

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustainability of the Structural and Semantic Parallels in African Proverbs and Riddles: A Case of Temne Proverbial and Riddling Sessions

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Abstract

The study investigated the Temne proverbs and riddles of Sierra Leone. It particularly looked at the connections between these two oral forms and African Oral Literature. The aim of the study was to identify the main structure and semantic meaning that distinguish Temne proverbs and riddles. The researchers used linguistic and anthropological methods, which were adapted from Thulla to discover the structural and cultural meanings of Temne sayings. Specifically, the researchers employed both embedded and exploratory designs to provide a better understanding of the basic interpretations given to the concept of proverbs and riddles of the Temne people. A total of 60 communities were selected for the study from 12 Chiefdoms. The researchers carefully evaluated existing materials, including Temne proverbs and riddles from Thulla's collection, and conducted key informant interviews with 20 locals in the study area and 4 focus group discussions with indigenous Temne language experts to collect primary data. The study identified many similarities between them, which implies that the two forms are developed and interpreted using a common cognitive framework. The findings reveal that Temne Proverb and Riddle are circular and have instructional purposes, which adds to the debate over the need to preserve oral traditions. The study also finds that Temne proverbs and riddles



emphasize different values, which demonstrates the Temne people's philosophy and language, suggesting their continued significance in the community.

Introduction

The study investigated the Temne proverbs and riddles of Sierra Leone, looking particularly at the connections between these two oral forms and African Oral Literature. According to cultural history studies in Sierra Leone, oral traditions such as parables, proverbs, and riddles are important in reflecting societal norms and conventions (Williams and Spencer-Walters, 2024; Thulla, 2019; Koroma, 2016). The Temne, Sierra Leone's second-largest ethnic group (Taylor, 2014), have historically wielded considerable authority, as seen by their protracted settlement of the peninsula and the military dynasty represented by King Bai Bureh of Kasseh. The Temne's violent resistance, particularly the "Hut Tax War" against British colonialists in 1898, is a moving example of their battle (Kaifala, 2016; Basu, 2016). However, the impact of Western education and cultural approaches has significantly weakened the Temne people's indigenous knowledge systems (Winter et al., 2015; Denov, 2010). Industrialization gradually erodes the Temne people's distinct identity and essence, obscuring their natural, cultural characteristics. Intertribal marriages and generational shifts are altering this ethnic group's linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As Mazrui and Mazrui (2007) point out, this transformation has resulted in an over-reliance on Western thinking, which has limited our understanding of African history.

As it stands now, attention to Sierra Leone's cultural traditions is diminishing. The young generation now prefers Western means of message transmission and education like social media, mobile phones, etc. to Sierra Leonean Indigenous means. This study will help to foster a better understanding and an appreciation of the forms of Temne proverbs and riddles as part of the nation's cultural heritage, as well as the transformative impact of colonial and post-colonial influences on indigenous African civilizations. It emphasizes the need to comprehend the formation of cultural identities in postcolonial cultures. The aim of this research was to identify the main structure and semantic meaning that distinguish proverbs and riddles in Temne culture, to better understand how these elements convey the Temne legacy's underlying social, philosophical, and linguistic qualities. The research objectives were as follows: a) Examine the common structural elements in Temne proverbs and riddles b) Investigate the semantics parallel of proverbs and riddles in Temne culture. c) Assess how Temne proverbs and riddles represent societal values and norms. The researchers expected the study to provide detailed documentation and analysis of Temne proverbs and riddles, a scholarly contribution to the understanding of African oral literature and its linguistic and cultural dimensions, and the development of a framework for comparative analysis of proverbial and riddling traditions in other cultures.

