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Riding the Horses of Speech in Chika Unigwe's Night Dancer

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Abstract:

*This paper is an exploration of proverb use in Unigwe's **Night Dancer** whose preoccupation with the ambiguous relationship between mothers and their daughters celebrates a recent phenomenon in African literature. Divided into five groups, the proverbs are explicated within the context of the novel. As observed in this study, these proverbs are rendered by the elders to whom the stamp of traditionalism seems a second nature even if they are far away from home. This is contrary to the new generation of educated elite who have little or no patience for the slow but deep folk wisdom inherent in these proverbs. The novelist's generous use of proverbs, the paper concludes, not only enhances the structure and plot of the work, but also constitutes her contribution to cultural revival in Africa.*

Keywords: Proverbs, values, Africa, marriage, society, tradition

1. Introduction

One of the most effective means of transmitting culture, social morality, manners, and ideas of a group of people from one generation to another is the proverb. The proverb is an aphorism or wise saying which reflects the social values and sensibility of the people. As a distinct genre which expresses general truths, the proverb owes its existence to a repertory preserved by a community of speakers. It is one oral literary form whose relevance has never waned. Herskovits the folklorist called their corpus Africa's "grammar of values" (1958:56). The continuing relevance of proverbs among Africans, for example, can be seen in the way the Igbo of eastern Nigeria refer to them as the palm oil with which words are eaten. To the Yoruba of South West Nigeria, proverbs are the horses of speech that are often saddled with the difficult task of locating missing words especially when truth becomes elusive. The observation of Nketia (1958:51), is specifically illuminating here:

The value of the proverb to us does not lie only in what it reveals of the thoughts of the past. For the poet today or indeed for the speaker who is some sort of an artist in the use of words, the proverb is a model of compressed or forceful language. In addition to drawing on it for its words of wisdom, therefore, he takes interest in its verbal techniques –its selection of words, its use of comparison as a method of statement, and so on. Familiarity with its techniques enables him to create, as it were, his own proverbs. This enables him to avoid hackneyed expressions and give a certain amount of freshness to his speech.

Although Nketia is here writing about the proverb in Ghana, his observation also applies to other parts of Africa where the proverb has become a part of the everyday life of the local people.

The proverb, says Ruth Finnegan (1970:389), is a "saying in more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of truth tersely in it". Encapsulated in the proverb are nuggets of wisdom, truth, moral and traditional views which are often couched in a "metaphorical, fixed and memorable form that are handed down orally from generation to generation" (Mieder, 1996:557). Although proverbs vary from society to society, there exists a certain degree of similarity as a result of shared properties which confer some kind of homogeneity, especially in Africa. This is why Peek and Yankah (2009:374), aver that, "there are similar properties of content, which is understandable, given the task of the proverb to express general truths that are the fruits of experience of the society as a whole".

Proverbs are idioms whose meanings go beyond any literal interpretation. In Africa, they are easily recognized by their formulaic turn of phrase like, "according to our elders" and or "our elders say". It is this association of adages with the elders, which instantly confer on them a stamp of venerableness and the sign of antiquity, which Whiting (1974:502) says " makes them difficult to be counterfeited by a clever literary man". Proverbs help to economize words as so much can be said in just one proverb; Proverbs are used to convey delicate and exceptional messages in a rather instructive and innocuous manner away from the naïve listener who should not be given the interpretation in order not to make a mockery of his/her mother's bride price in the typical Igbo parlance. Indeed, as the Yoruba of South West Nigeria say, proverbs are the roots of words; when words tangle, proverbs are summoned to the rescue. Akporbaro and Emovon (1994:2) explain this point further:

Whenever there is doubt about an accepted pattern of behaviour, whenever there is doubt, a stipulated line of action, whenever traditional norms are threatened; there are always proverbs and indeed tales or myths to vouch, illuminate, and buttress the wisdom of the traditional code of conduct. The value of the corpus of societal proverbs lies not only in the way they strengthen tradition, but in the variety of ways in which they may and do contribute to the life continuity of the given society, and the individual who lives in it. It is in terms of the way that the proverb expresses culture, belief and social psychology that it may be said as Bascom affirms that proverbs constitute the genius and soul of the people.

