



**NSO AND MBUM ORAL TRADITION AND THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT:
THE STUDY OF PROVERBS**



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ABSTRACT

The paper sets out to illustrate how oral literature of Nso and Mbum can be exploited as an instrument for development in a multicultural context. The study contends that, “Lamnso” and “Limbum” which are the languages spoken by Nso and Mbum people of the North West Region of Cameroon transport cultural values that respond to the needs of the people in this global context. The rich culture that is lodged by Nso and Mbum oral tradition is threatened by neo-colonialism, globalism and modernism. It is for this reason that this study considers the collection and exploration of Nso and Mbum proverbs in relation to the concept of development crucial to the survival and existence of the Nso and Mbum people. Since oral art forms anchor on the culture and natural environment of the people, proverbs collected are analyzed using the ecocritical and new historicist lenses in order to attain the objectives of the study. The paper emphasizes that oral literature which generally consists of materials that

are not only several generations old, but are also transmitted by word of mouth is relevant in a modern society that is visibly assaulted by enormous scientific and technological forces. It is in this light that the collected proverbs are examined as instruments of education in relation to development. The findings reveal that the local knowledge that is brought to light during performance can be exploited in complementarity with innovative and modern scientific methods to foster development in the ever evolving Nso and Mbum oral communities. The conclusion here is that since every development efforts begin with the right mind and good ideas, Nso and Mbum proverbs studied in relation to development is a worthwhile venture. The study therefore assumes that in the present dispensation relevant development can be attained if we think locally and act globally.

KEYWORDS :

Nso and Mbum Oral Tradition, Proverbs, education, communities

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The principal concern of this study is to collect, document and investigate the contribution of oral literature within Nso and Mbum social settings. In this vein, proverbs studied in this paper are a response to social, economic, cultural and moral concerns of the Nso and Mbum oral people. Given that African orature in a globalised context is a response to the social, economic, political and moral concerns of the modern setting, it can be used to address social concerns to enhance development by restoring dignity in a morally dwindling society. Oral literature exists in all communities in Africa. Nkem Okoh in his *Preface to Oral Literature* has clarified that;

We are no longer delimiting or elucidating the phenomenon call oral literature; rather we are concerned with its application, to demonstrate that it has great relevance today for our country in particular, especially if we can tap its resources, potentialities ...oral literature deals with certain serious issues about life, man, his relationships with his environment and with other human beings, all of which are question that are highly pertinent in the African society today. (235-236)

The implication of the above citation is that African literature is a dynamic phenomenon and researchers in the domain have transcended the era of responding to misinterpretations and denial of its existence by some bias minds. Nso and Mbum proverbs help in reconstructing and reinforcing the culture and history of the people thereby providing them with a vision for the future. According to Lupenga Mphande in *Encyclopedia of African Literature*,

Despite the ravages of slavery and colonialism on Africa's political, economic and social systems, the continent's cultures and aesthetic sensibilities remain independent and vibrant, particularly in the orally based forms of cultural expression. Although African communities have developed writing traditions, Africans are primarily an oral people, and it is that tradition that has dominated the cultural forms created in the continent.(579)

In line with Mphande, this paper is concerned with the application of Nso and Mbum proverbs to demonstrate that they have a legitimate place in the efforts to promote development especially if the indigenous knowledge that they harbour can be utilized in all areas of community life. The point emphasized here is that Nso and Mbum proverbs originate from the people and are very sensitive to their needs due to their dynamism. This is in line with Ruth Finnegan in her *Oral Literature in Africa* when she points out that, "Oral literature arises from the society"(5). This sensitivity comes from their Nso and Mbum flavours as well as from their contemporary existence and it is from this juncture that proverbs said in Lamnso and those said in Limbum assume a wider social relevance. The social, economic and political concerns in a society can determine its literature and that literature can change the direction of lives of its producers. It is from this perspective that this study becomes relevant to the concept of development in this globalized context. Mphande's contention is that, "oral performance is also an important instrument in the educational system, for not only does it act as an incentive to and reward for socially improved actions but also its recital is a reminder to all present of what qualities and conducts are praiseworthy (585). The contention here is that oral literature does not only entertain; it is also an instrument of education. Our focus in this study revolves around these same functions.

From the foregoing submissions, therefore, this study make bold to argue that the performers no longer remain in the confines of their villages since they now develop orally transmitted material into global commodities thus, the relevance of the study of Nso and Mbum proverbs to the concept of development. This study hopes to ascertain that Nso and Mbum oral tradition is not basking in the euphoria of its distant past. The principal issue here is how to preserve it so that it continuous to serve.

