

THE FUNCTIONS OF PROVERBS IN YORUBA FOLKTALES

John M. Vlach
Folklore Institute
Indiana University

African folktales and proverbs have usually been collected and studied as two separate and unrelated genres. This procedure is followed to give individual attention to both forms in order to achieve a solid understanding of the particular genre. However appropriate this approach might seem, the separation of proverb from folktale in many instances can obscure the nature of African folklore. Very often one finds folktales which contain proverbial expressions or which are derived from proverbs. Thus proverbs may account for the content and intent of some folktales or vice versa. Whatever the case, the two genres need to be studied together. Such an approach has two advantages. First, it places the proverb in a "natural" context, allowing it to be studied in one of the ways in which it normally occurs in the culture.¹ Second, it provides a format for inquiry into the cloudy area of genre overlap. The answers gained by following this approach will hopefully yield added insights into proverbs, folktales, and oral tradition.

Very rarely have folklorists probed the relationship between the proverb and the folktale. An early theoretical discussion of the proverb's functions was made by Archer Taylor, the noted proverb and riddle specialist. He was mainly concerned with the question of proverb origin and he observed that proverbs could develop from tales: "The fable which can be positively recognized as the source of a proverb appears in its proverbial dress as an allusion, intelligible to those familiar with the story."² But Taylor also mentions that tales might also spring from proverbs: "Whenever the scanty narrative content of the fable is summed up in a proverb, we are justified in suspecting that the fable is secondary in origin."³ Thus, he concluded that the relationship of the proverb and the folktale was "particularly close." But even before Taylor's landmark study, the relationship of the proverb and the tale had been noted by H. Chatelain as early as 1894. He observed that Kimbundu proverbs are closely related to anecdotes, while a proverb is frequently an anecdote in a nutshell.⁴ Others who have spoken most recently to this point include George Herzog, Jack Berry, E. C. Rowlands, and Ruth Finnegan. Herzog said that among the Jabo of Liberia: "The word for proverb is dá lè kpa. The same word is used for parable.... Thus, the word applies to a proverb, or a parable, or both as a unit."⁵ Berry mentions briefly that proverbs are used for many things but that in particular they function as literary devices.⁶ Rowlands exposed the use of proverbs in the writing of essays by Yoruba students. He however does specifically, although briefly, tie the proverb to the tale: "The association of proverbs and moral tales is, in fact, very close in the Yoruba tradition, a proverb being normally used to round off and drive home the point made in a tale."⁷ Finally, Finnegan comments at length:

The literary significance of proverbs in Africa is also brought out by their close connection with other forms of oral literature. This is sometimes apparent in the local terminology, for proverbs are not always distinguished by a special term from other categories of verbal art. The Nyanja mwambi, for instance, refers to story, riddle, or proverb, the Ganda olugero means, among other things, a

saying, a story, a proverb and a parable, and the Mongo bokolo is used of all poetic expression including fable, proverb, poetry, and allegory. This overlap in terms is fairly common in Bantu languages and also sometimes occurs in West Africa too: the Limba mboro refers to story, riddle, and parable as well as to sayings which we might term proverbs, while the Fulani tindol can mean not only a popular story but also a proverb or maxim.⁸

We can conclude from all of these remarks that Taylor's supposition about the closeness of proverb and tale can be supported strongly by African folklore. Thus, there is a basis for the joint analysis of the folktale and the proverb.

The folktales of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria have provided the materials for this study. An early collection was published in 1894 by A. B. Ellis⁹ but most folklore studies on Yoruba traditions have been concentrated on Ifa divination, hunter's *ijala*, and other poetic forms. The Yoruba are then not as well represented in folktale collections as are other African ethnic groups.¹⁰ However, I was able to locate a total of 107 Yoruba tales printed in English (there may be many more). Of this number, thirty stories contained proverbs, proverbial expressions or allusions. There is then a sizeable corpus of material to be analyzed.

Since the proverb is a short, fixed-phrase genre, while the folktale is larger and looser in its construction; the viewpoint of this paper will consider the role of the proverb in the folktale rather than the importance of the folktale for the proverb. For the most part, discussion of proverb-tale relationships will be concerned with narrative and esthetic characteristics. In order to clarify how the proverb contributes to the folktale, the following functions may be helpful.

I. NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS

1. Introduction
2. Ornamentation
3. Textual Clarification
4. Conclusion

II. DIDACTIC FUNCTIONS

1. Moralization
2. Socialization

Primarily there are two groups of functions: I) Narrative and II) Didactic. Group I is concerned with the way that the proverb is used in the text of the story, while Group II focuses on the social significance which proverbs lend to tales. Both of these categories are further divided into more specialized functions. Rarely are any of these functions mutually exclusive and hence proverbs can operate simultaneously in several ways.

NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS

Narrative functions are textual. Their significance is thus determined totally within the context of the words and phrases of the folktale. The placement of a proverb in the text of a tale in large part determines its narrative function. That is, proverbial expressions at the beginning of stories can easily be given introductory status, while those at the end of stories serve as conclusions. Textual clarification occurs most often as a mid-story or episodic summary to end digressive elements in folktales. A proverb serves this function in the central body of the text. The function

of ornamentation is constantly in operation as proverbs are highly stylized phrases and always possess artistic diction.

1. Introduction

The introductory function of proverbs is artistically rendered in a tale by J. Omotosho Aremu called "Trees." He begins with two proverbs:

The elders say, "The absent cannot answer 'yes' when called," that is, silence to one's name means absence, and that "Where the wind is so fierce that it sweeps away a whole cauldron of wet maize starch, a pinch of cassava flour does not have the slightest opportunity."¹¹

He then continues to relate a story of the great trees -- teak, palm, walnut, agbayun and akan -- and the lowly grass. A flood was coming and the grass was sure that he would be washed away. The trees, however, in boasting of their great strength, criticized the grass for its lack of confidence. But it was the trees who fell before the storm and the flood, while the grass remained because it bowed to the forces of nature.

It is apparent that the opening statement of this tale alludes directly to several topics which appear in the story. With the first proverb, the narrator introduces the themes of silence and absence. In the text of the story the powerful trees are destroyed so that they cannot answer when called. They are absent and their silence is testimony to that fact. The second proverb mentions strength and weakness with a comparison of a "whole cauldron of wet maize starch" and "a pinch of cassava flour." These objects parallel the strong trees and the weak grass who are the dramatis personae of the tale. Further, the element of a storm (wind) is mentioned in the proverb, and it alludes directly to the flood in the story. Thus, the proverbial introduction foreshadows the events in the story and even adds irony because the second proverb leads one to believe that if the strong are lost then the weak must also fall. However, in the story, the grass is able to survive because of its weakness.

In a tale by Ayodele Ogundipe called "The Ten Ridge Farm" she introduces her story with the apothegm: "It is our tongue that destroys us."¹³ The story is developed around the fox and hare cycle. It tells of a time when there was a famine and the fox went to a medicine man to procure some juju to help him get food. The magic was done and any animal who counted the ten ridges the fox had made in the middle of the road fell down dead. But the hare would only count to nine and then say, "nine and one." The fox, in anger, counted from one to ten to show the hare how to count properly. Forgetting the magic, the fox was struck dead. He had been destroyed by his tongue as the proverb had warned. The proverb thus in an introductory capacity can establish the content of its accompanying folktale.

2. Ornamentation

The ornamental function is in operation whenever a proverb is used. But perhaps the effect is best in evidence when a proverb is spoken by a character in a folktale. E. Ojo Arewa reports two stories told by Yoruba chiefs. One of the stories is about the tortoise and the leopard:

The tortoise and the leopard were friends. One day, when the leopard was hungry, he met the tortoise who was

carrying a heavy sack. The dog was inside the sack carried by the tortoise. Some time later, there was a quarrel between the tortoise and the leopard. As the leopard wanted to know the reason for the unusually hostile attitude of the tortoise, the tortoise put down the load he was carrying, started running away from the leopard saying, "I am not possessed by the devil; the burden on my head is possessed by the devil." The leopard opened the sack, found the dog and killed him. (my italics) ¹³

The proverb here appears right at the climax of the action. This statement by the tortoise delays the final action, thus creating a tension before the end of the tale. Also, placing a proverb in the mouth of the tortoise in place of regular prose adds artistic diction to the story. The ornamental effect of the proverb is then esthetic on several levels. It contributes to the emotional as well as the textual content of the folktale.

