

Anthropology of proverbs in the feature film genre: An appraisal of *Isakaba* 1&2

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Abstract

Proverb has been an advanced form of communication between two or more persons in African societies. As the Igbo adage goes, “a man who cannot interpret the meaning of a proverb said to him and allows it to be interpreted by the same speaker, renders his mother’s dowry useless.” The use of African proverbs in the feature film genre naturally gives a flavor that only a true African narrative portends. Hence, this paper focuses on interrogating the usefulness of African proverbs in Nollywood film narratives, using *Isakaba* as case study. While adopting a qualitative research method, the paper interrogates its theoretical framework with the Social Semiotics Theory, explicating the manner in which the theory underpins the comprehension of meaning and meaning-making in human interactions. This premise is foregrounded by expounding how the film director’s interpretational prowess is also guided by the knowledge of the culture, setting or social order in which the writer has domiciled his story – towards creating a realistic and engaging audio-visual narrative, which is about typical indicator in the culture of proverbial language globally. Findings show among other things, that the usefulness of proverbs ranges from compacting protracted dialogues into simple and fewer sentences – thereby making the story less boring, spelling out the culture in which the narrative world is pitched, etc. The paper recommends that for the preservation of the nation’s culture, Nollywood filmmakers should integrate Proverbs in their films amongst other cultural traits on a more consistent basis.

Keywords: Proverbs; *Isakaba*; Narrative; Film; Nollywood; Africa; Culture

1. Introduction

This study is motivated by the fact that African oral culture, chiefly proverb saying, seems to be going down the drain of history. A proverb is a concrete but simple traditional saying that conveys perceived truths and deep meanings based on common sense or experience. The particular context in which a proverb is uttered, determines the meaning that is red to it; just as how complex or simple a proverb becomes to the listener is determined majorly by the context in which it is said, the depth of its meaning and the experience and mental capacity of the listener. Often times, proverbs are metaphorical in their denotation and gist with formulaic languages mostly used to convey them. Collectively, proverbs form a genre of folklore. Many African proverbs are strongly tied to the earth and animals, conveying lessons of life and learning often through daily, seemingly menial procedures (*Mustapha, 2020*). Take for instance, the example of the proverb “he who owns a drum does not beat on his chest”. This adage tries to convey the message of the right peg in the right hole, self sufficiency or contentment, depending on the context in which the proverb is said.

Africa can be said to enjoy the pleasant culture of proverb as indeed every nation and tribe within the continent has its vocabulary of wise sayings chock-full, both those that have been passed down from one generation to another as well as those emanating with times and trends of the African social order. Although these proverbs may vary from one language, country or culture to another, the wisdom they convey is continental. Africa in particular, is overflowing with inspirational sayings, many of which provide a captivating insight into the rich and vibrant cultures that crafted them.

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Apart from looking at the significance of proverbs in Nollywood films and how they help to improve the film's quality as well as initiate an export of the Nigerian culture through audio-visual means, this article also analyzes the situational clues that help proverbs yield meaning in film.

1.1. Social Semiotics Theory

Social semiotics theory is concerned about meaning and meaning-making in human interaction. The word "semiotics" is a derivative of the Greek word "semeion," which means "sign". In lieu of the fact that in signs and via signs made by different communicative modes, meaning is made, whether tangible or audible, it also becomes available for semiotic work and sensory engagements. In consideration of language as a sign system, Halliday (1978) argues that language must be interpreted "within a socio-cultural context" (p.2). Halliday's work is highly subjective to the semiotic thoughts of linguists and the theories of Freud and Marx. In the account of Hodge and Kress, language is a social phenomenon which happens by developing tools for the analysis of the interrelation of power and language (Hodge & Kress, 1988, vii). Hodge and Kress came to the realization that language was but a part of broader sort of cultural resources for the making of meaning, which later became established as a major premise of "Social Semiotics". Hodge and Kress' work and others such as: Bezemer & Kress, 2016; Kress, 1997, 2003, 2010; Leeuwen, 2005, etc., seem to have remained the basis for many ongoing researches aimed at developing the theory in various Social Semiotics spheres, including film criticism.