Writing about proverbs in *Folklore and National Development: Kom and Bakweri proverbs* Jick posits that, “proverbs of the societies under reference in this study are examined in particular reference to their thematic preoccupations. These selected proverbs recreate both the good and the bad in their various societies... and teach us to learn from our mistakes, correct our ills and also emulate the positive aspects reflected in some of the proverbs so that our nation can be a better place for us to live in (44). In line with this perspective, this study shall be analyzed following three thematic areas which are: proverbs and socio-cultural values, moral and economic. This organization is apt for this analysis as Jick further maintains: “culture is the basis of development and that science and technology are only its products that education stabilizes, develops and transmits” (45).

The Nso and Mbum People, Origin and Location

The Nso People

According to the *Lamnso-English Dictionary*, “Nso refers to people as an ethnic group that came from Rifem in Tikar land. Their oral history has it that they migrated to the present site around 1370 led by the legendary young lady Ngonso. The word Nso also refers to the Region inhabited by the Nso people. Nso is found in the North West region of Cameroon. More than four fifth of the Nso people are farmers. Beans, maize and potatoes are cultivated both for subsistence and commercial purposes. The people mainly occupy themselves with farming, cattle rearing, hunting and the tapping of raffia wine. Some men and women among them are traders.

The Mbum

Henry K. Jick and Andrew T.Ngeh in “Globalization and Tradition Non-verbal Communication Symbols of Mbum Land: Issues, Dilemmas and Challenges” have written that, “Wimum migrated from the upper Benue River in the North of Cameroon (116). They are known as the Tikar and other historical accounts hold that they were remnants of the Kanem Bornu Empire. The oral traditional history traces the origion of the Mbum to a place called Kimi, around the Adamawa Highlands of North Cameroon. Jick and Ngeh cite Talla Ngarka’s *The Wimum People of Donga Mantung Before the Coming of the Europeans* and write that, “the word Mbum comes from Mbu which means base, below or bottom. They state that the meaning of that word Mbu geographically connected to the low land area from where the Mbum migrated up to the Nkambe Plateau.

Margo Fransen in *A grammar of Limbum, Grassfield Bantu Language spoken in the North West province of Cameroon*, “the people call themselves Wimum, their language Limbum, Li means language and Limbum means Mbum language . Wimum , means Mbum people, wi meaning people’ (21). Mbum refers to the territory occupied by the people and also the people of that land. Their main occupation is farming and cattle rearing. They are also hunters, weavers, tappers and businessmen and women. These activities form the basis for their literary creativity since they are primarily an oral people.

Conceptualization

For this study to be properly comprehended, it is important to define some key concepts. These terms are proverbs, development and oral tradition.

Bernth Lindfors in “The Blind Men and the Elephant” in his comments on Chinua Achebe’s proverbs has said that “proverbs are perhaps too slippery to be grasped by one hand, no matter how dexterous that hand might be” (60). Peter Grzybek in “Proverbs” *Simple Forms: An Encyclopaedia of Simple Text-types in Lore and Literature* has it that :“there is no generally accepted definition which covers all specifics of the proverbial genre” (22). Wolfgang Mieder in *Proverbs Are Never out of Season: Popular Wisdom in Modern Age* writes: “ A proverb is a short generally known statement of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation(24).The above definition states the character and function of a

proverb which is shortness, and ability to move from one generation to the other, transmitting moral values, wisdom and truth.

On his part, Henry Kah Jick in *Folklore and National Development: Kom and Bakweri Proverbs* has observed that, "The word proverb has suffered from the multiplicity of definitions. Most writers on proverbs seem to know what a proverb is but none is able to provide a generally accepted definition that will silence criticism. An attempt to provide a razor-sharp line of demarcation between the proverb, proverbial expressions and other aphorisms only complicates the definition of the proverb (20). But in his *Standpoints on African Orature* .Nol Alembong defines a proverb as, "a gnomic or metaphorical statement accepted and used by a community as an expression of truth or wisdom"(131).

According to Walter Rodney in his *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, development refers to "increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well being"(9). Jick throws more light on the concept of development in relation oral literature when he says:

we set out in this essay to attempt to show how proverbs , a subset of folklore, contribute effectively to national development bearing in mind that proverbs express the philosophy of a people....We contend here that if we are to achieve the feat or phenomenon called development in whatever colour, size, shape, or by any other label in addition to what we commonly refer to in Cameroon as 'national development', 'economic development', 'cultural', 'political', or 'democratic development' this must begin from the mind.(24)

Simon Gikandi in Encyclopedia of African Literature writes that, "oral tradition is something passed on through the spoken word, and because it is based on the spoken language, it comes to life only in a living community"(580). The implication here is that where community life is absent oral tradition is absent. From the perspective of Jan Vansina in his *Oral Tradition as history*, oral tradition refers to "messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation"(27). Though these definitions relate to other areas in the academic discipline, they also highlight an area that is addressed in oral literature: its dependence on live performance and a living, memory and the spoken word to survive.