Another example of ornamentation appears in a tale entitled "Famine in the Animal Kingdom." When the fox observes the tortoise and "killer" plotting to kill him, he says: "When a Greek meets a Greek, there comes a tug of war."¹⁴ This "borrowed" proverb adds formularized diction to the story. The narrator could simply have stated that the fox was in trouble. But instead he took up the proverb as a device with which to add imagery to his story. Since a proverb is a sentence unit, usually composed in specialized language, it stands ready to be inserted into folktales for decorative purposes. Hence, the proverb becomes the embroidery of the folktale. Its brilliant threads can add richness and texture to the plain cloth of a story.

3. Textual Clarification

Textual clarification is a function served by proverbs which usually occur in the main body of the tale. Again, like ornamentation, this function can be operative wherever and whenever a proverb appears. However, clarification can sometimes be singled out at the primary reason for a proverb's use.

In a story of a beautiful girl's stubborn desire to marry a stranger, there is a lengthy description of her firm determination:

Girls that are too choosy always wind up marrying good-for-nothing make-shifts. No sooner did she set eyes on the handsome stranger than she decided she was going to marry him. Her parents endeavored to keep her on the right path, but she was adamant. "Don't marry a stranger who you don't even know," they advised. "You know nothing about this man. You do not know who he is or where he is from." The girl asked her parents not to be unduly worried and to stop plotting and planning to marry her off. She was going to marry the stranger because her place was beside him, just as a palm kernel's place was with cooked beans. (my italics) ¹⁵

The apothegm at the end of the description of the girl's attitude is an apt summary of her feelings. This word-picture conveys a sense of insep-

arable closeness. The very appropriate food imagery shows the audience that the girl cannot be deterred by the good advice of her parents. Once the strength of her resolve is demonstrated, the tale can then progress. The proverb thus brings a conclusion to this brief aside in the tale by compressing several sentences into a few image-laden words. The point that the girl's decision is final is thus made abundantly clear.

Another instance of the textual clarification given to folktales by proverbs occurs in a pourquoi story "Why the Ajao (flying fox) Remained Unburied."¹⁶ In this tale the ajao dies and his neighbors try to call his relatives so that he can be buried. They call the birds, but the birds claim that the ajao has no feathers and therefore he is not of their family. The neighbors then call the rats. However, the rats also refused to take him since he had no tail. The ajao was thus left unburied. There is no proverb in the tale text but there is constant allusion to a Yoruba proverb: "The ajao is neither rat nor bird."¹⁷ There is most likely a very intimate relationship here between the proverb and the tale with one genre being the parent of the other. However, our main question concerns the effect of the proverb on the story. The many textual references to the rats' and birds' rejection of burial responsibilities can be anticipated by the preknowledge that the ajao belongs to neither group. The audience thus has a predetermined plot outline of the tale to which they can mentally refer while the narrator tells the folktale. The certainty of the tale's conclusion does not create a lack of interest in the story. Rather, it encourages avid attention by the audience as they can listen forward to the ending which they consider most appropriate. Thus, textual clarification can enhance narrative esthetics inasmuch as the audience can respond more enthusiastically to the narrator.

4. Conclusion

The function which proverbs most often serve in Yoruba folktales is that of conclusion. In nearly sixty-five percent of the tales where proverbs appear, they were used as the concluding statement. A concluding proverb is usually the last line of the tale, but often it is separated from the text of the story and employed as an extra-textual comment or summary (this may only be an editorial ploy). Thus, the proverb physically ends the tale as well as summarizing what has gone on before.