In the theory of social semiotics, communication and channels of communication are considered multimodal. Writing, speech making, acting, singing, dancing, layout, and so on are all examples of modes. In other words, they are the material resources for making meaning evident. Mode is to sign, what costume, make-up, lighting, set design, etc., are to a film production. Modes are the tools or elements used for the production and materialization of signs.

In the opinion of Clarie Gualberto and Gunther Kress, within the central premise of Social Semiotics theory, the prompt is a sign-complex and in a sign the conjunction of meaning and form and of signifier and signified, is never uninformed. Furthermore, they state:

It is motivated by the interest of the sign- maker, who chooses a (material) signifier as an apt means for expressing the meanings of the signified. Signs are motivated by the interest of their maker, bearing in mind what are seen as salient factors of the environment. The specific combination of signifier / form and signified / meanings is due to the interest of the maker of the sign. As every occasion of sign-making differs from every other, social semiotics asserts that signs are always newly made. In every sign-making action, the already designed world is constantly re-designed (2018).

1.2. Film and Social Semiotics

The deliberate construction of information by media institutions can be referred to as gate-keeping. For instance, when considering putting out news in the television, the news writers strive to report information that is objective and accurate while also striving to maintain audience' attention (Dahlstrom, 2014). The same thing happens in film production. While interpreting a story, the director having known the culture, setting or social order in which the writer has domiciled his story, also tries to create a realistic narrative by ensuring that the story line and the way it is plotted depict the particular culture or social order presented therein while striving to ensure that the viewers who are the final consumers of the film content are satisfied. In the same manner, proverbs are spoken within the context of the culture of both the speaker and the listener. Therefore, the listener decodes the deep words of the speaker in relation to the socio-cultural knowledge available to his or her mind. This is why an Igbo man cannot succeed in communicating with a Ghanaian who does not understand Igbo language or culture, using an Igbo proverb. The foregoing correlates Halliday's argument within the premise of social semiotics, that language must be interpreted "within a socio-cultural context" (1978, p. 2). Although unlike news media, entertainment media (films, novels, videogames, etc.) do not always aim to inform audiences about a particular topic (Dahlstrom, 2014), same way proverbs do not always aim to give listeners particular information. They use narrative formats, meaning that information is strategically selected. Hence, in decoding proverbs, one must link it to the context in which it was spoken, even though it can still mean many other things to many other persons in many other situations.

1.2.1. *Isakaba (2021)*

Isakaba 1&2 is a Nollywood feature length action genre, directed by Lancelot Imasuen. Led by Ebube (Sam Dede) known for his highly parabolic characterization, the *Isakaba* boys are team of crime exasperated fellows who by self will volunteered to contend with armed robbery gangs and all such groups and individuals seriously posing as threats and

terrors to the social equanimity and security of the south-eastern states of Nigeria, specifically the commercial town of Aba, Abia State. In attempt to measure up and brawly match the armed robbers who possess mystical powers that make their operations seamless and stress free, Ebube and his team of Isakaba boys also acquire superior powers to enable them confront the robbery gangs face to face. With way over seventy adages, and many uncounted verbal shrugs, *Isakaba 1&2* is a soubriquet of a true African moving image that told a true-life African narrative in the semiotics of its truest culture.



Figure 1 Wide Shot of Isakaba Boys and a Chief in a Scene where a criminal is about to be beheaded.

