

Performance of the Somali Proverb and Elders use of Both Verbal and Non-Verbal Skills during Clan Meetings to Deliver the Message

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Abstract

Among the Somali community, the art of speaking eloquently with abundant use of proverbs is not only a cherished skill, but it is also an institutionalized public behaviour where the young craves for it and the elderly practices it.

The social rating of an elder statesman in the community is directly linked to his ability to hammer points in the clan meetings, not through a plain or prose form of speech but by his power of persuasiveness by employing relevant proverbs. To deliver the message of the proverb, some performance skills are always at work.

The study explores performance in the Somali proverbs and elders' use of both verbal and non-verbal skills during clan meetings to deliver the message. The aim is to show the two way relationship between the performance and the mode of delivery of the message in the proverb. The main proposition of the study is to confirm that the performance of the Somali proverb does not only add color to this art but rather aids in communicating the message of the proverb.

The research is based on material collected through field research. The research area was northern Kenya & south-western region of Somalia. A total of 21 proverbs were collected but 18 of them were analyzed to induce evidence for the arguments and statements made in this study. A total of 18 respondents were interviewed. Those were 12 men and 6 women who were considered community opinion leaders.

The study is based on two theoretical approaches:

1. Sociological approach and
2. Ethno poetics approach

The two approaches are chosen to interrogate the social and the performance aspects of the proverbs.

The study recommends further research into this area especially the often elusive non-verbal elements of the performance.

Keywords: Proverb, performance, gesture, Somali

1.0 Introductions

The Somali proverb occupies a central place in the social life of the community. It reflects the social occupation, activities, inter and intra-clan engagements subscribing to societal norms on day-to-day nomadic life and pastoralists 'democracy'.

The skilled Somali artists who consummate this art employ it with ease to deliver judgments on matters of dispute and concern which might otherwise have threatened the cohesiveness of the community.

The study discusses the performance of the Somali proverb. Performance is an important element in any genre of oral art and especially so in the Somali proverb as it is used to facilitate to deliver the outcome of the clan meetings. The primary objective in the discussion of performance of the proverb is to unearth how the proverb aids in the process of delivering the decision of the elders as they deliberate weighty matters of concern under 'the tree' (the local count premises). Our focus is on some performance techniques which are both verbal and non-verbal gestures and facial expression.

2.0 Research Hypothesis

The study tests the following hypothesis:

1. The performance details of the Somali proverb aid to add color to this verbal art rather than help in communicating the message of the proverb.
2. There is no relationship between the speaker of the proverb and the audience during the clan meetings.

3.0 Significance and Justification of the Study

This study is justified at mainly two levels:

Despite the major role that the proverb serves in this community, little research has been conducted on it. What appears to be close to academic work on this genre is a mere collection of proverbs with no analysis. The Somali proverb attracted limited attention from both the international as well as local scholars (Bare, 1994). For example, during the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s when writers like Bell (1976), Galal (1956), Andrezejewski (1964), Aw Jama (1976) and others scrambled to collect and analyze oral literature material from Somali people, the

proverb was neglected. This underlines the compelling need not only to collect but also to study this verbal art so as to unearth its aesthetics in the social context.

The significance of the study is that it contributes to the existing pool of knowledge of the discipline. The findings of the study, I hope, will equip scholars with knowledge and skills to carry out further research into this field.

4.0 Scope and limitations of the study

This is basically a study of the Somali proverb. The research area extends from Kenya to Somalia. We make a distinct identification of our study area since Somali people are also found in Ethiopia and Djibouti.

The focus of the study is to carry out an in-depth study on the performance of the proverb and how it contributes not only to the aesthetics of the proverb but more importantly communicate messages more effectively. This scope also gave us the opportunity to appreciate the meaning of the proverbs selected for analysis.

I have collected 21 proverbs. However, for purposes of this study we used 18 proverbs as a basis for illustrating our arguments. The 18 proverbs were selected using purposive sampling technique, that is, they were chosen on the basis of how best their performances bring out their messages. The researcher sought guidance from the societal opinion leader in the selection of the 18 proverbs.

