomach aches"** (111) The narrator leaving his father's household had consequences for those who were his care givers. While people are mourning the loss of the deceased, it appears other losses were being counted. Mama was to lose her errand boy who also usually takes care of her house chores. **"A village cock knows not to crow in the city"** (111) the narrator owes Mama One so much allegiance by virtue of the fact that she housed and fed him. After playing pranks on Baba Ayo, the narrator is severely punished and afterwards he did not need to be told to desist from antisocial habits. The narrator is scared of the antics of the big boys who make incredible promises about travelling out of the country using unorthodox means. Due to his previous experience on his trip to Ilorin which culminated in his being labeled *émère* and change of school, loss of friends and being treated with suspicion, he does not want to be beaten a second time by listening to fantastic tales. **"A man whose mother has been killed by a red animal is scared by an anthill"** (115)

An occasion concerns the presentation of a delicate matter which is capable of causing psychological injury. A concubine *iyawo kekere* who is pregnant is about to be introduced to the legal wife by family, friends and relations. A visitor during the occasion tries to sensitize the wife that the husband having a second wife would be of benefit to the family. The legal wife sensing the announcement of grave news appeals to the speaker to hasten his message to end her suspense. **"As long as there are lice in the seams of the garment, there must be bloodstains on the finger nails."** (134) She acknowledges circumstance must inform the speaker drawing her attention with truisms. **"The frog does not jump in the day time without reason"** (134) A frog would normally like to reside in a pool or stay in a cool place during the day time. When it starts jumping about, it is assumed it is running away from danger.

A latecomer into the scene tries to prepare the ground for the unpleasant news the visitors are about to break admitting that the world is full of strange happenings. The speaker concedes that the husband's actions is not wholly acceptable but tries to down play his adulterous act. **"The crocodile does not die under the water so that we can call the monkey to celebrate its funeral"** (134)

A speaker who has come to resolve a marital conflict appeals to the wife's understanding, giving her a subtle warning that she is unlikely to win a

marital contest. In a tone of flattery, the visitor tells the legal wife to consider herself to be snake, an animal which crawls but may be lucky to feed on a flying animal such as a bird (the husband in this case) if circumstance brings it. **"Although the snake does not fly, it has caught the bird whose home is in the sky"** (134)

The memoir examines the various Yoruba cultural tenets especially the institution of polygamy. The narrator, devises strategies to cope in a polygamous setting being exposed to various experiences, learnt numerous lessons in several environments where he grew up, Ode Aje and Agbokojo. In a bout with words, in the narrator's school, the challenger lays claim to superiority as the rat is unlikely to beat a cat in any challenge. **"When the cat returns from a trip, the rat goes into a depression"** (141)

School rules had to be obeyed including rules regarding punctuality. Late arrival elicited punishment by school prefects and the penalty has to be endured by junior students who cannot fight back. **"Only a stupid rat will challenge a cat to a fight."** (143) The narrator derived so much fun playing with school mates at the end of lessons. This results to getting home late, necessitating severe rebuke from parents. Despite the scolding, after school games remained part of him. **"The river cannot be so full as to cover the eyes of the fish"** (151) There is a reference to wives at Ode Aje who do not break off relations with their parents after marriage. They often make out time to attend social and religious functions and visit their paternal and maternal relations. **"Only a foolish woman would love her husband to the extent of abandoning her own father and mother, to bring a monkey that lived in a tree top"** (161) The high point of the narration is Yoruba mysticism especially in Leku's world where secrecy is paramount in her activities. As a child the narrator was fascinated by Iya Lekuleja. In adult life he is reluctant to share all he thinks about the woman's mysterious ways. **"One must first cross the river before saying that the crocodile has a lump on his snout"** (181) Baba Olopa has a visitor who condemns polygamy especially a household where conflicts cannot be resolved. The narrator was serving them drinks and uses that opportunity to listen to their conversation. The adults are engrossed in their conversation paying no attention to the narrator as they laughed and drank.

