



**Bringing our Cultures Home:**  
**FESTSCHRIFT FOR**  
**BADE AJAYI AT 70**

Ahmad Shehu Abdussalam (Editor-in-Chief)

Lere Adeyemi

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**Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Ilorin**

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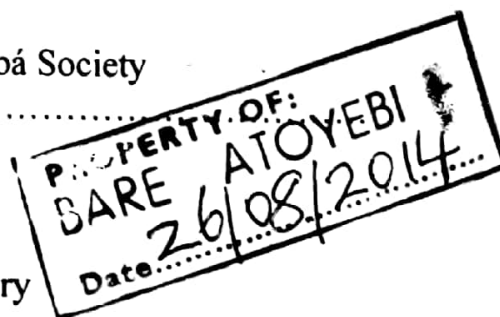
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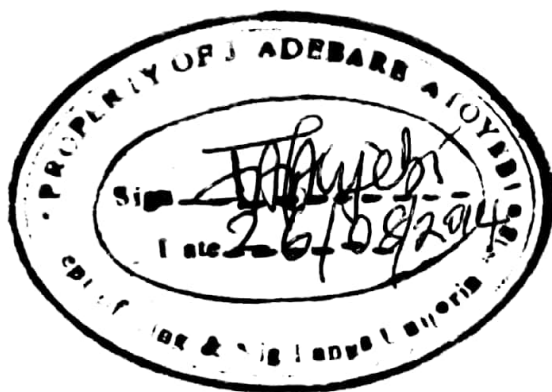
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# FUNCTIONS OF PROVERBS IN CONTEMPORARY YORÙBÁ SOCIETY

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## Abstract

*Proverbs reflect the life and the beliefs of the speakers of a language. They are the words of wisdom handed down from one generation to the other. The elders are the custodians of language and culture in a given society. In Yorùbá society like any other community the world over, proverbs have the capability of serving as a store-house for cultural values that are highly cherished by the people. Hence, this paper examines the functions of proverbs in contemporary Yorùbá society. The survey method of research was used. One hundred proverbs were collected from Kwara and Òsun states respectively; and twenty were randomly selected for analysis. Among the major findings of the study were that Yorùbá proverbs are still used for instruction and counselling purposes. Different categories of people namely: politicians, business men and women, traditional rulers, market women and few elites make use of Yorùbá proverbs in the contemporary times. However, the younger ones are generally incapable of using Yorùbá proverbs; they use modified ones which could be called "new proverbs".*

**Key words:** proverbs, language, culture, contemporary Yoruba society

## Introduction

Odùjinrìn (1967:59) observes that Yorùbá of western Nigeria are fond of using proverbs when they make speeches in their daily activities. It is very interesting to note that their proverbs blend harmoniously with the point they treat, thus driving the point home in a way that the audience enter into their feelings.

These proverbs the world over are inspired by nature. They are part of any language community. They are products of the experiences and observations influenced by man's environment. What constitutes man's environment include his occupation, where he lives, the physical features around him like forest or desert and things therein, the hills, the rivers, the socio political and economic life and other things created by God which exist in the same vicinity with him. The elders are fond of using proverbs to reflect given circumstances and situations brought about by contact with their environment. The proverbs spoken are meaningful and so attract positive attention and become incorporated into Yorùbá language for future use. However, the colonial period that brought formal



education into our society paid little or no attention to these words of elders classified as proverbs with the result that young generations in Yorùbá land do not have good knowledge of these proverbs. In Yorùbá society like any other language community in the world, proverbs have the capability of serving as a store – house for cultural values that are highly cherished by the people. Therefore, this paper examines the functions of proverbs in contemporary Yorùbá society. This is an attempt to revisiting proverbs as an aspect of our culture long neglected and probably forgotten. It is also our goal to make known to a larger audience the importance of proverbs in Yorùbá society yesterday, today and tomorrow. It is apposite to say here that there cannot but be some sort of linguistic problem in the literary strength and semantic difficulty of the original material when translated as observed by Olátúnjí (1982: vii). Nevertheless, we will try as much as possible to be literal and close to the original materials used in this paper.

