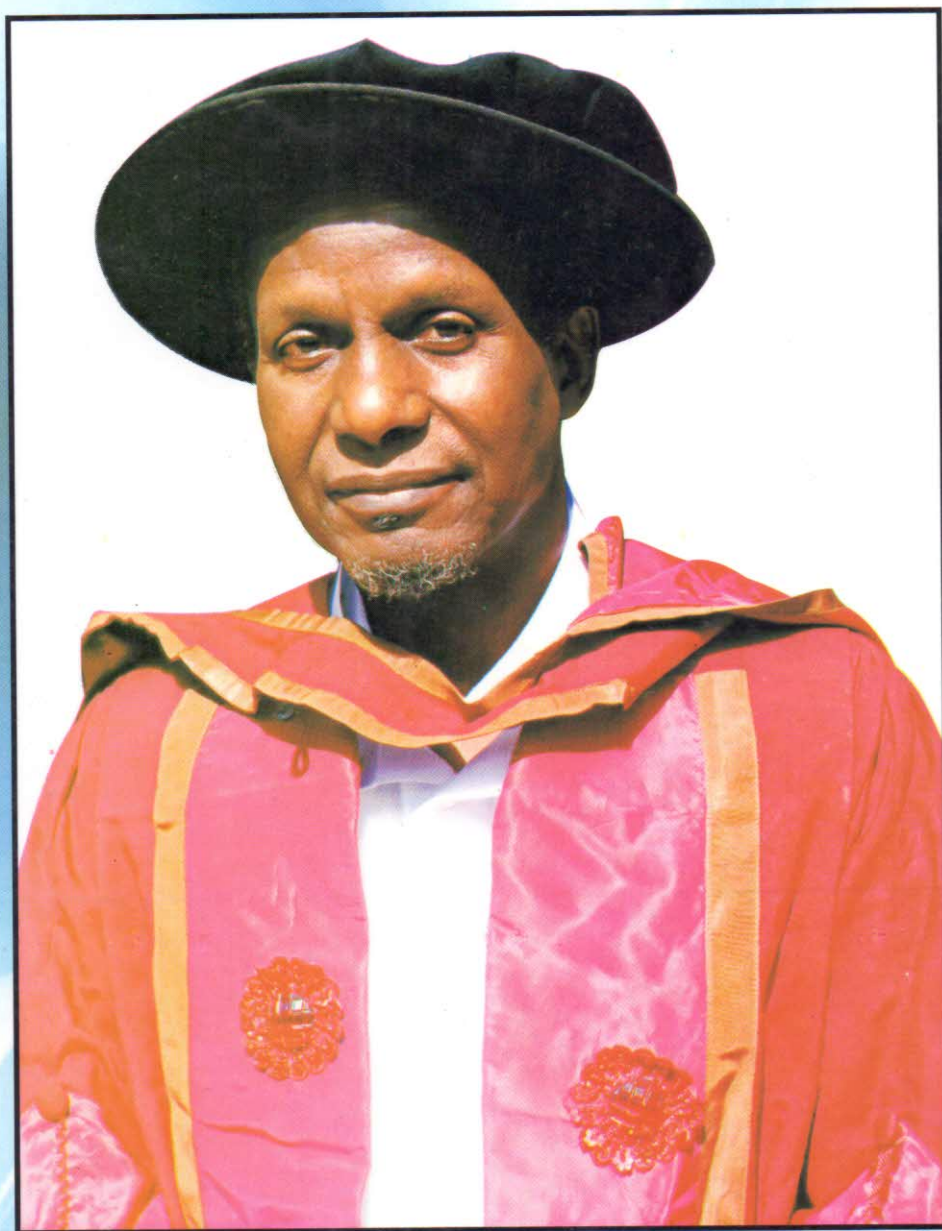


CHAMPION OF HAUSA CIKIN HAUSA

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Editors

Prof. Ahmed Halliru Amfani
Dr. Bello Sodangi Yaro Al-Hassan
Adamu Ibrahim Malumfashi
Dr. Magaji Yakawada Tsoho
Dr. Muhammad Lawal Amin
Dr. Balarabe Abdullahi