In the story of "The Wrestling Contest Between the Cat and the Tortoise" a very interesting tale of competition is developed. The cat and the tortoise were friends, so the tortoise asked the cat how he always managed to win his wrestling matches. The cat revealed that he had two secret jujus. The tortoise then had two jujus made for himself and challenged the cat to a match. Their first two rounds ended in draws because of the offsetting magic. The tortoise then decided to use his two jujus together for the third round. However, the cat had a third juju which the tortoise did not know about and so he beat the tortoise very soundly. The last line in the story has a pourquoi story ring: "And ever afterwards the tortoise has taken good care to avoid both the cat and the wrestling ring." But the tale ends, "If you have a friend do not try to fight him, even if you think you know his secrets."¹⁸ This proverb summarizes the major themes which have occurred in the story. A fight is mentioned which parallels the wrestling match. There is also an aspect of warning expressed in the proverb. This statement of caution is balanced by the events in the tale when the cat only reveals two of his three jujus. The audience at this point realizes that the tortoise is at a disadvantage and they anticipate

a sorry end for him. The proverb thus restates the essential components of the story. In summarizing the folktale, a comment is also made on the lesson of the tale. However, this aspect will be considered below as a didactic function.

Sometimes the closing proverbial statement is made by a character in the story. Although the function does not change when the proverb is rendered in this way, the esthetic effect is altered as the ornamental function is brought clearly into operation. The following example demonstrates the effect of a textual proverbial conclusion.

The tortoise and the boar were bosom friends and accustomed to dining together. They invited each other to dinner in turns. At last the boar did not want the tortoise to dine with him any more. So when his dinner was ready, he wound himself around the bowl of meal and called the tortoise to dinner.

The tortoise went 'round and 'round and finally had stretched to reach the bowl when the boar exclaimed, "Hush! I invited you to dinner and you are stepping on me!" The tortoise, after this futile effort to get at the meal, returned to his house, disappointed but resolute.

On the following day, the tortoise prepared his own dinner and tied a rope to his tail which he wound around the bowl of meal. He then hailed the boar for dinner. As the boar stretched to reach the food, the tortoise exclaimed, "Hush! I invited you for dinner and you are stepping on me!"

In amazement, the boar questioned the tortoise, "Since when have you been so big?"

"Man teaches man to be tall or short," answered the tortoise defiantly.¹⁹

Again the proverb restates the essential actions of the tale. However, the effect of the proverb, when uttered by the protagonist of the folktale, gains a definite vitality. The narrator's inclusion of the proverb within the text helps to make the conclusion immediately relevant to the audience. Hence, the function of conclusion also serves artistic as well as narrative needs in the folktale. In the story of the tortoise and the boar the proverb may appear only ornamental but it is really an ornamental conclusion.

DIDACTIC FUNCTIONS

The didactic functions of proverbs in a folktale context are enhanced by the pertinent social nature of the proverb. This genre taken by itself touches on all aspects of community life, either by its use or its content. In Africa proverbs may be used to correct children who have misbehaved as well as to end arguments between adults.²⁰ The subject matter of some proverbs makes them appropriate devices for settling legal disputes²¹ or for commiserating the death of a relative.²² They can also intrude into aspects of politics, economics, religion, and art.²³ William Bascom has explained the roles of proverbs in Yoruba culture:

...proverbs are the concern of adults, and a boy must ask permission before quoting a proverb in the presence of adults. Because they express Yoruba morals and ethics they are convenient standards for appraising the behavior of others. They are used to express social approval and social conventions and criticism, or ridicule of those who deviate; warning, defiance, or derision of an enemy or rival, and advice, counsel, or warning to a friend, when he either contemplates action which may lead to social friction, open hostilities, or direct punishment....Proverbs are highly regarded because of the wisdom they express; it is significant that although even sacred myths have been questioned in the post-contact period, educated Yoruba have retained their respect for proverbs.²⁴

We then find that the multi-layered significance of the proverb is not much changed when it appears in a folktale. As a recognized traditional form it is pregnant with meaning and when related to the tale its meaning gains another dimension.

Of the two didactic functions, moralization is the more specific. It encompasses the textual meaning which a proverb lends to a particular tale. The other function, socialization, then explains the contextual effect which a proverbial statement can have on a story. These two functions are difficult to separate from the narrative function of conclusion, but we can recognize that they involve distinct aspects of the use of proverbs.