### **Proverbs among the Yorùbá**

Adékeyè (2001:31) defines proverbs as philosophical sayings of a group of people handed over from one generation to the other. Adékeyè says further that proverb can also be called the poetry and moral science of the people who own it. Many proverbs contain traditional observations on the nature of things, some educational, dealing with man's duties. They throw light on the subject and drive points home when they are relevant. Ògúnṣínà (1982) cited in Adékeyè (2001:31) describes proverbs as a rich source of instruction, admonition, information, counselling and enlightenment. Fádípè (1970:302) has this to say on Yorùbá proverbs:

As a final example of the sociability of the Yoruba, one may mention his frequent use of abundant proverbs. Of all African peoples the Yorùbá are probably unsurpassed for the wealth and appropriateness of their proverbs. I once had occasion to translate for a proverb enthusiast more than 1,200 Yorùbá proverbs. Proverbs are sometimes used in order to avoid giving a blunt direct answer which is a necessary thing to do when expressing one's opinion before elders even when such opinion has been directly solicited. But most frequently, the proverb is used in bringing out clearly the meaning of obscured points in argument. Thus to the Yoruba, 'the proverb is the driving force in a discussion'. If an argument becomes entangled the proverb is used to restore clarity.

Though, knowledge of proverbs is not the possession of only a few wise men or elders, a speaker using a proverb is expected to give reference to his listeners, especially, the elders by saying any of these: "Mo júbà o," "Yorùbá bò wòn ní ..." "Bí ó bá jò òwe, kí ó jẹ̀ ti èyin àgbà o", "Tó tó ó ẹ̀se bí òwe o" meaning with the permission of the elders or I pay due respect to the elders around. The elders or audience will answer 'ò ó rí òmíràn pa, meaning may you live long to say more and more proverbs.

Delano (1976: ix) observes that in Yorùbá society, no one can be considered educated or qualified to take part in communal discussions unless he is able to quote the proverbs relevant to each situation. Akínyelé in his forward to Ajíbólá (1974: vii), describes proverbs as the poetry and the moral science of the Yorùbá nation. Many of them contain traditional observations on the nature of things; some educational, deal with man's duties, and a few are simply an ingenious play upon words. As Olátúnjí (1984:170) rightly observes, the Yorùbá 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 phenomenal and human relations, old people are regarded as a repository of proverbs. Anyone who does not know, or who cannot understand the application of proverbs is regarded as unwise. Matters are easily handled and rifts settled by people who are versed in proverbs. When a situation seems intractable, one can bring it under control through proverbs. Great respect is, therefore, accorded anyone who can use proverbs frequently and appropriately. Like the proverbs of other nations of the world, Yorùbá proverbs serve as rules and regulations, to praise what the people consider as good and condemn in totality every bad attitude.

The New Macmillan English Dictionary (2007:1194) describes proverbs as short well – known statement that gives practical advice about life. Westermann cited in Ajíbólá (1946: viii) says:

Àkójopò ìrírí ayé, àkíyèsí fínńífínńí àti ìrònú tí ó jínlẹ̀  
ni àwọn òwe jẹ́, àwọn orílẹ̀-èdè mǐíràn sì ní wọn  
lópòlópò, pàápàá, àwọn èniyàn dúdú nítorí pé ó bá  
òná tí wọn fi ń ronú mu. Kò sí ị̀seşí kan ní ị̀gbéşí  
ayé èniyàn tí wọn kò lè fi òwe ẹ̀se àpẹ́júwe rẹ̀, wọn  
a sì máa lò wọn láti tọ́ ara wọn sọ̀nà yálà ní ìlòsì  
wọn nínú ilé tàbí nínú ị̀seşí wọn pẹ̀lú ẹ̀lòmǐíràn.  
Ogbón tí ó wà nínú àwọn òwe wònyí jẹ́ èyí tí ó bá  
ibikíbi mu láyẹ́, kíí ẹ̀se orílẹ̀-èdè kan soşo ni ó lè lò  
wọn.