Statement of the Problem.

Many have thought of oral literature only as a thing of the past which is outdated and cannot contribute to the advancement of humanity. Such are the views of scholars like Grahame Clarke, a leading English prehistorian of his generation who saw Africa as " a cultural museum in which archaic cultural traditions... continued to adapt to ecological change and even on occasions to display idiosyncratic variations without contributing to the main course of human progress" (qtd in Middleton et al (181). But Walter Ong has contended that writing from the beginning did not reduce orality but enhanced it, making possible to organize the 'principle' or constituents of oratory into a scientific art "(9). Ong's observation is that written literature is a recent development in human history. The contention here is that oral literature exists in African oral societies and responds to the realities of the changing times due to its dynamic character. The problem here is that many have not believed it continues to serve given enormous scientific and technological innovations.

Research Question

Given the above problematic, the following research questions are crucial to the understanding of this paper.

Since oral literature can only come to life during performance, how can it be preserved so that it continues to serve?

How can its existence be sustained given that it is rooted in the distant past and its only medium of transmission is the mouth?

How can the contemporary society be spurred to the signification of its oratures?

Hypothesis

In view of both the statement of the problem and research questions raised, this paper is built around the hypothetical contention that while oral literature is rooted in a distant past and its only medium of transmission is the mouth, it is still a relevant instrument in addressing social concerns. Nso and Mbum proverbs can be preserved if we investigate and identify their relevance to development in a multicultural context. Oral literature provides the society with a panacea for its social, moral, political and economic concerns and by collecting and documenting its various genres; society can be rescued from most of its problems.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The proverbs selected for this study are presented as closely as possible to the way they were originally performed by the performers who also acted as informants. Some of the data was first collected when the researcher was writing her PhD thesis titled, “The Performance and Relevance of Oral Tradition in a Contemporary Context: The Study of Nso and Mbum Proverbs of the North West Region of Cameroon”. She also collected some of the proverbs in 2017 when she was writing a paper titled “The Artistic Performance and Social Significance of Nso Incantations”. In order to attain the objectives of this study ecocriticism and new historicist critical criteria were employed in the interpretation, analysis and evaluation of Nso and Mbum proverbs. Consequently, these critical and analytical tools were employed in order to ascertain the relevance of Nso and Mbum proverbs to development in the modern context.

The word ecocriticism originated from the articulations of the African scholar, Cheryll Glotfelty who coined it to refer to a theory that examines the way nature in general is presented in literary works. Figures like Harold Fromm, Lawrence Buell and Michael Branch are prominent in ecocritical discourse. Though ecocriticism has influenced other critical perspectives like new historicism, Marxist critical theories and feminism, it has some basic tenets that underlined the discourse. It is principally concerned with the relationship between man and all that is natural in his environment and how this is presented in literary works whether written or spoken. This theory emphasizes the fact that plants, animals and other elements of nature and the ecosystem have and deserve their rightful place within the environment.

Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm define ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”(xviii) . Jelica Tosic in “Ecocriticism-Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and Environment” writes that “ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man’s relationship with his physical environment is reflected in literature” (qtd in Fondo, 97). Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature (spoken or written) and the natural environment from which it emanates. Through literary ecology, the study intends to explore the economic, social, cultural, and moral relevance of indigenous or traditional knowledge inherent in Nso and Mbum proverbs.

The new historicist approach to literary criticism emphasizes a literary text as a product of its milieu and moment. New historicism is the study of literature within a historical context. It is a mode of analysis in which history is seen as a form of writing; a discourse of language. According to Bonnie Klomp and Larry Stewart in *A Guide to Literary Criticism and Research*, the main propounders of this approach include: Michel Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt, Joseph Litvak and Louise Montrose among others. This literary criticism developed in the 1980’s largely in reaction to the text-based approach pursued by formalist critics who focused on a literary text but did not put an eye on history. M.H Abrams in *Glossary of Literary Terms* writes: New historicism conceives of a literary text as situated within the totality of the institutions, social practices and discoveries that constitute the culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text is interested as both a

product and a producer of cultural energies and codes (190-191). The proverbs studied here are coin from the background of the Nso and Mbum historical and natural environments.

Textual Analysis

Nso and Mbum proverbs emanate from the background of their various communities and incorporate all the ways of life of the people including their natural environments, socio-cultural, political, moral backgrounds and their ideological perspectives.