Eighteen proverbs were deemed sufficient for the study because of the time and resource constraints. In addition, they were the best proverbs in terms of performance, in the collected corpus.

5.0 Library and Field Research

I collected data from various sources so as to build the theoretical approach the study adopted. I have done a thorough reading on works generally about oral literature from both African and non-African authors especially studies on proverbs. Reading the concepts & views expressed in the literature I reviewed enabled me to build a conceptual framework in which I could support my engagements in the study. Areas I visited to carry out a library research included: Garissa University library, Kenya National library services headquarter in Nairobi, university of Nairobi and Kenyatta libraries.

To seek evidence for my argument, I also read and analyzed contents of some journals, magazines and newspapers. In addition, I purchased books on Somali culture and clan system from bookshops and even from book vendors in the streets of Nairobi.

In the field, I actively participated in the clan meetings where live performances of the proverb were recorded. I managed to attend 7 meetings and this offered me an opportunity to see, record and analyze a variety of performances in different context. I also made an effort to video –record the proceedings. This was for the purpose of keeping a record of the performances and this helped me in the analysis as I went back on the recorded material to confirm certain movements, gestures and even tonal variations and facial expressions. I also used pen and paper to document proceedings & this greatly supplemented whatever details I had recorded on video.

To gain insight into why and how the proverbs are performed in the clan meetings, I interview 12 men and 6 women from various Somali clans. The respondents were clan leaders from northern Kenya and south-western regions of Somalia.

6.0 Data Analysis and Interpretation

I first transcribed all the texts collected. The texts were then translated into English. After this, a thorough analysis of the proverbs were undertaken in order to understand the performance details.

After the analysis, the study was presented to the opinion leaders and some other members of the community who were knowledgeable in Somali culture for authentication. Presentation of research findings to the cultural experts of the community where the research was based is of late becoming an important element of cultural analysis (Alembi, 2002) of which this study is a part. Purposive sampling technique was used to get these experts.

7.0 Theoretical Framework

Sifting through the wide range of the literacy theories available, I realized that the study may require more than one theoretical approach. Being a study of an oral culture of a specific community, the analysis of the collected data takes two folds:

1. Interpretation of the text to understand its larger social context. This will bring us close to appreciate the cultural context in which the texts are invented and the norms and expectations of the community upon their delivery.
2. Unearthing of the performance based meaning. This is observing and interpreting a variety of techniques that are meaningfully and purposely employed to communicate the messages of the

proverbs.

Based on the foregoing justifications, I based my study on two theoretical approaches:

1. Sociological criticism and
2. Ethno poetics approach.

I have chosen the Sociological Approach to interrogate the relationship between the performer/artist /speaker and the audience (society) and to elucidate both the literary and social functions of the selected texts of the proverbs analyzed in this study. Unlike the New Criticism which advocates “close textual ” analysis without considering the composers intention, the Sociological Approach brings in social elements in the interpretation of the literary works. It contends that “works of art to be considered with a social context”.

One of the major proponents or rather the introducer of this approach Kenneth burke in his “literature as equipment for living “article considers art as manifestation of society, one that contains “metaphors and references directly applicable to the society.”

This study is also based on Ethno poetics approach especially the stand of this approach advocated by Tedlock is useful in the analysis of the significance of the performance of the proverb and the given meaning. The assigning of meaning to any oral text is defined by the culture and tradition of the performer and audience. Foley (1995) observes: “transferring to the performance arena of traditional oral art, we could observe that interaction of item and context mutes the denotative force of traditional units of utterance and foregrounds the special performance based meaning selected by the selected word.”

I adopted Tedlock’s line of discourse because he advocates data collection through field work and to grasp the full implication of the meaning of the performance and texts, he encourages live attendance of the traditional events of the society. Foley (1995) seems to support this when he observes “to appreciate the work on its own terms, one must attend the events in the proper arena. The place it is performed and received ”

Tedlock’s strand of this theory was specifically handy as I was digging into the actual meaning and the significance of various forms of the non-verbal elements of performance as discussed in the study.

