

**Urbanising orality: A socio-artistic interpretation of Cameroonian Pidgin
English proverbs**

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Abstract

In this paper, the focus is that though proverbs are known to be elitist by nature, the birth of urban spaces in Cameroon and the growth of Pidgin English have generated a popular culture. One of the outcomes of popular culture is the composition of proverbs in Pidgin English. The paper has, therefore, argued that Cameroon Pidgin proverbs can contribute to the shaping and construction of the Cameroonian worldview. This study is guided by the theoretical views of Hall (2007) especially as he propounded that studying works from Cultural Studies perspectives takes two angles – the aesthetic and the ideological angles. The method of collecting data for this research was Naturally Occurring Data and especially the tool known as Field Notes (Golato, 2017). Naturally Occurring Data usually functions with experimenters that are not predicted in all situations in which a given speech event may be produced (Golato, 2017). With the help of the Field Notes research tool, the proverbs were collected on the bus after an ensuing debate on the importance and relevance of pidgin English in present-day Cameroon as the researcher traveled from Yaounde to Buea. The research reveals that there is a huge corpus of pidgin proverbs that if carefully analyzed and interpreted; they can serve, as a tool for enhancing the much-needed Cameroonian national culture.

Key Words: Orality, Urban, Pidgin, Culture, Popular

Introduction

Gunner affirms that the African continent is largely “the oral continent” (2004, p.1). This assertion shows the importance that Africans still have on their orature today. So that one may not be completely out of place to claim that the oral is part of African identity. This explains why Gunner’s term “orality” makes sense in the context of this study. To Gunner, “orality needs to be seen in the African context as the means by which societies of varying complexities regulated themselves, organized their present and the past ... (2004, p.1). According to Gunner, orality is not or does not limit itself to aesthetic functionality but is spirit and the ethos of communities. In this connection, orality in Africa becomes “self constitutive” as it “can be viewed as site of enormous, long and ongoing creativity ... as vector for the production of social life, religious beliefs, and the constant constituting and reconstituting of society,

ideology and aesthetics” (Gunner 2004, p.1). Of course, Gunner functionalization of orality is generally held by most scholars of orality (Opkewho 1992, Jick 2006, Alembong 2011, Finnegan 2012 and Tala 2013) and though seemingly neglected, the performance nature of orality continues to speak and change people’s perceptions in communities around Africa.

According to Salami (2004), everywhere in Africa, proverbs are considered a serious art form. She argues that proverbs seem to be a very important element of speech that is spoken by the “well bred”. This implies that proverbs are not the province of common people. In this regard, proverbs fall in the class of what cultural critics like Hall (2007) and Gilroy (1993) will term High Culture. Yankah (1986) gives some characteristics of proverbs:

The poetic brevity of the proverb, its basic impersonal character, and its perception as an eternal verity tend to make it a ready tool for rhetoric in situations of tension. Indeed, the proverb lurks behind the literary philosophy of Kenneth Burk (1957) and provides the basis for Roger Abrahams’s rhetorical theory of folklore, which perceives each item of expressive culture as a tool for persuasion. (p.280)

Yankah helps us understand that brevity in proverbs is very important for it helps in memory. Turin ((2012) acknowledged, and rightly so, that oral literature at all times had depended on culture and memory. Though modern digital and other recording devices may seem to question Turin’s claim, it is important to assert that orality relies still on the power of memory. Being an element of the oral art, memory is so important as it leads to the sustaining nature of the vocal art. Yankah’s claim that memory forms part of the folklore of a people is therefore central to discourse on orality.

