

**THE ROLE PLAYED BY IDIOMS, PROVERBS, PROVERBIAL
PHRASES AND IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN SOME
SELECTED XITSONGA POETRY BOOKS**

BY

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ABSTRACT

The essence of idioms and proverbs in spoken and written language cannot be overemphasised. African idioms and proverbs reflect both the past and present, and are as relevant to contemporary society as they were to traditional society. They have both practical and philosophical relevance. Most of them are short and succinct, enabling hearers or readers to memorise and repeat them easily. They also demonstrate universal or cultural truth that is familiar to the hearers or readers.

Proverbs and idioms on the other hand, are used to describe human nature and behaviour abounds in the language of the African continent. Sometimes they are used to caution people against certain forms of behaviour; at other times idioms and proverbs are used as an encouragement. African proverbs are used as a means of moral instruction at all levels of society and to educate the youth about the importance of respect and reverence for elders. They play a vital role in the education and instruction of members of society. It is this heritage coupled by oral poetry that first attracted western writers to study African languages and literature.

Lysere as cited by Stewart (2005:6) states that the modern African writer is to his indigenous oral tradition as a snail is to its shell. Even in a foreign habitat, a snail never leaves its shell behind. The Kaonde (Zambia) proverb, “kwenda kwa kolokofwa ne nzubo yanji” which can be loosely translated as ‘the journey of a snail and its house’ expresses the sentiment that wherever a wise man travels, he takes his wisdom with him, like a snail that travels with its house, which is its shell.

In the same way, contemporary African writers are aware of the heritage contained in the communal wisdom of their people. This communal wisdom is realised in the language use in their literary works which are full of imagery and rich, vibrant and profound in the use of figurative language which is bound in the use of proverbs, riddles and idioms.

This is an indication that it is not a coincidence that we find the use of idioms and proverbs in African poetry as an important literary device. African poets, Xitsonga poets included, cannot divorce their writings from this inherited wisdom, which to them is like a tribal meeting place, which was the play-ground where skills in language use were learned, practiced and polished; where elders would proudly express themselves in figurative language which was a demonstration of their powerful command of language.

Therefore it is in literature, precisely in poetry, where idioms and proverbs, which are valuable language heritage, can be found and are still recognised. It is against this background that the study of the role played by idioms and proverbs in Xitsonga poetry is conducted; to show their role in poetry where they are used to bring out the theme of the poem, which in turn bring out their vital role in society, both of which are irreplaceable.

Thus, the primary aim of this study is to indicate to contemporary language and literature students and readers that the role played by idioms and proverbs in Xitsonga literature is of utmost importance. As a result, it should not be allowed to be overridden by any social, technological and curriculum changes, but be preserved and allowed to flourish and be continuously popular as they used to be in the past.