Proverbs are combination of experiences, critical observation and deep thoughts, some nations have them in abundance, especially the black because it

is in line with the way they think. There is no aspect of human life which they cannot describe with proverbs; they use them to direct themselves aright either at home or in their relationship with other people. The wisdom in these proverbs is applicable anywhere in the world; it is not only one nation that can use them.

It is evident from Yorùbá proverbs that this man's statement about proverbs is correct. Proverbs revolve around the orbit of human life in general.

### **Methodology**

The research methodology used in this paper is survey method. About one hundred proverbs collected from Kwara and Òsun states respectively would be used. However, because of time and space, only twenty randomly selected from the one hundred proverbs shall be analysed. We want to say here that there cannot but be some sort of linguistic difficulty in the literary strength and semantic interpretation of the original Yorùbá proverbs used in the analysis when translated. This is because every language has its own peculiarity. However, we will try to be literal and closed to the original materials used in this paper.

### **Analysis of the selected Yorùbá proverbs**

The English translation of each of the selected proverbs is written immediately after the original material. This will make the Yorùbá proverbs used in this study to be clear and self-explanatory. Only twenty of the collected proverbs would be analysed here.

1. Mo gbón tán, mo mò ọ́n tán ní í mú èniyàn yàn iyá rẹ̀ lórẹ̀ẹ̀  
'A man who claims he knows all eventually ends up marrying his mother'.

This proverb is used to let us know that nobody is a repository of knowledge; whoever claims he knows all is bound to make mistake and do what he is not supposed to do. In Yorùbá society, incest is not allowed. Hence, for a man to marry his mother is a great abomination in the society. This proverb is like a metaphor. It is said to condemn anybody that commits an atrocity as a result of his self-confidence or over-confidence in one's ability or knowledge.

2. Odò kii sàń sàń sàń kó gbàgbé orísun rẹ̀  
'A flowing river can never forget its source'.

This is to say that one should always remember one's origin or source of success. The proverb is used to address someone that allows his success to

enter into his head and does not recognise those who help him or her to get to the top.

3. Ìka kan kò ẹ é bọ ojú  
'A finger cannot wash the face'.

This proverb is used to show the importance of cooperation and unity among people. The Yorùbá people use this proverb to admonish anybody who thinks that he can succeed in life without the assistance of another person. The proverb is said to emphasise the spirit of togetherness and interdependent of life in Yorùbá society. There are things that two or more people can do better than one.

4. Àkùkọ tí kò níi kọ, kékeré ni àṣá ti í gbé e léyìn iyá rẹ.  
'A cock that would not crow is always eaten up by hawk at a tender age'.

This is to say that it is better to lose something, for instance, a baby at infant than when the child grows into adult. The proverb is used to console people, like a bereaved family that gives birth to a pre-matured child or whose child dies early in life.

5. Ariwo òròmọdìe kii ba àṣá lérù.  
'The noise of the chicks cannot scare the hawk'.

This is used to tell people not to be fearful unnecessarily. This proverb is used to talk to someone that is believed to be making hullabaloo or threat that he would do this or that to another person that is more powerful than he does.

6. Ìròyìn kò tó àfojúbà.  
'Seeing is believing'.

This proverb is used to show the importance of witnessing a particular event and have first hand information instead of waiting for another person to tell us about it. This is said to someone that gives all sorts of excuses to avoid being present in an occasion or event to let him realise that his absence will not speak well of him or contribute to the success of the event.

7. Pípé ni yóò pé, akólòlò yóò pé baba.  
'If you give a stammerer enough time, he will pronounce his father's name'.

This is to say that if someone is given sufficient and necessary support, he would surely excel. It is used as an encouragement for somebody that is

labouring day and night with little or no fruitful result that, no matter how long it may take, with patience and long life, the problem would be solved one day.

8. Ọ̀fọ̀ kii ẹ̀ni tí kò ní ẹ̀niyàn, ikú kii pa àna òkóbó.

'A man that has no relation can never be bereaved; an impotent man can never say that his inlaw is dead'.

This proverb is used to tell the audience that there are certain things that can never happen to some people in the society. The proverb is said to prove that there are certain conditions for certain things to occur or take place. It is a kind of rule of conduct to assert that certain things are always prerequisite for other things or situation to arise.

