

# Food and African Proverbs

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## ***Abstract***

*As a literary category, proverbs participate actively in the communication of culture. One significant way proverbs accomplish the dynamic articulation of culture is through the instrumentality of metaphors and tropes which embed food as a representational site. However, this character of proverbs is not always sufficiently acknowledged in literary/critical discourses. My governing concern here is to engage African proverbs, their referentiality to food/foodways and the significations they secrete in African cultural ontologies. My argument is that proverbs are culture-specific and that inscribed within African proverbs relating to food is a cultural logic which expresses the sociology and anthropology of African peoples and their grammar of mores, values and vision. Many of the proverbs and the food idioms they mobilise negotiate a diversity of cultural themes and preoccupations relevant to the African world in the spatio-temporal continuum. Some of the thematic issues and concerns gesture towards African social histories, cultural cosmologies, political systems, institutional memory, gender relations, religious rites/rituals, politics of the body as well as the ecologies of space. Still some of the proverbs which web into their universe the topicality of food navigate culture through acts of personal arrival, symbolic rites of passage, ethnic or national longing and belonging, moral economies, environmental politics, and power relations. Drawing from the ecology of African proverbs on/about food through ethnographic research and the rigorous reading of some African literary texts in their oral, written and digital manifestations, I hope to demonstrate how proverbs are critical to culture and structure its expressive logic as a means of communication in traditional societies and post/modernity. Some of the texts to serve as analytic paradigms include Djibril Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, and proverbs I have collected from Facebook.*

**Key words:** *African proverbs; food/foodways; cultural cosmology; digital manifestations.*

## Introduction

Proverbs are closely connected to food in many African cultures. This reality is eloquently expressed by Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian writer. In his classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, proverbs are described as the palm oil with which words are eaten (Achebe 1958, 4). Achebe's novel negotiates the cultural cosmology of his native Igbo in eastern Nigeria just before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this autochthonous African society, proverbs were routinely deployed to season and lend weight to oral communication. According to Isidore Okpewho, a notable scholar of African folklore, proverbs in traditional African communities were mostly wielded by elders but the young also employed them while crediting the elders as the guardians of the form (Okpewho 1992, 234). Similarly, D. T. Niane (1965) observes that whenever the young employ proverbs in their communication, it is a clear indication that they have benefitted from adult company.

Nwonwu validates Achebe's perspective regarding the intimate connection between food and proverbs using salt, another food substance. He observes that proverbs constitute the salt which flavours African literature and oral communication and that they are concise and loaded expressions elders and language philosophers design to spice up communication (Nwonwu 2014, xiii). Proverbs, therefore, function as a profound philosophical meditation on human life. As Patrick Ebewo affirms, in the oral cultures of Africa, proverbs are for speech what spices are for food (Ebewo 2014: x) Thus, for communication to be palatable, it must be garnished with proverbial language.

It is important to state that proverbs are not an antiquated, pre-scientific art form. Even within the schema of industrial and technological ferment, African societies still elevate and value the compelling wisdom embedded in proverbs and celebrate those who are custodians or repositories of this piece of native wisdom. Thus, despite the contingencies and pressures of modernity, the prominent place of proverbs in human discourse is not compromised as it remains as important as it was in indigenous African communities. Many proverbs relate to a variety of issues and concerns that negotiate the complexities and peculiarities of the human condition. However, some have intimate relationship with food.

### **Defining the Proverb**

To define the proverb is sometimes problematic. This challenge consists in the fact that there is no one neat way to achieve an acceptable definition (Coinnigh 2014, 112). Thus, in some contexts, the proverb is assumed to be a portmanteau term, a one-size-fit-all concept. This makes the proverb a composite of many other forms of oral media. These may include aphorisms, maxims, witticisms, wellerisms, allusions, riddles and sometimes even extended oral forms like folktales, fables, myths and legends. These forms, however, differ markedly from proverbs since the proverb is unique and distinctive in its form, structure, style, content, function, meaning and value (Mieder 2004, xii).