The brevity in the structure of proverbs is also guided by the fact that it is spaceless which ensures its timelessness. Again, one important aspect of the proverbs is that it is enshrined in the historicity and topography of its production. De Certeau (1990) had argued that “Comme les outils, les proverbs, ou autres discours, sont marqués par des usages; ils presentent à l’analyse les empreintes d’actes ou de process d’énonciation (p.38)¹. Reading de Certeau, it seems that

¹ Like the tools, proverbs, or other forms discourse, are marked by usage; they present in analyses prints of the act of enunciation (My Translation)

though proverbs are elitist in nature, they have a functional role in society that helps the reader/listener to be able to decipher the context of the proverb in time and space. At that point, the proverb is considered the discourse of the “well situated” (de Certeau 1990, p.38). In de Certeau’s view, studying proverbs purely as a linguistic production does not put the genre in its rightful process. This paper argues that, as a genre in orality, proverbs fall under the genre of the privileged high cultures and yet, it has a functional role that it plays in society.

Pidgin, on its part, is a *lingua Franca*. Historically, it started during colonialism and its goal was to serve as a means of communication. Over the years, the language has grown to be one of the most widely spoken languages in countries that speak it like the ex-British West African colonies including Cameroon (Ohaeto 1995, p.69). It should be noted also that the language, though growing, has had a lot of obstacles from the colonialist and those with the colonial mentality. Thus, the expressions “bad English”, “broken English” have been attributed to the language, coupled with the fact that many, as Loftman puts it, held that “Good breeding and a sound education invariably result in the renunciation of Creole (pidgin) speech (Ohaeto 1995, p.69). This leads us to understand that Pidgin forms part of the popular culture for it is a language of the low, illiterate and working class which is in contrast with English language here that is part of the high and dominant culture. Pidgin becomes the proletarian language.

Within the Cameroonian context, it is possible to claim that the beginning of urbanism was facilitated by the growth of Pidgin, which was the result of radical contact between the unintelligible languages of the natives and the colonial language (Fonka 2014). As such, Pidgin in what is today considered as the Cameroonian territory has its roots in the 15th century and as Fonka puts it, it has developed and has spread throughout Cameroon. However, Fonka notes that from the 1960s, with the Cameroons gaining their independences and also re-uniting, the new elite surprisingly pushed the language to the periphery. Despite frantic appeals by linguists the widest spoken language and means of all forms of communication in Cameroon remains unrecognized. However, the language continues to thrive in the artistic and creative sectors.

This paper demonstrates that the growth of urbanization in Cameroon has led to the growth of what can be referred to as Pidgin English, a *lingua franca* that serves as a means of communication and artistic expression in cosmopolitan settings in contemporary Cameroon. Though proverbs are generally considered as a genre of the privilege class, Pidgin as a popular form of communication has had artists who have created proverbs that continue to mold and shape the worldview of Cameroonians. This paper finds out whether proverbs in Pidgin are popular art or elitist and also, if proverbs spoken in Pidgin English shifts from an elitist genre to popular one. With this in mind, I argue in this paper that proverbs in Pidgin English can serve as an artistic tool towards morality in the growing urban spaces in present day Cameroon. The producers in this new society have shifted proverbial creation from the high and dominant spaces, represented in dominant languages (colonial language and mother tongue) to the low spaces as exemplified in the *lingua franca* that is the vehicle for this production. This position taken is guided by the principles of cultural and critical theory, which is a multidisciplinary study that deconstructs the opposition between high cultures and low cultures. The approach is based on the assumption that literary works should be interpreted with keen attention to their cultural roots (Hall 2007, p. 37). This is because according to Hall (2007), society plays an important role in all human productions. Therefore, the argument is that modes of production are cultural and that even societal constructions like race, gender, class are culturally constructed. Thus, using cultural theory to analyze Pidgin proverbs as a social tool is relevant since I have argued that Pidgin proverbs are born of the new dynamics of urbanization that cropped up from colonialism in Cameroon.