Proverbs and Socio-cultural Values

Nso and Mbum people see unity as an essential element in development. Some of the proverbs coined by the Nso and Mbum people bring out messages on the significance of communal life. An evaluation of their proverbs presents several instances in which the idea communalism is clearly illustrated. For example:

Nso: Wirdzə wir bi' wir.

Translation: A person is a person because of a person.

The above Nso proverb that is adorned with repetition puts emphasis on the inability of man to function in isolation. The proverb acquires significance in this multicultural context because it emanates from the Nso philosophy and ideology that see the other person as the centre of all development efforts made by any given community. The principal message that this proverb communicates is that members of the Nso contemporary society should consider others first for individualism and egocentric attitudes retard development.

The socio-cultural value that the proverb carves on the human psyche is quite enriching. It reminds Nso people to stay away from activities that impede a communal spirit among people without whom one's endeavours would be worthless and unprofitable. The poetic vibration in the performance is rendered by the lyric derived from the performer's repetition of the word *wir* "person". This repetition used to dress the above proverb renders the verbal expression a complete short long text which is dense and charged with a force that echoed the theme of communality and corporation in a distinct manner. It is through this use of lyricism that the memory sustains the message that contributes to the reinforcements of communality as a rich socio-cultural value on which the Nso oral community is anchored.

This Nso proverb arises out of the comprehensive and historical African world view based on the values of intense humanness, which embody respect, love, sharing and caring, courtesy, compassion and concern for others. This implies that among the Nso people one affirms his/her humanity through his/her affirmation of others. Through its emphasis on humanness the proverb brings out the pedagogic innovations of the Nso oral culture thus, highlighting cooperative learning and interdependence. This sense of communion as emphasized by the repetition of the word *wir* "person" presents each element of the Nso community as a member of a whole. The proverb illustrates a deep sense of Kinship, which stands as a strong force in Nso cultural life.

Consequently, belonging to a community constitutes the very fabric and core of Nso culture. The implication is that among the Nso people no successful development can be carried out without the efforts of others. Closely linked to the above proverb that centres on the importance of communality among contemporary Nso are the following:

Nso: Wir e tan Nkarsi e wovrijiwuyo' kerashisho

Translation: A person lacked friends and pretended that he did not need any.

Nso: A dzewiryika la wir?

Translation: what can a person do without a person?

Like the Nso people and Mbum believe that:

Mbum: Rdipli ke jermimngiku goote.

Translation: A river that travels alone meanders.

The performer of the above proverb text uses the image of the "river" that "meanders" because it "travels alone" to discourage those that are passive to team spirit. The images that

are used during performance define a communicative situation which acquires significance beyond what the object literary means. In the personification of the “river that meanders travels alone” the image is meaningless without its social and natural context because their transition from nature to social context involves a transportation of meaning. Mbum people use this performance to reinforce team spirit, unity and collective efforts. Also, among the Nso people team spirit is seen as a crucial ingredient in every development endeavour as illustrated in the following performance:

Nso: Wirjevrinsu' ηgvønwu fəə fəŋgvən.

Translation: If one resents giving the land owner's share of what has been harvested, he/she should quit the farmland.

This performance enhances an aspect of Nso cultural practice whereby there is land owner identified as tarηgvən who gives out land for people to cultivate. Those to whom land has been given are expected to give a small quantity of what they harvest yearly to the tarηgvən. What is given out to the landowner is known in Nso oral culture as *nsu' ηgvən*. This expression as used in the performance is largely an exploration of the Nso socio-cultural and spiritual universe in an endeavour by the performer to bring to light fundamental world view that underlies the collective consciousness of the Nso person's life. The expression *nsu' ηgvən* defines the proverb as distinctively Nso as it celebrates this unique social practice that gives the performance a purely Nso flavour.

The researcher watched this performance live in Banten village during a meeting convened by the lineage head to caution some members who do not participated in the clean up sessions organized every month to keep the road clean as part of the village development projects. When she stood up to speak, she danced a few steps while singing and said the above proverb, thanked the village head for giving her the opportunity to speak and sat down. In this case, we observe that the verbal context represents only one element in a complete opera-like performance, which combines words, music and dance. Though the verbal element seems predominate, the actual delivery and movement of the element of dancing to both performer and audience enhances the aesthetic effectiveness of the occasion.

Proverbs and Moral Values

Nso and Mbum societies are closely knit communities and, to maintain an orderly system of moral relations, they fit into John Beattie's opinion when he writes in *Other Cultures* that, “people have to be subjected to some degree of compulsion. They cannot all the time do exactly as they like for often self-interest may incite behaviour incompatible for the common good, and so it is, that in every society some kind of restraints of people's behaviour are acknowledged and on the whole adhered to.” (1). Consequently, in the Nso and Mbum oral communities, performance functions as the means to safeguard the dignity of the individual and the morality of the community as a whole. The moral values of Nso and Mbum oral literature are immense. Proverbs emanating from their societies reinforce moral values such as patience, honesty, humility and self control. Among the Mbum people patience is encouraged through performance thus:

Mbtt ce eka' yemj□□ c□rc□r e kuuye né btetirηwe.