Proverbs in speeches appeal to the listener's imagination by the poetic effect of their expression. They give authority and weight to arguments because they are generally recognized as eternal truth. Proverbs owe their appeal to their characteristics which display metaphor, simile, rhyme and parallelism. Specifically, their epigrammatic terseness and charm not only resonate with wisdom but also "implies a certain economy in the choice of words and a sharpness of focus, while the charm conveys the touch of literary or poetic beauty in the expression" (Okpewho 2004:226). In the Malinowskian socio-functional view of art forms, proverbs, like riddles and idioms go beyond sheer entertainment. This is because they help people generally to adjust to the vagaries and vicissitudes of life. They have a vital role to play in the social organization of people as well as help to maintain and validate each community's beliefs and accepted patterns of life. According to Iwuh (2011:76)

Authors from different geographical region of the country (Nigeria) particularly the east and the west have demonstrated through their writings how significantly proverbs feature in daily Nigerian communication.

This paper, therefore, explores proverbs as a fictional device in Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* (2013) One of the recent thought-provoking writers in Africa whose focus is on complex female characters, Unigwe from Nigeria, is a 2008 UNESCO – Aschberg fellow and recipient of 2012 Nigerian Prize for literature.

2. Night Dancer in Perspective

Unigwe's *Night Dancer* (2013), is a veritable demonstration of the mother-daughter plot in African literature which, according to Monica Bungaro (2006:67), "is a recent event that helps us to understand the wider politics of Africa's post-colonial societies". It occupies the same pedestal with recent novels like Amma Darko's *The Housemaid* (1998), Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Girl Who Can* (1992) and Nozipo Maraire's *Zergale: A Letter for my Daughter* (1995), all of which deal with the ambiguous relationship between mother and daughters. Ezi, a bold and brash woman, abandons her marriage because her husband, Mike, impregnates their housemaid Rapu in his search for a male child. She leaves with Mma, their only child, to Enugu where she later settles down to a life of prostitution. She dies without telling Mma, now a teenager, who her father is. Mma inherits not only her mother's wealth and memoirs but also her bad name. Desperate to find out about her father and family, she ravenously pores into her mother's memoirs through the leading of Mama Gold, her mother's friend. The information she gleans from the memoirs enables her to travel home to her mother's parents and later to visit her real father, Mike Ugwu, in far away Kaduna. Although her stay in Kaduna ends on a sour note as she accuses her father and the step mother of betraying her mother, it nevertheless catalyzes her renewed zeal to straighten up her relationship with her fiancé Obi, and make up with her dead mother in order for her spirit to rest in peace.

3. Contextual Explication of Some Proverbs in Chika Unigwe's Night Dancer

Like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Arrow of God (1964), Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and Eghargha's *Death, Not a Redeemer* (1998) which are full of proverbs and Idioms, the profundity of Unigwe's proverbs in this novel cannot be underestimated. However, in analyzing these proverbs, their context is highly critical. Therefore, Following Malinowski (1926) and Nwachukwu Agada (1990), the study of proverb in this work is context-based. It is divided into five sections namely: common sense proverbs, proverbs of patience, proverbs of caution, philosophical proverbs and proverbs of opportunity.

4. Commonsense Proverbs

When you give medicine to a very sick man and his penis rises up, it is best to leave him alone as he has already found a woman on the other side (15).

Medicines are administered to sick persons in order for them to get well. Getting well is a function of the efficacy of the administered medicine. When the efficacy of the medicine is overwhelmed by the illness, the patient takes a turn for the worse. Every qualified medical practitioner or medicine man in the traditional setting knows that when this stage is reached, the patient is said to have found a friend on the other side, to put it euphemistically. Death becomes a certainty that nobody can do anything about. Despite all the meaningful pieces of advice from Mama Gold to Ezi to stay with her husband in spite of his infidelity; despite all the talk to Ezi to stay and keep her marriage, it is obvious that she has made up her mind to go. It is obvious that her stubbornness has carried the day as nothing can change her mind. Mama Gold, therefore, decides to leave her friend alone since any more advice will amount to nothing short of pouring water on the back of a duck – an exercise in futility.