8.0 Performance

8.1.0 Verbal Elements-Vocalization

Vocalization of oral performance means variation in delivery. This means oral materials are either sung, intoned, recited or spoken. The case of the Somali proverb, as we studied, we found it is spoken. However, speaking of the proverb is distinguishable from ordinary speech. This is mainly because of the poetic nature of the proverb. During the performance of the proverb, poetic techniques like externalizing the sounds and heightening of the tone are effectively employed. This allows the performance of the proverb to assume a special form which significantly marks it out as distinct from ordinary speech. Performing/speaking (not intoning, reciting or singing) the proverb, as an art form, is not accidental but is done with a purpose and has some implications. In other words, performing the proverb affects the minds of the audience and activates its reactions. During debates or submissions “under the tree which signifies the local court” elders speak proverbs to express their stand or offer their view on some sensitive issues biting against members or among sub or main clans.

8.1.1 Audience Participation

The Somali audience plays a very crucial role in the performance of the proverb. In almost all the meeting I attended during my field research for this study, the audience, for example, joins in the clapping, blowing the shell or conch (Buun), beating the drum and so on. This is always interaction between the audience and the performer during meetings whereby the proverb is immensely used. In some meetings where the subject of the debate is very sensitive like rape issues, the role of the audience in the meeting becomes very crucial to the extent that a speaker is unable to proceed to address the meeting without the assistance of the audience. It is a common practice and I observed during the research in the meetings I attended that a speaker, for example, starts his contribution with a proverb which the meaning is to ask a member of the audience to keep on saying some reference words as he (speaker) delivers his points. A speaker, for example, used the proverb below for the purpose:

“Halhays ma Tihid ee Halbixis baad Tahay-ee Igaqabo”

(An orator you are, but keep my reference words)

The proverb address the member of the audience who has been chosen by the speaker to keep “the reference words” and says “though I know you(the member of the audience) are an orator who chairs meetings, excuse me for the time being I have chosen you to keep on saying the normal reference words.”

The proverb is used to pre-arrange somebody in the audience who sits directly opposite the speaker whose task is to emphasize all important points made by the speaker. As the speaker addresses the gathering and pours out proverbs, that particular member of the audience keeps on to interject, for examples, the following reference words:

Somali version

Haa
Hii-ii
Hagaag
Na'am
Iska dheh
Cajaa'ib
Waa sidaas
Ii hii
Ma'aragtay
Lai-illah
Bismillahi
Allahu akbar

English translation

yes
yes!
okay
yes-yes
say it
wonderful
it is that way
continue
have you seen it (you have)
no God but Allah
in the name of Allah
God is great

These reference words are chanted spontaneously and only few of them may be utilized in a given occasion.

Another interval at which the audience participation comes out clearly is when the performer deliberately leaves a proverb incomplete for the audience to complete. The performer (speaker), for example, speaks the first part of the proverb and omits the second part for the audience to add the missing part. See the following incomplete proverb I observed in one of the clan meetings I attended:

“Waxaa la Yiri Nin kuu Digay.....”

It was said, (someone who warned you.....”

The audience completes the proverb by saying in chorus:

“Kuma Dilin”

(Has not killed)

The meaning of the proverb is that if one is threatened with death and fails to take precaution, the consequence is that one is skilled due to one's foolishness or negligence.

As we observed in the performance of the Somali proverb, we realized that both the roles of the audience and that of the performer are very crucial. The mood of the performer affects the audience and likewise the mood of the audience affects the performer. An active audience gives the performer the required motivation to maximize his delivery. Also a good and skilled performer, through his manipulation of performance techniques, makes the audience respond to his performance.

8.2.0 Non-Verbal Elements

8.2.1 Gesture

One of the most outstanding features of performance of the Somali proverb is gesture. Somali use gesture liberally when performing a proverb. Gestures are made by using sticks, hand and head. The discussion begins to explain how different types of sticks are used as a tool to make gestures.

