

PROVERBS AS AGENTS OF CULTURAL WISDOM AND IDENTITY AMONG THE YORÙBÁ PEOPLE OF SOUTH- WESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines proverbs as a genre of oral literature with a rich tradition, especially among the Yorùbá-speaking people of South-western Nigeria. Because Yorùbá proverbs are commonly used in everyday communication, the Yorùbá people like other African ethnic nationalities assign a great importance to its use. Proverb as a verbal art is an important tool that project the Yorùbá people's wisdom and unique culture in addition to shaping their moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs. This paper, therefore, explores the moral nature and significance of Yorùbá proverbs which contributes to the norms, values, virtues, conventions, cultural wisdom, and promotes a well-ordered society. The paper establishes that the Yorùbá proverb as an intellectual exercise serves communicative, philosophical, historical, instructional, therapeutic and entertaining functions. The study also establishes that proverbs as a verbal art remains a potent tool for the survival of the Yorùbá-speaking people's wisdom and cultural identity. The study recommends that the Yorùbá people should continue the use of Yorùbá proverbs in their day-to-day activities in order to enrich their communication and preserve their culture and tradition.

Keywords: Proverbs, Cultural Wisdom, Identity, The Yorùbá People, South-western Nigeria

Introduction

The Yoruba-speaking people of South-western Nigeria, like every other language speakers in the country, and by extension, speakers of various African languages possess a very rich folklore tradition comprising folk tales, folk songs, myths, legends, folk festivals, riddles, jokes and poetry among others. Though all these identified verbal arts are very important to the survival of the Yoruba wisdom and cultural identity, proverbs are by far more important because it is the most frequently employed, in a number of ways for different purposes, circumstances and situations. In their day-to-day communication and interaction, the Yoruba people often resort to proverbs as an essential and most effective communicative tool to optimise the rhetorical effectiveness of the speech messages. Because proverbs are commonly used in everyday communication and situations, the Yoruba-speaking like every other African ethnic nationalities, assign a great socio-cultural importance to the use of proverbs. In African culture in general and Yoruba culture in specific, a feeling for language, imagery and expression of abstract ideas, through compressed and allusive phraseology is realised through proverbs,

According to Badru (2020), proverb is a veritable tool for fighting corruption and an essential ingredient capable of promoting peaceful co-existence. In specific terms, the researcher claims that Yoruba proverbs are effective means of curbing, eradicating and even preventing corruption in the society. Additionally, Yoruba proverbs are a significant instrument capable of instructing, warning, advising and correcting individual members of the society (Badru, 2020). Individuals with a deep understanding of Yoruba proverbs and their possible implications would always advocate for a society free from corrupt practices in all ramifications (Adeyemi, 2014). Proverbs as a form of literature cannot be divorced from Yoruba

language and culture. It remains a potent tool for communication in Yoruba society and it is capable of building character in individuals. In the same vein, proverbs could be applied to every situation at all times.

Identity simply means the distinction or state of being oneself and another. It is what distinguishes a person, group of persons, society, or a nation from another. It consists of our membership in social groups (i. e., race, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc.), the traits we show and the traits others ascribe to us (Mawande, 2023). A particular group's identity locates them in the social world and thoroughly affects everything they do, feel, say, and think in their lives. Oral literature (especially proverbs) and culture are fertile grounds where identity is negotiated and formulated. Cultural identity signifies what differentiate a particular culture from another. It is the feeling of belonging to a group or being able to associate with and feel like part of a group based on its culture.

Yorùbá Proverb as an Agent of Cultural Wisdom and Identity

A proverb is a short, well-known saying which expresses a common, pieces of advice or piece of wisdom based on wisdom (Owomoyela, 2025). In a similar vein, proverb, from a linguistic perspective, could be seen as a source of figurative language and metaphor. It is used to express commonly accepted precepts, often regarded as points of wisdom, and may be used to summarise or finalise the presentation of a claim (Ehondor, 2017). Yorùbá proverbs are wise sayings which project the wisdom, ethics, cultural heritage and worldview of the Yorùbá people. They are tools used in designing and settling life's difficulties and they remain a great value because they present very clearly possible and ready-made solutions and advice to the multiplicity of human situations. Adéyemí (2014) asserts that proverb is a phrase, saying, sentence, statement or experience which contains wisdom, morals, lessons and

advice concerning life, and it has been handed down from generation to generation. Proverbs are enigmatic and universal phenomena present in all cultures, ages, societies and languages of all nations (Òjó, 2015a). The scholar stresses further that proverbs bear philosophical insights because each proverb constitutes philosophical statement.