Proverbs

Proverbs have served as important linguistic elements in the discipline of folk literature because of their historical, panegyric, moral and cultural values. In many African cultures, these brief sayings have served as a cultural repository and a mark of communication mastery (Thulla et al., 2022; Thulla, 2019). The structure of proverbs, according to Mac Coinnigh (2015) is universal, cutting across languages and follows grammatical patterns such as "He who...", "If/When...", "Like...", "Better than", and "Every...", (112-132) and use both structural and semantic parallelism for comparison or contrast. For Baxadirovna (2023), proverbs record the general knowledge of representatives of an ethnic community. Similarly, Xasanova (2023) claims that Proverbs have both linguistic and speech properties, which make them unique. Mieder (2019) states that proverbs typically begin with a prelude showcasing their profound insights, a pattern common in biblical literature such as the Proverbs of the Old Testament. According to Yang et al. (2021), most discussions on oral forms such as folktales and, to a limited extent, proverbs have been about these forms following Freytag's Pyramid. For Alexey and Evgeny (2023), there are interlingual structural-semantic modelling of proverbs that identify the analogues, structural models and proverbial images and concepts of proverbs in different languages. For example, the Swedish and Belarusian proverbs are separated into different groups according to the nature of the variability of the lexical composition, and conceptual and figurative plan of the proverbs. Farkhodovna (2023) summarized the main features of proverbs as a sentence, with "stability and relative immutability of form and exists in the language as a ready unit within the phraseology in the broad sense"(p.83), a thought that reflects truth, fact or admonition, having a common meaning. Xasanova (2023) states that the structure of proverbs needs to be further studied since they combine the properties of linguistic and speech phenomena that make them unique. It is clear that proverbs are determined by their cultural origins and community values, which Mohammad (2023) identifies as "important cultural components that show the way and style of common thought in a society. They are often mediators and devices for language pressure and influence"(1). But Mohammad makes an important point when he states that proverbs direct the audience to a familiar story, using "dualities and contrasts in the superstructure"(1), which have a great influence on the listener, shaping their mental and allowing them to quickly remember and understand the message. Its brevity in stating established truths stands out very glaringly. Khamraevna (2024) confirms that proverbs are "concise, culturally specific statements that impart a great deal of life experience and promote sensible judgment" (43).

Even though there is agreement among most scholars about these shared characteristics, such a generalization cannot be made for the proverbs of the Temne people of northern Sierra Leone. This gap provides an excellent opportunity for in-depth research, to discover the syntactic and structural paradigms of the Temne proverbs, which will enable us to further understand their literary legacy and significance in the broader discipline of paremiology (Owoade, 2019; Ashipu and Amende, 2013).

Riddles

Archer's findings, according to Thulla (2019), show how influential riddles were in Greek and English civilizations. This oral form served instructive and amusing functions, which are described in sources like *The Exeter Book* and studied in disciplines such as anthropology, ethnology, and literature. Riddles are short, implicit or explicit, messages that are typically cultural or political in nature (Thulla, 2019). Madonsela (2020) states that riddles are not just limited to folk literature but can stimulate cognitive reasoning and critical thinking, which necessitates additional research into their informative benefits. *The Key Stage Two English* states that there are poetic challenges in the study of riddles to develop the intellect, which further emphasizes the worth of studying their educational value (Parsons, 1999).

Riddles have been known to have a two-dimensional focus: functional and contextual aspects, which ignore their social and ethical values (Ngonyani, 2013). Fischer (1964) and Scheff (2005) state that there is difficulty in distinguishing between the linguistic form of a riddle and its situational context, which again reveals the need for further research. Most studies have focused more on the content of the riddle rather than its presenter and the social context in the riddling sessions (Ashipu and Amende, 2013; Awedoba, 2000). For Mukhtoralievna (2023), there is a problem in defining riddles, which he basically sees as having to do with setting tasks and testing the competence of the interpreter in a special anthropocentricity, i.e. bringing the intention of the author at par with the performance of tasks by the addressee. He describes this in terms of hyper, mega and graphic texts derived from "wide information content generated by the consciousness of the author of the crossword puzzle." (22) Mirzayeva and Rahimov (2024) emphasize the interaction between language, mostly in the form of riddles, proverbs, and short sayings, and the community in which they are used, which is critical in the formation of the people and the values they hold. In this respect, riddles are viewed as verbal rather than cerebral. Dinda (2023) used a more technical approach to understand the nature of riddles, adapting the relativistic first-order perturbation theory to analyze the continuity and formulation of this oral element, resulting in a better understanding of the impact of cosmic curvature on structure formation. Abalı (2023) sees riddles as not only a means of fun and entertainment but also a means of arousing curiosity and solving the unknown. He claims that sexual and aggression impulses can be satisfied through "peculiar structure and characteristics of riddles" (191). LUCHECHKO (2023) uses the three-component coding to analyse riddles viz: attributive, predicative, and nominative, looking at the explicit and/or implicit manifestations of the attributive and predicative characteristics of riddles, which constitute the core of the SUN concept. Danesi (2024), on the other hand, takes a developmental and philological-archaeological approach to examine riddles in terms of their shift from a referential aspect of speech to an abstract, conceptual function of language. In other words, He is saying that apart from its metaphoric meaning, riddles also have cognitive implications, a faculty for producing complex thoughts. He goes on to say that riddles can be used to test metaphoric hypotheses, citing their naming capacity and references to the surrounding world, which have evolved into language when