Source: Aforevo TV



Figure 2 CU Shot of Ebube (Sam Dede) Addressing his boys

Source: Aforevo TV

The film's story, narrative theme and style also represent the true reflection of most popular justice system in Nigeria, which amount to jungle justice. Against this backdrop, this group of men with diabolical powers make it their responsibility to eradicate corruption and purge their land of evil men since the law enforcement agencies had failed to do so. This multi-part movie must have been motivated by the social trend of the period as it was shot at a time when the vigilante system served as substitute for the judiciary, especially in the eastern part of Nigeria. The people tend to either resort to jungle justice themselves or appreciate the acts when carried out by third parties, not minding whether it is against the law or not. An apparent case in point is the extrajudicial killing of four young men: Ugonna Obuzor, Toku Lloyd, Chiadika Biringa, and Tekena Elkanah, all students of the University of Port Harcourt, in Aluu, Rivers State, in 2019. These students were lynched following a false accusation of theft by residents and indigenes of Aluu. Notwithstanding, there is a wave of acceptance of this shade of justice, especially within natives of communities where

there are alarming rate of negligence to duty and gross corruption by the men of the Nigerian Police. A situation where a crime victim is asked to register a simple case with huge amounts of money, fuel police vans or pay for government purchased bullets before the police can respond to a distress call could never be less discouraging.

Isakaba was inspired by the most popular vigilante group existing within the Eastern part of Nigeria at the time (Bakassi Boys). Bakasi Boys made their mark by fighting crimes perpetuated by heavily and sophisticatedly armed criminals within major commercial cities of the eastern Nigeria, including Onitsha and Aba. Bakasi Boys served vendetta to their victims by mutilating and burning their bodies. In spite of this, they were welcomed and appreciated by residents of these cities, having lived in fear of violent and of deadly robbers for long.



Figure 3 MCU Shot of Man 2 (Stan Kay) Confessing to killing his brother, having been won the Isakaba Charm (an artefact, which induces truth from criminals} around his neck.

Source: Aforevo TV.



Figure 4 MCU Shot of Igbudu, a powerful witch doctor (Colombus Irisoanga) making incantation in his shrine.

Source: Aforevo TV

This Imasuen's classic starred casts such as Sam Dede, Remmy Ohajianya, Mike Ogundu, Emeka Nwafor, Tom Njemanze, Uche Odoputa, Emeka Ani, Chiwetalu Agu, Pete Eneh, Amaechi Munagor, John Okafor, Friday Nwafor, among others. Amazingly reminiscent, the film's most recurrent lines, also the Isakaba slang 'Odeshi', its score 'Isakaba Owende!' and its chant 'E! 'Sakabaaa!' are all still stuck in the minds of most viewers who saw the movie as far back as 2001. But most interesting of this account is the fact that over seventy proverbs were used in the film. Going by the convention,

screenwriters take this credit as it is assumed that all lines delivered by the artists on set are either red texts from the shooting script or derivatives from same.



Figure 5 MS Shot of Okenwa (Emeka Nwafor) the spiritual commander of Isakaba and Nwoke (Sam Dede) the leader of Isakaba teaming to get rid of Igbugu (Colombus Iriasoanga).

Source: Aforevo TV.

Agreed, there are usually provisions for adlibs, which could in some cases cause the actor or director to generate a large percentage of the lines in a given scene, yet, the fact that any modification made to the job of any unit within the crew lineup only amounts to a collaborative effort to better the film and not a yardstick for gaining credit, except where it is previously agreed and possibly penned down in an agreement, the screenwriter takes all credits, including adlibs and addendums. But in a case where it is formalized, the person who creates the addendum takes a credit underneath the screenwriter known as “additional lines, additional story or additional scenes by...,” depending on the impute. However, the credit scroll of *Isakaba* does not include any other save for Chukwuka Emelionwu.

1.2.2. Parabolic lines in *Isakaba 1&2*

The parabolic lines articulated and uttered by casts of *Isakaba* were innumerable overwhelming, befitting the well dramatized actions, set before a ‘mise en scene’, which corroborated the performances, especially within the milieu of the Isakaba Boys. While noting that the acting did not seem more of a screen act, it is important to commend the classical theatrical performances, which had been reinforced by the crop of theatre arts graduates on the casts lists, such as Senior Lecturer of Acting in the University of Port Harcourt, Dr. Sam A. Dede, Lecturer of Film in same institution, Professor Friday Nwafor, graduates of the same department and institution, Mike Ogundu, among others. It is also logical to say that screen acting was a novel form at the time *Isakaba* was shot, as only very few Nigerians, understood its intricacies. While some actors in *Isakaba* were either people coming from theatre departments in the university or those emanating from the theatre troupes, majority were entirely green horns.