To cut ones nose to spite one's face (237)

This proverb means to harm oneself while taking revenge on somebody else. Ezi's first reaction to her husband's defiling of their marriage bed by impregnating Rapu their housemaid is that of anger and disbelief. She feels deeply betrayed by Mike. This is quite normal in a marriage like that of the Ugwu's where there is love. However, her anger soon sends her on a quest for vengeance which she finds in walking out of the marriage to Mike. According to Mama Gold, "she wanted to punish him by taking away what would hurt him the most" (15) Blinded by vengeance, Ezi's case is actually the equivalent of the proverbial cutting off of one's nose to spite one's face. This is because by abandoning her marriage, she has actually given up everything she has worked for, for her housemaid,

Rapu. She is so far gone in her quest for revenge that she even tells her daughter that she has no father. It is only after her mother's death that Mma manages to gather some information about her father from Mama Gold. To the scheming Rapu, Ezi's loss is simply her gain as she soon becomes the madam of the house after Ezi's exit. When Mma, the first child of the house, later visits her father in far away Kaduna, she becomes nothing but a total stranger or visitor who is expected to stay for a while before leaving his host. Although it is Mike and Ezi that eat sour grapes it is unfortunate that it is Mma's teeth that are set on edge.

A man who wants to hide does not hide in his house (237)

Common sense dictates that one's house is the last place to hide from one's enemies. This is because the search for one, more often than not, starts from one's house. It will therefore, amount to sheer foolishness to hide in one's house for one will easily be found out. In her anger, Mma accuses her father of having hidden from her all these years. The truth of the matter, however, is that Mike, her father, has always been in Kaduna ever since Ezi abandoned her marriage to him. He has been in his house in Kaduna where he can easily be found. Mma's accusation is therefore, borne out of anger and frustration.

5. Proverbs of Patience

If the yam used in sacrifice does not die prematurely, it will eventually germinate (7)

This is an Igbo proverb, and among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, yam is regarded as the king of crops grown exclusively by men. One of the indices of wealth in the traditional setting is a barn full of yams. Care is, therefore, taken by men to plant it to enable it germinate and blossom. Except there is a miscarriage of the elements or interference by humans, even a piece of yam that is used for sacrifice and carelessly thrown about will eventually germinate like a well-planted one in the farm. In the context of this novel, Mma seems the sacrificial yam in the quarrel between Ezi and Mike. As a child, her mother does not even bat an eyelid to tell her that she does not have a father despite her disbelieving eyes. But the young, folk wisdom says, shall grow if they do not die prematurely like the sacrificial yam. As soon as her mother dies, Mma goes to Mama Gold, her mother's friend, to find out about herself and her father. Through the prompting of Mama Gold, she finds herself poring over her mother's memoirs. One is not surprised, therefore, that like a normal child, she decides to look for her father. The catharsis or emotional purgation Mma gets when she eventually meets her father leading to her resolve to build her mother's house shows that she has finally grown to maturity to face life's realities away from apportioning blames to either of her parents. With patience, she is able to discover her true self, and as she looks to a future marriage to Obi, she realizes that everybody has got to sacrifice to make life livable.

Hot water will always eventually cool down (203/204)

Literally, this expression is true, but the essence of this idiomatically, is the need to celebrate the virtue inherent in patience. No matter the jet age which best describes modern civilization, the patient dog knows that the biggest bone will eventually be his. After Ezi's departure, Mike initially finds it difficult to replace her with Rapu. In spite of the fact that Rapu has given birth to a boy for Mike, he still sees her as a mere maid of the house to be kept at arms length. Rapu still stays with her baby in her old bedroom, and even when Mike makes love to her it is Ezi's name that he moans at the height of sexual ecstasy. Although Rapu feels humiliated, she has learnt from her friend, Anwuli, that patience has its value. All she does, therefore, is wait for the sizzling love that Mike has for Ezi to cool like hot water. Indeed, this soon comes to pass as Mike transfers his love to her, even inviting her to come and sleep in his bed. At last, Rapu becomes the madam of the house completely replacing Ezi. She is no longer the callow usurper of her former mistress! Hot water will always cool down and when it does, only the patient will savour it. Rapu is willing for it to cool down. Need we be surprised at her rich reward as the new madam of the house? Surely, we needn't!

