

PROVERBS AND THEIR ROLES IN SHAPING AFRICAN LITERATURE: AN IGBO LANGUAGE

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Abstract

In African literature, proverbs hold a magnificent role in shaping the cultural settings and background that encapsulate the norms, values, beliefs, wisdom and perceptions of the people in a given community. This paper examines the role of proverbs in shaping African literature, with a precise focus on Igbo language. In Igbo culture today, proverbs are not merely linguistic expressions but also reflect the dealings of our daily life involving storytelling, oral traditions and even written literature. They function as tools for moral instruction especially for children, preservation of cultural heritage and medium to showcase our cultural rights. This study highlights their thematic importance in some works of Igbo scholars and writers thereby examining their role in understanding the complexities of Igbo proverbs in African literature in general thereby plays a vital role in shaping the behavior and attitudes of the people. The method of the study is descriptive. The study adopts oral tradition theory as the theoretical framework. The finding reveals that proverbs showcase our cultural heritage and is also essential in projecting oral and written literature to the limelight. Again, it is obvious that deeper appreciation between literature and language in African literature is highly showcased. The method adopted is descriptive research and this research therefore recommends that proverbs should be used in our educational system in order to teach morals and inculcate sound knowledge to the society. Government should see to it and implement it in the educational curriculum.

Keywords: Proverbs, African literature, Igbo language.

Introduction:

Proverbs are a very vital instrument in the hands of an African man. It is a panacea, succinct and also a statement that encapsulates the values, norms, wisdom and cultural heritage of a given community and its incursion. Proverbs are short, simple sayings that convey truth or a piece of advice based on common sense. It is an accessible tool for

understanding life and navigating its challenges. In African literature, particularly within the Igbo culture, proverbs play a pertinent role not only as a literary device, metaphorical outcome but also as a means of presenting oral tradition and imparting moral lessons. It also stands as a gap between generations conveying the collective experiences and philosophies of the people.

Again, proverbs in African society often reflect communal values, social norms and show some ethical standards which are seen in contexts like storytelling, conflict resolution, inter community and intra community as well as education which helps to offer insight into the complexities of human behavior and relationships. In Igbo setting, proverbs are more than mere phrases in the integral to communication, expressions, interactions often used to emphasize some solid points provide counsel or critique behavior.

In addition, in African literature, proverbs enrich narratives adding layers of meaning and cultural context. Proverbs enhance storytelling by providing in-depth meanings which serves as thematic explorations of the human condition. Authors like Chinua Achebe have masterfully woven proverbs into their works thereby using them to create a sense of authenticity and connection to Igbo identity. For example, Achebe's use of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* is not only for the Igbo man but also critiques of colonial influences and the subsequent cultural dislocation. Proverbs become a voice of resistance and a means of preserving indigenous knowledge.

With these, proverbs as the lens and the richness of African literature and the depth of its cultural narratives can be fully appreciated.

Theoretical framework

To explore the topic of proverbs and its role in shaping African literature, the oral tradition theory is very important. This framework emphasizes the importance of oral traditions, including proverbs in preserving cultural identity and knowledge. It examines how proverbs are used to convey wisdom, morals and culture. Milman Parry (1902-1935) An American scholar is often credited with establishing the study of oral tradition. His research on the oral epic poetry of the south Slavic tradition laid the groundwork for understanding oral literature. This theory was good for this work in the sense that, literature was mostly orally transmitted in the past ages than written. This study helps to provide valuable insights into how societies convey their histories and values. Milman Parry tried to reveal the intricate relationship between storytelling, memory remembrance and understanding the community. Oral tradition theory also applies to various cultures such as African cultures, indigenous cultures etc.

In addition, this theory reveals how storytelling serves as a vital mechanism for cultural

preservation and identity across different societies. The theory reveals that each adapts oral practices to suit its unique context, reinforcing the significance of oral narratives in shaping worldviews and collective memory.

