

A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THEMES AND POETIC DEVICES IN SELECTED BURA PROVERBS

BY

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Abstract

In fact, every society, culture, tradition has peculiar ways of inculcating discipline, knowledge and the culture of hard work amongst her people. The Bura people who originated from North-East of Nigeria but migrated over a period of time are not an exemption. The Bura people are regarded as a particular group of Chadic speakers whose language has come to be known as 'Bura' by the people themselves and by others who want to distinguish people from this area. This study analyses the contents of the themes of knowledge, advice and hard work in some selected Bura proverbs. It also seeks to analyze some selected Bura proverbs with a view to identifying some poetic devices such as metaphors, similes and personifications. The researcher collected, translated, transcribed and analyzed into English some selected Bura proverbs with the view to explore both the prominent themes and the poetic devices in some selected Bura proverbs. The researcher uses the functional and contextual approaches as a theoretical framework. The study collected and analyzed twenty-nine different Bura proverbs. It is evident that Bura verbal art, especially proverb is highly figurative and poetic, exposing both the native and the non native speakers of the rich Bura language and culture: in terms of inculcating knowledge, advising the individual and imbibing the culture of hardworking amongst the people which is achieved through the understanding of the hidden meanings within the language. This research which examines the rich language of a given society recommended that for a language not to easily go into extinction should be studied, examined and documented. Through these processes the rich culture and the language of such societies will be maintained for generations to come.

Keywords: *Bura, Karapu (Proverb), Poetic devices, Translation and Themes.*

Introduction

Historically, the Bura people originated from North-East of Nigeria but migrated south-west over a period of time. They are said to belong to the block of tribes, which also include the Margi and the Kilbas, who originated from the East. They probably are from the Cushite Origin (Davis, 1965:280).

The Bura people are regarded as a particular group of Chadic speakers whose language has come to be known as "Bura" by the people themselves and by others who want to distinguish people from this area. An adventurer subdued many local people, married Bura women and settled down in Bura land. They learned the language (Bura) and also assimilated Bura customs, but retained their own Borno methods of war-fare, customs and concepts of political centralization and forcefully assumed superiority over the Bura people who were not weak but peace-loving.

The Buras have always had a thriving unwritten indigenous literature much of which was verbal art up to the advent of the Christian missionaries in the area which dated back to the early 1920s. Oral literature was an intrinsic part of their culture. Elders in the evenings gather

children usually by moonlights and tell them stories which are meant to entertain and to teach them.

In fact, little or no much study has been carried out on Bura proverbial lore with a view to explicating its contents and poetic devices in a systematic and accessible form with which they are dressed. Haruna (1989) on the other side observed in her study of Bura Oral poetry that Bura proverbs exists but where it exists it is better considered as prose narratives. Early scholar on Bura society in the person of Davis (1956) treated the issue anthropologically (Davis, 1956). It is this lacuna, this want of a systematic presentation that this study to be undertaken.

This study is aimed at highlighting the content of themes of knowledge, advice and hard work in Bura proverbs. Therefore, this study is primarily to collect, analyze and document some Bura proverbs with a view to explicating its contents and poetic devices such as metaphors, similes and personifications.

Bura Oral Literature

Various genres of African oral literature are found among the Bura people. These genres include myths, legends, folktales, riddles and jokes, songs, proverbs, plays. A close examination of the categories of African oral literature reveals that Bura oral literature consists of mostly all of the genres. Notable among the several categories of Bura Oral literature are the following. Tales (Makumdla), Songs (Ha huwa), proverbs (Karapu).

Bura *Karapu* as a genre of Bura oral literature has a lot of significance. Like other societies in Africa and the world at large, its importance cannot be overemphasized. *Karapu* could be used by the Bura to enforce conformity to social norms, to validate social institutions and religious rituals, and to provide a psychological release from the restrictions imposed by society. Indeed, these four functions can be considered as aspects of broader functions that is maintaining the continuity of the Bura culture (Bascom, 1965: 18).

According to Kelso (1971:415) “There is no conceivable situation in life for which the proverbial wisdom of the Chinese cannot furnish some apposite citation”. Finnegan (1970:404) also says, “Since proverbs can refer to practically any situation, it would be impossible to give any comprehensive account of the content of African proverbs”. What Kelso says of Chinese proverbs and Finnegan of African proverbs is also true of Bura Proverb, for matter-of-factly, there is no aspect of life or any topic under the sky for which at least one Bura *Karapu* can not provide an appropriate citation. The Bura have an apposite *Karapu* for any situation on any subject matter.