metaphoric and literal meanings are merged. In straightforward terms, it's a way of communicating that "Man is to try to hide what he says or writes, and sometimes only the one to whom the speech is addressed understands it directly, and then the enigmatic text constitutes a dialogue method of artistic value." (Al-Omairi, 2023, 215). In other words, Al-Omairi is saying that the mental activities of the recipient, and the mental structure of the reader or recipient are a part of the structure of the text, which cannot be separated from the other. Kortabaeva et al. (2023) describe riddles as a mental game; a guessing game with religious overtones that represent the history of folk culture development in any society.

These disagreements in the study of riddles highlight the necessity for additional research into the characteristics of riddles, specifically the roles of the presenter and participant, as well as the cultural and social impacts of riddles in various cultural situations. This investigation could shed light beyond their status as a literary form to provide insight into the importance of riddling sessions as interesting components of cultural activities and intellectual exercises.

Methods

Research Design

The study used ethnolinguistic approaches to investigate Temne proverbs and riddles. From the Mixed methods research design (see Figure 1), adapted from Thulla (2019), organized into four categories, the researchers employed both embedded and exploratory designs, to provide a better understanding of basic interpretations given to the concept of proverbs and riddles of the Temne people.

Data Collection Instruments

The researchers adapted Thulla's (2019) questionnaire to obtain opinion data and carefully examined existing materials, such as Temne proverbs and riddles. In addition, key informant interviews with 20 locals in the study area and 4 focus group discussions with indigenous Temne language experts were done to collect primary data. Interview guides were designed to gather data and Key Informant Interviews were conducted in Krio and Themne, which are the two widely spoken local languages in the study area.

Sampling Procedure

The research used inhabitants of the Northern Province of Sierra Leone with an estimated population of 2,502,805 people (Thulla, 2019). Four districts were investigated, which were the Bombali (606,544 people), Tonkolili (531,435 people), Port Loko (615,376 people), and Kambia (345,474 people) districts, which have an estimated population of 2,094,708 with the total 1,019,059 forming the adult population (Thulla, 2019). A total of 60 communities were selected for the study from 12 Chiefdoms. These communities were selected because the pilot survey by Thulla (2019) revealed that they were the central communities for the Temne

cultural institutions like Bondo and Poro secret societies, chieftaincy ceremonies, etc. The study was carried out in the following communities and towns: Makarie, Buya, Mataboi, Rogboreh, Bombe, Rokulan, Madina, Rogbin, Patifu-Mayoppoh, Mayoppoh, Yele, Maporthor, Roketeh, Rochain, Magburaka, Rowalla, Mayossoh, Mamuntha, Songo, Mabere, Matotoka, Matufali, Masamp, Masongbo, Rosinth (Tane), Kambia, Mamamah, Magbentha, Sumbuya, Masiaka, Mahera, Conakridee, Feredugu, Masoila, Mayobo, Tantafor, Lunsar, Makomp, Petifu, Mambolo, Mabure, Kambia city, Rokupr, Kapairo, Masaprie, Rogbara, Rokirma, Rosinor, Gbonka Maria, Bamoi-Luma, Mamira, Kawula, Bamoi, Bena, Katema, Rokoma, Rosinth, Robanka, Robot and Makeni city (Thulla, 2019).