Finnegan (1970) opines that proverbs are a rich source of imagery and succinct expressions on which more elaborate forms can be drawn. The proverb, in a real sense, is an open-ended conception, expressing at once different meanings applicable to varied situations and experiences (Akporobaro, 2012). It (proverb) serves formally to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown; an instrument for taking the hearer (audience) from the known and familiar state to a less well-known and less-familiar state of practical wisdom. This is corroborated by Akínmadé (2012) who observes that a proverb is a metaphorical horse in the popularly approved saying which carries one beyond the surface meaning of a saying to discover the truth of ideas. Akínmadé (2012) thus stresses further that proverb is an in-depth, carefully selected provocative thought which commands, advises, rebukes or warns a person or a thing to which it is applied. Generally in African societies and specifically in Yorùbá society, proverbs have been and will continue to be of immense advantage to man. This is because proverbs express the nature of African wisdom as they perform diverse functions ranging from bringing peace where there is hatred, especially during conflict resolution and misunderstandings, to giving hope where there is despair and light where there is darkness.

The Yorùbá are fond of using proverbs when they have to make speeches (which they often do). Indeed, it is a pleasure to see how Yorùbá proverbs blend harmoniously with the point they treat, thus driving the point home so vividly that the audience enter very

fully into their feelings (Badru & Ogunniran 2019). Interwoven with this custom, however, there is a lead utterance that must accompany every Yorùbá proverb. It is expected of a speaker using proverb to give due deference to his/her audience, particularly the elders, by saying *Tótó, ó ṣebí òwe* (It sounds like a proverb). The audience will reply, *Wà á rí òmíràn pa* (You will get more to render).

Although this practice (giving deference to the audience) drives a wedge into discussion that is otherwise impressive, the habit has become so ingrained that people relish it. The failure of modern youth to use Yorùbá proverbs well with the established structure is looked upon with disgust and disdain (Badru et al., 2019). Yorùbá proverbs are in myriads; some of them have only local implication. However in general, there are thousands of Yorùbá proverbs, some of which reflect the customs and beliefs of the Yorùbá people.

In the social life of the Yorùbá people, proverbs constitute a powerful rhetorical device for shaping moral consciousness, opinions and beliefs (Akínmádé, 2012). As a creative oral expression of one of the largest ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, proverbs in Yorùbá are as varied and colourful as there are people and communities (Oláoyè, 2012). This is corroborated by Akínmádé (2012) who observes that as one moves from one community to another, one will be confronted with new conceptions, a startling array of proverbial imageries and philosophical views of the nature of man, the world of nature and the mode of human conduct.

Proverbs play a very significant role in the everyday language of the Yorùbá people. They are a means of communicating ancient wisdom from one generation to another and encapsulating a wealth of indigenous experiences, traditional knowledge and perspective of the Yorùbá people. Proverbs are used to serve many functions which include instructional, cognitive and corrective

purposes (Akínmádé, 2012). The store of Yorùbá proverbs is inexhaustible, and the subject and imagery which form the basis of the proverbs cover the entire spectrum of life. Many of the Yorùbá proverbs are profound in their philosophical and moralistic formulations of the realities of the life of man. Examples of such proverbs are *Mòkànmòkàn loyè ñ kàn, oyè tó kan ará Iwó, yòò padà kanará Èdẹ* and *Àgbà tí ò binú lomọ rẹ pọ, Àgbà tó ní sùúrù, ohun gbogbo ló ní* which literally means (*Leadership comes in turn, the chieftaincy title conferred on the Iwó people will soon turn to the Èdẹ people* and *The elder who has patience has all things*) respectively.

Some other Yorùbá proverbs that are capable of guiding the people include: *Àgbájọ ọwọ ni a fi í sọyà, àjẹjẹ ọwọ kan ò gbẹrù dóri* (It is a whole hand we use to beat a chest, a single hand cannot lift a load to the head); *A-gbójú-lógún fi ara rẹ fòsì ta* (He who relies on inheritance exposes himself to wretchedness); *Àdàgbà ségi tà, wọn ti sinmi léwe ni* (People who hawk firewood with old age have rested during their youthful days); and *Ohun a se lóni, ọrọ itàn ni lóla* (Whatever we do today becomes history tomorrow). The educational implications of these proverbs for the Yorùbá children are: the need to work collectively (collaboratively) rather than individually to achieve common educational goals; work hard to earn incomes rather than relying heavily on parents' acquired wealth; to respect the constituted authority, their teachers as well as peers and be just and kind to everyone; and to do the right thing at the right time by using their active years judiciously- working more in their youthful age in order to work less during the old age respectively.

