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### INCORPORATION OF PROVERBS IN LITERATURE

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#### ABSTRACT

*This study analyses the incorporation of proverbs in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* and *The Great Ponds*. The validity of the proverbs used in the novels was proved after being subjected to Richard Dorson's criteria of biographical evidence, internal evidence and corroborative evidence to ensure that they were real orallore. The criteria assures us that folk material found in the novels came directly from the authors' personal exposure to actual folk tradition which was established because they passed the three principal kinds of evidence.*

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**Keywords:** Biographical, Internal and corroborative evidence, Oral lore, Folklore.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Proverb is one of the most interesting of all verbal arts employed by writers' especially didactic writers. It features prominently as one of the ways in which authors are recapturing traditional speech atmosphere and wisdom even with the influence of the western culture. In this vein [Ogbalu \(1965\)](#), omments that

In spite of the influence of the west, one cannot help breaking his speech in English in order to insert one or more Igbo proverbs here and there, as there is a feeling that it is only by so doing that the point is driven home(vi)

A proverb which is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional view in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation has been extensively used by writers like Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi in their novels- *Efuru*, *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine*. The proverbs they used in these novels, as Bernth Lindfors argues, serves as keys to the understanding of their works because they used them not merely to add touches of local colour but to sound and reiterate themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict and to focus on the values of the society that they are

portraying. This paper tends to study the incorporation of proverbs by Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi and their work will be judged with Richard Dorson's yardstick ie The Three Principal Evidence to determine three appropriateness or otherwise.

### **Richard Dorson's Three Principal Evidences**

Generally, proverbs serve to instruct, to sanction behaviour, to amuse and to enhance ordinary conversation. This seems to be the case in Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Chukwuemeka Ike, and Ola Rotimi's works. Therefore, [Richard Dorson \(1964\)](#) maintains that a proper analysis of folklore in literature must start with the three evidences ie the critic must provide three principal kinds of evidence

- Biographical evidence
- Internal evidence
- Corroborative evidence

He was able to produce this evidence because original folklore materials are sometimes borrowed by individual writers who consciously restructure and rewrite them. The results, according to Alan Dundes, "should be called 'art' based on folklore but occasionally these moulders refer to their productions as folklore."(233)

Folklorists such as Richard Dorson refused to refer to these bowdlerized and edited materials as folklore but fakelore, arguing that these materials are not authentic products of the traditional process.

Therefore, in a symposium jointly held by the American Folklore Society and the Modern Language Association in New York, Richard Dorson wrote that

The first need is to establish clearly and demonstrably that novels, short stories, poems or plays incorporate folk materials. The second... is to show that this folklore offers new insight into our understanding of creative writings (2).

He also expresses his desire of the need to set a standard in the assessment of the incorporation of folkloric materials in literature. To him, many critics fail to demonstrate the presence of folklore in creative writing. And in his paper "Folklore in Literature: A Symposium," he states that a literary critic can satisfactorily establish the relationship of a given work to folk tradition if the three principal kinds of evidence mentioned above can be demonstrated. To check the folklore used by writers with Dorson's evidence calls for caution and hard work and also helps to eliminate what Bernth Lindfors calls the impressionistic approach to the study of folklore in African literature, which is one involving assumptions and suggestions rather than facts and proofs.

Lindfors (1973) expresses that

The critic is content to make a few bland assertions about the presence of traditional elements in a modern literary work without bothering to ascertain whether what he says about these elements is true (8)

This kind of critic does not like to take the trouble to do research. For them “No verification is necessary”. The three principal kinds of evidence that Dorson Richard suggested will be elaborately discussed below.

### Biographical Evidence

In this case “an author may be shown through biographical evidence to have enjoyed direct contact with oral lore”. (5)

In *The Concubine*, *The Great Ponds* and *Efuru*, Elechi Amadi and Flora Nwapa integrated proverbs well and it shows that they are very familiar with the use of proverbs in their place. They used them naturally to show that they were originally exposed to them and that they enjoyed direct contact with their culture and tradition.

Flora Nwapa (1966) is among the first English language novels by a woman from Africa. She was mostly educated in Nigeria, attending primary and secondary schools in Oguta, Elelenwa and Lagos. She was awarded the highest chieftaincy title (Ogbuefi) in her town; this title is usually meant for men of achievement. With Nwapa (1966), *efuru* became black African’s first internationally published female novelist in the English language.

Flora Nwapa’s vivid description of the goddess of the lake (her fairy godmother) in *Efuru* was actually based on her early exposure to folklore. She had direct personal contact with Oguta Lake which was near her birth place.