Research Philosophy

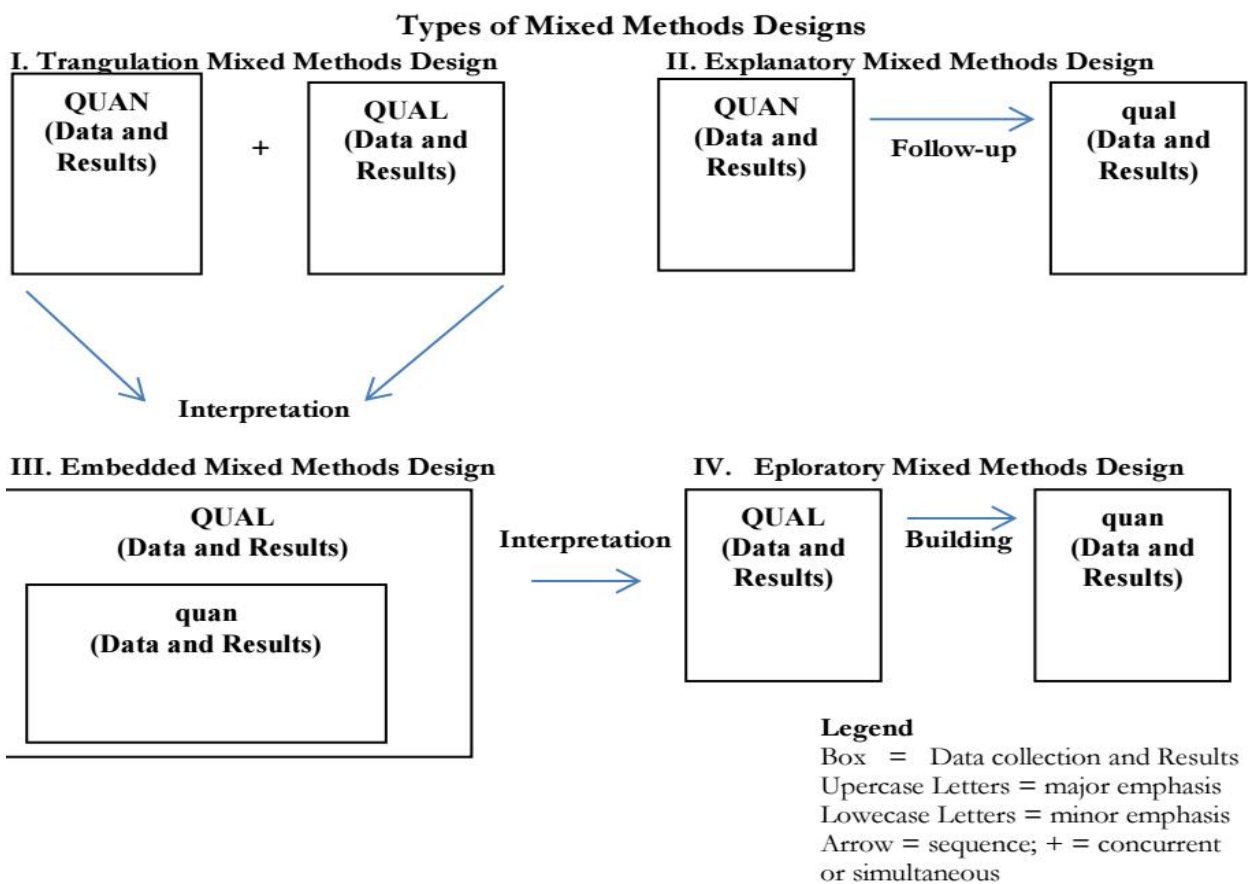


Figure 1: (Source: Thulla, 2019)

Embedded and exploratory research methodologies were employed to collect and analyze information during discussions and performance sessions of two folk forms, which could not be easily quantified. Questionnaires adapted from Thulla were used to collect data on the opinions expressed by the sample. The data was collated numerically and analyzed statistically.

Data Analysis Procedure

The proverbs and riddles were thoroughly coded and examined for compositional and semantic aspects. A comparative study was then performed to determine structural similarities and differences in the embedded meanings of proverbs and riddles. The quantitative data were analyzed using a descriptive statistical analysis. This thorough examination of sample proverbs and riddles allowed the researchers to identify convergences and divergences in literary forms, improving our knowledge of the cultural paradigms ingrained in the Temne worldview.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent, cultural sensitivity, confidentiality, and community engagement. Participants were assured that their personal information would remain confidential and used solely for research purposes. Specifically, the following research interview procedures adopted by Woods and McNamara (1980) were observed:

1. Interview settings were comfortable and had little distractions with less light and noise.
2. The researcher explained the purpose of the interview and terms of confidentiality without promising any financial or related award.
3. Interviewees were informed about who will get access to the information they shared.

Results and Discussion

A. *Common structural elements in Temne proverbs and riddles*

The researchers assumed that Temne proverbs and riddles had specific structural characteristics. They tested this assumption with a circular representation, and the results are shown in the figure below.