6. Proverbs of Caution

Men are like palm wine, you sip a bit at a time and you sip it with respect (161)

Palm wine is tapped by the local people from palm trees that are found in the forest in the humid parts of West Africa. Palm wine is drunk by elders during occasions like wedding, burial ceremonies and festivals. Any ceremony without palm wine is considered incomplete and of no consequence by countryside folks. Palm wine is sipped by the elders with a lot of respect. This is why it is never done in a hurry. Elders sip it leisurely as they discuss weighty matters in the community.

African society is a patriarchal one where men are held in high esteem. Wives are taught by their mothers to respect their husbands, prepare their food in time and wash their clothes. This is necessary, not only to keep their husband from "straying" to other women who are too ready to claim them as their husbands even without any bride price on their heads but more importantly, to stabilize their marriage. In a continent where many men take pride in the number of wives they have, every woman must be cautious the way she treats her husband in order not to drive him into the waiting hands of other women. According to Rapu, "no matter the size of your husband's penis, no other woman should know it. Every girl was taught that back in the village. You only showed familiarity with your husband in private. Other women should not be privy to it" (102). For all her brilliance, boldness and brashness, Ezi does not seem to possess an inkling of this folk wisdom as she does not mind to ridicule her husband in front of her housemaid. Ezi does not observe that even when her husband laughs along, "he was really elsewhere" (102). That "elsewhere", we later discover, is no other than Rapu herself. Thus, although Mike's inability to get a male child through Ezi is a major factor which gravitates his lecherous attention towards Rapu, Ezi's bad manners which prevent her from being able to hold onto her husband are also critical in this direction. Unlike other wise women who have learnt to keep their eyes sharp, tongues warm and see that they lure their men back home before they get out of control, Ezi takes things for granted and eventually loses out in the game of keeping her home intact.

The man who refuses to open his eyes to the excreta his friend has successfully sidestepped will have no one but himself to blame when he steps into it (73)

This saying is found in the memoirs of Ezi. It is a self-evident truth that where others have succeeded, one has no excuse to fail. Caution, therefore, is the watchword. But no two persons are the same. Circumstances vary. Failure is always around the corner. Even so, there is always a thin line between success and failure.

Closely examined, it can be said that it is Ezi who refuses to open her eyes to the excreta thereby stepping into it. Rather than be reasonable and level-headed to keep her husband, his infidelity notwithstanding, as folk wisdom dictates, Ezi stubbornly abandons her marriage. This is because in the words of Mama Gold, “everyone knew that marriage here was not an intimate affair between two people like it was with the oyibos” (18). Ironically, the greatest beneficiary of this proverb in the novel is Rapu, the former housemaid-turned-housewife. Having watched Ezi abandon her marriage through her rashness, stubbornness and disrespect, she is determined to make a success of her marriage to Mike. Unlike the lazy Ezi, she has vowed not to abandon her household chores to a housemaid in order to keep her man, for while the next door mistress cooks her husband’s food every single day and personally bathes her children before they go to bed, Ezi sits glued to the television all day or sings along to a High life tune. A lazy woman, Rapu has come to know only creates chances for her husband to be snatched by other women. Unlike Ezi, Rapu is determined to open her eyes to avoid the “excreta” that slips her mistress in order to be successful in her marriage to Mike.

It is only the fly without guidance which follows the corpse into the ground (108).

This proverb is a celebration of the necessity of accepting good advice before embarking on any project. No one is an island. Good advice enables a person to avoid making mistakes or getting harmed like the proverbial fly. It is in this connection that the Chinese say that it is better to ask for a direction a thousand times than miss one’s way once. Mma wants to meet her grandparents in Aba. But she cannot just turn up there as things must be done the proper Igbo way in order for her not to look out of place “like one without an older person to advise her” (108). Mama Gold therefore, comes to her rescue by ensuring that an envoy is first of all sent to Ezi’s parents to inform them of Mma’s coming. There is no doubt that, for this intervention from Mama Gold, Mma’s journey would have miscarried especially with such a strict traditionalist as Papanukwu.

Mma’s grand reception by her grand parents is an indication that Mama Gold’s guidance is indeed worth the name. Really, the fly which refuses to heed any meaningful advice and guidance can only expect to follow the corpse into the grave like the children of Isidu who refuse to pour libration to their father’s god contrary to the advice of the village elders thereby losing everything in the city (136).