Flora Nwapa in “*Women and Creative Writing in Africa* (2007) writes that

...the story of **Efuru** struck me in a most dramatic way as I was driving at a speed of 80 miles per hour along Enugu-Onitsha Road. I got to my destination, borrowed an exercise book and began to write *Efuru*’s story. I wrote chapter one ... and did not stop until I finished the entire novel (526).

This singularly shows that she was brought up in an environment where folklore was part of tradition because she could not have written deeply using proverbs to portray their life before the colonial time if she had not been deeply involved with the culture and customs of the land.

Flora Nwapa is best-known for re-creating Igbo life and traditions from a woman’s view point. She became the first African woman publisher of novels when she founded Tana Press. She is also known for her governmental work in reconstruction after the Biafran War. In particular, she

worked with orphans and refugees. She also worked as a publisher of African literature and promoted women in African society.

Elechi Amadi was born in Aluu near Port Harcourt, Ikwere Local Government Area of Rivers State of Nigeria to an Igbo family. His early education was in Aluu, Ikwere Local Government Area. He also studied at Government College, Umuahia. Like major Nigerian writers, he was educated at the University of Ibadan. Amadi received his Bachelor of Science degree in physics and mathematics in 1959. He worked as a surveyor and teacher, and later enlisted in the Nigerian Army. During the Nigerian Civil War, he served with the former 3rd Marine Commandos. He left the army and became the Head of the Ministry of Education in Rivers State after the Nigerian Civil War.

Amadi's first novel, *The Concubine* was published in 1966, six years after Nigerian independence, and it was set in Port Harcourt. *The Concubine* was followed by *The Great Ponds*, published in 1969, which centres on the war between two rival villages over fishing rights. As an educator, a novelist and dramatist, writing in English, he has interpreted in his novels the life and values of the traditional village society.

In *The Concubine* he showed effective style and narrative technique in the way he elaborately described the Amadioha Shrine, funeral ceremonies, especially the part played by the Umuada during the burial of a kinsman (Emenike). His clear description was also based on his familiarity with oral tradition.

Elechi Amadi's contribution to the African novel lies in his portrayal of traditional life with its vivid scenes and identifiable characters. He does not show a village with a conflict of values or a village in transition.

Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi's incorporation of items of folklore in their novels shows that they enjoyed direct contact with oral lore. This is true because their early life began in the village and wherever they went, they carried their village within them and it affected their aspirations, their emotions and moral values which gave the village community its particular culture.

### **Internal Evidence**

According to Richard Dorson, the internal evidence requires "The critic to show that an author plausibly describes the folk milieu and therefore must have observed folklore first hand" (5). This shows that the background of the work must look real to depict the real-life of any situation.

The proverbs used in the novels available to us were studied. It was discovered that Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi integrated proverbs intimately into their work, showing that they observed the use of proverbs personally. For example in *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa showed where Ajanupu and her sister, Ossai (Efuru's mother-in-law) met at the market and were discussing Ajanupu's son who

had a convulsion. She advised her to take good care of him because “If an old woman falls twice, we count all she has in her basket” (17). This is because Ajanupu had lost a child before through convulsion and a repeat is not good.

Five days after the birth of Efuru’s child, it was customary to put alligator pepper in her mouth so that her tongue would be free. This is what transpired,

“Ajanupu, my daughter will talk like you. I am afraid she will be very talkative”. Efuru’s mother-in-law teased her sister. That is alright. Aren’t you lucky that I am near to put alligator pepper in her mouth? Who wants to be quiet these days? Don’t you know that if you don’t lick your mouth the harmattan will lick it for you? (33).

Another saying was used when Efuru came back from Agbor after seeing the futility of waiting for her husband. She said this to her mother-in-law.

“Mother, I cannot stay any more. A man said that he has wept for the death that killed his friend but he did not wish that death to kill him (,88).

Also, in Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* and *The Great Ponds* proverbs were used to show that the Igbo cannot discuss effectively without inserting one or two proverbs. Like Flora Nwapa’s, the background of the work looks real like the actual thing.

In *The Concubine*, Elechi Amadi discusses the funeral of Emenike and the fight between Madume and Emenike vividly as if he had witnessed similar events personally. The way he incorporated the items of folklore in his novel shows that he had had direct familiarity with these items of folklore he used.