9. Bí a kò bá lọ, a kii dé.

'One does not arrive until he has departed'.

This proverb is telling us that if we want to embark on any task, the moment we take the first step, the work would soon be completed. Twenty years journey always begins in a day. The proverb is said to encourage people that if one takes a bold step to face a fearful or dreadful challenge, one would succeed and probably come back to meet his peers where he left them.

10. Ká pé lórí oyè kò tó nńkan, ohun tí a ẹ̀ lórí oyè ló ẹ̀ pàtàkì.

'A man should think of not how long he will remain in power or office, but of how long history will remember him'.

This is to tell someone in position of authority, for example a king, that what he does while in power is very important and will always be remembered when he is no more in office. The age of Methuselah, they say, has nothing to do with wisdom of Solomon. The proverb is a warning to our leaders or people at the corridor of power that they should have meaningful impact on their followers. Whatever they do while in position of authority, either good or bad will live after them, even, when they are no more in power or when they are dead.

11. Ká fi ọ̀wọ̀ wẹ ọ̀wọ̀ ni ọ̀wọ̀ fi í mó.

'Hands washed together will always be cleaner than single hand washed in isolation'.

The proverb is said to reiterate the importance of cooperation and unity among people. The proverb enjoins every member of the society to be liberal and considerate, knowing the rule of interdependence. We need to co-operate and live peacefully together for each and everyone of us has one service or the other to render to one another.



12. Ohun tí ojú òkú bá rí ní sàréè, ikú ló fà á.

'Whatever happens to the dead in the grave is caused by death'.

This is to say that there is always a causal antecedent for one incident or the other. The proverb is an advice to every member of the society to be mindful of his action because of what could be the after effect of such behaviour or actions.

13. Nńkan tí a bá pónlẹ ní í níyí ní í mú obinrin fowó kó oyàn sòkè bí ó bá ń sàré, kí ẹ nítorí kó má ba à já bọ.

'It is for dignity that a woman holds her breast while running, not for fear that they would fall'.

This is a technical way of saying that something is being exaggerated. The proverb is used when someone is trying to make something very small to look more attractive and important. Again, the way a man or woman presents himself or herself in the society is the way he or she will be treated. Therefore, one should accord himself or herself a kind of dignity in order to be respected by others.

14. Oníjibìtì kí ná ọjà.

'A trickster does not negotiate for the price of a product he wants to buy'.

This is a kind of advice to a businessman to be careful so that he would not fall a victim of trickers. There is no doubt that fraudulent men and women abound in our society, and they always use all sorts of tricks to rob people of their valuables. The proverb therefore, enjoins us to be vigilant and very careful when dealing with customers or buyers of our services.

15. A kíí gbé etí odò ká fí itọ wẹ ọwọ.

'He who lives on the bank of a river does not wash his hands with saliva'.

This is used when someone is suffering unnecessarily where he is not supposed to suffer. Where there is abundance, one is not supposed to enjoy little or nothing. For instance, God has blessed Nigeria and Nigerians with what could make life worth living for us, but reverse is the case. It is only few people that enjoy, while many people are living in abject poverty.

16. Èniyàn tí kò bá jẹ àtẹ rí kíí mọ iyí iyò, ẹni tí kò bá jẹ àsán rí kíí mọ iyí ẹran.

'He who has not eaten tasteless soup before cannot value salt, he who has not eaten food without meat will never appreciate the taste of meat while eating'.

The proverb is used to tell people that we cannot appreciate something dear to us until it is lost. We should know that a thing can be valuable and appreciated if we realise its importance. Therefore, we should always make use of any opportunity that comes our way.

17. A kǐ yán kǐ a tún mǎa sín.

'Yawning and sneezing cannot take place simultaneously'.

This proverb is used when someone is trying to do an impossible thing. This shows that one should take one step before another. Our efforts to embark on two or more things at a time may not fetch us the expected results.

18. Bí adìe bá sùn ní alé, aáyán a mǎa rin àrìnyan.

'Cockroach moves proudly at night when the hens are asleep'.