7. Philosophical Proverbs

Night Dancer is studded with many philosophical proverbs which deal with everyday facts of life. Some are treated here

There is nothing as resented as the guest who has overstayed his welcome (17)

“One of the most useful lessons life has taught me” says Ezi in her memoirs, “is knowing when to get up and go” (17). It is a common fact of life that every guest that overstays his welcome in his hosts house craves resentment. Every guest is therefore, expected to know when to bid his host goodbye. Having stayed with Mama Gold for some time during which she is able to gather some information about her late mother and Rapu, this philosophical saying begin to nudge at her. “I should be leaving Aunty, Thank you” (17) Mma tells Mama Gold. She just does not want to overstay her welcome in Mama Gold’s house. This is even more so as her mother’s friend is not her age mate. Any attempt to prolong her visit would have made her feel like the “visitor of whom the end of the yam was being served, the hit reserved for unwanted guest” (235).

God helps those who help themselves (175)

It is a common knowledge that the Almighty cannot come down from heaven to help people on earth. He can only bless the work of our hands, our efforts. In other words, God can only bless our energy exerted towards the realization of our goals. After all, as stated in the Holy Scriptures, “faith by itself without works, is dead” (James 2:17). A corollary to this local parlance says that it is only the baby who stretches out its hand that will eventually be carried by its mother. While Mike believes that Ezi will get pregnant in God’s good time, his mother and cousin think otherwise. To them, he can help himself by marrying another woman who will give birth to children for him rather than wait endlessly for the “barren” Ezi. While indeed, God helps those who help themselves Silas and Mike’s mother have chosen to forget that Ezi is supposed to be traditionally married to Mike. Even so, Mike and Ezi have tried to help themselves by subjecting themselves to several tests in the hospital to no avail. All the tests simply do not give any reason why Ezi could not have a baby. This is why Mike initially decides to wait for God’s time to the chagrin of his relatives and friends who think he must be insane. It is a piece of bewildering irony that rather than help himself in another way by marrying a second wife in the traditional way, Mike decides to impregnate his housemaid. What a way, indeed, to help oneself!

It is not the thing that we fear most that crushes us but that which we have forgotten to fear (171).

It is a cruel irony of life that our concentrated energy often ends up being misplaced. Man is so afraid of the big monster death, for example, that he actually forgets to pay attention to other so-called lesser monsters that actually bring about death. Many people are afraid of dying, but they have forgotten that by paying less attention to their hygiene, eating good food, obeying simple health tips like exercising their muscles, they are actually inviting death. To Ezi, Rapu is just a village girl without education and sophistication. She is just a maid without any meaningful ambition except to please her employer, through hardwork and dedication to her duty. She therefore, poses no threat, in Ezi’s estimation, to her marriage since her beloved Mike will not descend so low as to begin to get attracted. But since girls, by their nature are full of natural endowments that men can hardly resist, Ezi decides to be watchful and alert. However as Ezi later discovers it is true that which we have forgotten that slithes in under the door, for as she concentrates on her so-called watchfulness, she gradually abandons virtually all her wifely duties through her laziness and bad manners to her maid who is already scheming her way into Mike’s mind.

There is nothing the eyes would see that would ever make them bleed (195)

It is the duty of the eyes to shed tears not blood. No matter how terrible a circumstance may be to make emotion run high, the eyes can only shed tears not blood. No matter how long one cries, it is tears that one will shed. Street wisdom says that nothing is new under the sun. Indeed, nothing is so strange or new on earth that will make the eyes abandon their natural duties for another.

In the context of this novel, there is nothing new in what Mike has done in impregnating his housemaid, Rapu. After all, Ezi herself has said that stories abound of lusty men who slept with their wayward maids. This is why, to the more realistic mother of Ezi, the way forward for her daughter is to think of how to hang on to Mike rather than brood ceaselessly on his act of betrayal which is the equivalent of the proverbial spilt milk now.