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Department of African Languages and Cultures,
Faculty of Arts,
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Editor-in-chief

Prof. Ahmed Halliru Amfani: ahmedamfani@yahoo.com; tel.: (+234)8035881796

Editors

Dr. Bello Sodangi Yaro Al-Hassan: bellotangam@yahoo.co.uk; tel.: (+234)8037335778

Adamu Ibrahim Malumfashi: a.malumfashi@yahoo.co; tel.: (+234)8036004791

Dr. Magaji Tsoho Yakawada: yakawada001@yahoo.co.uk; tel.: (+234)8036522503

Dr. Muhammad Lawal Amin: ml_amin@yahoo.com; tel.: (+234)8036578231

Dr. Balarabe Abdullahi: iba2709@yahoo.ca; tel.: (+234)8032147362

Ahmadu Bello University Press Limited, Zaria,
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Tel.: 08065949711, 069-879121

E-mail: abupresslimited2005@yahoo.co.uk

Website: www.abupress.org

YORUBA PROVERBS AS A TOOL FOR FOSTERING SOCIAL BALANCE AND EQUILIBRIUM

Adeosun, Hezekiah Olufemi & Alabi, Taofiq Adedayo

Abstract

Proverbs are wise sayings which, in a short, witty and loaded manner, instruct, guide, praise or condemn human activities. It is interesting to note that proverbs are somewhat poetic; hence, they are laced with messages whose intended meaning rises beyond the ordinary surface perception of what is uttered. So, it becomes a formidable medium of engendering a lasting impression on the psyche of the intended addressee with a tendency of putting him under a 'spell' to embark on a certain course of action which ordinarily would not have been achieved. In other words, these proverbial expressions are usually invested with compelling force which eventually generates the envisaged perlocution on the part of the addressee. Proverbs are used as a customary means of evolving the constituents of the societal norms with a view to preserving and transmitting the cultural values and the belief system of a given people. Yoruba as a people uphold communalism. This principle is a confirmation of the philosophical stance of being one's brother's keeper. It is in the light of the foregoing that this paper intends to conduct an investigation to see how well proverbs function as a vehicle of foregrounding the Marxist belief system of the Yoruba people.

1. Introduction

Modern African languages have been influenced to a remarkable degree by the continuous long-standing tradition of orature. Before the spread of literacy in the 20th century Nigeria especially, texts were preserved in memory, performed or recited. These traditional texts serve many of the same purposes that written text serve today, e.g. entertainment, instruction and commemoration. Whether proverbs are used for enjoyment or utilitarian function, the dexterity of its grand linguistic style is a force to reckon with.

The contents of proverbs feature human beings and animals either separately or together. They are often employed for social commentary and instruction; and they also serve as a potent means of affirming group values and discouraging anti-social behaviour. When the integrity of a text is important, it is cast in verse and laced with proverb or aphorism. For instance, certain myths must be recited exactly as part of the sacred cult of a divinity or chanted when divination is in progress. Versified texts and proverbs are readily accessible and easily committed to memory and, subsequently, recalled when there is the need.

The Yoruba culture in particular possesses a rich repertoire of epigram, including proverbs and aphoristic expressions. Like in many African societies, effective speech and success attached to social communion among the Yoruba depend on a good command of proverbs. These treasured sayings convey the wisdom of the ages. Hence, they serve as a reliable authority (of \ for conviction) in arguments or discussions; the understanding of which is based on principle of analogy that requires the listener to decode the meaning as intended.

Moreover, proverbs, among the Yoruba, have been regarded as a 'speech tracer' and a kind of drum that only the wise can dance to and decipher its tunes. Hence, the saying 'bi

òwe bí òwe là n lùlù ògidigbó, ológbón ní í jó o, òmòrán ní í mò ón' (the war drum is cryptically beaten like a proverb, it is wise men that dance to it, it is informed men that know it). A proverb is a statement in general use expressing perception about everyday life or a universally recognized truth. It is sometimes short, witty and marked expression of truth which is intended to praise or condemn; encourage or discourage a given course of human action. According to Olatunji (1984: 170), the Yoruba value proverbs very highly, for they are considered to be the wisdom lore of the race. And because the proverbs are considered to be traditional, and originate from the observation of natural phenomena and human relations, old people are regarded as a repository of proverbs. Also, great respect is given to anyone who can use proverbs frequently and appropriately.