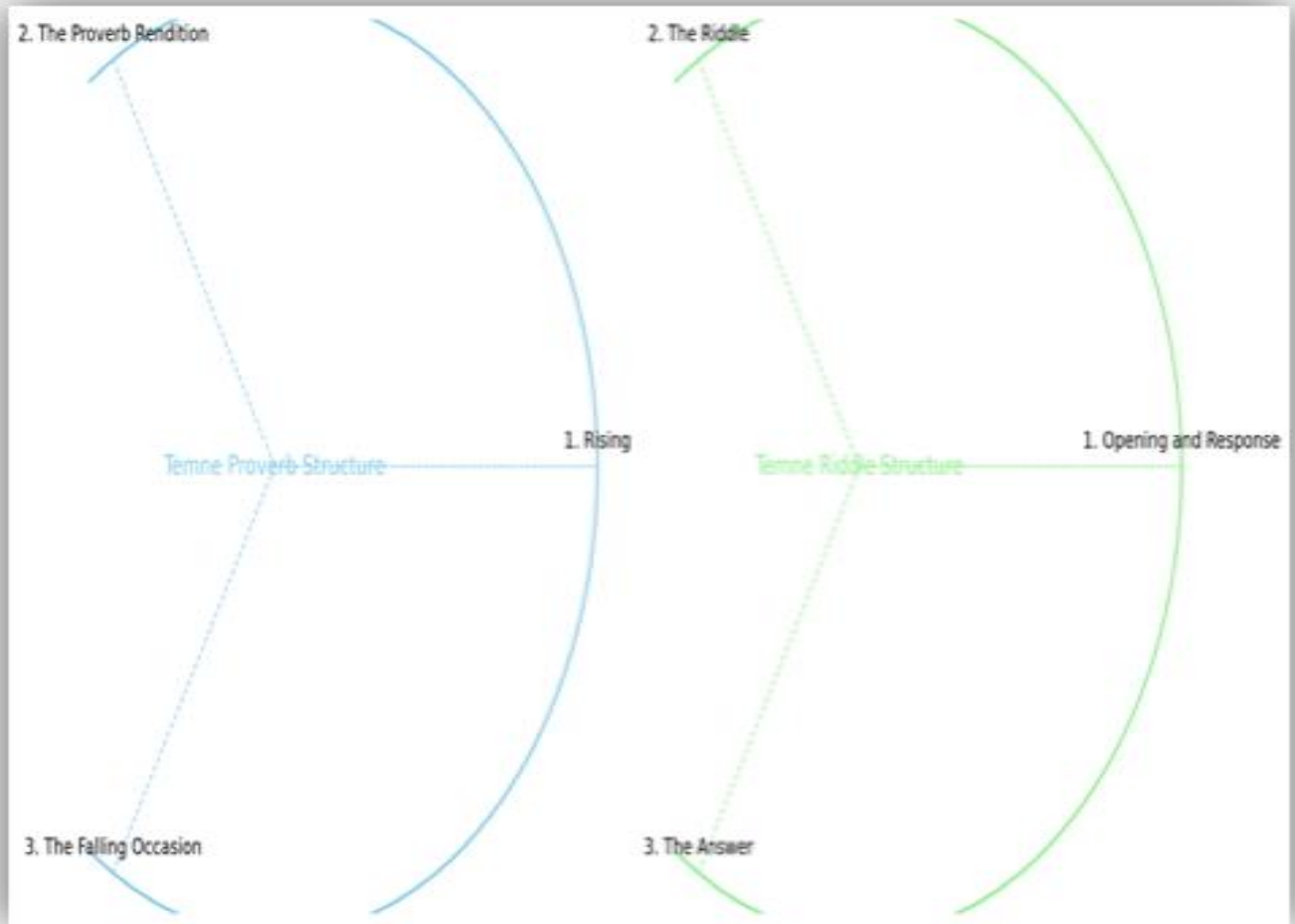


Figure 2 The Circular Structure for Temne Proverbs and Riddles (Adapted from Thulla)

The Temne Proverb Structure is presented in the form of a circle with three segments: 1. "Rising", 2. "Proverb Rendition", and 3. "Falling Occasion", which imitates Freytag's stages of a story. Similarly, the Temne Riddle Structure is presented in a circular manner with three segments: 1. "Opening and Response", 2. "The Riddle", and 3. "The Answer".

Importantly, these structures may even loop back to the beginning, revealing the sequential nature of the components.

B. Semantics parallel of proverbs and riddles in Temne culture

The researchers assumed that the meanings of proverbs and riddles in Temne culture were similar. They used data from Thulla's study, which included Temne proverb and riddle sessions.

