

CHAPTER EIGHT

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF JESUS' ETHNO-CULTURAL PROVERBIAL LANGUAGE OF MATTHEW 15: 21-28 IN AN AFRICAN SETTING

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Introduction

The Bible is replete with allusions to diverse peoples, cultures and by extension languages. Pertinent to this are the languages used in writing the history of the family of Abraham before God made a covenant with him to the period of the return of his descendants from the Babylonian exile. Prominent among these languages were Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Primarily the Old Testament was written in the Hebrew language and during the exile in Babylon, Aramaic was used to record the escapades of the Jews who lived at the period. Aramaic was the folk language of the returnees until the time of Jesus Christ. However, by the time of Jesus Christ, the world political leaders were the Romans who ruled over the people but adopted the language of the Greeks that was already the lingua franca of the world at the time. As a result of this, the language used in writing the New Testament was Greek. This enabled easy access to the materials by many who were not of the Judean lineage. It must be reiterated here that the folk language in Judea at the time of Jesus was the Aramaic, an adulterated form of Hebrew which was a result of their long exilic sojourn in Babylon. At the time of Jesus Christ, several ethnic groups and people of other nations in the land interrelated with one another. Some of these were the original owners of the land like the Canaanites. The Romans were also in the land to keep law and order. These intermingled in the time of Jesus Christ.

A similar scenario is playing out among the Yoruba of south west Nigeria, where people of diverse localities intermingle in marriages and socio-economic engagements in their day to day activities. Besides this, the South-western part of Nigeria is filled with people of different religious persuasions. These religions include Christianity, Islam and devotees of the African Traditional Religion of the Yoruba extraction. This picture presents a similar situation at the time of Jesus Christ in Palestine.

Proverbs as vehicles of expression of the intent of the mind is a feature that runs across the languages of the world (Mielder, 1993, p. 10). Asiyanbola (2007, p. 63), talking of the Yoruba of Nigeria, posits that the Yoruba hold proverbs in high esteem. This is similar to the importance and use of proverbs in the days of Jesus Christ in Galilee.

The purpose of this work is to examine the ethno-cultural proverbial language of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, the 15th Chapter and from the 21st to the 28th verse. The intention here is to look at the passage from the African context and compare

with what obtains among the Yoruba. This is therefore a comparative study. The Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria are chosen for this study because of their rich repertoire of aphorisms. In addition to this, the Yoruba were purposively chosen because they are an ethnic group that has been extensively studied. The areas that were particularly studied are their religion and language. This will enable access to their worldview from the perspective of their literature as a people. Besides, the Yoruba cultural background is akin to that of the Jews in many areas. They share a common outlook of life with regards to existential challenges. This work is premised on a multi-disciplinary approach of linguistics, African studies and hermeneutics. Relevant materials both on the internet and libraries were consulted in the elucidation of this exercise.

Theoretical Framework

Semiotic analysis has long been an object of keen interest in the academic world with an interdisciplinary orientation. Its relevance is particularly striking in linguistics and anthropology and other linguistics-related studies. Its importance in paremiology, which is the study of proverbs, is therefore not far-fetched. Semiotic analysis is not a traditionally established phenomenon in religious studies. However, our recourse to semiotic analysis is meant to give fresh breath to the study of proverbs in a religious setting.

Morris (1947, pp.58-63) sub-divided semiosis into three semiotic dimensions: the pragmatic dimension, the syntactic dimension and the semantic dimension. The pragmatic dimension deals with the relation between sign and sign users, whereas the syntactic dimension is more interested in the "formal relation of signs to one another" (Grzybek, 2014, p.69). The semantic dimension is concerned with the relations to the objects referred to. Morris did not intend to make a distinct difference between the three dimensions. Later studies in the field have not however limited themselves to Morris' close-knit definition of or study of the term. The change or modification in definition and subsequent changing methodological approaches have however not "rubbished" the orientations proposed by Morris.

In discussing semiotics from the perspective of pragmatical dimension, the fundamental question would be predicated on why and how the answers will be sought within contextual and situational explications of a defined social life. In the specific instance of proverbs, the utterances would be seen as "indirect speech acts" (Grzybek 2014, p.17). Grzybek explains this in line with tradition of Austin and Searle: before the situation when someone, in a given communication, says one thing (the locution ring act), and means something different (or additional). This is performing an illocutionary act, with some effect on someone else.

Thus meaning cannot always be understood in a literal sense. In the case of proverbs, it is important to understand the social content of its use and possible significance. An understanding of the social and cultural context and import of the accompanying signs will lead to a proper appreciation of the semantic function of signs.