Theoretical Framework

The research is based on multiple approach to literary criticism, which like the eclectic approach posited by Cargill (1992:16) in Bressler (1999); holds that ‘...any method which could produce the meaning of a work of literature was a legitimate method’ adding that ‘...the critics task was to procure a viable meaning appropriate to the critics time and place’ and concludes that in such a situation the critic employs ‘not only one method in interpreting a work of art but every method which might prove efficient.’ The theories in this study are drawn from the approaches of structuralism and functionalism; concentrating particularly on the function of Oral literature in stabilizing or validating current order of things.

In the light of these, the researcher employs these theories to examine and analyses the contextual and the structural components of the verbal art of the Bura people considering the main assumptions, methodologies and the effects.

Literature Review

The name 'Bura' denotes both the people and their language. Bura language has six vowel system used currently in Bura orthography. These are; a, i, t, e, o and u (Agheyisi 11). This six vowel system dates back to 1962-Bura Adult Premier (1962).

Champion (1966: xv), states that serious proverb collectors normally take considerable pains to trace the etymologies of the words, which signify proverbs in the language they set out to investigate. Whiting (1932:279) explains that the Greek word for proverb is *Paroimia*. It comes from *para* and *oimos* 'way', 'road'-so *paroimia* is the sort of saying often heard along the way, a common expression.

Works written in Bura language include: *Alkawal Bilin ar Mthaku Yesu Kristi* (New Testament 1950); *Baditar Duniya* (The Creation of the World no.date) by the Scripture Gift Mission (SGM) and *Bura Adult Primer* (1962) by the Church of The Brethren Mission (CBM). Other publications are: *Bura First Reader* (1951) by the Church of the Brethren Mission and *Kakadur Ar Ha Ka Sur Vunkir sili Aka Hyel* (songs and psalms of praise, 1931); Revised (1958), a translation of written Christian Hymns. *Kakadur Bila Nggakur Na Ntang Kuma* (Health care 1937) is a book also prepared by the Church of the Brethren Mission.

There are written Bura translations of some Epistles in the Holy Bible, e.g. *Labar na Pdaku rubutar Luka* (1950) by the British and Foreign Society, the Gospels according to St. Luke and the Gospels according to St. John. Christiana M. Kulp (n.d) also wrote *Mdakur Na Pwa* (n.d) and the scripture Gift Mission prepared *Mdir Mba akwa Duniya* (n.d) and also *Lakur Mba* (n.d). We also have: *Preliminary Remarks on Bura Sounds, Spellings, Accent and Tone* (1952) by the Church of the Brethren Mission: *Bura Second Reader* (1952), *The Bura Dictionary* (1941) and *The Bura English Vocabulary* (1931), written by the Church of the Brethren Mission. *Thlimada Ku Tuwa* (famous Men) (n.d) was written by the British and Foreign Bible Society's (BFBS).

It is evident that these works deal mostly with the Bura language and orthography, Bura people's history and anthropology. While some are translations of the Holy Bible and written Christian Hymns into Bura language, some are write-ups on moral lessons and health care. Bura folktales and writings on Bura proverbs (Karapu) are noticeably absent.

In the light of the foregoing, this paper dwells on the thematic analyses of some prominent themes and dominant poetic devices found in Bura proverbial. In fact, there is no aspect of life or any topic under the sky for which at least Bura Karapu can not provide and furnish an apposite citation.

Theme of Knowledge in Some Selected Bura Proverbs

The theme of knowledge is important in Bura society because knowledge is a very vital instrument of development among the Bura people and indeed in every human society. Some of the proverbs that focus on this include:

2.1.1a *Mtika thlipta titil su akila mayarni.*

2.1.1b *The chicken learnt how to scabble about from her mother.*

Learning processes are explained and stressed here in this Karapu. Chickens are always together with the mother and therefore imitate the behaviour of the mother.

2.1.2a *Ma mda ata ndasa dethlu tir kucivari ala ri.*

2.1.2b *If one is swallowing a bone assist him by pushing his anus for him.*

To swallow bones is not easy. If a person decides and insists on doing it, allow him to do as he wishes. He will certainly learn in a hard way. Knowledge directly or indirectly is going to manifest herself.