The methodology selected for this research is qualitative; with the analyzing and interpreting of the corpus – basically proverbs in Pidgin English to be able to sustain the results established. The corpus here studied was collected in the bus in one of the researcher’s trips from Yaounde to Buea. The Naturally Occurring Data methods were used especially as the data were collected at the spur of the moment. According to Golato (2017, p. 22) “Naturally Occurring Data are data that are not directly elicited by the researcher; instead, they are data that are observed”. In this case, Data are generally used for analyses of real language use. There are two research tools when using the Naturally Occurring

Data: the Field Notes and Recording. In this study, the Field Note tools was employed as it tied very well with the spur of the moment approach that necessitated the gathering of the proverbs. The bus, in this case, enhanced the idea of urbanism and much more, cosmopolitanism, since it had people from various backgrounds traveling for different purposes. The proverbs were told exclusively in Pidgin English by those who could and there were no criteria for selecting the presenters of the proverbs. The proverbs collected, analyzed and interpreted in this study are focused on the lone criteria that they are proverbs in Pidgin English. Middle-aged educated men and women told most of the proverbs as we traveled.

Proverbs and the ruler /ruled binary

One of the elements that have been expressed through Pidgin proverbs is the binary that exists between the rulers and the ruled. This binary reveals that in urban centres, power structure still exists even after colonialism with the new elite fitting into the shoes of the colonialist. Thereby, creating a new periphery.

Fanon has articulated this continued binary in these words,

The traditional weakness, which is almost congenial to the national consciousness of under-developed countries, is not solely the result of the mutilation of the colonized people by the colonial regime. It is also the result of the intellectual laziness of the national middle class, of spiritual penury, and of the profoundly cosmopolitan mould that its mind is set in. (1963, p.119)

Fanon's argument is interesting especially as it situates him among the first revolutionary critiques that attempted an internal evaluation of the postcolonial condition. Fanon's arrows are not only targeted on the colonialist for the construction of the urban structure of classes but also, Fanon indicts the ex-colonized for lack of initiative. Bhabha (1994) has stated as a way of pushing forward Fanon's claim that the middle class in ex-colonized territory is drawn to mimicry. To Fanon, laziness and the desire to fit in purely into the shoes of the colonialist by the colonized constitute a pitfall to the nation. The proverb "Monki di work Baboon di chop" reveals this binary between classes in urban settings. Built on primate symbolism, the speaker reveals that the sameness of the creatures may lead them to co-exist easily. But because of their sizes, they are different. What we find is that the creature with the large body is the ruler while that with the small body is the ruled. That is why the monkey must work for the

baboon. The proverb also translates a semantic assumption in Pidgin English that has come to be enshrined in the people's mentality. In Pidgin English, the term "big" signifies greatness, powerful and leadership. That is why bigness is a signifier for leadership, fame or one that is influential. In the proverb, the baboon is the ruler because of its bigness and the next thing we find is its exploitation of the small monkey; a signifier for the ruled. The proverb illustrates that the urban centres are stratified with postcolonial classism well enshrined with the exploitation of the less privileged. In this connection, the urban spaces, constructed as a result of the colonial encounter continue to represent the colonial reality even after "decolonization". This justifies what Fanon had said that the *nouveau elite* in ex-colonized territory is just ready to replace the colonial oppressor (1963, pp.119-120).

Besides working for those who have wealth and power in the urban centres, the masses or ruled are seen as victims of the social construction of the urban space. The social construction in the urban space pushes the masses or the ruled into marginalized spaces which are ghettos and dangerous. They are silent. This leaves the ruled/masses to themselves and they enjoy no protection. In proverbs like "yu no fit put arata and gronut for de same hous"/ "cockroach no fit win kes with man fowl insaid fowl dem court"/ "goat no fit win kes with tiger insaid tiger dem court", the same trajectory of the ruler and ruled is being represented. The proverbs are built on contrast with a creature that victimizes and the other a victim. This predator image shows how the ruled live in fear, lack and injustice. Drawn from different backgrounds and transported into the urban settings, the proverbs all express the same idea. The first two proverbs are home-based proverbs that focus on the symbols used – the rat, groundnut, cockroach and fowls. These creatures are all visible in homes and the last one is in the wild with the tiger having the goat as prey. The image of the prey is very strong in these proverbs. This indicates that the masses or the marginalized, as seen in the groundnut, the cockroach and the goat are preys to a higher order. These proverbs demonstrate that the masses in urban settings are not only exploited but they are seen to be the victims by their oppressors and leaders.