Definitions by paremiologists, linguists, ethnologists, folklorists, and literary scholars constitute a range of tributaries which find their confluence in the idea that “proverbs are traditional, pithy, often formulaic and/or figurative, fairly stable and generally recognizable units” of linguistic expression (Norrick 2014, 7). The word proverb is a derivative from the Latin root *proverbium* which means a wise saying. This wise saying is popularly known and repeated over time. Also it usually expresses a universal truth in a simple and concrete manner. Quite often, it is metaphorical, practical in a philosophical sense and thrives on common sense.

Morphologically, the proverb (pro-verb) suggests the mandatory presence of the verbal element in its constitutive syntactic structure as a linguistic unit. It is an adjunct to the verb, an action word and works with it to complete the action in the linguistic environment it occurs. Thus the proverb is a “doing” saying or statement whose defining character is action. In other words, the proverb animates and gives urgency and immediacy to communication. That is why it is the “pro-verb”, a saying which supports the verb which is an action word.

To Mieder, a proverb is “a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” and so becomes the “the wit of one, and the wisdom of many” (Mieder 1993, 24). Ben-Amos describes proverbs as “linguistic ornamentation in formal discourse” (Ben-Amos 1977, 4 – 5). To Ruth Finnegan (1970) it is the fixation with language, imagery and abstraction “through compressed and allusive phraseology” that defines proverbs.

Okpewho (1992) defines proverbs as “a piece of folk wisdom expressed with terseness and charm” often with philosophical content and depth. Thus one scholar observes that proverbs are “indigenous sayings with philosophical and spiritual meanings” (Ebewo 2014, x). This largely underscores the anonymity and communality of proverbs.

A number of features are remarkable about the proverb. It is brief, memorable, philosophical and rhetorical. It expresses a truth or belief that is universal. It is often economic or highly condensed embodying, with bold imagery, some commonplace fact or experience. Proverbs can, therefore, be defined as short, witty, lucid, and pointed wise sayings which express certain truths about our lived and shared experiences quite often with universal significance. They are also speech patterns which are indirect and metaphorical. This quality of metaphoricity and indirectness makes proverbs function as “verbal masks” (Tsaaior 2010, 325). One distinguishing marker of proverbs is that they are generally self-evident, and are crucial to accentuating, vivifying, clarifying, embodying, concretising and consolidating experiential reality and meaning.

Proverbs are found in all world cultures and do have a universal character and application. However, the specific category this chapter examines is African proverbs. African proverbs can be said to be the wise sayings which emanate from African cultures and cosmologies. They are structured and mediated by African worldviews, values and vision of life and the universe. They also reflect the African natural environment and epiphenomena and are animated by existential experiences which are peculiarly African (Okpewho 1992, 236). To Lugira (1981), the African proverb expresses the subtleties, nuances and the didactic finesse of African wisdom. But beyond its didactic value, Lugira insists that the proverb in “African tradition is the storehouse of wisdom and philosophy which is fraught with wit, rhetoric, humour and poetic values” (1981, 1).

Food, on the other hand, is any substance of nutritional value comprising fats, minerals, proteins and vitamins consumed to give energy and fortification to the human body (Jango-Cohen 2005, 50). It is a source of nourishment and sustenance to human beings, animals and plants. It is a valuable source of energy, maintains healthy life and stimulates meaningful growth (McGee 2004, 253). Food is mainly sourced from plants and animals and can be processed or unprocessed, raw or cooked (Davidson and Taine 2014, 356).

Palm oil, for instance, is a fatty food product from the seeds of the palm tree commonly found in the tropical belt of Africa (Poku 2002). It is fascinating how palm oil has been used as a metaphor for proverbs by Achebe. Indeed, the metaphor is extended to incorporate the act of “eating” as an art of verbal communication since words have become food.