The conceptual framework

Proverb

Proverbs are short, wise saying containing words of advice, truth or warning. It is a well-known saying handed down to us from ancient times. Proverbs enrich our use of the language for they make our expressions belief, clearer and to the point. (Odiaka 2010). A collection of proverbs may come to be associated with a person famous for wisdom, just as the book of Proverbs in the Bible is attributed to King Solomon. Proverbial sayings were popular in the Middle Ages and were treated as accepted wisdom. Egwuchukwu (1996:76), opines that proverbs are ideas, made in the conversation of ordinary people that have been accepted as wise and sensible, and so passed on to the language for use on suitable occasions. They sometimes conveniently express ideas better than the speaker can, and help him to produce a wise thought. He further adds that proverbs express in a few words a truth which is related to everyday experience. Proverbs are widely used in a traditional society to describe in very few words, what could have otherwise required a thousand words.

A Proverb is a condensed but memorable saying embodying some important facts of experience that are taken as true by many people. According to McAuthur (1996:234), the word proverb is derived from a Latin word 'proverbium' (a saying supporting a point) 'pro' means on behalf, while 'verbium' means word. It is a pithy saying which had gained credence through widespread or frequent use. Proverbs express basic truth or practical precepts. A proverb, which describes a basic rule of conduct, may also be known as a maxim. The study of proverbs is called paremiology while the collection of proverbs is called paremiography. Nwoga (1975: 186), states that proverbs are “the wisdom of many and the wit of one, the experience and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression”.

Wilson and Smith (1970), state that proverbs are multifunctional and flexible instruments of reasoning, although they may maintain solidified attitude or traditional modes of thought of a certain culture. A proverb is a proposition loaded with hidden feelings, wishes and intentions of the speaker. Meaning is the basis of language use for appreciation of proverbs. According to Nwoga (1975:188), “proverbs have three meanings, the literal meaning, the philosophical meaning and the contextual relevance”. The achievement of the correct interpretation of the social values of any group through their proverbs can only be arrived at, with circumspection, guided by taking into account, all the relevant proverbs and the situations in which they are used.

The situation in which proverbs are used range from formal litigation, bride price settlement, family meeting, giving advice and commenting in praise or blame, resolving conflict, entertainment and proverb contests.

Amamgbo (2021) gave an example of proverbs related to Nkwụ Na Akwụ in Igboland. She gave examples of proverbs as; “Ọ bụ maka na di atọka uto kpatara awọ ji akwọ nke ya n'azụ”. “Nne ewu na-ata agba, nwa ya a na-ele ya anya” etc. Amamgbo (2021) in another write- up delved into proverbs that are linked to yam as the chief food in Igboland gave examples of proverbs related to yam. Examples; “Chi nyere nwata ji ganye ya mbazụ ọ ga-eji gwuputa ya”, “e lelebe ukolo anya enwe, ji di n'oba agwụ” etc. Anagor (2022) stated some proverbs that relate to women and their meaning. This also serves as a proof that Igbo people have different proverbs for any situation and they use it as either a satire or as a praise but they all serve as a medium of learning. They are as follows; 'Nwata nwaanyị zuru tooro onwe ya'. There is an assumption that a child brought up by a woman did not undergo any home training. 'Nwoke lụchaa ọgụ, nwaanyị enwere akuko'. When a man has won a battle, women go around discussing and celebrating the victory. 'Nkita nwaanyị zuru na-ata akwa okuko'. Any child brought up under the tutelage of a woman is uncontrollable/ as free as air. The person has shallow discipline etc.

Igbo Language

Igbo language is one of the languages in Nigeria amongst Hausa and Yoruba. It is primarily spoken by one of the largest ethnic groups called “Igbo”. The language has many dialects like: Onitsha, Owerri, Abakaliki, Nsukka, Ngwa, Mbaise etc. according to Amadiume (2003), Igbo is the language spoken in ala Igbo or anị Igbo (Igboland) by the people who are collectively referred to as “Ndị Igbo”, their community is known as “Olu nọ Igbo” (those in the lowlands and uplands). He further explained that there are several theories concerning the etymology of the word “Igbo” (wrongly spelled “Igbo” by the British colonialist). Eighteenth century texts had the word as “Heebo” or “Eboe”, which was thought to be a corruption of “Hebrew”. “Igbo” is commonly presumed to mean “the people”. The root **-bo** is judged to be of Sudanic origin; some scholars think that the word is derived from the verb **gboo** and therefore has connotations of “to protect”, “to shelter”, or “to prevent”. Hence, the notion of a protected people or a community of peace. According to other theorists, it may also be traced to the Igala, among whom **onigbo** is the word for “slave”, **oni** meaning “people”. Igbo is classified in the Kwa subgroup of the Niger-Congo language family, which is spoken in west Africa.