Sample Proverb

ኃወ ስላ ገላ ስላ ስላ ኃወ ስላ ወ

baksir. (Metaphorical)

Translation in English: *He who laughs last laughs best.*

Explanation in English: *Strong foundations are always better than weak ones.*

Sample Riddle

Riddler: *Ta lom ኃኅ!*

Audience: *Ya!*

Riddler: *Miገ kaiba. Iba totobe iyema-e. Memekኃthe, iba kokobe. (Allegory)*

English Interpretation: *I am a strong man; I have all I need when I move around.*

Answer: *ኃkusheshe (The tortoise) (235)*

The proverb conveys (metaphorically) that 'Strong foundations are always better than weak ones', whilst the riddle uses the metaphor of 'The tortoise' as an island to emphasize virtues such as planning and readiness. An elderly woman in the focus group discussion states:

We put everything into our sayings, which you have to dig deep to see. For a simple warning, we will tell a story or a proverb, highlighting the moral we intend to share, instead of doing so directly and testing the knowledge of our common values with a riddle. That's who we are as an ethnic group.

C. Society values and norms in Temne proverbs and riddles

The answer was determined by descriptive statistical analysis. Figure 3 shows the results.

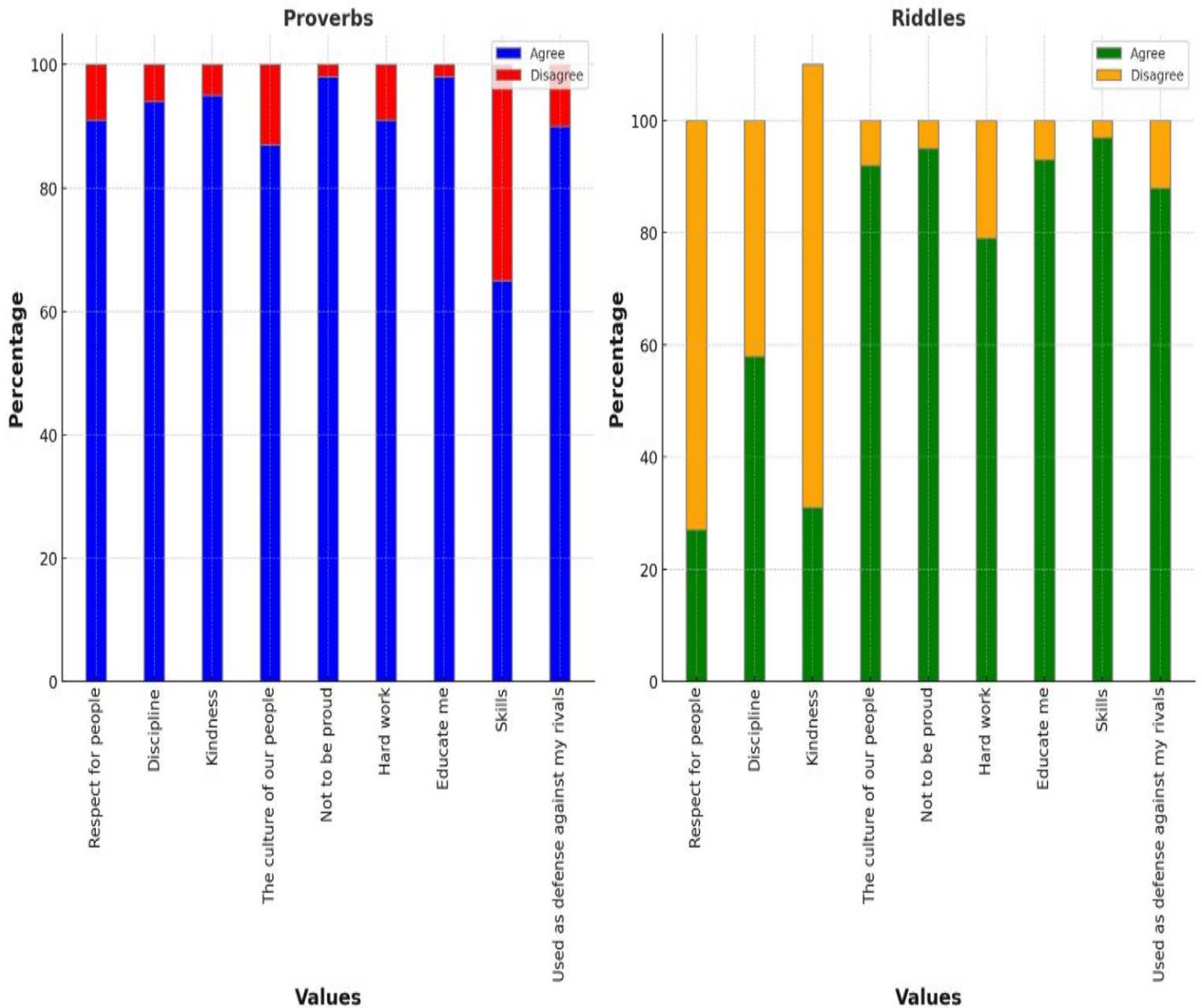


Figure 3: Examples of values of the Temne folk literature (n = 645) (Thulla, 2019)

Riddles display less consistent agreement levels. For example, the concept of “respect for people” is widely agreed upon in proverbs (91%), but has a low agreement in riddles (27%), which implies that this attribute is not as clearly or positively depicted in riddles. On the other hand, the concept of “the culture of our people” is widely agreed upon in riddles (92%), but has a lesser agreement in proverbs. Although this value remains high, there is a considerable difference in how it is expressed throughout the two performance sessions. Respect (95%) is expressed more positively in proverbs than in riddles (25%). So are obedience (58%) and kindness (25%).

An elder in one of the discussions revealed that 'Our sayings relate directly to our belief system. There is where we give directions to our people.'

Discussion

Temne proverbs follow a Rising structure, which begins with the setting up of the context and builds suspense or intrigue. This agrees with Yang et al. (2021) who state that oral forms such as proverbs follow Freytag's Pyramid. The Proverb Rendition is where the actual remark is made, and it employs metaphorical language to communicate wisdom, morals, or cultural norms. This agrees with what