The Yorùbá people, like many other races of the world, hold the use of proverbs in high esteem (Owómóyèlá, 2005). The Yorùbá proverb, as one of the backbones of the language, carries the symbol

of culture and tradition of the people. In actual sense, Yorùbá proverbs are indeed an embodiment of Yorùbá cultural value, norms and philosophy. To the Yorùbá, *Òwe ni ẹ̀şin ọ̀rọ̀, ọ̀rọ̀ ẹ̀şin ọ̀we, bí ọ̀rọ̀ ba sọ̀nù, ọ̀we la o fi wá a*, which literally means “Proverbs are the echoes of words (speech), if communication is lost, we use proverbs to find it”. Yorùbá proverbs therefore, are symbolically linked to a horse which, according to Lindfors (2002), can be employed not only to retrieve communication gone astray but also to speed it up, slow it down, convey weighty messages, deliver light-hearted jests, sharpen arguments, blunt criticism, clarify difficult ideas and disguise simple ones beyond easy recognition.

The numerous ways in which proverbs are used are evidence of humanistic artistic creativity. Hence, proverbs are invaluable in every culture (Finnegan, 1970). According to her, some are couched in very esoteric concept and idioms, which only the very old and the wise understand. Others exploit very local history, cultural traditions and views of life and social values, which differ in either detail or form from the manifestations of these in surrounding communities. In spite of the variations and vigorous diversities of proverbs, there are core ones which cut across different Yorùbá communities and are reflective of the general imaginative creativity and traditional wisdom of the Yorùbá people. A remarkable feature of a good proverb, according to Adeyemi (2014), is the immense variety of applications which it admits, and indeed challenges and invites.

Functions of Yorùbá Proverbs

Every culture or human race has a way of projecting its cultural heritage, philosophy, world-view, beliefs and ethics. Proverbs perform communicative function and they are the highly valued wisdom-lore of the Yorùbá people and a special means of communication employed by the Yorùbá to instruct and impact lives (Owómóyèlá, 2005). They are prescriptive, serving social charters,

to praise what the society considers as values and virtues, and they are used to condemn social ills. Resort to proverbs is considered as the most important and the most effective strategy the Yorùbá have devised to optimise the efficaciousness of speech (Owómóyèlá, 2005).

Furthermore, Yorùbá proverbs serve as an instructive function as they are employed for instructional, cognitive and corrective purposes. In the Yorùbá society, the elders, regarded as the custodians of cultural heritage, employ proverbs to instruct and guide the young people on the social values of life. They instruct and guide them on respect for elders, consideration for others, cooperation, hard-work, tactfulness and other forms of behaviour that befit the proper *Ọ̀mọ̀lúàbí* (a person of good character in all ramifications) of the Yorùbá society (Ọ̀láyè, 2012). In addition, in the Yorùbá cultural life, proverb has continued to function as a living, vigorous and current rhetoric device for transmitting moral wisdom, teaching young ones, and advising people and criticising them, events and situations. For instance, the proverb: *Asọ̀ kò bá Ọ̀mọ̀yẹ̀ mọ̀, Ọ̀mọ̀yẹ̀ ti rin ihòhò wọ̀jà* shows that the Yorùbá people, unlike certain ethnic groups of the world, dislike the practice of going out nakedly. *Ọ̀mọ̀yẹ̀*, as the name implies, a typical girl of fashion, moved out of a household nakedly and the suggestion of pursuing her with a dress to cover the shame of her nakedness was set off with the reply that the secret was already publicised, since she (*Ọ̀mọ̀yẹ̀*) had reached the market place, typical of a big congregation of people or a public place. The proverb, therefore, applies to all undesirable matters that have developed beyond amendment.

In addition, some Yorùbá proverbs perform axiomatic and affirmative functions. They are used as axioms and affirmations to inspire ready belief from the nature of their (Yorùbá) self-evident

truths. Examples are: *Èsin kì i kọ eré àsárelé*. (A horse takes a return journey home willingly) and *Òbẹ kì i mú, kí ó gbé èèkù ara rẹ* (A sharp knife does not prepare its handle by itself). Specifically, Omóbólá (2013) identifies the following as functions of Yorùbá proverbs: the expressions used for rhetorical, appreciative, aesthetic and regulatory purposes. They mould behaviour, cultivate discipline and give encouragement; they signal unity, confidence, disappointment and alternative directions; they are a means of praising the spirit of hard work, condemning social vices, expressing messages subtly and succinctly, hitting the nail on the head, declaring intention and expressing beliefs; and they are a means of summarising an elaborate message on which they do not want to waste their time. From the foregoing, it could be deduced that Yorùbá proverbs perform philosophical, historical, instructional, therapeutic, and entertaining functions.

Philosophical Function of Yorùbá Proverbs

Yorùbá proverb demands an intellectual exercise, logical reasoning and contemplation. Òjọ (2015b) gives an example of a Yorùbá proverb in this category as *Èrò ni ọbẹ gbẹgìrì, bí a kò bá rò ó, kò ní í kí* (The beans soup requires continuous stirring; if it is not stirred, it would not be thick.). This Yorùbá proverb demands reasoning and reflections which would definitely lead to a logical decision. It could be deduced from the above that the Yorùbá proverb teaches that one's discussion on critical issues need to be pondered upon before taking a major decision. Another example is *Adirẹ ñ làágùn, iyé ara rẹ ni kò jẹ kí á rí i* (A hen/chicken sweats, but it is its feathers that prevent us from noticing it). This proverb expresses people's hard labour for their community, which may not be given due recognition by the community because of such a community's high expectation, or when the channels of spending are more than the sources of income (Ọláoyè, 2012).