Resistance and surrender

The concept of resistance is one that has mutated as theorists view it from different perspectives. Breidlid (2001, p. 35) posits that resistance in the colonial and postcolonial sense is the relationship built on Manichean binaries with the goal to reverse an order. What this means is that resistance is a manifestation that proves that the mass is not satisfied. Thus, reaction to the status quo is done with the hope for change. One other effect of the growth of urban centres in Africa is the response of the masses to their status quo and with these urban dwellers seem to be taking all the risk to go about what will help them succeed. To defend the course of their action, proverbs like “man no die, man no rotin”/ “goat di chop fo pleis we dem tie am” / “elephant no fit hite fo gronut fam” all sound like an excuse for any action takes by these urban dwellers. From the proverbs, we come to understand that the urban dwellers are in a *fait à complit* situation. In “man no die man no rotin” the speaker justifies an act. It is a fact that for a dead body to decompose, it must first die. This action is a call for the people to resist without fear and cowardice the ills of urbanization and the oppression of the masses. This resistant call is further justified in the fact that “goat di chop fo pleis wei dem tie am”. This explains why the people are left without a choice but to talk about their plight. The proverb also reveals corruption, which is a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabric of lifestyle in Cameroon. According to Egbeyong (2018) the very system in Cameroon is corrupt. He says that Cameroon is corrupt “in several forms including bribery, nepotism, graft, fraud, speed money, theft, pilferage, embezzlement, falsification of records and influence peddling” (p.2). Though the powers that be have openly declared war against corruption in Cameroon, it is hard to judge the seriousness of the anti-corruption slogans. This is because corrupt practices are seen everywhere in Cameroon. It is not uncommon to hear in Cameroon that a top government official is going to prison on corruption charges.

In the proverb “elephant no fit hite fo gronut farm”. The image of the elephant (visibly the largest mammal that moves on the earth’s surface) and the groundnut farm with weak tenders and small groundnut leaves shows that the evil of oppression which is also symbolized in the elephant cannot be kept silent and thus, for the elephant to be in a groundnut farm proves that it will destroy the tender leaves of the plant. This proverb is a call on the people to resist

oppression and exploitation from the ruling and wealthy class at all cost. It is also an effort, to call on the working class to be conscious of their position as workers and to fight for their liberation as wa Thiong' o (1981), Easthope and Mc Gowan (1992) advocate.

One can also read the idea of resignation in the proverbs and the masses accepting their position to serve their rulers. To assert that a goat eats where it is tethered shows also that the goat has no voice and has accepted its fate and so justifying the corruption pandemic in Cameroon. Further more, it vituperates those who take advantage of every position given to them to steal and to collect bribes. In this connection, the speaker in this proverb seems to be one of those who have grown to the position of a goat (oppressor at this point against the grass that it feeds on that stand for the masses) in the urban centers of Cameroon. And thus, he/she begins to function like the oppressor who must reap the fruits of the position he/she now has. To be eating the grass makes the grass its victim and the proverb shows that the goat has no pity because that is where it is been put to eat its share. Fanon again had said that:

Since the middle class has neither sufficient material nor intellectual resources (by intellectual resources we mean engineers and technicians) it limits its claims to taking over of business offices and commercial houses formerly occupied by the settlers. The national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement: doctors, barristers, traders, commercial travellers, general agents and transport agents. (1963, p. 122)

From what Fanon said, the new elite as seen in the goat are doing all to put on the shoes of the former colonialist. Their present state is seen in the tone of attainment that we find in the proverb. It seems as if it the goat reporting that it can only eat where it is tethered and does not care how the grass it eats will feel. The urban aristocrat are therefore projected as those who do not care about the well being of the masses that they so well oppress in almost the same way that the colonialist did. This duality of interpretation of the proverb justifies the fact that proverbs even in Pidgin are a fine artistic creation that can match with dominant productions.