Farkhodovna (2023) calls stability and relative immutability of form, in the language, that reflects truth, fact or admonition. Equally so, Khamraevna's (2024) findings of proverbs as concise and culturally specific statements that reflect the experiences of society, agree with the metaphorical and literal meaning found in Temne proverbs. The Falling Occasion completes the proverb by explaining its meaning or applying it to a specific situation. Xasanova (2023) states that the structure of proverbs combines the properties of linguistic and speech phenomena that make them unique, which proverbs appropriate to be defined according to their cultural origins and values of communities. Furthermore, the study finds that Temne proverbs serve as a test of the community's intellect, as Mohammad (2024) discovers that proverbs relate to a familiar story in the community, influencing the listener, shaping their mind and allowing them to quickly remember and understand the message. Proverbs frequently follow grammatical patterns having both structural and semantic parallels (Mac Coinnigh, 2015; Mieder, 2019; Ashipu and Amende, 2013).

Temne riddles are made up of an Opening and a Response, with the audience participating through a question or challenge. This agrees with Kortabaeva, et al. (2023) who describe riddles as a mind game, and a guessing game, with religious implications. The Riddle and The Answer, contained at the center, require creative thinking to solve. The answer, which is occasionally offered by the audience or riddler, exposes the meaning of the riddle (Awedoba, 2000; Thulla, 2019; Madonsela, 2020).

The study has shown how the Temne proverbs and riddles semantically align demonstrating the depth of the Themne language when conveying complex ideas that highlight cultural and moral issues through metaphor and allegory. For example, the finding that Temne riddles engage cognitive capacities and promote critical thinking is consistent with the findings of Ngonyani (2013) and Madonsela (2020), who show that, while metaphors and structural parallelism present cognitive challenges, they are effective tools for developing linguistic and cognitive skills in children. Proverbs and riddles are extremely important in Temne society, as seen by their congruence with traditional norms (Winter et al. 2015; Denov, 2010). This has ramifications for ethnolinguistic and cultural studies. A thorough investigation of Temne proverbs can provide insights into the rules that regulate social interactions and community