Translation: A goat that chews in haste chews caterpillars.

This performance is used in the Mbum oral community to encourage people to be patient. The proverb is relevant to the lives and moral well being of the people from the background and understanding that impatience has negative effects on the individual and the community as a whole. Patience is an important tool in social cohesion. The primary factor in any development effort is the morality of the actors. Man is a moral agent through the effective and appropriate use of his primary tools which are his reason and free will. The performer's intent in this proverb is to expose the negative effects of impatience, so as to instill patience in the audience. This proverb is said among the Mbum people to advise people especially the

youth to journey through life at their pace. It is also used to caution those children or students who envy things their parents or care takers cannot afford. The image of the “caterpillar” is used to illustrate the undesirable consequences of indulging in a race of life which one’s natural strength cannot withstand. The performance further discourages unnecessary comparison and competition which are breeding grounds for envy, impatience and jealousy.

The performer uses the images of the “goat” and the “caterpillar” to enhance the effectiveness of the message. The idea in this proverb is that patience is an important ingredient in advancement of moral values. Oral tradition in oral communities thus becomes an effective communicative medium since it employs images that are understood within contexts of the Mbum cultural and environmental surroundings. In addition to the above proverbs is that which says:

Ce pyáayikeryùtée, w□w□ á nõhùmo’ sir ka’

Translation: A pear tree bares many fruits but they do not get ripe on the same day.

Performance offers a forum through which a piece of advice can be expressed more vividly and forcefully than it could be done through other media. The performer uses the image of “a pear tree” in this proverb to advise the members of the Mbum community to be patient. Oral literature responds to the needs of its immediate environment. In fast changing societies like Nso and Mbum which are affected by scientific and technological innovations, appropriate moral actions need to be encouraged. Impatience may trigger ills such as occultism, which has a lot of negative consequences on the society. It creates in youths the desire to be like others, to own things that will attract public attention but which may lead to untimely deaths and death is not an element of development with respect to youths. Patience can reduce social ills such as stealing, killing and prostitution.

The Nso community encourages humility and self-control with proverbs such as:

Viku vi yur a dzə e wirve a ker ñgwasanñ e tavsì shu.

Translation: cocoyams only itch in the mouths of those who have maize in their bans.

This performance reveals two elements of the Nso culinary tradition, which are: cocoyam and maize. Among the Nso people, these crops do not have the same values. The performer uses the technique of contrast to educate members on the significance of humility and self-control which help people to avoid the temptation of envying what they do not have.

The idea in this proverb is that those who do not have “maize” in their bans; seen from the perspective of the Nso oral culture are deprived of life. Maize in this context stands for those things that are crucial to us but are not always affordable due to financial constraints. The Nso people eat maize in different forms. They use it to make corn flour which is used in preparing corn fufu; their staple food, they fry it and eat, boil, make pap and corn chaff.

The performer here seeks to sustain a morally stable Nso community. Through the parallel he draws between “maize” and “cocoyam”, he encourages patience. His opinion here is that people should learn to accept what they have and make use of it. In this way envy and jealousy will reduce from our society since these ills results from out constant desire to own what we cannot afford. The contrast between “maize”and “cocoyam” brings out the Nso environment. Its climate favours the cultivation of the above-mentioned crops. These crops enrich the language of performance while providing the performer with efficient pedagogic tools.

The above proverbs bring out the relationship between literature and the natural environment which the ecocritic seeks in literary works whether written or spoken. The ecosystem of Nso and Mbum is brought out through the use of items like cocoyam, goats, sheep, pear trees, maize and caterpillars which help to define the context of performance as they give the proverbs Nso and Mbum distinct flavors. Fondo quotes Tosic who writes that, “ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how man’s relation with his physical environment is reflected in literature” (97). The performers in the above

proverb texts make use of elements from their natural environments and this illustrates the relationship between literature and the environment which is the concern of ecocritics.

Proverbs and Economic Values

Mbum: Nje ám ce yañ mbor, e loti a du a ryε Nyù e nε e bo fa ye yu gé fa yi ñù buu enεe du bye.

Translation: A lazy hungry man went to see God whom he thinks has everything edible but he gave him seed to go and plant.

The idea that the above Mbum proverb upholds is that we solve problems by teaching methods of acquiring solutions. The proverb focuses on sustainability, which entails meeting today's needs without compromising those of tomorrow. The advice in this proverb is that food should not be given to the hungry for it makes them economic units of consumption while "seed" transforms them into economic units of production through hard work.