What this implies is that without the palm oil of proverbs, it will be difficult to eat words; to achieve linguistic proficiency and competence. Proverbs, therefore, function as veritable surrogates of speech. They are critical to linguistic facility, artifice and ornamentation. Proverbs also help in the experimentation with meaning because of their inherent cognitive capacity/potential to signify.<sup>4</sup> Thus just like palm oil helps as a lubricant in the eating and digestion of food, so do proverbs facilitate the process of communication/delivery and the performance of speech acts in African philosophies and social communication during speech events (Andersson 2013, 28). It can, therefore, be argued that food and proverbs enjoy an interesting and organic kinship in the sociology and anthropology of African peoples.

The centrality of proverbs to oral media and communication in many African cultures is further underscored through the instrumentality of palm oil and other foods. Among the Tiv of central Nigeria, this idea is underscored in the parallelism: “If a man does not eat yam because of palm oil, he will eat palm oil because of yam”. Tiv culture elevates yam as the king of food crops just like Achebe's native Igbo of eastern Nigeria. Yam is a status symbol and a marker of social prestige (Spivey 2003, 43). But inherent in this statement is the putative power of proverbs as palm oil with which the yam of words is eaten. This at once establishes the organic link between proverbs and food in the African imagination. Indeed, in African aesthetics, food reinforces proverbs and serves as a re/source for proverbial knowledge. Food, therefore, constitutes a rich quarry of ideas from which many proverbs have been mined or distilled.

But proverbs are not only the oil with which words are eaten. They are also horses of memory. This means that proverbs are vital to individual/collective memory archives and the transmission of tradition/culture. They possess a mnemonic value and potential which help in the mobilization of stored up folk wisdom which can be retrieved and invested in the communicative contingencies of the moment. As useful memory aids, proverbs assist in the

articulation of realities which cannot be easily transmitted.

For instance, a child can play with its mother's breasts but not with its father's testicles. The proverb underscores the different social codes and attitudes imposed by cultural contexts/practices and how individuals are socialised to conform to them. In ordinary circumstances, it may be difficult to make this statement because of the undisguised sexual overtones inherent in it. However, a proverbial statement renders it less notoriously difficult because proverbs vouchsafe brutally frank statements even when they offend sexual sensibilities.

### **The Structure of Proverbs**

The structure of proverbs is quite often fixed, rigid, invariant and determinate. This endows proverbs with the character of stock or formulaic expressions. The compositional essence of proverbs, in other words, does not yield itself to variability, flexibility or flux. This structural invariability is not absolute. Proverbs sometimes undergo slight changes cross-culturally and especially when they are undermined through deconstructive processes using counter-proverbs/post-proverbs. Their grammatical structure is determined by the content and theme of the truth they are intended to express.

Proverbs can be declarative, imperative or rhetorical/interrogative. For instance, “Pepper cannot be an ingredient for a soothing balm” is a declarative statement which signifies that certain things are incompatible and yoking them together cannot achieve any positive results. Similarly, “Do not bite the finger that fed you” is an imperative statement which advises people to return gratitude, not betrayal, for favours done them. In the same token, “Isn't the best way to eat an elephant to cut it into tiny bits?” is an interrogative statement which suggests that no matter how grandiose a task may be, it can be surmounted through a gradual approach.

Proverbs are culture-specific. What this means is that they are derivations from specific cultural histories, social experiences and existential realities. However, because we share a common humanity, the cultural particularities may not be peculiar to one culture. Indeed, in their itineraries or travelling patterns through time and space, proverbs can transgress cultural boundaries and get absorbed and domesticated across cultures. They can actually be universalised and applied in similar situations which may have occurred in other cultures. Despite their cultural specificity, proverbs emanate from

individual creative sensibilities and individuals demonstrate sophisticated awareness of their resonances (Speake 2003, 10).