1.2.3. List of Proverbs used in *Isakaba 1&2*

- A clear conscience fears no accusation
- A forest cannot disappear because one tree was cut down
- A man is not said to be a hero by the many war tales he can tell but rather by the many wars he has fought and won.
- A river does not follow through the forest without bringing down trees.
- A Snail does not go anywhere without its shell
- Anyone who abhors injustice can fight it
- As Kingdoms rise against Kingdoms, so shall brothers rise against brothers
- Crimes and punishment are twins of the same destiny

- Do not be deceived by the frail nature of Amadioha's wife or you will be consumed by the volcano of the anger of her husband
- Even if the mountain tumbles into the sea, the truth will remain the truth
- Evil has many heads but they will surely be plucked
- Fear is the imagination we create in pier minds
- Greed is a seed planted and nurtured by ambition until it grows up to become power. But you must know how to control it lest it destroys you
- If you fight justice you set yourself up for destruction
- Immortality is not for children.
- It does not take an Elephant to be triumphant in battle
- Necessity is the product of society
- No captain abandons the ship before his crew
- No man praises the ocean for size
- No matter how high the Eagle soars it must come back to the earth
- No matter how high the Eagle soars it can never touch the sky
- No matter how rough or smooth the ground is, it never stops the rain from raining
- No matter how tall the Iroko tree grows it can never touch the sky
- No one challenges the Lion in its den
- Nobody has the right to take another man's life
- Nobody persecutes a man who makes an honest living
- Nothing is hidden under the sun. If the wind does not reveal it then the rains will or the earth will throw it forth
- Revenge is sweet when served cold
- Season comes and goes but what one knows he knows
- Some Cockroaches are stronger than Elephants
- Sometimes our dreams and hopes are different from our ways and means
- Strength is not physical but spiritual and with it you can destroy many things
- Tears and water might look alike but it will not taste the same
- That the Lion is the King of the Jungle does not mean it cannot be cut down by the hunters gun
- That you are the son of a Lion does not protect you from the claws of the Lion
- The Bird may fly the length and breadth of the sky but at night it will return to its nest
- The Chameleon cannot leave the Forest because the Bush caught fire
- The Chicken does not dare the Python
- The Chicken does not refuse Corn thrown on its path
- The child that says the Mother will not sleep, he too will not sleep
- The dance steps of the gods are not for human beings to savor
- The danger of creating a Monster is that one day it will turn against its Master.
- The day a child insist on knowing what killed the father, that day the child begins a journey to the land of the dead
- The day you chose this Path is the day you chose to stay awake while others sleep
- The Dog never barks at its owner
- The guilty are usually the most innocent but they have blood on their hands
- The Horse treks a thousand miles on barefoot and still do not feel heat
- The Hyena cannot challenge the Tiger just because of its body marks
- The Lion is ashamed when it sees its cub running away at the mere barking of a dog
- The mother Hen does not relent in hatching Eggs just because the Hawk took her Chicks last season
- The private part of an old man is not a play thing for a crying child
- The River never flows up the Mountain
- The shepherd has been struck and the sheep must disperse
- The smallness of the needle cannot be compared to the blood it draws when It is stepped on
- The stone that one sees never blinds his eyes
- The strength of a broomstick is in its numbers
- The Snake once challenged the gods to battle, but today it crawls on itsbelly
- The tortoise does not embark on a journey it is not ready to finish
- The truth they say shall set you free
- The Worm that eats the Vegetable is behind the Vegetable
- There is no way you will fight a Lion without a scratch on your body

- Things are not always the way they appear on the surface
- Those who choose the Path of Foolhardiness end up as corpses
- Those who hunger will surely get filled. The problem is they will be filled by what they hunger after
- Those who take other People's life do not deserve to keep theirs
- Those who walk in the path of darkness will end up in the Dark
- Those who yearn for material gains pay a gruesome price for their yearnings
- Water has no enemy for it is the source of life
- Weeping may endure the night but Joy comes in the morning
- What one knows can never kill him
- Whatever the Son of the Lion knows he learnt from the Father
- Whenever you point a finger, three others will point back at you
- You cannot eat your cake and still have it
- You fight only what you know, you do not fight what you do not know.