Nso and Mbum proverbs respond to the realities of the contemporary society for the education they promote is in conformity to the pattern of life in these local communities. The man in the proverb demonstrates a physical manifestation of the inhibitive negative life pattern, which paralyzes the economy. From the perspective of this proverb, laziness and dependence on the fruits of other people's labour can cripple a society. It lays emphasis on hard work and suggests that the solution to hunger and poverty is to change the poor and hungry citizens into investors. The proverb encourages the Mbum youths and the Cameroonian citizens in general to look at hunger as an opportunity for investment. The image of the "seed" is a metaphor of hard work, which calls on all Cameroonians especially the youths to drop the traditional habits of complaining and waiting for food and jobs to fall from space and take up their farm tools. The proverb is emphatic on the fact that dependency and laziness have negative effects on agriculture, which is the largest source of employment and also a significant contributor to the emergence of the Cameroon economy. The proverb states the opinion of the Mbum people on the fight against poverty, hunger and unemployment.

The proverb highlights the manifestation of poverty through hunger, ignorance, vulnerability, insecurity and denial of dignity, which make the person to go and beg. These expressions of deprivation within the context of Mbum oral tradition provide opportunities for the elders and creative minds to coin proverbs that propose a participatory approach to poverty reduction strategies. The fact that God, who is believed to have everything edible, as the proverb states, gives "seed to go and plant" is proof of the fact that even God himself is against the act of begging and dependence. The proverb looks at the concept of poverty, its manifestation and solution from the perspective of the Mbum philosophy. It reveals that one of the most significant strategies in poverty reduction is "seed to go and plant".

God's reaction can undoubtedly be seen as a mockery and a warning to lazy youths who believe that the solution to their problems is in the hands of others. The idea is that hard work restores dignity and that begging and dependence on the labour of others can bring disgrace and humiliation to the "lazy hungry man". The attitude of the "lazy hungry man" reveals that laziness is one of the factors affecting agricultural productivity and development. It makes food supply to be frequently inadequate to meet the needs of the people.

This performance illustrates the fact that the Mbum oral people are not ignorant of the global cry of population pressure, which leads to food shortages. According to C.C Webster and P.N Wilson,

The Food and Agriculture Organization estimated in 1969 that the population of the developing countries as a whole was growing at the rate of 2.5 to 3.0 percent per annum, which indicated that it would be more than doubled at the end of the century. To feed this expanding population vastly more food will be needed and much of this will have to come by way of larger yields from land already in cultivation.(97)

Mbum oral tradition is not passive to global concerns on the issues of food shortages and population pressure. The situation may be different in some areas due to advanced technology and innovations in food cultivation methods but the average African still suffers from malnutrition and food shortage.

The idea that the image of the “seed” and God’s response to the beggar pilot is relevant to Webster and Wilson’s opinion when they write:

A great improvement in efficiency and productivity of agriculture is essential in most of the tropical developing countries if their rapidly increasing populations are to be provided with adequate food, employment and a better standard of living. Nearly 70 percent of the people of these countries currently depend for a living on agriculture which, except in a few territories with substantial oil or mineral production, accounts on average for almost one-third of the gross domestic product and for rather more than half the total value of exports. Hence, agricultural development is not only needed to produce more food for domestic consumption, but also to provide exports to earn foreign exchange for the purchase of resources which must be imported for industrial development.(99)

Farming forms an intrinsic part of the economic activities of Mbum people and is considerably influenced by other elements of culture such as human qualities. What this proverb communicates is that agriculture and the possibility for its development are greatly influenced by human resources. Their argument is that agriculture be taken seriously for it is a lasting solution to social, cultural and economic problems plaguing a large portion of the African population in the modern era.

The Nso people highlight the importance of hard work and commitment with these proverbs:
Nsayyò’ yiika’ là yii.

Translation: The soil does not make empty promises.

A wánlè nsùmkérlavwùn à sùmé, bosì lumèn.

Translation: It is by owning a house and a farm that a boy becomes a man.

Jiyyò’ dzè wà’ wir.

Translation: Hunger is no one’s age mate.

Oral performance cannot be analyzed in isolation since context is what provides a grammar of values by which the ideas expressed by the performer can be measured and evaluated. The audience observes how the images in these proverbs operate within the larger lexicon of rhetoric built into the Nso specific context of performance before attaching economic meaning to them. The above Nso proverbs, like that of the Mbum, emphasize hard work and commitment as economic norms essential in the advancement of the contemporary Nso oral community.