The use of a stick to make gestures to convey messages is common in the performance of the Somali proverb. Being pastoralists, Somali men carry sticks all the time. The stick is used for various purposes including herding the animals. It is also used as weapon for self - defense. On top of these uses, the stick is an effective tool of making gestures in the clan meetings where proverbs play a central role in the communication process. Most of the speakers in the meetings come with their own sticks, not to use them as weapons, but to use them to make the necessary gestures as they address the meeting. If a speaker leaves behind his stick (which is rare), he borrows one from a friend when his turn to talk comes.

Customarily, there are, for example, different types of sticks recognized for various uses. There are, for example, (Dhanged) and (Shabiiq) for canning errant wives and children respectively. There are also (Samey) and (Salimow). (Samey) for exclusively for the simple of the powers of kings, sultans and elders and (Salimow) for strictly religious purposes. Other types of sticks we should mention here are: (Hangool), (Garoon) and (Bakoora). (Hangool) is used both for shaking the acacia tree to bring down its seeds known as (Abqa) for goats and corralling for the animals. (Garoon) and (Bakora) are used as weapons during the inter-clan fightings. However, narrowing down to the focus of this study, one common use for all these types of sticks mentioned above is to make gestures during the performance of the proverb. However, we should still note that each type of stick we have named above is used for a special type of gesture depending on the subject matter of the proverb. For example, when an elder speaker speaks a proverb such as the following one:

“Haddii Eygayii Hore aan ka Dagaalamo, Kayga Dambe lama Dileen.”

(If I had fought when my previous dog was killed, the present one would have been safe)

He uses (Garoon) or (Bakoora) to make gesture by violently shaking the stick, while pointing at an imaginary enemy of the clan. The proverb means the present aggression has roots in the past. This gesture is, therefore, made by using these types of sticks become the proverb has a war-like message, while as we said

earlier the (Garoon) and the (Bakoora) are themselves used as weapons during the inter-clan fighting. To add just another example, this type of gesture becomes evident when a proverb like the following one is performed in the clan meetings:

“ku Dhufasho ma Ogi, ka Dhilid ma Leh”

(No need to negotiate, just to hit)

The proverb means you cannot negotiate with somebody who has already settled in your grazing land. It urges the clan members to hit back the enemy, therefore, the gesture of hitting is made by using (Garoon) or (Bakoora) because they are used for fighting.

(Sameey) and (Saalimow) are used to make relevant gestures by the clan leaders as they stress unity or pass decisions through or with the help of the proverbs.

The clan elder, for example, passes his palm over the (Sameey) gently as he calls for the clan unity in the following proverb:

“Far Keliyih, Fool ma Maydho”

(One finger alone, cannot wash a face)

The meaning of the proverb is that a united people can do better than an individual.

On some other occasions, the gesture is made such that the (Sameey) falls and hits the ground gently and repeatedly like the mallet. This happens as the sultan passes verdict after chairing the clan meeting. The gesture is made through a carefully selected proverb like this one:

“Gunnimo, Geeri baa Dhaantaa”

(Death is better than slavery)

The proverb means instead of accepting oppression timidly one should fight and die for his/her freedom. It is performed as the sultan endorses the clan decision to fight against oppression by another clan.

Other gestures that are made by using sticks include the one where the performer gazes at the ground right in front of him and makes/draws crossing lines. Respondents to my interview told me the drawing of lines on the ground indicates the deep thinking of the performer as he renders the proverb. In other words, the lines reveal some sub-conscious mental disposition of the performer. The performer draws some straight lines on the ground as he stresses the proverbial message. When he is about to finish his speech with a proverb, he makes some other lines crossing the earlier ones. Finally, as he concludes his speech, the performer wipes out all the lines he drew.

Lines drawn, roughly, look like this:

On other occasions, as I observed in the meetings I attended, performers, as a way of making gestures dig small holes on the ground by using the stick. This is called

“Dhul farid” literally meaning (scratching the earth) and is associated with a gloomy mood. Deeply absorbed in the message of the proverb, which is now a sad one, the performer stares at the ground in front of him and digs a small hole with the stick. The gesture is used to demonstrate the unbecoming behaviour of some members of the antagonizing clan. Below are two proverbs which are performed with this gesture:

(Nin Abeesa Koriyoow, Adigaa u Aayi”

(Whoever brings up a viper, will reap the fruit)

“Boholo Haddimo ha Qodin, Haddaad Qoddana ha Dheereyn Kudhici Doontaana Ma’ogide”

(Don’t dig trenches for others but if you must dig, don’t make them too deep for you don’t know whether it will be you who will fall in)

The meeting in the first proverb is that one is urged to invest wisely. The second proverb means don’t sabotage humanity, it may turn against you.