1. Moralization

The moralization of tales by means of proverbs has been observed by Rowlands and Finnegan.²⁵ The proverb, as mentioned before, may conclude the story but it also provides a brief message which is more than a summary. The thematic content of the proverb has a unique relevance to the content of the story and thus it effectively explains the point of the tale. The manner of explanation is well illustrated in this example:

The tortoise is considered to be the wisest of all the animals. Well one day the tortoise decided that he would collect all the wisdom in the earth, put it in a gourd, and hang the gourd on a tree.

At last he had collected, as he thought, all the wisdom in the earth. He packed it into a gourd and tied the gourd around his neck. He began to climb the tree on which he had planned to hang the gourd. But he had great difficulty in climbing the tree since the gourd, hanging around his neck and against his chest, came between him and the tree, causing him to fall. He tried again and again, and fell many times.

There was a man watching him, and finally the man called to him, "You are supposed to be the wisest animal of all. I will prove that you are not wise. Why don't you hang the gourd against your back? Then it will not be in your way when you climb the tree."

The tortoise tried this trick and he found that he could climb the tree more easily and more quickly -- in fact, he could climb the tree. The tortoise was greatly disappointed that he had not truly collected all the world's wisdom in the gourd, that some useful things had been left out. So he broke the gourd, since he could not hope to contain in it all the wisdom in the earth. And that man was considered to be wiser than the tortoise.

Even the wisest of men has moments of foolishness.
(My italics)²⁶

Hence, the theme of the story is restated, not only summarizing the important tale components but also emphasizing the morally significant aspects of the story. This folktale's lesson is then conveyed directly and effectively.

2. Socialization

The effect of the socialization function is determined by the basic difference between the nature of the proverb and its folktale context. Most often we find that the story which contains a proverb is a tale in which animals are capable of acts which are normally only accomplished by humans. The stories are thus fantasies which operate as satires of human affairs. The proverb which serves as the moral of the tale helps to establish the satirical mode. Its allusion always pertains to the human sphere of behavior. The effect of the proverb is then to further transpose the animal tale into a socially meaningful homily. Just as the proverb has multiple possibilities for communal relevance, so too does the tale gain many social interpretations. The animal tales thus become human tales as in the case of "The Two Mice," which ends, "It was better to be a poor man in peace than a rich man in distress" (my italics).²⁷ This type of tale does more than entertain because the proverbial moral adds reference to the local social milieu. The frequency with which socialization occurs is quite interesting. Of twenty-three folktales in which proverbs provide moral comment, nineteen were animal and plant tales. The remaining four were human stories. As there are many animal tales among African peoples (even though they are not the dominant type), there is ample opportunity for the socialization function to operate.²⁸ Certainly, this function is noticeable in Yoruba tales.

Socialization is quite evident in "The Story of the Sad Tadpole." Here, when the king of the frogs dies, a tadpole is selected as the candidate for the new king. He had been shunned before, but now as king he would be greatly flattered. He was very happy and decided to celebrate. In the course of the festivities, he became very drunk and began to dance. However, he was so intoxicated that he fell down and broke his leg. The frogs had a rule that anyone with a deformity could not become king. Thus, the old toad was crowned in place of the tadpole. The tale ends with the proverb "When you hear of a good thing coming your way think of yourself."²⁹ This statement makes the tale of frogs and tadpoles particularly significant to the audience. The proverb is addressed to each individual in the audience with references to "you," "your way," and "yourself." Also the moral can be applied to more situations than the crowning of the king. The lesson of this story concerns caution, which is a behavior trait that is certainly applicable

to many social relationships. The proverb thus makes the tale relevant to the context of Yoruba culture.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the effect of proverbs on folktales has revealed two major aspects of the nature of Yoruba folklore. First, proverbs facilitate the telling of folktales in a number of ways. They can be used both to introduce and to conclude stories as well as clarify and ornament the text of a tale. Second, proverbs provide instructional meaning for folktales. On one level they can give each tale its own moral. Furthermore, they also contribute to a deeper level of communication by adding social significance to tales.