The syntactical dimension of Morris' semiotics is not limited to grammatical rules of sentence structure. Morris (in Grzybek 2014, p.72) defines syntactical dimensions variously as dealing "with combinations of signs" and a "branch of semiotic that studies

the way in which signs of various classes are combined to your signs". This implies among others that meaning of signs could be sought at the level of "simultaneous combination" of a variety of signs. One of the "fall-outs" of this is that, the linguistic environment is no less important in the syntactical dimension. Thus in the specific cases of explaining proverbs in natural senses, the co-text too matters. The co-text means the text preceding or succeeding the proverbial utterance.

On its part, the semantical dimension relates to the signification of signs. Semantics incorporates a variety of foci or branches. Lexical semantics refers to meanings of words and morphemes while sentence semantics studies larger syntactic units. Text semantics deals with a combination of sentences that are studied in relation to real or hypothetical courses. All these can be identified in a proverb. Proverbs in our context will be discussed not merely as representation of meaning but as the process of generating meaning through the signs.

Semiotic is the systematic study of signs and symbols and the process related to their interpretation. The study includes likeness, metaphor and communication. The Swiss linguist de Saussure called it semiology, that is the study of the life of signs within society. In semiotics the main idea promoted is that the inherent meaning cannot be interpreted logically and directly in relation to the object being represented.

Semiotics theory provides a framework for understanding the interplay and interaction of signs, contexts and representation. De Saussure proposed a dyadic model of sign: signifies and signified. De Saussure's binary terms differ from those of C.S. Peirce and Charles Morris (2004), both of whom propose triadic approaches where the sign creates in the mind of the speaker, the listener an equivalent sign. Saussure interpreted semiotics from a structural perspective. For Peirce and Morris, their emphasis was a process and not structure. This study has its root in Morris's semiotic approach.

Proverbs in the Context of Yoruba Language and Culture

The Yoruba people are spread all over the world but traditionally, they are believed to emanate from the South western part of Nigeria spreading as far as the Republic of Benin. They are known to occupy Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Osun and Oyo states. They also occupy parts of Kwara and Kogi states of Nigeria. The Yoruba are a people who have various cultural expressions that have been codified in languages that are expressed proverbially. Their linguistic expressions are comparable to people of other climes outside the African continent.

Culture has been defined as the totality of the way of a people. Leigh and Stanbridge (1991, p.17) perceive culture as a "mixture which incorporates behaviour (thoughts, actions and language), knowledge, belief, art, moral law, custom and other qualities acquired by man as a social being." Language and culture are inseparably interrelated and intertwined. Language is what drives the cultural expressions of a particular people. It is what showcases the worldviews of the people. Oke (2008, p.34) succinctly captures it this way:

A means of communication, a means of presenting and shaping series of beliefs. Language is not something somehow separate from the ideas it contains....

As a medium, language conveys the ideas, behaviours, actions, and worldview of a particular people. It is in the light of this that it can be said that language is actually what expresses culture. By extension, proverbs fall under the categorisation of culture. Considering this fact among the Yoruba, Ehineni (2014, p.27) concurs that:

Yoruba proverbs are used to instruct on acceptable norms and conducts in the society. They are therefore repositories of traditional ethos and ethics. Furthermore, proverbs draw from the holistic daily experience of life of language users. They could convey the past, comment on the present and connect the future. This implies that proverbs are very central part of a people's beliefs and culture, and as a result, reflect the totality of their culture. Proverbs give expression to culture.

The foregoing has enumerated the pride of place the Yoruba place on their proverbs. Their language is what drives their culture and gives it expression. By extension, their proverbs are short sayings that encapsulate and bring to the fore, deeper meanings of their culture.

Interplay of Language, Culture and Proverbs

Odebunmi (2006, p.5) has rightly observed that there is an intricate relationship between language and culture. There is no way culture can exist on its own without language. It is in the light of this that language is central to culture. The major role language is playing in culture is that of giving expression to culture. In support of this, Oyelakin (2009, p.8) insists that there is no way language can be separated from culture. Culture therefore can be seen as embracing religion, rules, rituals and symbols. Other components of culture will include government, man-made things like building, artefacts and a host of other things. Certain things come to the fore from the foregoing perception of the term "culture". One of these is that culture is an indispensable material in the existence and survival of a people. Secondly, as an integral part of the society, culture also plays a central role in the establishment of discipline within the framework of the community. One of the major characteristics of culture is the fact that it does not stand in isolation but is shared by many. In his study on culture, Ajayi (2005, p.8) has this to say:

Depending on the region, the climates and historical heritage, people form a set of values and beliefs which shape their culture. Secondly, culture is learned and not inborn. Culture is handed down from generations to generations and culture is also elastic, not static. There is a gradual change of culture of a people. It loses some values and gains some values.

A cursory observation of the above reveals that culture, without language, is an impossibility. Without language, culture cannot be transferred to generations upon generations. Language therefore becomes a fundamental part of culture.