Proverbs are also context-specific. It is the context that gives energy to proverbs and imbues them with signification. This, however, depends on individual positionalities in relation to the contexts since proverbs can lend themselves to multiple interpretive possibilities. The possibilities occur at various grids: contextual, ideational, realist, referential, semantic, stimulus-response, and epistemic. It is, therefore, possible that within the same context, individuals can interpret and reinterpret the same proverbs based on the contextual contingencies of age/generation, class, caste, gender/sexual orientation, social constitution, religious persuasion or political/ideological sympathies. The functions of proverbs can only be identified through a context-and-situation-based interpretive analysis (Jesensek 2014, 133).

An example can be given of a proverb I collected during my field research in central Nigeria: “A hen cannot scratch for food with her two legs at the same time”. The semantic value of the proverb is that it is difficult to undermine nature since a hen by nature scratches for food with one leg at a time. The lesson can be extended to mean that it is difficult to combine many tasks at the same time and do them effectively, a reality which is expressed by another proverb: “Avoid having too many irons in the fire”. However, with advances in modern science/technology, it is possible to multi-task and young people who are digital natives are redefining in radical ways the work ethic of the older generation. Regarding gender, the hen represents the female principle while the cock typifies the male ideal in many African cultures and a patriarchal interpretation of the proverb may implicate this gender calculus.

The sources of proverbs are myriad and wide-ranging (Doyle 2012, 32). One common source is the natural environment and epiphenomena. Many proverbs are also drawn from history. History, undeniably, is an inexhaustible storehouse of proverbs. This makes proverbs to be highly allusive. Proverbs are also sourced from contemporary developments and events like scientific discoveries, computer and digital technology. Today, in the modern age of science and digital technology, someone might make a spontaneous proverb-like statement that will literally travel across a country or even the world in seconds. For example, “it is only the ignorant girl that believes you can ping with every cell phone”. This proverb is a telling commentary on oppositional

binaries, on appearance and reality. “For the food being cooked, the heat from firewood is not so different from that of a microwave”. This proverb foregrounds the inevitability of fate or the deterministic power of destiny as the food cannot escape the heat. “A bomb does not discriminate between its friends or enemies”. This proverb suggests the impossibility of changing the essential nature of things including human beings”.

### **Food and African Proverbs**

Food participates actively in the ecology of African proverbs. Food and foodways therefore constitute an ever-present and powerful site for cultural communication using proverbs as a sieve. Some proverbs concern animals while others deal with plants/crops. For instance, a Facebook proverb, “It is the pot used in cooking the iguana that will also be used in cooking the crocodile” expounds on the philosophical idea of appearances but its moral has to do with the similar fate which confronts two individuals/groups even though one thinks he is more powerful and privileged than the other. The proverb is context-specific in a historical sense. It is about slave raidings in the West African coast during centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the campaigns to capture slaves, one community would think it was safe from slave marauders and would refuse to assist a weaker clan until it became victims.

In appearance, the iguana and the crocodile, both meat when killed, look alike except that the latter is bigger than the former. Following the logic of immensity of size and strength, the crocodile may be deluded to think that it will not end in the same cooking pot like the iguana. Communities which were fairly large and had some formidable military technology believed they were safe from slave raiders. They forgot the vital need for solidarity with other communities to boost their resistance against the slave dealers. Such communities suffered the same destiny with the weaker ones. In other words, the proverb emerged as a lesson to the effect that those who are powerful should protect the weak and vulnerable otherwise they will also become victims of the same fate.

There is another Facebook proverb on the theme of meat: “It is better to eat mushroom in freedom than to eat meat in slavery”. The proverb advocates the appreciation of individual agency or subjectivity even in difficult situations than to enjoy when one's self-autonomy or independence is circumscribed. It is significant that the semantic field of the proverb establishes a direct



relationship between mushroom and freedom, on the one hand, and meat and slavery, on the other. This dichotomous link emphasizes the differences between mushroom and meat but takes on a symmetrical character through the use of the word “eat”. Even though both mushroom and meat rank hierarchically in terms of importance, the act of eating unites them as food.