In the first Nso proverb, the performer makes use of personification. The “soil” is seen in this performance as a living being that can be trusted. This performance encourages members of the Nso community especially the youths to believe in the “soil”. The image of the “soil” and the expression “does not make empty promises” communicate the fact that those who work hard by tilling the “soil” always succeed.

In the second Nso proverb above, the performer employs the images of a “house” and a “farm” to encourage hard work and responsible socio-economic actions. In the third proverb, the performer sees hunger as a threat to peace.

Context plays a significant role in performance for it triggers semantic elasticity. In the Mbum performance analyzed above, the performer uses the image of “the lazy hungry man”. The description of the man as “lazy” and “hungry” brings to mind the image of an irresponsible person who can possibly pose as a social plague to his community.

In the performance of the last Nso proverb cited earlier, the performer sees hunger as “no one’s age mate”. Both the Nso and Mbum oral traditions perceive “hunger” as a disturbing

factor that brings discomfort. They are engaged in a variety of economic activities such as farming, tapping, weaving and cattle rearing which we deduced from performance like the following:

Nso: Bvəynjii-ii shēmngoo wùn à ye loŋ, e kfār̀kikú’.

Translation: A sheep that moves with goats eats raw cocoyam.

The social ills that exist come under the sharp eye of talented observers of nature who engage their minds cognitively in order to give moral instructions to their youths and warn them against actions that lead to unacceptable conduct. The “sheep”, the “goat” and “cocoyam” are metaphorically employed to vividly point out the outcome of bad company. The Nso oral mind sees nature as a rich source from which didactic materials are tapped to facilitate moral instruction. These three images are realistic depictions of the Nso specific natural environment. The images demonstrate that nature persistently and profoundly structures the way talented oral minds in the Nso society perceive and conceive what they feel about the world. Nature helps to sustain the socio-ethical philosophy of the Nso people.

This proverb is said to advise someone who keeps company with those who care very little about their cherished positive characteristics and moral values. It can also be performed to warn and caution those who admire and keep company with those who are richer than they are and own things their limited financial resources can neither afford nor provide. From the perspective of the Nso observer, sheep do not eat raw cocoyam, whereas goats do. But when a sheep frequently associates with goats, it learns to eat what they eat. The metaphors of the “goat”, the “sheep” and “raw cocoyam” reveal that nature provides a short and accessible text to the cognitive mind of the oral artist whose principal concern is the moral product, which the community depends on for its continuity and development. The Nso people practice farming and cultivate cocoyam, which they use to feed their households and sell some to raise money. They also rear animals like goats and sheep. The images in the above proverb are therefore communicative signs that convey meaning from the live performer to the live audience in a live performance within the context of Nso community. It further instructs youths and whoever the proverb is spoken to, to avoid copying negative attitudes that impede development in their community.

The performer’s language presents a difficulty, which Nso people who cultivate “cocoyam” may encounter. The performance reveals that goats and sheep may eat “raw cocoyam” thereby leading to poor yield and a decrease in the farmer’s income. This expression takes the audience to other issues that are common in the Nso community and most areas in the Bamenda grass field such as the farmer-grazer conflict. It is a common phenomenon in Nso to find farmers complaining of cattle that have eaten their farm produce. Within the context of the Mbum oral community, oral performance communicates the people’s economic activities as deduced from proverbs such as:

A Ka’ bu’ ŋgo’ reŋarkoka’ banəbsiŋve bi jy

If you dig termite and cannot catch birds will eat everything.

Wekàràasimré, mikuko’ à bta’.

If you direct a yam tendril it will climb on the stake.

Wékàtəe too ŋgòmbenjepnfe’ kàfu’ yi bur njepnshe.

If you do not support a plantain in time, it will be pushed down by wind.

The Mbum, like the Nso talented oral artists, observe culture and nature keenly to coin proverbs that reinforce their economic activities. The performance of these Mbum proverbs among the Mbum people caution members of their community on the negative consequences of negligence. The images employed by the performer evoke the Mbum ecosystem and how it is related to man. Wind is a threat to the cultivation of plantain while negligence is a threat to the cultivation of “yam”. The performance provides a clear picture of how living organisms interact with each other and their environment. The images of the “termites” and the “birds”

illustrate, that the environment of an organism is made up of all conditions that affect it. This includes other living organisms and the physical surrounding. For example, birds feed on termites and man feeds on both.

The second proverb which is performed using the image of the “yam tendril” is metaphorically directed to parents. The image of the “yam tendril” and the expression “will climb on the stake” are metaphors, which highlight the indispensable role of the parent in child upbringing. Like a yam tendril that can only climb on the stake if directed, children and youths in general can only become useful elements of their community if they acquire the right instruction. Farming and the observation of the characteristics of crops can provide the performer with the right language. This implies that in oral cultures like those of Nso and Mbum people, the performer’s language is shaped by the natural environment and its economic activities, thus making oral performance more relevant to the lives of the local people than other development ideologies

The third proverb that is performed using the image of the “plantain” conveys a message that is linked to the second one, but puts emphasis on when the activity of supporting must be carried out. A plantain can only resist wind if it has what to lean on in time. The image of the “wind” signifies the forces of destruction that readily act against what is good if it is not properly taken care of.