Ekwueme’s attachment to Ihuoma made his father hurry over his marriage negotiations with Wagbara. On one occasion this discussion arose

The normal period of negotiations was a year, but Wigwe has rushed things. Each time Wagbara pointed out that a hen cannot lay eggs and hatch them on the same day, Wigwe had countered by saying that the slow-footed always fail in battle. (129)

The following ensued between Ekwueme and his father when the former said that he prefers marrying Ihuoma to Ahurole that was betrothed to him twenty years ago.

Who do you what to marry?

Ihuoma, do you realize that Ahurole was engaged to you almost  
twenty years ago?

I do.

What is wrong with Ahurole?

Nothing.

Is Ihuoma more beautiful than she is?

I can't tell.

Listen, my son, you must not be like the  
Caterpillar that holds fast to tree branches  
when small but loses its grip and falls to its  
death when much older. (107)

Wigwe, Ekwueme's father used the proverb to send home his message to his son to show that he should be sensible to note that Ihuoma is not a very good choice for him.

The authors of *Efuru*, *The Concubine* and *The Great Ponds* showed that they observed the Igbo using of proverbs in real life. They applied them well in their novels. It is clear from the examples given above that Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi have satisfied Richard Dorson's criterion of internal evidence because they have realistically described the events showing that they have observed the items of folklore first hand or personally.

### Corroborative Evidence

Dorson explains that finding a likely piece of folklore properly set in an authentic social situation, or woven naturally into the speech and manners of regional characters does not terminate the quest of the folk critic. He must prove that the saying, tale, song or custom inside the literary work possesses an independent traditional life. In other words, our critic must present corroborative evidence to supplement his proofs (7).

There are some published works like *Ilu Igbo* by F.C. Ogbalu, *Mmanu E ji Eri Okwu* by Rev. Fr. F. O. F. Onwudufor, *The Palm Oil of Speech: Igbo Proverbs* by Rems Nnanyelugo Umeasiegbu, *Ilulu Igbo* (The Book of Igbo Proverbs) by P. K. Davids. The proverbs used in the novels of Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi are found in the books mentioned above.

Also, interviews with some tradition bearers show that these proverbs are authentic.

Examples are taken from *The Concubine*, *The Great Ponds* and *Efuru*

"If an old woman falls twice we count all she had in her basket" (*Nwapa, 1966*). This particular proverb is found as number 720 of *Mmanu E ji Eri Okwu* (*Onwudufor, 2007*) and as number 578 of *The Palm Oil of Speech: Igbo Proverbs* (*Umeasiegbu, 1986*).

"He who pursues an innocent chicken often stumbles" (*Amadi, 1969*) is found as number 224 of *The Palm Oil of Speech: Igbo Proverbs* (*Umeasiegbu, 1986*).

“Truly when one finger picks up oil the others soon get soiled with it” (Amadi, 1969) is also found as number 171 of *The Palm Oil of Speech: Igbo Proverbs* (Umeasiegbu, 1986).

“A child usually sleeps when he has eaten the thing for which he has been keeping awake” (Amadi, 1969) is found as number 66 of *The Palm Oil of Speech: Igbo Proverbs* (Umeasiegbu, 1986).

The following proverb,

“When a child washes his hands he may dine with his elders” (Amadi, 1964) can be found as number 72 of *The Palm oil of speech: Igbo Proverbs* (Umeasiegbu, 1986).

While in *Efuru* the proverb “Start early to look for a black goat because at night a black goat will be difficult to find “ (Nwapa, 1966) is found in *The Palm oil of Speech: Igbo Proverbs* (Umeasiegbu, 1986) number 243.

Again, “let’s perform the sacrifices expected of us and let the gods take any blame” (Nwapa, 1966) is number 449 of *The Palm Oil of Speech: Igbo Proverbs* (Umeasiegbu, 1986).

These proverbs which are found in published works mentioned above confirm their possession of independent traditional life. Therefore, Dorson’s third principal evidence is satisfied.

Richard Dorson’s criteria of biographical, internal and corroborative evidence assure us that folk material found in the novels came directly from the authors’ personal exposure to actual folk traditions.

## CONCLUSION

Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi really incorporated proverbs successfully into their novels for this study. This implies that they used the proverbs plausibly and realistically, showing that they observed most of the activities personally, they were also familiar with the proverbs and that the proverbs used possess an independent life of their own and they are found in books. It is also important to note that the relevance of proverbs in the novels lies in the preservation and dissemination of culture, education of the readers and entertainment. This was achieved by the authors – Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi because they succeeded in changing oral art into literary art through the utilization of our rich cultural heritage. Therefore, by introducing traditional Igbo proverbs in their fiction they produced a convincing, in- depth portrait of traditional Igbo society and their values.

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