2.1.3a *Tsuwha akwa shizha Viranta mi.*

2.1.3b *To weed on an exhausted land is to increase hunger.*

An already exhausted land has lost its fertility. It is like someone who gives loans out and later does not get his money back. Poverty will certainly come in. This Karapu teaches that knowledge can be gained in a hard way, this time through poverty.

2.1.4a *Mda nkir nkir heni aka mthlenga wa.*

2.1.4b *One does not tell the blind when to sleep.*

The blind man can sense when it is dark or bright though he does not see. Therefore he does not need knowledge for him to sleep, since the eyes are always closed. The proverb also indicates that there are things or situations that are self explanatory and do not need reminders. Knowledge is portrayed here in a negative way metaphorically.

2.1.5a *Ga nji kini ka dlidli kari nki nga wa.*

2.1.5b *One cannot urinate and fall on the slippery mud (occasioned by the urine).*

It is obvious that you already know where you urinated. This knowledge is enough to guide your steps. The bottom line is that only the individual who is an active actor in a given activity knows some secrets.

Theme of Advice in Some Selected Bura Proverbs

The Bura attitude of informing and advising is discernible in many *Karapu*. Thus, the following illustrations:

2.2.1 a. *Gadiya kilar nyarmbwa aka pinjuwa.*

2.2.1 b. *One should not open the door for the mosquito.*

The *karapu* gives an advice not to invite trouble. It is similar to the English saying that let sleeping dogs lie. One should always distance oneself from problems rather than opening an avenue. This is symbolized by the act of opening the door for the mosquito to come into the room. The mosquito is a metaphor for problems.

2.2.2 a. *Whi hidi ka tirkwa tiha.*

2.2.2 b. *To run away from fart, to fall into a diarrhea.*

The *karapu* is similar to the English 'from bad to worse' or 'from frying pan to fire'. It advises that one should not attempt running away from a problem; because we may fall into a greater problem. It is therefore better to attempt solving it or else you will fall into another problem or situation beyond your control.

2.2.3a. *Mda sinda mya udzum na ana pi ka u'u wa*

2.2.3b. *One may not know the firewood that can keep a fire burning throughout the night.*

The *karapu* emphasizes the need to be extra careful with one another and respect one another. Who knows who can become so successful in life, no one can tell.

2.2.4a. *Mda ana kica tsi ka divir marwa.*

2.2.4b. *A woman should not wash (wait)for her rival's meal(food).*

Do not and never relay or trust on someone else's property or things. It could be her turn to prepare and give you but at the same time she may decide not to do so. What do you do? Nothing. The implication is that one should try to be self-reliant.

2.2.5a. *Vir kidla anti mda ana nziha diva aka kila wa.*

2.2.5b *It is not on the hunting day that one would give the dogfood.*

This *karapu* advises that one should prepare before hand. It is advisable to start feeding a dog and prepare her fit for the hunting day. This could enable you achieve your aim. In short, do not allow something to happen to you before you start looking around for help.

Theme of Hardwork in Some Selected Bura Proverbs

The Bura attitude to work is found in many Bura *karapu*. Thus, the *Karapu*:

2.4.1a. *Hadla a wuta mpwa wa.*

2.4.1b. *To grind does not mean getting a powdered grain.*

The *karapu* refers to the act of grinding. It is only when the action has been carried out that the outcome will be positive or would be achieved. Therefore after the hardship of grinding then the product will be achieved.

2.4.2a. *Sur mda a kuri diba wa.*

2.4.2b. *To depend on somebody's property may not be satisfying.*

Hardwork and not depending on someone else's property is advised here. Indeed, an individual's property does not belong to you. He may demand for it any time.

2.4.3a. *Yimi kida a bwanta tsir wa.*

2.4.3b. *Borrowed water cannot cook beans.*

It is true that beans require long time before they are properly cooked. When one borrows, one may not get enough from the lender. This *karapu* is saying that people should not rely on someone's property, it does not pay. Why not work hard and get yours.

2.4.4a. *Kithlir apa kaliya(slave), ka si sima apa kamba(not a slave).*

2.4.4b. *Work like a slave, and eat like a freeborn.*

The *karapu* is saying that, he who strives hard like a slave shall later enjoy the fruit of his labor. He shall no longer want.

2.4.5a. *Mda fifikwi ka mpwa akwa mya wa.*

2.4.5b. *You can not whisper with a grain in the mouth.*

You cannot whisper while the grain has not been swallowed; it may be thrown out. Act fast; swallow it, and then whisper. In fact, unless you end a situation successfully, you can never

say you are free. To end every situation in life successfully requires hard work. This *karapu* encourages one to strive hard to the end and succeed.