The Question of Morality

One of the rising crises of urbanization is the loss of virtue and the rise of a morality crisis. According to Jan, Jan and Khan (2016, p. 171) “moral values

are the principles and standards which determine whether an action is right or wrong. Moral values are based on a moral code, which is a system of morality according to a particular philosophy, religion and culture.” This explication by Jan, Jan and Khan reveals that what is moral is what a people generally agree to abide by. The desire for morality becomes a mark for social cohesion, which ensures safety and security to all individuals. Through morality, the sense of belonging and the pride to existence is enhanced.

Pidgin proverbs, like all proverbs of other languages, have the obligation to “teach us to learn form our mistakes, correct our ills and also emulate the positive aspects reflected in some of the proverbs” (Jick 2006, p.27). In Pidgin proverbs like “Dem no di folo small pikin fowl tyam wei rain di fol” / “No gi fowl chop weyn yu wan go sellam” illustrate the virtues of punctuality and the respect for time which seems to be a problem in post independent urban areas. The fowl is a domestic birth that for the most part is used to generate revenue in most homes in Cameroonian urban centres. In the proverbs, the speakers call for caution as they conscientise their audience. To the speaker, it seems futile to go after a chick when the rain is falling because the chick might not be caught or simply the situation might not change. It is the same thing with feeding a fowl to grow big on the day one takes it to the market. The speakers of both proverbs satirize procrastination and waste of time in African urban centres.

Besides correcting the people on time management, Pidgin proverbs also lay emphasis on the respect and honour of the elderly and their wisdom. Jick argued that African social organizations are predicated on the assumption that age and the experience that comes with it are indispensable to the well-being of the community (2006, p.45). Though Jick makes allusion to traditional proverbs that evoked the issue of experience and respect for the elderly, its occurrence in urban creativity that is subaltern, as I have justified in this study, shows that the need to respect and venerate experience is an issue at all times in Africa and Cameroon.

In a proverb like “kola di stay na fo de mop wei yi sabi”, we find a celebration of age and experience. Kolanut is a bitter fruit that young people generally seem not to desire it. However, the elderly people usually eat this nut. The nut also plays a great role in the initiation of peace and harmony in African societies. It

is this nut that is usually shared before meetings begin and as a sign of reconciliation. Therefore, the elders seem to be endowed with wisdom and that is why they understand the importance of kola. It is for this cause that they eat the fruit without complain. The proverb also denotes that the elderly because they can eat kola with pleasure are capable of undergoing the storms of the society and handle them with wisdom and endurance in contrast to the naïve and impatient youth. Kola nut then symbolizes wisdom, unity and peace in society, which are virtues that seem to go with age.

The proverbs also celebrate experience, which is in contrast with naivety or ignorance. In the proverbs “trenja no di kuk kanda” / “na big mami get plenti brok brok pot dem”, one finds that experience is very useful part of the urban life in post independence Cameroon. It is however interesting to notice the female gender playing central role in the enunciations. Cooking and the use of pots are generally signifiers that denote femininity. Feminists, like Mutia (2009) have argued that concerning the African space, “women keep reproducing the iconoclastic values of domesticity such as marriage and motherhood, while men handle decision making, even when these decisions have to do with the destiny of women” (p.153). Though Mutia, like other feminists, will judge that the proverb celebrates the stereotypical image of the woman in Africa instead of giving her true representation, what is evident and is my focus here is to show that the woman is endowed with some qualities that are worth emulating in the urban centres. Mutia may be right to argue that these locales, like the traditional society, exploit women through wifhood and motherhood (2009, p.153). The first proverb dwells on the cooking of hides. In Pidgin, kanda is cowhides that are used as part of the spices in soup. This part of the cow or animal skin is tough and therefore needs some one full of experience to cook it. The speaker, in this proverb, praises the experience of those who prepare cowhides by calling on the urban dweller to grow to the point of experience, which goes with hard work and patience. Also in the proverb “na big mami get plenti brok brok pot dem” present first the image of the old woman who is praised for her experience in the art of cooking. The proverb valorizes the greatness of experience over innocence.