To sufficiently appreciate this proverb, it is imperative to situate it within its cultural context. In many rural communities in Africa, mushrooms grow wild: in forests but sometimes in the outskirts of settlements and so can be picked easily for food. Meat is a lot harder to get since it may sometimes require hunting or exerting greater energy and resources. Meat is, therefore, more valuable and treasured than mushroom making it significantly superior to mushrooms. Meat is also more proteinous and nourishing than mushroom. It is also a lot easier to get mushrooms on one's menu than meat especially if it is meat from the wild. The proverb is an expression of self/group autonomy and cultural sovereignty especially during moments of external threat. It specifically expresses the resistance to hegemonic control by many African cultures during the colonial encounter especially in East and Southern Africa where settler colonialism was experienced.

In West African cultures especially in some Nigerian communities, yam is a food crop that performs certain symbolic social/cultural functions. They are used for birth rituals, naming ceremonies and weaning babies. Yams are also used for funeral rites, and as sacrifices to gods and spirits (Spivey 2003, 43). This makes yams a source of communal celebration like the New Yam festival in Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. Similarly a farmer with an abundance of yams enhances his social/economic capital and is held in high esteem. This is much so if his barn of yams lasts for an entire harvest season until the next planting season. The following proverb illustrates this: “A farmer does not boast that he has had a good harvest until his stock of yams lasts him the following planting season”.

The proverb underscores the paramount need for commensurability between achievement and pride, between accomplishment and personal self-importance. Inherent in the linguistic environment of the proverb is the central referent, the farmer whose strategic referentiality is intimately associated with planting, yams, harvest and planting thereby completing and renewing the cycle. Thus within the cultural context of this proverb, to be proud of an accomplishment means that it should be truly remarkable just

like a good yam harvest can only receive validation through an abundance which lasts till another planting season. With such abundance, the farmer will be able to feed his large household and entertain the community and his guests.

In another example, “Whoever presents his head to break coconut will not be able to partake in the eating of it”, the nexus between food and African proverbs is fore-grounded. Coconut is an edible fruit with a hard outer covering in which is encased the whitish fruit. Most coconuts also have a residue of water called coconut water which is drained with an opening before the hard shell is broken. Normally a stone or hard surface is used to break the coconut before consumption. For a man to present his head for the breaking of coconut is unusual and almost synonymous with a death warrant. The head is considered to be the symbol of personal destiny in African spirituality/culture. Many rituals in Africa target the head more than any other part of the body. A man's physical prowess in traditional society is measured by his ability to cut human heads in war. The head also contains the brain which coordinates human thought processes, the same way the coconut shell contains the edible part. This proverb deplores the deployment of inappropriate procedures in the resolution of a situation. The proverb warns against desperation, overzealousness and lack of prudent judgement in handling issues especially when they are of great urgency.

In another proverb: “You can tell a ripe corn by its looks”, the ability to understand the natural environment especially food crops is the concern. Corn is a nutritious cereal crop grown in many parts of Africa. When planted, it takes about three to four months for many species of corn to mature. They produce cobs on which can be found several seeds which are roasted or boiled before eating. Corn can also be ground into paste and prepared as food. It is possible to know that corn is ripe because it loses its tiny tassels and changes colour from deep green to a slightly yellowish appearance. This proverb makes a commentary on the possibilities of understanding the core essence of an individual by closely observing his/her behaviour in ordinary circumstances and situations. It presents a fascinating experience in the power of keen observation of the natural environment.

“A man does not wander too far from where his corn is roasting” is another proverb which appropriates corn as its central organising theme. Usually corn is roasted over an open fire made for the purpose. This requires due diligence and careful attention because to neglect it will lead to the corn being over-

burned. In such circumstances, such corn cannot be eaten again. The moral of the proverb is that every duty or task in life has commensurate responsibility attached to it. One should be careful not to abdicate such responsibilities by exercising utmost watchfulness and dutifulness.