In the same vein, *Encyclopedia Americana* (1994: 704) describes a proverb as "a brief saying that usually points a moral or expresses accepted truth based on observation and experience". It states further that proverbs are closely related to folk wisdom. Their relationship with folk wisdom also makes them comment generally on matters of everyday interest like weather, medicine, religion and family. The implication of the foregoing is that the use, understanding and intrinsic appreciation of proverbial language is culture and context constrained; hence, the need to deploy necessary socio-pragmatic strategies in exploiting the truth value engendered in them.

Ojoade (1980: 63) also observes that proverbs and proverbial sayings summarize the wisdom of the people. They mirror the life of the people, reflect what they do, what and how they think, how they live, what values they admire or abhor and what joys and sorrows they experience in their daily lives.

Similarly, Ikudayisi (1980: 27) sees Yoruba proverbs as the compilation of Yoruba wise sayings which emanated from their culture, religion, attitude, belief, philosophy and their experience in day to day activities. He further describes Yoruba proverbs as something used to compare two things in an attempt to achieve a specific goal. Above all, the Yoruba place anyone who is versatile in the use of proverbs in a high esteem. Hence, such a person, irrespective of his age, is seen as being intelligent and well versed in Yoruba culture. Therefore, the importance of proverbs among the Yoruba in their daily affairs cannot be over-emphasized.

Despite the rapid changes in the sociological superstructure of Nigeria in the last two centuries, a large number of people still remain in close contact with traditional culture and institutions. Proverbs, as an oral tradition, have continued to play important roles in their lives. Even for the westernized elite, proverbs remain a resourceful oral tradition of placing an authentic African flavour as a stamp on writings and spoken utterances. In like manner, apart from serving as catalyst to resounding memory and quick recall, proverbs function to aid reconstruction of traditional life through reminders of socio-cultural heritage borne by historical affiliations that some of these proverbs have. This factor necessitates their survival till date; making them effective lubricants of interlocution even in the modern world.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted for this work is Marxism. Throughout the modern history of Europe, and especially at the end of the eighteenth century in France, where a resolute struggle was conducted against serfdom in institutions and ideas, materialism has proved to be the only philosophy that is consistently true to all the teachings of natural science and hostile to superstition.

At the time, Karl Marx developed his theory of class struggle. Marx considered the capitalist class – that is the employers – a reactionary force that maintains a position of supremacy by holding back the advancement of the proletariat or working class. He predicted that the proletariat would one day rise up to replace the bourgeoisie as the dominant economic class by taking over the means of production.

Moreover, as fashioned by Lenin, building on the earlier works of Marx and Engels, it is the belief that history advances by means of class struggle, always nudged in a benign direction by the leadership of a communist party. This theory foresaw that in capitalist societies, a small vanguard of professional revolutionaries was necessary to infuse the working masses with revolutionary fervor and overthrow capitalism. In Lenin's view, the communist party ruling on behalf of the working class would establish a socialist state and put in place the foundation of a communist society. Eventually class differences would vanish, the state would be abolished and people would live in affluence and harmony.

Though, Marx and Engels conceived of communism as socio-political system of abundance, equality, and free choice, they said little about how economic decisions would be made, other than property would belong to society as a whole. However, Kommuna (1919) as cited in Lenin (1985: 60 – 61) has suggested a way out in building a new socialism. He observes that we cannot totally ignore the materials inherited from the old capitalist world, rather we must utilize them. He says:

If you are unable to erect the edifice with the materials bequeathed to us by the bourgeois world, you will not be able to build at all. For the purpose of building socialism, we must make the fullest use of science, technology and in general, everything that capitalist Russia bequeathed to us.