The mood associated with the performance of these proverbs is one of gloom. In the first proverb, the performer scratches the ground making a hole as he stresses the message of the proverb. The proverb is about someone who betrays his mentor. I witnessed live the performance of this proverb during my research as I sat among the elders of the Abuduwak clan who were meeting at Balambala town over a disobedient son who beat up his aged father. The father who was in the meeting used this gesture in the first proverb as he lamented about his eldest son who harmed him after he asked him to assist in herding the stock. Speakers of the second proverb use this gesture to portray a sullen mood and warn against sabotage because the saboteur himself becomes the victim.

The hand or to be specific, the thump, middle finger and the palms are also used to make gestures during clan meetings where proverbs are performed.

The thump and the middle finger are tightly pressed against each other to crack the knuckle. This gesture is used to the attention of participants in the meeting whose attentiveness may have been distracted. It is also used to indicate or point at an event that took place a long time in the past. The following two proverbs are usually

accompanied by this type of gesture:

“Rujaal, Laba Qalbi Maleh”

(No man has two minds)

“Wax Tagay, lama Tiigsado”

(Anything long gone is pursued)

The first proverb means no one is capable of planning and executing two issues at the same time. The speaker uses the proverb to call for the attention of the participants to the meeting and it is the one in which the speaker cracks the knuckle as a form of hand gesture. The second proverb means that one should forget about bad experiences in the past and concentrate on present. Again the same thump versus middle finger gesture is used but for a different purpose.

Another form of gesture is noted when the palms are rubbed together implying something has completely been destroyed. Also the foot is sometimes used instead of the palm which is rubbed against the ground to communicate the proverbial message that the enemy has been neutralized. The following proverb is used with this “foot” gesture:

“Cadowgaada Cagta Hoosteedaa lagu Cadaadiyaa.”

(Your enemy is crushed under your feet)

The proverb means that in order for one to be save, the enemy must be crushed. As the performer performs this proverb the crushing of the enemy is gestured by rubbing the palms together or the foot is rubbed against the ground.

The head is used as a tool to make gestures in the performance of the Somali proverb. This gesture is the universally known nodding and shaking of the head to signify acceptance and rejection of issues. I noted, as meetings are in progress, the head is nodded when the message of the proverb is agreeable and it is shaken when it is unacceptable. One unique aspect of this type of gesture which I observed during the research is that both the speaker and the audience are free to employ it and both gestures can be used within a single proverb. See this proverb:

“Dagaal Wiil baa ku Dhintaa, Wiilse kuma Dhasho”

(A conflict kills a son, but does not bear a son)

The proverb discourages conflicts by stating that conflicts only kill the sons of the community, but never produce sons. During the performance of this proverb, the performer nods his head as a sign of approval of the message in the first clause of the proverb, while he shakes his head as a sign of disapproval of the message in the second part of the proverb.

Shaking of the leg during meetings by the proverb performer is another form of gesture. In making this gesture, the speaker sits torso erect, crosses his legs by putting one leg on top of the other, supporting himself by tying his knees and waist together with his bed sheet. Then the top leg shakes as he speaks more and more proverbs. The gesture illustrates the deeply felt emotions that the performer is experiencing and the shaking of the leg, as I noted, is spontaneous. The gesture accompanies proverbs with more serious and emotionally involving subjects. For example, proverbs touching on kinship ties or the spiritual life of the members of the clan are spoken with the accompaniment of this type of gesture.