African Literature

African literature is the literature of Africans told in their various languages which reflects the happenings in Africa, their beliefs, traditions and cultures. Their literature

started from oral; moonlight tales, folktales, myths and legendary stories. These stories were passed down to them from generation to generation and it guided their ways of living. It was used as a medium of informal education before westernization came and brought development which ushered in written form of writing.

According to Hulihan, Belknap & Blakeley (Sep. 15th, 2019), Africa has over 54 countries with different cultures and stories that make them unique. Their literature is based on oral tradition of storytelling and folktales. African literature has a deep and complex history that stretches back to thousands of years originating in ancient Egypt. Colonization, the process of settling in and establishing control over the indigenous people of a particular area, marked a dark time for African people as it had huge impact on literature and culture in general. West Africa developed a written literature during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The development came as a result of missionaries coming to the area. The missionaries came to Africa to build churches and language schools to translate religious texts. This led to African writing in both European and indigenous languages as well as a heavy Western influence. The main characteristics of all African literature include; oral tradition, folktales, slave narratives and the African novel. Oral tradition involves the telling of stories, advice, and history to the new generations by mouth. African folktales are characteristically anonymous, timeless, and placeless tales that were often told orally and were passed down through generations. Slave narratives refer to autobiographical accounts of enslaved Africans. These narratives were the first form of African literature that gained popularity in the west African novels from 1950's mainly expressed a desire to become independent.

Roles of proverbs in shaping African literature

There are so many roles proverbs play in shaping African literature, and they are as follows:

1. **Symbol of identity:** Proverbs serve as a mark in shaping the common man through cultural identity, helping to distinguish one community from another and showing a collectiveness, oneness and togetherness.
2. **Communication tool:** Proverbs serves as a strong pillar in facilitating effective communication and allowing for nuanced expression to convey some complex ideas, values, norms and perceptions.
3. **Conflict resolution:** Proverbs done more good than harm in setting conflict especially among the elites. The wisdom proverbs convey help in resolving conflicts, misunderstanding, disaster, difficulties challenges, disputes among individual communities. When this is done, peace unity, harmony, love and others will take place thereby creating a conducive atmosphere.
4. **Cultural preservation:** Proverbs serve as a repository of cultural knowledge and traditions of a given community preserving the good history and values of such communities.

5. **Literary Aesthetic:** Literary aesthetic refers to the principles and characteristics that define the beauty and artistic value of literature. Therefore, the use of proverbs enhances the poetic quality of language thereby, appreciating the rhythm and beauty of African literature.
6. **Moral instruction:** Proverbs inculcate morals, ethical teachings and life lessons which facilitate good behaviour and decision making seen among individuals, groups and organizations.
7. **Enhancement of narrative:** Proverbs as we can see helps to expand and enrich storytelling by adding in depth illustrations, understandings and meanings in a more simplified way. With these, resonance and authenticity to characters and plots.
8. **Critique of society:** Proverbs can be employed to critique social issues, highlighting injustices and prompting reflection and flashback on societal practices.
9. **Facilitation of dialogue:** Proverbs is a great initiator. It can create discussions, conversations, solid agreement and dialogue especially among the elites. When this is done, it helps to encourage the exploration of themes related to identity, morality and existence.
10. **Character development:** Proverbs serves as a modifier, developer and sanitizer. Characters may use proverbs to articulate their thoughts, revealing their values, beliefs and norms. Etc.

Similarities between proverbs and literature

In African culture, proverbs and literature are indispensable. They are like two sides of a coin which shared several similarities that can be explored in many ways.

1. **Use of language:** Proverbs employ figurative language such as metaphors, similes etc that convey meaning effectively in expressing one thoughts, beliefs, ideas, feelings and perceptions that can be memorable. When these happen, literature utilizes it through poetic devices, symbolism and rich imagery to enhance storytelling and also create emotional resonance.
2. **Oral tradition:** Through the use of proverbs in oral tradition, ideas and values are shared from the elders of the community. This can be seen lively through the written methods which many literary works evolving from spoken stories to written texts while help in preserving cultural narratives.
3. **Educational role:** Proverbs and literature are inseparable in educational settings, proverbs serve as tools for teaching moral values and life skills often used in educational settings and literature as well functions by providing readers with knowledge, empathy, and cultural thinking skills through its exploration of complex characters and scenarios.
4. **Expression of knowledge and wisdom:** In African culture, proverbs often encapsulate traditional wisdom and life lessons in concise way. Then, literature explored it into themes of human experience, bringing varied moral lessons and

creating insights through narratives, characters and dialogue.