8. Proverbs of Opportunity

Those with buttocks do not know how to sit (11, 99)

Buttocks are used for sitting down as parts of the human anatomy. However, the meaning of this proverb which appears twice in the novel is the need for people to use their opportunities well to their own advantage. This is because an opportunity lost can never be regained. Many persons like Ezi, who are blessed with great opportunities often do not know how to use them to their own advantage. Mike, her husband is not only rich but also caring. He loves Ezi dearly. He provides almost everything she needs for her. Even more important, is Mike's mother's love for Ezi. In a continent where there is no love lost between many mothers-in-law and their sons' wives, this is no doubt a huge marital asset to Ezi. But just an act of marital unfaithfulness and Ezi walks out of the marriage. When Mama Gold says that Ezi should have stayed rather than stubbornly leave she is only being realistic as an African woman to whom polygamy or infidelity in marriage is not strange Ezi's decision is therefore, nothing but foolishness rather than an act of bravery. A wise African woman in such a situation would have looked for ways to entrench her position as the first wife of Mike's house, who, by tradition, commands respect and wields a lot of powers. And now by trading such an opportunity for a life of prostitution through her stubbornness Ezi has made her daughter to inherit her bad name. Like Mama Gold rightly proverbializes, "it is the dog that eats shit but it is the goat that gets rotten teeth" (106). It is such an embarrassing liability of an inheritance for a daughter.

When God creates an itch, He creates the fingernails with which to scratch it (135)

A natural problem needs a natural solution. This must be a major reason many scientists now advocate a return to nature to solve the world's problems. Organic farming, for example, which is a system of farming practiced without artificial chemicals, is a consequence of this reasoning. Today, organic vegetables and organic-horticulture are household names in many advanced countries that have long parted ways with fertilizers. The almighty always provides a natural solution for a natural problem if only man can look beyond his artificial contraptions which he often calls solutions.

When Rapu was born, Ajofia the midwife-cum-priestess had prophesied that she would be the solution to her family's poverty although how this was going to be was never explained. But the gods are mysterious and so are their ways. If according to Unigwe, "it is also generally known that the gods expect a certain amount of initiative" (131), then certainly, Rapu's industriousness, diligence, scheming and deliberate failure to resist Mike's sexual advance surely help to fulfill Ajofia's prophecy. This is because by getting married later to Mike the rich business man, she eventually arrives to lift her parents out of poverty. Rapu thus becomes the proverbial fingernail that the gods provide to scratch the poverty of an itch of the Echewa family. Thus, unlike Ezi, Rapu the worldly-wise housemaid is able to use a rare opportunity to her own advantage. Except that by betraying her mistress, she has succeeded in pulling down one of the pillars of feminine solidarity. Indeed, by her action which is an equivalent of a dog eating another dog; Rapu becomes the fish in the proverb that "must swallow other fishes to grow fat" (123). Sometimes an exploited opportunity for profit actually translates into a veritable loss for others.

9. Significance of the Proverbs and Conclusion

This paper does not pretend to have exhausted the treatment of all the proverbs in this novel. But from the ones analyzed so far, it is obvious that many of the proverbs are philosophical in nature in that they express general truths. They manifest self-evident truths that are easily discernable and observable. The extensive reference to the meaning of these proverbs is a function of the context in which they are used in the novel. As observed in the study, these proverbs are rendered by the elders to whom the stamp of traditionalism seems a second nature even if they are far away from their countryside home. Mama Gold's several years in the city, for example, has not dulled her sense of the traditional as can be seen in the novel that most of the proverbs are credited to her.

Mma represents the new generation of educated elite who has little or no time for the slow but deep folk wisdom inherent in proverbs. Members of this generation, it has been noted, can hardly speak their indigenous languages fluently having schooled and brought up in the cities. Iwuh (2011:23) is right in his submission:

The loss of the rich spoken texts of these languages also means the loss of the fundamental resource of discrete proverbs inherent in them.

The above situation notwithstanding, the significance of Unigwe's proverbs cannot be underestimated. They contribute to the overall development of the structure and plot of the work. A proverb is used to introduce each of the three parts of the novel as well as prepare the reader for the next action in the novel. Through the use of these proverbs, the novelist adds a touch of local colour to the narrative. Proverbs are part of the fast fading values of African traditional society. The novelist's generous use of these proverbs is no doubt part of her contributions to cultural revival in Africa. On the whole it is not an understatement to state that through these proverbs Unigwe has been able to present "a thoroughly African world in thoroughly African terms" (Lindfors 2000:92)

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