Analysis of Metaphors in Some Bura Proverbs

Metaphor comes from the Greek word, 'metaphora' which means, "Carrying from one place to another"(Shaw, 1972). Therefore it is a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another thing. In other words, metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing, or one idea or one action, is referred to by a word or term or expression normally denoting another thing or another idea or another action, the ultimate aim being to suggest some common quality shared by the two. The above implies that there is a resemblance between the tenor and the vehicle. This resemblance is assumed as an imaginary identity rather than directly stated as a comparison. Indeed, metaphor is a compressed simile.

Metaphor is the most important and wide-spread of all figures of speech. Much of our daily conversations are made up of metaphorical statements, which pass almost unnoticed. A typical metaphor consists of the primary literal term known as the "tenor" and the secondary figurative term called the "vehicle". For instance, in the metaphor, "the road of life", the "road" is the vehicle, "life" is the tenor. Metaphor has the same effect as simile. But the fact that a metaphor is brief and straight to the point gives it a more striking clarity and vividness of picture than a simile.

Bura *karapu* abounds in the use of metaphors. Below are selected examples:

3.1.1a. *Diva akwa kwatam nubwar kila wa.*

3.1.1b. *The food in the dish does not belong to the dog.*

Usually, the master in the house feed dogs traditionally by setting aside a place where remnants are kept for them to come and eat. Food served for the master in his dish is not meant for the dog at all. Here there is a comparison between the subject food (*diva*), which is the tenor and the abstract statement object- not meant for a dog (*nubwar ar kila wa*) is the vehicle, Oni (1982). Here the act of trying to eat served-food prepared for the master is considered metaphorically, signifying the theme of inferiority to the master. One should know one's place in every circumstance.

3.1.2a. *Whomba duku ku huzupta thleha.*

3.1.2b. *A single frog spoils the whole river.*

In the above metaphor, the two things that are compared are frog (*whomba*) and single (*duku*). The frog is an animate and single is an idea denoting an action. From the point of view of the coiner, the common thing between the two is the idea of staying in the river (*thleha*). The action of `whomba duku` (single frog) signifies lack of unity. In other words, this proverb metaphorically uses a frog for a person and a river for community or society. What the *Karapu* implies is that a single person can destroy the reputation of his family, his clan or his village at large. Hence human beings should be careful of how they act as their behavior can have grave consequences for the larger society. This is similar to the Hausa *Karin Magana* that the single seed of a locust bean tree can spoil water.

3.1.3a. *Mda kica tsi ka divar ar mar wa.*

3.1.3b. *One does not wash hands to eat a rival's food.*

In a polygamous family set-up, whenever you eat a co-wife's food you later reciprocate the gesture by giving her part of your own food. You have to think whether you can equally give

her food when your turn comes. The comparison here lies in the action of repaying. The common quality shared by the two here is the idea of repaying. The fact that you give, does not mean that you will be given. One is being asked not to engage in vain hope or rely on someone else's property.

3.1.4a. Tsingi vidza kusarari aka nfwa kambila tsa nggingya.

3.1.4b. The lion needs a tree's support before roaring.

Compared in the above *Karapu* is the action of roaring and the idea of support (tree). The common thing here is the support. The lion, despite its strength is always afraid of its anus bulging out, but when it is properly supported then it can roar to the maximum. Metaphorically, the strength of an individual depends upon the support he or she gets from others to act.

3.1.5a. Kasuku ata titila, coku ata pukthla una.

3.1.5b. The market session is coming to an end when the fool is getting set.

The two things compared are the ideas of people departing and the fool getting set. The action of the foolish man denotes his folly. It is when the market session is fresh in the morning or noon that a wise man displays his wares for sale in the market place for people to see. When people are getting set for home, who sees or even prices your goods? Metaphorically, the action in the market is transferred and compared to a fool. People are being advised to do things at the right time.

Analysis of Simile in Some Bura Proverbs

Oni (1982:10) stresses that simile is a comparison between two things, which differ in kind generally, but these two things are the same in one particular point. It is this special similar point that the user of a simile wants us to see. He further stresses that similes are generally used to make a passage clear and vivid because the figure in a simile draws a picture in your mind so that you see the description as if it were a drawing or a photograph before you.

Traditionally, similes are defined as comparison between two dissimilar things with the use of 'like' and 'as'. In fact, simile is very prevalent in Bura *karapu*. For example,

4.1.1a Pilari apa harari wa.