5. **Positive impact on society:** Proverbs can create pros and cons which can influence individual social life, attitudes and behavior to an extent either shaping cultural norms and practice vice versa. Literature on the other hand, has the power to challenge societal norms, provoke thought and inspire change through its narratives and characters.
6. **Cultural reflection and brain storming:** Proverbs bring individuals and communities together as a result of reflection based on the norms, beliefs, values passed down through one generation and another. Literature itself, helps to broaden the cultural contexts often portraying society issues, historical events, and the human condition. With these, proverbs and literature serve as crucial expression of human feelings, thoughts, experience and attitudes which showcase wisdom, tradition and culture of the people. They are the yardstick in expansion of storytelling and also reinforcing the importance of language in shaping thought in the society.

Proverbs as we can see are integral to African literature particularly within the context of Igbo culture, which we can define as the totality of people's ways of life, serves as vessels of wisdom, cultural identity and social values. Their significance is multifaceted thereby influencing narrative structure, character development and thematic depth in literary works. This analysis explores how proverbs shape African literature with a focus on Igbo examples.

1. **Ilu bụ mmanụ ndị Igbo ji eri okwu.** This means that proverbs are word edifiers. Here, proverbs showcase their importance in the power of communication, expression, interaction among individuals and without proverbs, communication may not be rooted especially among the elders in a given communities or local settings. Proverb in this aspect helps to enrich conversations and convey deeper meanings and understandings.
2. **Nne ewu na-ata agbara, nwa ya a na-ele ya anya n'ọnụ.** It means that the kid watches the she-goat carefully to emulate her. This proverb illustrates the transfer of knowledge and cultural values from one generation to another. In African literature, proverb helps in emphasizing the importance of mentorship, tutorship, purity and a holistic life which when it is well lived, the children will learn within the community.
3. **Anụ bu ụzọ na-anụ mmiri ọma.** In English language, it simply means the early bird catches the worm. Here, this proverb is a translator, initiate or inculcate the need for punctuality or doing things at the right time which leads to success. Things done well is what done. Therefore, in African literature when a child learns how to do things on time, he/she will grow faster than his/her mates.
4. **Enyi m, agwara m gị agwa ka mma karịa enyi m aka m ịgwa gị.** It means a friend in need is a friend indeed. A good friend is a builder and motivator because when a stone is left untouched, it may directly or indirectly affect or harm you at

last. A true friend always helps his friends in the times of need.

5. **Onye ndidi na-eri azụ ukpoo.** The expression is that the patient dog eats the fattest bone. When someone is doing something gradually and diligently, he/she may not make mistake and even if he/she does, it may be correctly. In African literature, the need of patience and calmness in our life leads to great success. It tries to encapsulate the importance of having patience at all cost, preserve and endure which we can see in some literary works or texts we read.
6. **Otu osisi anaghị eme ọhịa.** It means that a tree cannot make a forest. This teaches us the need for collaboration and team work in order to achieve a greater feat in life. In African literature, it also teaches us that man cannot isolate himself from his fellow human being.
7. **Mmiri zochaa, anwụ ga-acharịrị maọbụ o zochaa, ọ gbachaa.** The expression is that after rain comes sunshine. There is no condition either bad or good that lasts forever. Even if the condition seems to be acclimating with negativities, challenges, and circumstances of life, it is never permanent. There will come a time when one will experience the positive aspect and brightness of the day in his or her life.
8. **Ogechukwu ka mma.** This means God's time is the best. It requires us to hope and trust God our creator. In the contemporary society nothing seems to be permanent. Life is full of ups and downs. If one is in a disastrous situation today, tomorrow he/she may be seen in a joyous mood. All these are seen in our present society and is written in some African literature in order to insert hope to be hopeless.
9. **Ihe anaghị eme na nkịtị.** This simply means that there is no smoke without fire and every event must have a cause. This proverb is used in African literature to create a notion that there must be a cause before effect of anything. Anything that happened must have been triggered by something whether good or bad. Therefore, the proverb is used to shape the behaviour of the people in order to be conscious of themselves.
10. **Anaghị amụ aka ekpe na nka.** This means you cannot teach old dog new tricks and as well, there is an age limit for learning certain new things. Here, certain things are supposed to be learnt early. For instance, when a child is grown to learn a particular skill or acquire a particular profession and he/she fails to learn it at that time, it may be very difficult for him/her learning it at an older age. In African literature, this proverb plays a vital role in shaping and even re-shaping the child's attitude, character, behaviour and thoughts. It also helps to mould and direct his/her footsteps accordingly.
11. **Ndị bi n'ụlọ ugo gbe anaghị atụ okwute.** This means that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones. In other words, people with blemish should not find fault in others. This is because if they do, their weaknesses will be exposed by some others thereby leading to excommunication and rejection