The functions of the proverb are constant and are not culture bound; they operate even if the proverbial expression is borrowed from another culture. The phrase "The man had made his bed and therefore he must lie in it"³⁰ occurs in a tale told by a college-educated Yoruba which dealt with male pregnancy. The expression was used as both a conclusion and a moral for the story. It adds stylized language to the story, thus serving as ornamentation. Hence, foreign material can be accommodated into folktales without radically altering the process of tale telling.³¹

Further conclusions of this paper touch on the nature of the relationship between the proverb and the folktales among the Yoruba. It was found that the two forms do occur together. Whenever they are joined, their union can be very complex because several functions may be in operation. However, it seems that the tale gains more from the alliance. Proverbs add sophistication and elegance to the tale, whereas the tale only provides one of the many cultural formats for the expression of the proverb. Proverbial expressions dominate their stories rather than vice versa. Thus the proverb has more importance for the folktale than the tale has for the proverb. The two genres do not then merge completely into one form. Bascom has noted a similar situation in the relationship of folktales and Ifa divination verse.³⁶ There he found that tales could be distinguished within the corpus of the poetic form. In like manner, when proverbs appear in folktales, they remain distinguishably apart. The proverb is thus a unit of oral tradition which the tale teller may use arbitrarily for narrational and esthetic purposes.

NOTES

1. E. Ojo Arewa, "Proverb Usage in a 'Natural' Context and Oral Literary Criticism," JAF 83 (1970), 430-437.
2. Archer Taylor, The Proverb (Cambridge, Mass., 1931), p. 31.
3. Ibid.
4. Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa (London, 1971), p. 391.
5. George Herzog and C. S. Blooah, Jabo Proverbs from Liberia (London, 1936), p. 1.
6. J. Berry, Spoken Art in West Africa (London, 1961), p. 22.
7. E. C. Rowlands, "The Illustration of a Yoruba Proverb," JFI 4 (1967), 251.

8. Finnegan, Oral Literature, pp. 390-391.
9. The Yoruba-speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa (London, 1894).
10. William R. Bascom, "Folklore Research in Africa," JAF 77 (1964), 13-14.
11. Ayodele Ogundipe, "An Annotated Collection of Folktales from African (Nigeria) Students in the United States" (M.A. Thesis, Indiana University, 1966), p. 103.
12. Ibid., p. 48.
13. Arewa, "Proverb Usage...", p. 432.
14. Ogundipe, "An Annotated Collection," p. 48.
15. Ibid., pp. 41-42.
16. Ellis, The Yoruba-speaking Peoples, pp. 252-253.
17. Ibid., p. 233.
18. Abayomi Fuja, Fourteen Hundred Cowries (London, 1962), p. 9.
19. Barbara K. Walker and Warren S. Walker, Nigerian Folktales (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1961), pp. 46-47.
20. Melville, J. Herskovits and S. Tagbwe, "Kru Proverbs," JAF 43 (1930), 223.
21. John C. Messenger, "The Role of Proverbs in a Nigerian Judicial System," Southwestern Journal of Anthropology 15 (1959), 64-73.
22. Ellis, The Yoruba-speaking Peoples, p. 246. "Without bad news there can be no sadness of the heart" is a proverb appropriate for funerals.
23. Finnegan, Oral Literature, p. 392.
24. William R. Bascom, The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria (New York, 1969), pp. 98-99.
25. Rowlands, "The Illustration of a Yoruba Proverb," loc. cit. and Finnegan, Oral Literature, p. 377.
26. Walker and Walker, Nigerian Folktales, pp. 35-36.
27. Ogundipe, "An Annotated Collection," p. 77.
28. E. Ojo Arewa, "On Devising a New Arrangement for African Tale Types," SFQ 31 (1967), 266.
29. Fuja, Fourteen Hundred Cowries, p. 19.
30. Walker and Walker, Nigerian Folktales, p. 73.
31. See Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, Dahomean Narrative (Evanston, 1958), pp. 70-72 for further examples of cultural borrowing

in African folktales.

32. William R. Bascom, "The Relationship of Yoruba Folklore to Divining,"
JAF 56 (1943), 127, 131.