The images of the “termite” and “birds”, “plantain” and “wind” and that of the “yam tendril” are communicative signs that bring out the distinctiveness of the Mbum natural environment in relation to farming. Expressions such as “dig termite”, “birds will eat everything”, “support a plantain in time”, “pushed down by wind”, and “direct a yam tendril” demonstrate that culture, nature and orature are inextricably connected. For example, termites and birds are some of nature’s gifts to the Mbum people. Digging termites for food and for economic purposes are some of the activities that keep them busy. It is a delicacy and very important in their culinary tradition especially during special occasions such as cultural exhibitions. As communicative signs these images identify a Mbum person as one who is hard working, busy as he or she carries out activities such as digging termite, supporting plantains because of wind and directing yam tendril to climb on the stake. The people are thus advised using these metaphors to carry out their farming activities with diligence in order to realize good yield. This study sees the ideas expressed in these proverbs as what makes oral tradition relevant to the modern setting. The Mbum people are farmers. They cultivate yam and plantain for economic and domestic purposes.

The use of the conditional “if” in the three Mbum proverbs above is a warning against unfriendly activities to the natural environment and the neglect of activities that enhance productivity. Within the framework of the Mbum proverb discourse, the images that the performers create become strong educative tools for youths who are by these advised to concentrate and work hard. The proverb texts and the economic practice become constituent units in the Mbum signifying system. The images act as anchors linking members to the dominant ways of thinking within society. They further draw their attention to appropriate cultural patterns in the practice of agriculture and what it takes to realize good yield. Thus, if they concentrate on activities such as directing “yam tendril”, supporting “plantains in time” and digging “termites” and knowing how to catch them, their economy will emerge. It is from this perspective that Mbum oral tradition become relevant to development in a contemporary context.

The images employed by the performer during performance grow out of their ecological environment and are thus relevant to the pattern of life as lived in their historical setting. New historicism is used here to illustrate the link between history and literature. Greenblatt has pointed out that “New historicism is concerned with historical context which includes a variety of elements...such as economic, political, cultural, religious, and other

considerations". His emphasis is that context must not be taken for granted but be examined closely. In the analysis of the proverbs selected for this study both the socio-cultural, historical and economic contexts have helped to identify the performance as specifically Nso and Mbum though the messages therein have universal value.

Conclusions

The study reveals that though oral literature comes from a distant past and only come to live in a living community where it is only realized through performance, it is relevant to development in this era that is characterized by scientific discoveries and technological innovations. It contributes to development in that it focuses on the mind of the individual. The relevance of this study to development lies in the fact that the right people with right decision draw relevant development strategies.

This paper has examined the proverbs collected from Nso and Mbum and illustrated how they effectively transmit diverse cultural values of the people under reference thus providing them with a vision for the future. Proverbs as conceptualized by Jick in relation to development is still significant in the lives of their producers in this modern era for he maintains that: "culture is the basis for development and that science and technology are only its products that education stabilizes, develops and transmits (45).

Proverbs constitute a very important instrument for living and continued mutual and harmonious existence of the Nso and Mbum oral communities. The principal objective of this paper has been to demonstrate how oral literature can be exploited as a relevant tool in development. The study met its objectives as it illustrated that the proverbs selected for this study reinforce socio-cultural values such as communalism, peace, unity and cooperation which are essential ingredients for development.

The analysis also revealed that proverbs can aid in development as they enhance and reinforce moral values. They sustain moral qualities such as humility, honesty, respect, self control, love, self esteem, patience and selflessness. Without these human qualities among a people, their society will be void of any form of development for meaningful development depends on the quality of the mind.

The study has further illustrated that the proverbs collected for this study transmit and sustain economic values and activities like hard work, farming, cattle rearing, tapping and weaving which reveal that agriculture is their main source of live. Tala validates this fact in his *Orature in Africa* when he indicates thus: "Oral literature in African languages is naturally, the oldest and most predominant kind of literature in Africa. This is so because its creators and users are, generally speaking, non-literate, rural and agricultural" (5). The performers employ images from their cultural and natural environments to reinforce these values which contribute to sustainable development. Therefore, oral literature of the Nso and Mbum oral people, which is a summary of their collective experiences contain valuable indigenous knowledge systems which can contribute in reinforcing human qualities that can enhance development in their communities.

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