Here are three proverbs that bring out these emotions and are performed with this gesture:

“Nin ku Caayay, Tolkaana waa Caayay”

(One who has abused you, has also abused your clan)

“Tolkaa, Xaar buu ku Cunsiiyaa”

(Your clan can make you feed on feces)

“Dad u Taamoow, Allah ha kuu Tabiineeyo”

(Assist humanity, God will assist you)

The first proverb means that a man and his clan are inseparable. The second proverb means the clan interest always comes before that of a member. The meaning of the third proverb is very straight forward: assist people and God will assist you. Because of their subject matters which are kinship and religion, these proverbs are, by nature whipping the emotion of the speaker, hence the use of this type of gesture.

8.2.2 Facial Expressions

Deeply felt emotions are expressed through facial expressions. Proverb performers wear a facial expression when there is a tense message in the proverb and relax the mood when there are glad hidings and hopes. Performers occasionally scowl at the audience or stare hard at a vacant space in the meeting arena as a way of performing and facially reflecting messages in the proverb.

The facial expression of the performer is powerful and affect and influence the audience. A facial expression worn by speaker of proverb may make the clan to react angrily and lead to fierce inter-clan clashes. Likewise, a sober and relax facial expression by a performer in a peace meeting may relieve tension and bring lasting solution to the dispute. The following proverbs are accompanied by this type of gesture:

“Qaniinja, Qaniinja Bujisaa”

(Biting is met with Biting)

“Hadal Daawa ayuu Keenaa, ee Dab ma Kiciyo”

(Negotiations bring peace, but don't ignite fire)

“Nin Daad Qaaday, Xumbo Cuskay”

(A drawing person seeks help from the foam)

The first proverb means that a culprit is dealt with according to the crime he committed. The second proverb is an equivalent of the English saying: let us talk means let us agree.

As messages expressed in these proverbs vary, the facial expressions assumed by the performers also vary. In the first proverb the message is a tense one as the performer calls his clan to fight back. The facial expression is fierce, appropriate to interpret the subject matter of the proverb. In the second proverb the message is reconciliatory. The performer interprets the mission of negotiation in a veiled message. Negotiators are urged to seize the opportunity to resolve the dispute. The facial expression of the performer, therefore, is one of hope and appeal. The third proverb is a mockery of a member of the clan who disobeys the clan customs and rules and who in the consequence, is affected by calamity but has no one to assist him. The facial expression worn by the reciter of the proverb is, therefore, one of rueful laugh and cruel pity suggesting the helpless state of the rebellious member.

9.0 Summary and Conclusion

In this study we have discussed the performance of the Somali proverb. We have especially looked at the verbal elements like the vocalization of the proverb. We have also dealt with non-verbal elements in which the various gestures performed by using different sticks were explored. In doing so, we exposed the way Somali speakers exploit the performance of the proverb to deliver their messages effectively. Our discussion confirms that the performance of the Somali proverb utilizes both verbal and non-verbal elements effectively.

In the light of the foregoing, the study has achieved its objectives. From the evidence provided in the study the validity of the research hypotheses is challenged on proved wrong. Thus, we can say that the performance details of the Somali proverb not only aid to add color to this verbal art but also help in communicating the message in the proverb. The study, therefore, confirms that messages in the proverbs cannot be effectively communicated without a careful study of the performance details.

The findings of the study also challenge our second research hypothesis that there is no relationship between the speakers of the proverbs and the audience during the clan meetings. The study thoroughly examines the relationship between the performer (speaker) and the audience. It concludes that the relationship is two way: the mood of the speaker affects the audience likewise the one of the audience affects the speaker.

10.0 Recommendation

Having carried out this research on the performance of the Somali proverb and the elders' use of the performance skills to deliver the proverbial messages, the study wishes to suggest the following:

1. Thorough collection and analysis of broader sample of proverbs extended to the areas which this research didn't cover
2. Development of comprehensive theory of African folklore which will act as a guide to future researchers of African oral literature.
3. Garissa, Wajir and Mandera county governments of Kenya to put up a Somali Cultural Centre and equip it with reference materials, so that researchers of the Somali oral literature can benefit from it.
4. The Garissa University to facilitate the study of the Somali Language by creating Department of Linguistics where the Somali Language could be one of the disciplines to be studied.

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