Historical Function

Yorùbá proverbs are seen as instruments of historical preservation; they can also be regarded as a linkage or a connective force which links the present with the past, and the past with the future (Òjọ, 2015b). An example of a Yorùbá proverb which performs an historical function, according to Òjọ (2015b), is *A kí ní jẹ a kí ni; A finihàní jẹ a finihàn; Èw oni 'E kú o, ará Ègbá' lójúde Ògúnmólá?* (Salutation is known as salutation; Betrayer is known as betrayer; How does one classify 'How are you, you the Ègbá native' in front of the Ògúnmólá's house?). The import of this proverb was as a result of the war between the Ègbá and the Ìbàdàn with Sòdèké and Ògúnmólá as warlords of the two warring towns respectively. Some other related examples include "*Bí o láyá o sèkà, bí o rántí ikú Gáà o sòótó*" (If you are brave you can do bad deeds, but if you remember the death of Gáà (a chief who always do bad deeds and challenged the authorities of the King), tell the truth and "*Ó kù dẹdẹ kí á gbé iwí dé Akẹşán, Ọba Jáyin tẹrí gbaşo*" (Shortly before we took the masquerade chant to Akẹşán (the name of the biggest market in Ọyó town), King Jáyin (the Ọyó King who murdered his son) committed suicide.

Instructional Function

Yorùbá proverbs are instructional tools; a very special means of communication. They can also be regarded as social charters to recommend and condemn practices (Òjọ, 2015b). Examples of Yorùbá proverbs that perform instructional functions are "*Ajá tí ó bá lẹni lẹyin, ní i pa ọbọ*" (It is the dog that has people at its back that kills monkey), "*Ojú tí ó bá fara balẹ ní i rímú*" (It is the eye that is composed that sees the nose), and "*Ówúrọ kùtù ni à á ká imọ gbígbe*" (The dried palm leaves could only be folded in the early morning).

Therapeutic Function

Therapeutic or healing effect is another function performed by Yorùbá proverbs. Therapeutic proverbs are those that ease emotional tensions, bring healing to the mind and heal wounds and wrong perceptions. Examples of the Yorùbá proverb in this category are *Orí tí yòò bá lani ní í gbé Aláwoore koni* (The head to be prosperous will meet a good priest.), *Afòpiná tó loun ó pa fitilá, ara rẹ̀ ní yòò pa* (A moth (flying insect) attempting to quench an open flame lamp with its wings will end up destroying itself) and *Adùn ní í gbèyìn ewúro* (Sweet taste ends the bitter leaf).

Entertaining Function

Aesthetic pleasure, amusement, fun and laughter are derived from Yorùbá proverbs. For instance, “*Bi a bá bú ènìyàn ní abẹ̀n uyànyàn, ó yẹ̀ kí onítòhún ó lè pa ẹ̀nu òhún mó*” (Whenever someone is sarcastically addressed as a big-mouthed person, it is proper for such a person to keep that mouth shut). This proverb, through the use of *èébú* (invective), performs an entertaining function. *Yànyàn* serves to entertain the audience and therefore, generates aesthetic pleasure. Other proverbs in this category include, “*Àgbàlagbà kì í jó lán gbàlángbà*” (An elderly person does not dance a meaningless beat or dance), “*Ajá kì í jámọ̀ léyìn ẹ̀kùn*” (A dog does not snatch a cub from the tiger’s back).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The use of proverbs among the Yorùbá people of South-western Nigeria is attached with great importance because they regard it as a wise saying which is employed to showcase their wisdom and project their cultural identity. Proverb, the most widely employed verbal art remains one of the mainframes of the Yoruba language because it carries the symbol of culture, wisdom, and tradition of the Yoruba people. Its usability in different purposes,

circumstances, and situations makes it very important to the Yoruba. Yorùbá proverb is not only capable of tracing historical antecedent, it also capable of instructing, healing, and entertaining. Every of its forms, such as literal, metaphoric, concrete, and hyperbolic is capable of moulding and remoulding individuals and defining the uncommon wisdom and the rich cultural heritage of the Yoruba people of South-western Nigeria.

Based on the conclusion drawn from this study, it thus recommends that the Yorùbá people should continue the use of Yorùbá proverbs in their day to day activities in order to enrich their communication and preserve their culture and tradition. The elders who are the custodians of the proverb should always encourage and motivate the younger ones on Yorùbá proverb usage.

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