1.3. Proverbial Tones in Film

The narrative film genre is one creative art, apart from literature that adopts the use of proverbs in its narrative form. While poetry, prose, drama and other literary forms use proverb to enhance expression and communicate messages as well, film goes a step further by adding gestural movements to the spoken words. More so, with cinematic techniques such as camera movement and other relevant applications of mise en shot, a film's director can make the audience enjoy something beyond the libretto and communicative vibes of the actor. In *Isakaba*, the character Ebube (Sam Dede) often slanted his performances on the strength of well-articulated proverbs. The same goes for the Character Nwoke (Mike Ogundu). Ogundu's gestures were very much in sync with his lines so much that each time he spoke in parable, his body twisted while his limbs complemented it in random moves, all according to the wordings.

Although the formalist filmmakers may see Ogundu's acting as theatrical. This might also be seen from Europ-American viewpoint as been too melodramatic, since the Mike Ogundu's acting style wasn't formalistic (with very few or no limb throwing and body twisting); however, it is against this backdrop that Aguugo (2024) avers:

Since film is a reflection of the society, it is only ideal that the director ensures the socio-ideological representations of the narrative in a manner that makes the audience not find it complex to decode the film's setting, period in time of the story being told, and very importantly, the culture and social orientation of the narrative world been presented on screen. Accordingly therefore, Imasuen presents to us the popular truth about the African social stance and its royal modus-operandi, all of which are framed in strict communalism. This comes directly distinct from the orientation of the western world where arguably, the level of interaction and collectivism within the social order and the manner in which relationships are driven pluralistically and boundary-based cannot in any way be compared to the African orientation and culture (2024, p. 313).

The use of proverb in *Isakaba* therefore could not have been justified if its actors adopted the formalist acting techniques to Europeanize or Americanize the techniques of the actor. It would have simply seemed like a foreigner trying to imitate a native Igbo man. But even if it has to be a foreigner, and if such actor is first and foremost competent, which should be the case, then such actor can still convey the proper and ideal message by adapting the traditional African communication system, including talking African, gesturing African and looking African. Mixing gestural performance with adage speaking for the screen also helps to assuage and moderate the complexity of the adage so that viewers can make a swift grasp of the message. The bottom line remains that the proverbs used in *Isakaba* were timely, befitting and corroborate the acting of the films character. Most importantly, the proverbs depicted the traditional African communication system by coming into conversations where food for thought, wise quote or traditional chanting was involved.

2. Conclusion

The fact that proverbs reinforce the poetic and semiotic vitality of a film has so far been made eminent in this paper. It is also better understood, how useful proverbs can be in film, ranging from compacting protracted dialogues into simple and fewer sentences – thereby making the story less boring, to spelling out the culture in which the narrative world is pitched. Beyond these findings, it also clearly shows that some Nollywood screenwriters and directors are conscious of the semiotic and cultural relevance of proverbs in films, evidently, *Isakaba* 1&2 amid other films, made judicious use of proverbs in bringing its narrative theme to comprehension. Screening this 2001 thriller was awestricken as well over 72 proverbs ensued from it.

To this end, the paper recommends that (i) for the preservation of the nation's culture, Nollywood filmmakers should integrate Proverbs in their films amongst other cultural traits on more consistent basis (ii) the study proposes the use of proverb as deliberate attempt towards making Nollywood films less dialogic, for a more professional and cinematic narrative, which will also enable the industry meet basic standards stipulated within the framework of global best practices.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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