by the people they work with. African literature tries to shape our bad attitude and behaviour through the use of some Igbo proverbs as an antidote in sound reasoning and thinking.

12. **Mgbochi ọrịa ka ọgwụgwọ ya mma.** It simply means that prevention is better than cure. We should avoid trouble, problem or danger at all cost. African literature uses this proverb to shape our behaviour and attitudes.
13. **Nganga buru ụzọ, ọdịda esochie ya azụ.** It means pride goes before a fall. Humility is very rewarding and it pays off in our day-to-day life. For one to succeed in a journey of life, he/she needs to be humble. African literature tries to explore the need to be serviceable and considerate in life. And when this is done, proverbs work tremendously in shaping one's life.
14. **Gidigidi bụ ugwu eze.** It simply connotes that united we stand, divided we fall. In Igbo culture, working together and living a communal life is their yardstick. Group work brings great reward. The African literature stresses in dignity in labour as seen in Igbo traditional setting. It reflects also in the adage that says "if any work let him eat but he who does not work let him not eat. This proverb plays a tremendous role in re-awakening of an African man's consciousness on the need to maintain the spirit of doggedness and zealous nature of man.
15. **Jiri ehie chọwa ewu ojii tupu abali eruo.** In English proverb it simply means make hay while the sun shines. Which is also interpreted as work hard while you still can. In African literature, the work of this proverb has done more good than harm especially among youths. It is used to advise them on the need for dedication and commitment in life. This proverb helps in shaping the behaviour and also altitudes of an individuals who are serious minded in their existence in life and also showcase the spirit of existences in human beings. It also condemns idleness in the life of able-bodied men.
16. **Mmadụ anaghị agbara ubi nna ya ọsọ n'ihì na o ruru ahìhà.** It means, no one avoids his father's farm just because it is full of weeds. This shows that it is wrong for one to abstain from performing his duty because of the problem involved. It is used in teaching people on the need to try because life itself is a risk and we cannot choose to die early because we are scared of the risk life brings. We have to face life squarely and come out successfully.
17. **Nkụ onye kpatara n'ọkọchì ka ọ ga-añà n'udummiri.** The wood one fetched during dry season will be of help to him during the rainy season. This means that the effort one puts in during his youthful days will be his safe heavens during old age. It teaches people of the to work hard as a youth and save up for old age because help may not come at that time and the bones will be weak to hustle. This proverb helps in reminding the younger generation of the need to be make investments that will sustain them throughout their days.
18. **Nkwudo ọgụ ka ọlụlụ ya.** Motivating a fight is greater than the fight itself. It means that the one who indirectly supports someone's cause is fully

participating in that cause because it is through him that the doer draws the strength and motivation. It clearly shows that one can be directly or passively involved in a thing negative or positive but either way, he/she is doing the greater job. It teaches one to be mindful of who and what he is throwing his weight behind because you are an accomplice.