If language is integral to culture, proverbs, then, is an important part of language. In fact, what language is to culture is what proverb is to language. In his elucidation of

logic (to which proverbs are a part) and language, Kazeem (2010, pp.6-7) agrees with this assertion when he says inter alia:

Logic and language are two fundamental features of all societies. The cultural experiences of any human group are couched in a language. Language in this sense can be viewed as a system of communication that relates what is communicated with something that communicates.

In furtherance of the interplay of language and proverbs, the absence of language will make proverbs an impossibility. Across the cultures of the world especially among the Jews and the Yoruba, the transmission of the overwhelming complexity of experience has been largely rooted in the continent's culture of oral artistry. In fact, proverbs in the language of the Yoruba, is the vehicle that is used to detect words that are missing – *owe l'esin oro, oro l'esin owe; b'oro b'aso nu owe l'a fi nwa*. Oluwole (1997, p.19) captures this succinctly when he insists that proverbs are the analytic tools of thought. When thought is lost, it is proverbs that are used to search for it.

A Semiotic Interpretation of Matthew 15:21-28

Matthew 15:21-28 contains one of the passages where Jesus spoke with a foreign woman who needed spiritual intervention for her demonized daughter. This has a parallel in Mark 7:24-30. The first three verses situate the domiciliary of the woman, the region of Tyre and Sidon, a neighbouring country close to Galilee. The story in Mark calls the woman a Greek, and a Syro-Phoenician. By this word, she was an inhabitant of Phoenicia, which was a part of Syria in the time of the Roman Empire. While Mark's account speaks of the nation, that of Matthew pinpoints the specific abode of this unnamed woman by his reference to the district of Tyre and Sidon. These two cities were the biggest cities of Phoenicia in the time of Jesus. As a Canaanite woman, she descended from a race that has been cursed by Noah and one that was mandated by Joshua for annihilation. This made it easy for the two races (the Jewish race and the Canaanitic race) to be enemies of one another. Besides, she sought healing for another of her gender, her daughter. During this period, women were ordinarily, not highly respected.

The next four verses of Matthew (24-27) capture the dialogue that transpired between Jesus and the unnamed Canaanite woman. Jesus discussed his mission of being sent to the lost sheep of Israel. Obviously, the woman did not qualify because of her nationality. As a result of this, she appealed and the response she heard was the proverb of the unfairness of throwing children's bread to the dog. The Jews regarded themselves as the only children of God, therefore the only recipients of the provisions of God. Dogs were held in great contempt by the Jews. One of the most degrading things to the Jews was to be compared to a dog (1 Samuel 17:43; 24:14; 2 Samuel 9:8). The dogs referred to here are the dogs that are left to foray and scavenge in the streets with little care from the owners. In the days of Jesus, dogs symbolized people of low integrity (Deuteronomy 23:18; 2 Peter 2:22; Revelation 22:15). The semantical beauty of the proverb can be appreciated in the metaphorical use of dogs to represent a race, the Canaanites. Besides, while the woman sought for healing, Jesus alluded to bread. While the Jews boasted of their fraternal relationship with God as His children, they saw the Gentiles as dogs,

people who have no affinity with the God of heaven and the God of host. This saying of Jesus is a proverb that was well known to the people who lived close to the Jews. This is proven by the response of the woman which elicited her receiving the blessing she sought. The semiotic content of Jesus is clear. The Canaanite woman wanted her child healed yet Jesus said "bread" was not meant for dogs. Bread should not be understood in the literal sense.

Social and Cultural Dynamics in the Days of Jesus

The Syro-phoenecian woman's humility, prudence, patience and clarity of purpose was evident as she answered "Yes Lord". In other words, she agreed she was a worthless dog. She accepted the semiotic import of dog as being worthless. However, she quickly re-strategized by saying that she had a right to have access to the crumbs of the bread from the master's table. This right is predicated on the acceptance of the office of the dog. The result was rewarding to the Canaanite as Jesus told her: "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." (Matthew 15:8). Her daughter received instant healing.

Jesus was in Galilee until towards the end of his ministry when he relocated to Judea according to the reports recorded in the Synoptic gospels. Galilee was the utmost end to the north of the three provinces in Palestine (Galilee, Samaria and Judea). By the time of Jesus, these places were under the Roman Empire and ruled by the Herods. They introduced taxes and increased the presence of Gentile population in the region. This led to turmoil and unrest giving rise to hatred of the Gentile folks present in the land. In fact, Jesus referred to Herod Antipas as the fox (Luke 13:32), a semiotic and metaphoric allusion to a character that is cunning, voracious, mischievous and even destructive.