In essence, what Kommuna is suggesting is to place people of old type in new conditions, keep them under proper control, under the vigilant supervision of the proletariat and make them do the work needed under the new system of socialism. It can be inferred from the foregoing that the premise of Marxism is the struggle for egalitarianism and fairness. The next section examines how Yoruba people perceive social inequality and how they strive to correct the ill by using highly esteemed and unique linguistic expressions popularly known as proverbs. Given the understanding that a proverb is a communicative and performative tool which can best be manipulated by the wise, its effect or perlocution transcends the limits of overt expression of common place. In essence, the dignity and respect accorded proverbial expressions by the Yoruba invest them with a more compelling illocution such that the addressee is 'lured' into putting the teachings therefrom into practice. The following selected popular Yoruba proverbs are presented for investigation to see how social balance and interpersonal equilibrium are achieved via aphorism.

3. Presentation of Data

Datum I: Àpàrò kan ò ga jù kan lo, àfèyí tó bá gòrí ebè.

(All partridges (animals) are equal except the one that places itself on a ridge).

Datum II: Kò s'ágbà nídií òkéré.

(There is no age barrier in sharing a lynx).

Datum III: A kì í rí kékeré àna

(An in-law is not identified by his size / stature).

Datum IV: Ìbí kò yàtò sí ìbí, bí a se bí erú nì a bí omo

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- (A slave is conceived in the same way as a free-born).
- Datum V: Oba kì í p'obaa jayé.
(A king does not display his affluence by undermining the existence of others)
- Datum VI: Enìkan kì í je kílùú fẹ̀
(Communal progress is predicated on fair-sharing of the commonwealth).
- Datum VII: Je kì n je ní í mú ayò dùn
(A game becomes more interesting when all parties involved are challenging).
- Datum VIII: Àjoje kò dùn bí enìkan kò ní
(Friendship is impeded by lack).
- Datum IX: Dúkiá méjì kì í gbé owó enìkan soso
(An individual should not pride himself over the commonwealth).
- Datum X: A kì í kéré nídií nnkan eni, a kì í kànkà lóri nnkan elòmíràn.
(One is neither inferior in decision making over one's property nor superior over others' property).

4. Analysis of Data

As observed in the introductory section, proverbs sometimes use animals as overt subject. Such expressions emanated from a close study of the behavioural pattern of the animal in question or its peculiar features. Wise men in ages past and present display and transmit their wealth of wisdom through associative use of language. So, before certain proverbial expression can be deciphered, there is the need to make socio-pragmatic recourse into foregrounded traits(s) in the personality of the subject in question. This would engender a far-reaching effect when such is used to oil the wheel of naturally occurring conversation.

Datum I "Àparò kan ò ga ju kan lo, àfẹ̀yí tó bá gorí ebè" for instance is a popular saying used to control or 'sedate' the excesses of an over-powering, domineering person. It is believed that proverbs have a calming effect especially when it becomes imperative to denounce a certain course of action embarked upon by a person; an action which has a tendency of repressing others by his instrument of affluence of any sort. A rendition of a proverb as we have in datum I requires the person in question of the need to tread the ground softly so that he is not submerged. This has a cautionary effect of dissuading one from engaging in socially unfair practice for the betterment of all and sundry.

Datum II which reads "Kò s'ágbà nídií òkéré" captures a reiteration of the principle of equal distribution of wealth. 'Òkéré' (lynx) Here is a tiny game used as a metaphor. Considering the size of the animal, there is no way it can go round if it is not evenly shared. So, whether young or old, every individual should have a fair share of its meat. This proverb is quite effective especially where common resources or wealth of any sort is not equitably distributed among the 'legitimate' beneficiaries. The use of this proverb tends to instigate a sense of fair-sharing in someone who considers himself first and above others by whatever standard (may be because of his age, status or size) desires to have more than the share due for him from the commonwealth.