A proverb which expresses similar sentiments with the one above is: “We have left our pot unwatched and our food burns”. This proverb is self-accusatory and establishes a causal relationship between a negligent act and the repercussion that results from it. Unlike the preceding one which emphasises individuality, this proverb suggests the abdication of collective responsibility, the inability to exercise due diligence and commitment at the appropriate time particularly when the collectivity is not united. There is a strong collocation between pot and burning food. Usually food is cooked before eating especially if it cannot be consumed raw. In principle, therefore, a group cooking food should not wander too far from the fireplace to avoid the catastrophe of burning the food, and perhaps a greater consequence which may be a fire outbreak.

Among some traditional East African societies in the distant past especially the Kikuyu and the Maasai, the tradition was that if a man killed his neighbour, the body of the deceased would be thrown into the forest. The murderer would also be killed as a punishment for assailing a kinsman and his body would also be thrown into the wild. After some time, rationality and commonsense prevailed among the people as they came to the realization that such a practice only succeeded in feeding the hyenas on each occasion. This proverb: “The hyenas are hungry for food but we will not feed them twice” became a celebration of the triumph of their sense of reason over the culture of vindictiveness. What is significant is that it benefits from the trope of food as its organising structure and internal dynamic.

The hyena is a predatory animal which rarely kills prey. It mostly relies on the capacity of other bigger and more powerful animals like the tiger, lion, or leopard to kill prey. In its opportunism, it waits in the shadows for the kill and helps itself to the remnants. Hyenas are gregarious carnivores and communal scavengers. However, when exceptionally hungry, they can also hunt for themselves especially when they find a vulnerable prey. It is the same sense of communality which the hyenas use to advantage that the community in the proverb latches on to allow reason prevail in their social and cultural engineering.

The next three proverbs were collected using the social media platform Facebook. This suggests that proverbs are not monumentalised in the past but also enact their energies in a digimodern dispensation (Mieder 2014, 47). The proverb, “Covered food is more appetizing than exposed food”, is a declarative statement which institutes a discourse that negotiates the philosophical question about appearance and reality. Embedded in it is a paradox for it is contradictory for food that is covered to be appetizing. There is, therefore, a play on sensory appeal in the proverb. Because the food is covered, the proverb does not gesture towards the senses of sight and taste but rather the olfactory. Thus, it is not necessary to see food exposed before it can stimulate one's appetite. Sometimes, the appeal rests in the fragrance and the capacity of the perceiving agent to appreciate the quality of the food. The proverb ruptures another wise saying which declares that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder and another that the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

There is a plurality of interpretive possibilities regarding this proverb. One such interpretation concerns issues of public and private morality especially regarding young women who expose their bodies in the name of fashion and entertainment in a modern world. The proverb is a denunciatory commentary against the glamourization/commodification of the woman's geography of the body. Modern-day musical performances, beauty pageants, film, and even sports are complicit in this culture of spectacularity which fetishizes the human body. The rhetorical implication of the proverb resides in the fact that the value of something becomes enhanced when it is concealed. In contradistinction, when exposed, it becomes significantly debased.

Eggs are a delicacy favoured by all especially women who are in control of poultry (except the cock which is reserved for men in patriarchal African societies). Women are forbidden to consume eggs in some African communities because they make childbirth difficult (Spivey 41). This cultural appropriation masks the real reason which is that since women are in charge of the hens that lay the eggs, they will eat the eggs and few or none will be left to hatch. A proverb captures this reality: “It is the quiet dog that eats up the hen's eggs without a bark”. It focuses on two domestic animals: the dog and the hen, two animals that are hardly the best of friends. While one is a mammal, the other is avian and this foregrounds the asymmetry in their physical constitution. What is, however, focal is the behaviour of the dog, a carnivorous creature which finds the eggs of a hen of great culinary delight.

Interiorised in this proverb is a hierarchy based on power relations in which the dog is a predator and the hen a prey through its eggs. In this uneven relationship, the hen does not stand a chance against the cunning dog who is also stronger. In the semantic dynamic of the proverb, what is signalled here is the often mistaken association of quietness or silence with lack of action especially harmful action. The proverb emphasizes the oppositional binary between silence and garrulousness, introspection and aggressive behaviour as well as quiet efficiency and grandstanding. Therefore, to be silent or quiet is not synonymous with inaction, incapacity or indifference. Many times, silence communicates in a more eloquent, effective and dangerous manner than loquacity. Thus the power to conceal individual intention in silence and express it in action is the governing concern of this proverb.