Sheep was of great importance to the agricultural life of the Hebrews of the New Testament. The import of the lost sheep was not lost on the Israelites of the Old Testament. The Messiah intended to gather the "lost sheep," God's people that had missed the way. The coming of Jesus as the Shepherd of Israel symbolized a fulfilment of the prophecy relative to the Messiah (Mark 6:34). They are used in the Bible to symbolize God's people (Jeremiah 50:6). The semantic content of sheep also portrays affection and the ability for submission to authority for the purpose of peaceful co-existence. In his article, "Historicizing the cultural and semiotics a wolf and sheep," Morfen Tonnessen (2016) describes the sheep as a representation of innocence and vulnerability. He goes further to evoke the difference in cultural symbolism and imagery between human identities.

An assessment of Jesus' teaching exposes the dynamics of the social, political, economic and religio-cultural dimensions. He addressed the religious personages of his time, spoke to the rich and the poor using images in proverbs and parables that could easily capture one's attention. He employed several teaching methods in letting his audience understand his message. He used several parables that addressed the dichotomy with the people (parable of the Samaritan), spoke to the rich (the rich young ruler), and gave proverbs that were common place in the hearing of the rural folk of his days (new wine in old wine skin). Semiotics makes Bible scholars to appreciate certain links between certain images within the society and the cultural implications. It has helped to

improve communication while also revealing succinctly cultural attitudes, stereotypes and values.

Dogs in the Proverbial Repertoire of the Yoruba

Of particular reference in this passage is the use of the dog. Dog in the passage refers to the dogs found mostly on the landscape of the rural area. They are different from the imported breeds that dot the terrain of urban areas. Unlike the foreign dogs that are kept for the purpose of aesthetics and guarding the house, these local dogs are kept at home for the purpose of cleaning the defecations of children through eating the droppings and leftover food. Usually they are left to scavenge around the village for their sustainability. These dogs were also kept for the purpose of hunting animals. Dogs follow the hunters on hunting expeditions or allowed to tag along, kill rodents or any small animals that may be difficult for the hunter to catch.

Dogs have religious role in the traditional religion of the Yoruba. Dog is one of the principal symbols of Ogun, the god of war. Other symbols are iron and palm frond. These symbols are interpreted in terms of transformation, mediation and function. The relevance of a dog in the god of iron is its aggressive and doglike capacity to confront danger. It is also one of the sacrificial animals associated with Ogun. Dogs have symbolic relevance in Yorubaland. A faithful person can be metaphorically referred to as *aja* (dog). In a negative sense, a woman referred to as dog symbolizes a semblance of a prostitute. It is instructive to note that oftentimes, some people are called dogs as a result of some characteristic features the person so called exhibits that are similar to a dog's. For example, a person may be called a dog because of her insatiable penchant for sex as exemplified in a female dog that is on heat. Similarly, a person may be called a dog due to his or her ferocious appetite that dogs are known for. By extension, the person is also regarded as a witch that is dedicated to killing people. Jesus intended to dissuade the woman from her quest, by saying that he was sent only to the household of Israel, met a very strong determination from the woman. He then called her a dog. Saying that "food is for the children and not for dogs." The woman understood the proverb. She knew she was called a prostitute, a ferocious consumer and a witch, all in one word! Of course, she understood the folk language and reacted by accepting the insult and saying that even, dogs eat the crumbs from the children's table. This is actually true of the dogs among the Yoruba. The dog is the one that will kill the animals but the family will eat the meat and throw the bones to the dogs and the remnants which rarely remain.

For a Yoruba reader of the Bible, it is imperative for them to remove his traditional understanding of this animal and study its significance in the Jewish culture. To fully understand the meaning of dog, a Yoruba should not limit his interpretation to Matthew 15:26-29. Dogs feature in other portions of the Bible. In some instances they do not portray the symbolic or semiotic sense or sign of worthlessness, while in some cases the idea of worthlessness is reinforced. For instance, the epithet "dog" is used in 1 Samuel Chapter 24 verse 14 in a very negative sense: dog's head, dead dog. The symbols of humiliation can also be seen in 2 Samuel chapter 3: verse 8 and chapter 9 verse 8. Hazael's use of the word in 2 Kings chapter 8 verse 13 is a sign of mock humility. For Paul in Philippians Chapter 3: 2, dogs were an epithet for false apostles. The dreaded

Philistine Goliath referred to dog to show that he was not a mean person when he said "Am I a dog that thou comest to me with staves?"

Conclusion

The foregoing has been devoted to situating the proverb of Jesus as contained in the dialogue between Him and a rural based woman whose daughter was tormented by evil spirits. Africans in general and Yoruba in particular can identify with this woman because the setting is very similar to their own. It is clear that proverbs are not a monopoly of a particular people, rather, they cuts across boundaries and climes. The proverbs of the Jews of the early Church beginning from the time of Jesus have several similarities with those of the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria. It is clear that many of the components of proverbs are symbolic and are actually frequently used in both cultures. It is clear that most people with rural life background can readily identify with the proverb as proverbs are frequently used in their setting.

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