Datum III (A kì í rí kékeré àna) takes a cue from datum II. In three, 'àna' means in-law. So, whether young or old, male or female, an in-law should be accorded his due regard. A detailed understanding of the proverb is generated by the provision in the Yoruba worldview. Marriage is considered as a sacred institution and 'ana' as a facilitator of the union, may be by virtue of his supports, should be treated with reverence. The understanding

of the literal meaning can be extended to a discourse when the proverb is used to foreground the subject matter and possibly reverberate in the mind of the addressee the courtesy or politeness which others should enjoy from one's interpersonal relationship with them. This is closely linked to the use of datum X. "A kì í kéré nídíi nnkan eni, a kì í kànkà lóri nnkan elòmíràn" is a pragmatic way of drawing the attention of the addressee to a right the owner has over his property or a right he has to steer his (own) life affairs regardless of the wish of others who are more powerful and influential. This is a check and balance mechanism in the Yoruba cultural superstructure aimed at making everyone relevant and responsible in both micro and macro affairs of the state.

Sometimes, proverbs make practical references to popular experiences in life. The magnitudes of the sociological significance of these experiences are "hammered upon" and presupposed in order to generate a lasting and effective perlocution. Literally, datum IV "Ìbí kò yàtò sí ìbí, bí a se bí erú ni a bí omo" is a reminder of the birth-process of everyone. Whether rich or poor, powerful or weak, every human being undergoes a similar process of conception, pre-natal phase and delivery. Given that this is our source as individuals, and given that the processes involved are similar, there is no cause for canvassing social inequality later in life, it is believed that nature is fair to all; no wonder maxim-"the rain is a natural blessing for all". When it falls, everyone enjoys the succour it brings forth regardless of the social class to which one belongs.

This proverb (datum IV) is used to douse the perpetration of subjugation, domination, harassment or mystification of the poor and the weak by the well-to-do and the strong. In the spirit of being 'brothers' keepers', the affluent is enjoined to use his prowess to elevate the status of the wretched considering the fact that the artificial difference between them is ephemeral. A proverb as this has a tendency of driving the message 'more-home' as a result of its recurrent and resounding perlocution on the psyche of the addressee.

Yoruba culture abhors living on others' sweat. It attacks ferociously through short and witty expressions those who do not promote or comply with this philosophy. Just like a true capitalist would not mind whose axe is gored in the process of amassing his wealth, over-ambitious fellows tend to beat the social codes moderating a course of fulfilling one's ambition. Thus, "Oba kì í p'oba jayé" in datum V can be literally translated as "an ideal king does not rule by undermining the existence of others". It denotes that the atmospheric space is adequate for co-existence of all without clashes. This proverb has an undertone of emphasizing the Yoruba worldview which borders on the naturally endowed level playground for everyone to succeed and be successful in life. This serves as a dose of catalyst meant for inspiring and encouraging the weak and the poor to rise to the challenge of striving within the naturally endowed wherewithals to accomplish an appreciable level of social status like others; the essence of which is to close the artificial gap between the social classes.

This view is equally espoused in datum VI and datum VII; "Enikan kì í je kílúú fẹ" and "Je kí n je ní í mu ayò dùn". These literally mean "There cannot be societal growth and development where the majority starves" and "A game becomes interesting when everyone is a winner". Where everyone is well fed and comfortable, concerted effort for development can be garnered without much ado as the people already possess the necessary impetus or intrinsic motivation to partake positively and effectively in a collective task. Since there is no stratifying force, social cohesion is ensured for the good of the entire society. And because the Yoruba cherish philosophy of communalism, all hands are on deck to ensure brotherhood and togetherness which can only be obtained where stratification, of whichever kind, does not have a pride of place. Language, popularly perceived as a vehicle of culture expression,

becomes a formidable instrument of achieving this feat (of cohesion) especially through proverbial and aphoristic expressions.