19. **Nwoke na-esi agwa na ihe na-eme.** The man who is cooking beans is saddled with a heavy task. In African literature, when someone is fully employed in both social, commercial and domestic activities such that he has no time of his own, he is so described using this proverb. It is to show that often times, men work hard to care for the family and forget to take care of themselves in the bid. So, in all you do as a man, take care of yourself as you care for others. It can also mean that when a man takes over the responsibilities of a woman, he will struggle to survive because women are wired by the creator to do certain things seamlessly and still look okay which men cannot do.
20. **Nwata na-egbu osisi mana ọ bụ okenye maara ebe ọ ga-ada.** It is an elder that knows which side the tree which the child is cutting will fell on. Simply put, an elder is advanced both physically and in wisdom to know exactly the intent of a child's mind, the advantages and disadvantages of whatever the child is doing especially decisions, the end result of the child's output. The proverb teaches that as a child; you cannot outsmart the elders and it is of importance you seek their opinions about a thing to avoid regrets especially from those elders that have integrity.
21. **Onye na-agba egwu a na-afu nne ya bụ onye nzuzu.** He who dances to a music that ridicules the mother is a fool. He who enjoys the downfall of another person or a community lacks wisdom because one day, it will be his turn and others will laugh. It teaches that one should be careful and should not gloat over others because everyone has a weakness that when it surfaces, others will stand on it to ridicule the fellow.
22. **Ogoli lụọ di abụọ, ọ mara nke ka mma.** One makes a better choice after trying out two options. It shows that most people are not contented with what they have until they have a taste of the other one, they wished to have had. One makes clearer decisions from experience. It teaches that experience is the best teacher and most times, it is better to allow people to go through a path in order to appreciate what they have or had.
23. **Oke e jighi anya di mma ama n'onya.** The rat can never get trapped while in a serene mood. It means that some people out of great need involve themselves in what they ought not to have. In essence, most people got themselves in trouble not because they choose to but life let them with no other option, but it is not an excuse, though. It teaches that we should know why some people get involved in things they shouldn't have and render help to them if it is comfortable for us.

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24. **mụ obere osisi bụ na ọhịa ebuka.** The small trees make up a full forest. It means that we need each other to climb; it is wrong for one to neglect those he/she feels he is better off to because even if they are not useful to you according to your status, they have nuisance value. It is the lesser men around the great man who extol his greatness and they matter a lot.
25. **Uru adìghì n'òkpụkpụ ụkpàna.** There is no flesh on the leg of the grasshopper. It means that we should not get involved in things we know that is wrong simply because we want to make it happen at the moment. It shows that most times, what we struggle to get has no benefit to us on the long run and it ends up showing the Id in us. It teaches that one should do the right thing and stop chasing things by all means.

Findings

The research has shown that proverbs contribute in the growth of African literature and Igbo literature in particular because it was and is a medium of training. It was one of the early forms of prose before civilization brought in written form of literature and till date, Africans still uphold their proverbs. It is also seen that in Igbo language, there are various proverbs for various situations and they all have deep meanings. Proverbs are mostly short phrases; some use animal character that have similar behaviour to what is being said to indirectly relate to human beings who depict such characters. Finally, proverbs do not fade away. It is handed down from one generation to another. It may be spoken with dialect but it cannot be changed. The meaning is always the same as previously stated.

Recommendations

From the findings, there are recommendations as thus;

- Teaching of proverbs and their meaning should be incorporated in the curriculum from primary school level to preserve them.
- There is need for the older generation to normalize speaking proverbs to the younger ones around them and go further to explain them so that they too will know when to use which.
- There is also a need for literature writers to make use of proverbs while writing any piece of literary art and find a narrative to explain them.
- Some authors have done a great deal of work in using proverbs to either name their literature books or tell a story that has a proverbial undertone. Nevertheless, more is needed as it is a medium of also teaching proverbs and the knowledge of proverbs and meaning will help a writer with a story line.

Conclusion

The power of proverbs and their roles cannot be overestimated in shaping the African literature in an African community and society at large. Proverb is the pathway and yardstick in inculcating wisdom, knowledge, values, norms and beliefs in their cultural

settings.

Although, African literature may be said to be works done by African writers and audiences by African themselves, these works are also done in African language which Igbo language is used as an example here, and they can be written down or said orally. They also contribute to the core of African culture, customs and traditions of the said people. It is a vessel of cultural, wisdom and ethnic guidance. They encapsulate the values, beliefs and social norms of diverse African societies, thereby making them an integral part of storytelling and oral traditions. It also shows that proverbs are not just linguistic artifacts, they are fundamental to the fabric of African literature, enriching narratives, preserving cultural identity and imparting wisdom across generations.

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