The narrator and friends are prepared to assist Sali to make Risi become his girlfriend. They solicit the help of Omo Baba Olosanyin using a love portion which is bigger bait than a love letter. **"A big fish can only be caught with big bait"** (184)

Not done with winning the girl's attention, all the friends visit Leku to obtain a love portion. When she enquires about the purpose, they own up as to why the ingredients are needed, hoping speaking the truth would help their case. The narrator finds himself in a situation where Leku forces him to drink

a concoction. Left with no choice he gulps the unpalatable mixture. Nursing the hurt from being forced to drink a herbal mixture, the narrator begrudges every adult. **"The cane that was used to kill a snake but was not invited to share the meal when the animal was roasted"** (191) **"A termite can do nothing to a rock but lick it"** (191) in this case Leku is the rock while the speaker is the helpless termite who is in no position to retaliate. The narrator's helplessness in the face of the activities of Leku is emphasized. He is forced to endure the unpleasant situation. Leku overwhelms the narrator. **"For the mouse to laugh in the presence of a cat, there must be a hole close by."** (191)

The various dogma of residing in a village where the grandfather Pasitor is a notable figure is depicted. A villager, Jacobu has been arrested by the police on trumped up charges without honor to the villagers but the chief responsible for the action is devoid of any shyness in perpetuating his act. The village women were wailing but their noisy actions had no effect on the chief. **"A roaring lion kills no games."** (219) The villagers could only summon up courage to issue curses after the chief left the village with the police men. **"What the antelopes said over the dead lion's body could not have been uttered when the lion was alive."** (219) The villagers not wanting to give up, made attempts to proffer solution to Jacobu's predicament. An action had to be taken even if it was going to be without any effect. Pasitor's sympathetic act of inviting the chief for a favorable settlement ended negatively. **"The dog he bought had bitten him, the fire he kindled had burned him"** (220) The poor man has a lot of disadvantages. He makes utterances but lacks the means to take appropriate actions drawing on the observation that **"Even ants can harm the elephant"** (220) Despite the size of the elephant, the ants can be a source of discomfort. The poor farmers if properly mobilized against the rich land owners can be a thorn in their flesh.

The narrator recounts the various humiliating experiences of Pasitor as a mediator between village farmers and urban chiefs. Pasitor learns the fact that the chief was not ready to help and it was better seeking help elsewhere. **"If the bull has decided to throw you, it is better to lie down"** (249) When a discussion drags on, it may lead to an argument which may end up in a fight. Chief Ajibola cuts short Pasitor's discussion because he did not want to be dragged into a long argument with Pasitor. **"He who runs from the white ant may stumble upon the stinging ant"** (251) The first visit to the landowner seeking his understanding and cooperation yielded very little result and the visit to a second person, chief Ajibola turns out worse than the first. Pasitor does not want the narrator to partake of *atenuje* which is an evil consumption from an evil source. Partaking of proceeds of criminality was to be avoided as the narrator's grandfather is of the opinion that evil company would surely corrupt the speaker. **"He who lives with an ass will make noise like an ass"**

(252) Pasitor has been deceived two times, one by the landowner and the second time by chief Ajibola but does not want to give up the task of resolving the conflict. **"The sheep of a fool breaks loose more than once"** (254) Pasitor was advised to issue curses on the guilty chiefs but his previous failures make him reluctant to do so. **"A man bitten by a snake can be afraid of lizard"** (260) Pasitor learns in a rude way that his soliciting help from the ogboni fraternity in the case of the chief is futile. The chief is one of them and group solidarity was more important than meting out justice. **"Only a monkey understands a monkey"** (262) Pasitor did not have what it would take to negotiate with the ogboni fraternity. To tackle the corrupt chief was an impossible task for Pasitor not being a member of the fraternity. **"The head of an elephant is too big for a child to carry"** (262) A lawyer contracted to handle the tenant farmer's case made a lot of bogus promises knowing that he did not have what it would take to confront the chiefs legally and even Pasitor's intervention was frowned at by Leku. The latter rebukes Pasitor for exposing the narrator to danger knowing it was obvious that Jacobu, the tenant farmer was framed deliberately. **"If the end of an ox is beef, the end of a lie is grief"** (265) She is of the view that Pasitor has exposed the narrator to danger since it was easier to harm him to teach Pasitor a painful lesson. **"When the leopard is away, his cubs are food for others"** (269) An appeal for cooperation of different interest groups to fight the corruption of oppressive chiefs is made. In effect every aspect of the narration is interspersed with an appropriate African proverb and a proverb can be used in more than one context to enhance the story.

Conclusion

The main thrust of this paper is to establish the context of proverb with animal images used in Toyin Falola's *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt*. As the discussion shows, the popularity of the proverb stems from its philosophical and cultural value. It is possible to read varied meanings to a proverb especially as indicated in the text. This is particularly so in conversation and speech making and because proverbs are metaphorical in form. Thus knowledge of the culture by proverbs users affects its application in terms of clarity to advance a view-point. The aesthetic appeal of the narrator's appropriate proverb use is significant. The essential point which needs to be made is that proverbs with animal references play an important role in the text. This is because of special value Toyin Falola, the narrator has attached to environmental details, essential traits of animals and individuals he has interacted with and a keen use of traditional elements to elucidate his story.

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