The communal worldview of the Yoruba race is equally foregrounded in datum VIII. “Àjoje” means to wine and dine together. This is an exhibition of social cohesion which permeates all strata of the community. The “haves” do not derive intrinsic satisfaction when they are always ‘footing’ the bills of their ‘brothers’ who, do not have. This utterance presupposes that Yoruba live in harmony as one big family, and whatever bothers one equally bothers all. This understanding sheds more light on their perception of the world as an entity which belongs to and should be managed by all. Hence, the ‘management’ of envisaged ‘care for the world’ to make it a better place is adversely affected as a single finger cannot remove a louse from the head. Literally, the feast becomes more interesting where everyone involved is a part of its success story. This is probably why other supporting aphorisms like “òsùsù owò” (a bunch of broomsticks), “àjèjé owó kan ò gbérù d’óri” (a single finger cannot remove a louse from the head), “enikan kì í jé àwá dé”, (a sheep cannot make a flock), “igi kan kò lè dá’gbó se” (a tree cannot make a forest), etc. are frequently used to ‘lace’ discussions which border on ‘striving to achieve’ through concerted efforts.

Since a typical Yoruba man sees his fellow colleagues as members of one big family, it is incumbent on him to be concerned and to be interested in how they live, feed and develop themselves. To achieve this, he makes his wealth accessible for use by the less privileged ones. This is a generous demonstration of the spirit of being one’s brother- keeper as engendered in the Yoruba cosmo-sociological philosophy. Datum ix: “Dúkiá (eni) méji kì í gbé owó enikan soso”, literally translated – A public property should not be personalized or made to reside in the hands of a single person. This property can be monetary or solid. Whatever is the magnitude of wealth a man amasses, it is considered as the public wealth because such was built from what was taken from the society. In essence, a rich man is expected to ‘dispense’ the wealth to give succour to his ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ who are in his care.

It is true that nature itself is a fusion of contrasts; it is the duty of man to see how the opposites can be balanced so that no one is made to unjustly toil for the luxury that others enjoy. Datum X “A kì í kéré nídíí nnkan eni” is one of such common Yoruba proverbial renditions that seek to balance the exercise of power of individuals in the society. Some may want to subscribe to ‘unequal fingers’ phenomenon, yet the Yoruba are conscious enough to erect certain points of checks so that a powerful or an influential individual does not trample the rights of the weak. No matter how poor or fragile one is, what rightfully belongs to one should not be compromised as the dignity for which a Yoruba man is known is his will, his strong will to hold on to his claim.

5. Concluding Remarks

Just as language is the vehicle through which culture is expressed, culture provides the theoretical construct through which meaningfulness of a language corpus as used on a given occasion is achieved. Proverb as a unique index of a language characteristic of its cultures, values, belief system and worldview needs to be preserved by means of continuous transmission from parents to offspring; from generation to generation. One reality on ground now is the backlash effect of foreign language and its attending cultural attachés on the language and culture of the Yoruba. Granted that culture encapsulates the totality of the ideology of a people, what is taken as a basis for good life by the people is cornered when the wise-sayings elude our expressions. These wise-saying are supposed to serve as reminders of

what to do and what not to do. Where they are misappropriated, then, one may not be able to help averting the attending consequences especially in the area of our socio-cultural cum interpersonal orientation and interaction.

This paper, so far, has discussed selected Yoruba proverbs with a view to showing how the Marxist worldview has been superimposed on the linguistic structures which are directly serving the role of the vehicle for the ideological expression. Yoruba culture is presented as one which celebrates togetherness, fairness and social cohesion as opposed to capitalism and the social inequality which modernization instigates. One outstanding question, however, is: How well has our modern Yoruba society been influenced by proverbial expressions as reminders of our inestimable cultural values? It is true that westernization and much celebrated 'blind civilization' are visible threats from all directions. This is so because they carry along their instruments of fostering individualism and entrenching the economic philosophy of capitalism over and above our cultural ideals which have, over the centuries, been moderated by our worldview.

From the foregoing, it is evident that we can only keep our esteemed culture in its enviable position and restore the fast-fading indices of our cultural identity by re-orientating ourselves on the need to take an urgent measure to curb the erosion of this vital aspect of our culture. Since language is a universal binding force in any society, it is pertinent to ensure that the use of proverbs is encouraged at all strata of the society not only because of its aesthetic nature but also of the powerful communicative illocutions which accompany it. In so doing, we can, again, make the world our world; a habitable place that is worth living in; where equal opportunities abound and 'endureth' for all.

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