Eggs are also central to the following proverb: “If the crocodile is in the habit of eating its eggs, what will it not do to the eggs of the alligator?” This proverb deploys a rhetorical strategy to forcefully and persuasively drive home its moral. It poses an interesting question which interrogates the crude behaviour of the crocodile in its wilful self-violence by eating its eggs. By inflicting such a disaster upon itself, the crocodile prevents its eggs from hatching into new offspring thereby disrupting the rhythm of its self-generation and preservation. However, what is more disturbing about the cruel habit of the crocodile is that there is the tendency for it to visit the same destruction to the eggs of the alligator, its weaker aquatic neighbour. This is because the crocodile is the sovereign lord of the creeks. Thus, if it is unsparing to itself, there are no boundaries to its terror and predation against other creatures in its domain.

The moral of the proverb is that one should not expect justice from someone who is wicked. The cultural locus of the proverb is in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where riverine ethnic categories like the Izon, the Urhobo and the Itsekiri are found. Such communities are familiar with aquatic life forms and some of their bizarre habits. This familiarity issues from the fact that they are fishermen because of their marine milieu. They, therefore, curate amphibious behavioural patterns.

There is, however, a historical dimension to this proverb. Many of the cultural groups who today populate the Niger Delta region of Nigeria were vassals to the once powerful Benin Empire. The dictatorial and oppressive rule of the Benin kings against their immediate subjects and the conquered vassals is what has given energy and cultural valence to this proverb. The

feudalistic tendencies and exploitative schemes of the Benin overlords against their weaker neighbours parallel the tyranny of the crocodile against its eggs (subjects) and those of the alligator (vassals). The proverb is relevant to Nigeria/Africa's postcolonial predicaments. Africa's corpus of tragedies and contradictions is sometimes inflicted by her rapacious political elite. This makes a powerful statement on the culture of injustice, oppression and fear by the political crocodiles that have eaten their eggs (their people) and are threatening the eggs of the alligator (the lives of their neighbours).

Milk is a nutritious, nourishing food full of nutrients especially to a tender child who is growing. It fortifies the child against pathological conditions which may compromise and endanger the child's immunity and growth. It is therefore an indispensable food source for a child. What is interesting about milk is that it is the lactating mother who gives it to the child. One gives; the other receives. This relationship is hardly reciprocal because breast milk is not meant to be sold. Even if it were to be sold, a child cannot truly pay for this invaluable service offered by its mother because it lacks the resources to do so. This is captured in this proverb: "A child cannot pay for its mother's milk".

However, it can be argued that the validity of this proverb is contextual and time-bound. This is because a child who has grown up to be a man can pay for the mother's milk. What this proverb articulates in reality is that a mother's milk is so priceless that there is nothing a child who is even fully matured can do to adequately or sufficiently pay for it. What this translates to is that there are certain services or benevolences that we enjoy from others that we remain greatly, eternally indebted to them for. There is a dialectical relationship between the lexical items child and mother and this is energised by the morpheme milk.

The proverbs which constitute the analytic paradigm for this study demonstrate in a diversity of ways the intimate connection between them and food. African proverbs, therefore, manifest a symbiotic interaction with food and foodways. The universe of proverbs is dominated by food as food is the governing and animating concern which helps in the articulation of the encoded messages. Food also provides the context of many of the proverbs and structures their literary/aesthetic integrity and imbues them with the capacity to communicate culturally. In all, the sources of these proverbs are deeply rooted in food. However, the African cultures to which the proverbs owe their ontological existence have helped in shaping them based on their peculiar contexts and circumstances. What emerges ultimately is the organic

relationship which inheres between food and literature as the proverbs amply manifest.

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