4.1.1b To says it is not the same as working it out.

The two things that are compared in this *Karapu* are 'pilari' (say) and 'harari (work)'. The area of sameness is the fact that both are actions but the action could best be accomplished by the end product. Therefore, saying it does not mean it is already worked out.

The *Karapu* could best be used to describe someone's effort in terms of hardwork or someone's endurance. Traditionally, in fact, the use of 'apa' which is synonymous with the English term 'like' gives us the picture that the entire *Karapu* is a simile.

4.1.2a Kasila apa nggwar ka tsa kira mthlenga.

4.1.2b It's easy to stalk like hitting the blind.

The two things that are compared are 'Kasila' (easy) and 'nggwar' (secretly). It is easier to act slowly and achieve than to act fast without success. The point at which they are alike is the act. The use of like in this *Karapu* is where the simile occurs.

4.1.3a *Kithlir apa Kaliya, Ka si sima apa kamba.*

4.1.3b *Work like a slave, and eat like freeborn.*

The two things compared here that differs in kind are kithlir(work) and sima (eat). These two things indeed are the same in a particular point. There sameness occurs in the fact that it is believed that unless one works hard he ends up with hunger. In this proverb there is no doubt that the use of apa is prominent by signifying likeness.

4.1.4a *Apa kajir yankur.*

4.1.4b *It's like a relatives Vagina.*

Though this *Karapu* is vulgaric, it demonstrates the traditional use of the term simile by the simple definition that similes are comparison between two things with the use of like or as. The use of 'apa' is a clear manifestation.

4.1.5a *Apa u'u ka puwa.*

4.1.5b *It is like fire and cotton wool.*

The two things compared are fire and cotton wool. The point at which they are alike is that each shows a relationship, which the two must be far apart or else, face destruction.

4.1.6a *Hyelapamdawa.*

4.1.6b *No one is like God.*

Indeed, God and Man are incomparable. The supreme is never the same with man, though we are told he made us in his own image. The two comparisons in this *karapu* are God and Man, who differ in kind.

Analysis of Personification in Some Bura Proverbs

Baldick(1990) defines personification as a figure of speech by which animals ,abstract ideas, or inanimate things are referred to as if they were human. Oni (1982) defines it as the giving of life to inanimate things or ideas. When you talk of a tree, a stone, the sky as if it is a human being, then you are using personification. Personification comes from the word 'personify' which means to represent a thing or an idea with a person.

Personification is very much common in Bura *Karapu* as presented below:

6.1.1a. *Ma mta ku kil kumarnga tsa; tsa tsa karapu alaga.*

6.1.1b. *When death takes away your age mate; the next is your turn.*

Death here has been personified as if it were human being, which has human attributes like hand. 'Tsa', is an act of beating with a hand directly. In the light of this therefore it is seen as if it were human in action. Death is depicted as capable of beating a person.

6.1.2a. *Ngilar ndir ana bikanta kutawa*

6.1.2b. *To refuse a statement does not upset the stomach.*

Upset is a reaction from something abnormal taken inside the stomach. Here 'to refuse' a word has been attributed humanly in the sense that the feelings of the reaction to the stomach is being addressed as a life object.

6.1.3a. *Mta kil mi wa.*

6.1.3b. *A dead person does not feel hungry.*

Death is the total collapse of man (person) and, it is a known fact that, it is only an existing person that feels hungry. Here, in this *karapu* a dead person has been personified as if he were something existing which inhales and exhales and at the same time eats and feels hungry. Thus, Baldick (1990:10) says that 'Personification is an expression by which animals, abstract ideas, or inanimate things are referred to as if they were human'. It is therefore a common phenomenon in Bura *karapu*.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the research paper dwells on the literary analysis of the themes and poetic devices of selected Bura proverbs such as knowledge, advice and hardwork as a store house of Bura traditional wisdom. Several poetic devices such as metaphors, similes and personification were focused on with which the Bura proverbs (*karapu*) are expressed. Bura proverbs (*karapuyeri*), in common with the proverbs of other cultural groups, have been seen to be highly figurative and stylistic. The data at our disposal confirms this observation. Indeed, Bura proverbs are usually couched in themes and poetic devices. Proverbs are the most important type of aphorisms in Africa and indeed in Bura. They possess a deeper meaning than expressed literally, a meaning that can be comprehended only through the analysis of the social circumstances to which they are applicable.

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