Identity is another central theme that we find in Pidgin proverbs. A proverb like “gron bif no di foget ole haus” calls on the need for the urban dweller to return to his/ her roots. This creature is generally hunted and used as food by man and other creatures like snakes. Therefore, it is always on the run and in search of refuge. The rat mole would definitely not have a permanent place of shelter. The proverb explains that the rat mole does not forget its past (home) when it is in danger. This shows that the rat mole is a wise creature since it can retrace its root. The call is equally a satire for those who seem to forget where they come from since they are caught up with the puzzling and hustling nature of modern times and urban life to the point that they forget their past. The image of the rat mole is very strong and a signal because it is usually a creature that would not have a house. It enters any hole and hardly remembers the previous hole.

Further more, Pidgin proverbs reveal that there is need for good character and relationship in post independence African urban centres. When we listen to proverbs like “gut fashion de layk wuman wei yi de weti bele, e no di hait” / “dem no di sell gut fashion fo market”, we find that they all express the virtue of good character and behaviour. The first proverb is built on smile. Here good behaviour is compared to a pregnant woman and as the speaker adds, pregnancy does not hide. This means that good behaviour is not just an acceptable virtue in society but those who possess this virtue are not left unrecognized. The next proverb emphasis the unhidden quality of good behaviour in urban settings in Cameroon and from the proverb, the speaker makes it clear that good character is developed by the individual, as it is not a commodity that can be marketed. The natural value of good behaviour is expedient value to the urban centres as irresponsible behaviour can lead to social disintegration (Mbunda 2002, p.20).

Pidgin proverbs also serve as a means of education and calling on the people to be careful about certain practices. This can be seen in proverbs like “befo you mari mukusa, fes fyn weti kil yi massa” and “if fowl no hye shei, yi go hye bam”. These proverbs appear to be warnings about behaviours that seem not to be in order with the society’s mores. The “mukusa” is a widow and this proverb seems to caution some one who undertakes an action without finding out the consequences of his/her action. Here, the speaker holds that for one to get

married to a widow, it is just right for him to find out what killed the woman's former husband. Though this present a negative image on the woman as feminist listeners would interpret and even term the proverb patriarchal, it seems to me that the proverb is simple calling on the urban dwellers to think before they act. The onomatopoeia that characterizes the second proverb reveals the importance of the sense of hearing. "shei" is usually the sound produced to send off fowls and "bam" when it is caught. The emphasis on hearing here is very imperative as urban dwellers should not only think before acting but should listen to advice.

Conclusion

The growth of urban settings in Cameroon and the coming to contact of languages have given birth to what is referred to as Cameroon Pidgin (Fonka 2014). Though institutionally unrecognized, Pidgin in Cameroon is a nation-wide language that is used by people of all walks of life. There is even a rising number of poets and comedians who today use Pidgin as a means of artistic creation. In this language too, Proverbs, though elitist by nature have been composed in this "profane" language. I set out to justify the contention that proverbs in Pidgin can be useful as an artistic tool in raising urban consciousness and enhancing a just urban space in Cameroon. This is early seen in the fact that the proverbs, here selected, are critical against the ills of the postcolonial geopolitics that animate the urban settings in postcolonial Cameroon. With the help of cultural studies, I have established that though proverbs naturally are high cultural discourse, they have found a voice in the language of the lowly and thereby blurring class borders. In this connection, it may just be in the interest of stakeholders to consider recognizing the language since it has a very popular force; ideologically and aesthetically.

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