expectations, which Mirzayeva and Rahimov (2024) see as a formation of the people in the community and the values they have. The high level of agreement with Temne proverbs and riddles demonstrates their importance in expressing societal norms and conventions, notably in fostering humility and education, similar to what Mukhtoralievna (2023) found in his study of riddles, having to do with setting tasks and testing the competence the interpreter, which he describes in terms of hyper, mega and graphic texts. Dinda (2023) used a relativistic first-order perturbation theory to analyze the continuity and formulation of this oral element, which makes it easier for the audience to understand the structure of these two oral forms. The finding on the fun nature of riddles agrees with Abalı (2023) who states that riddles are meant for fun and a means of arousing curiosity. This can be an important finding for literacy development at the P1- P3 stages of learning in Sierra Leone, where research has shown that over 80% of pupils at that level cannot read a full sentence fluently (Thulla, et al. 2022). Regarding the shapes of Temne riddles and proverbs follow more or less LUCHECHKO's (2023) three-component coding, which analyses the attributive, predicative, and nominative attributes of riddles in his study of the SUN. This can be a rich source for teaching critical thinking skills, which Danesi (2024) examines in the form of a shift from a referential aspect of speech to an abstract, conceptual function of language, which talks about the metaphoric hypothesis that stresses combining literal (naming) and metaphoric (interpretive) meanings to be combined. These findings can help to create culturally relevant teaching materials, promote the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, and improve cross-cultural understanding.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study was necessitated by the popular opinions of scholars in Sierra Leone and other parts of the world that folk literature had always served as a potent instrument in directing the lives of Africans socially, politically, economically and culturally but that there had been little understanding of traditional folk practices in Sierra Leone. Heffernan et al. (2010) found that Sierra Leonean cultural heritage has been neglected and that, no archaeological and historical study of Sierra Leone had been done. This seems to result in the youth experiencing many problems in the sense that most Sierra Leoneans tend to no longer consider Sierra Leonean folk culture/literature as valuable. Some are even ignorant of the very existence of these forms of literature. In a sense, assimilation and acculturation have resulted in a lack of understanding and appreciation of these cultural elements. Though these seem to be the popular opinion, as Winter et al. (2015) and Denov (2010) also observed, the researcher undertook the study to investigate the structural and semantic elements of Temne proverbs and riddles. The Research Objectives were to a) Examine the common structural elements in Temne proverbs and riddles, b) Investigate the semantics parallel of proverbs and riddles in

Temne culture. c) Assess how Temne proverbs and riddles represent societal values and norms.

The study was conducted in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone which borders the Republic of Guinea (Manson and Knight, 2009). Four districts were selected in the Northern Province: Bombali, Kambia, Port Loko and Tonkolili districts. Qualitative data were collected using key informant interviews of 20 locals in a randomly selected sample of 60 communities from 12 chiefdoms in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone, which has an estimated population of 2,502,805 people (Thulla, 2019). Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative. Overall, 700 participants were interviewed. In each section, descriptive data were used to explain various constructs of the study. The study's key findings include: The Temne Proverb Structure is depicted as a circle with three segments: 1. "Rising", 2. "Proverb Rendition", and 3. "Falling Occasion", which imitates Freytag's stages of a story. Similarly, the Temne Riddle Structure is given in a circular format, with three segments: 1. "Opening and Response", 2. "The Riddle", and 3. "The Answer", The proverb expresses (metaphorically) that 'Strong foundations are always preferable to weak ones', whilst the riddle uses the metaphor of 'The tortoise' as an island to promote characteristics such as planning and preparation, and riddles have less constant agreement levels. For example, the concept of "respect for people" is universally agreed upon in proverbs (91%), but just 27% in riddles.

The following conclusions can be drawn based on the findings presented above:

1. The Temne Proverb and Riddle have a circular structure with three separate components, which implies that Temne proverbs and riddles follow a holistic approach to spreading wisdom and information in Temne culture.
2. Temne proverbs and riddles serve instructional purposes by including important life lessons in their structure, which implies that the Temne proverbs and riddles employ storytelling strategies to convey moral teachings or concepts.
3. Temne proverbs and riddles emphasize different values. Riddles tend to highlight cultural identification rather than respect for others, which, in a sense, means that each genre of Temne literature (proverbs or riddles) has a condition on how cultural values are communicated. This implies that to study or interpret cultural norms and values, researchers and educators must analyze their nature.

The following recommendations were made based on the findings and conclusions of this study to guide future research in folk literature.

1. Provide programmes at the school level, broad enough to include essential features of cultural education programmes that provide a diverse range of cultures.
2. Make provisions through government actions for incentives to serve as motivation and attraction to people still interested in the practice of their tradition and culture.
3. Similar research could be conducted to include other regions in the country to add to the generalizability of the study's findings.

4. A collaborative venture can be undertaken by the universities in Sierra Leone to examine most of the cultural and customary practices in Sierra Leone.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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