This is to say that one has freedom to do whatever he likes when he is not restricted in one way or the other. Every member of the society has freedom or right to do certain things in the society at one time or the other; but the freedom or right is controlled by that of others. Hence we should exercise our rights and know where to stop.

19. Òròmòdié tí yóò bá di àkùkò, kékeré ní a tí í mò.

'A chick that will grow into a cock is known from the day it is hatched'.

This proverb is used to tell people that he who is going to be successful or become an important person in the society starts working towards it at tender age. This is an advice to members of the society, especially, the youth, that he who wins in the race of life sees the results and works towards it early enough right from the beginning, where as he who fails in the race sees the result at the end of the race.

20. A kǐ bá ẹlẹnu mímú jà lógànjó òru.

'We do not engage in night wrestling with a man that has caustic tongue'.

This proverb is used to warn us to be careful and avoid a crusty and crafty person. It is a fact that we are bound to cross one another's feelings and engage in argument or quarrel; but one must be mindful of one's opponent. Otherwise, the after effect may become a bitter pill to swallow.

It is apposite to remark here that proverbs are not used in isolation. It is the current discussion that dictates the appropriate proverbs to be used, and one proverb may be used in many ways. The important thing is that it must be relevant and deliver the desired message.

All possibilities are established beyond any doubt that proverbs, especially, in Yorùbá society serve as a rule of law that governs human conduct in the society. They support highly cherished Yorùbá cultural values or norms and condemn in totality all the things that run contrary to the concept of *Omólúàbí*, that is, a well-behaved person. They are used in daily oral communication among all ages. They are store-house for dos and donts and emphasise conditions for certain acts or behaviours.

## Findings

It is evident from this study that Yorùbá proverbs are still used for instruction, counselling, advice, explanation, reprimand, encouragement, condemnation; to mention but a few. We also discover that different categories of people namely politician, business men and women, artisans, traditional rulers and chiefs, market women, commercial drivers, school teachers and few elites, make use of Yorùbá proverbs in the contemporary times.

However, it is very disheartening to note that the younger ones are highly deficient in Yorùbá proverbs. They are fond of using modified ones which could be referred to as new proverbs. Examples of these modified proverbs are:

1. Ilé ọba tó jóná, panápaná ni ò tètè débè  
'Palace that is destroyed by fire, it is due to late arrival of the fire brigade'.
2. Málùú tí ò nírù, ó wà ní sábo.  
'A tailless cow is found at sábo'.
3. A kíí lóyún sínú bí kò bá sí ọmọ nǐbè.  
'One cannot be pregnant if there is no baby in the womb'.
4. Ènì tí ò jìn sí kòtò ojú rẹ ló fọ.  
'He who falls into a pit is blind'.

The correct versions of the above proverbs are:

1. Ilé ọba tó jóná ẹwà ló bù kún un.  
'Palace that is destroyed by fire makes it to be more beautiful'.
2. Málùú tí kò ní ìrù, Ọlórún ní í lé esinsin fún un.  
'It is God that drives away the flies for the cow that has no tail'.
3. A kíí lóyún sínú ká fi òbò tọrẹ.  
'A pregnant woman does not give out her private part (delivery apparatus)'.
4. Ènì tí ó jìn sí kòtò kọ eni tó ń bò léyìn lógbón.  
'He who falls to a pit teaches the people coming behind him to be careful'.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper shows that proverbs still play important roles in the contemporary times. The role of proverbs in a language community is paramount; proverbs are product of the environment and have become an

important aspect of human language and culture from the cradle. We have been able to show that Yorùbá proverb can be used anywhere in the world. This is because the wisdom therein can be applied anywhere in the world.

Because of civilization and effects of our contact with foreign languages and cultures on Yorùbá language, especially proverbs, many people among the highly educated in Yorùbá society who, out of wilful or genuine ignorance see little or nothing good in Yorùbá language and culture, are deficient in the use of Yorùbá proverbs. Even, they do not speak Yorùbá in their homes. This does not augur well for our future as a race, and even Yorùbá language.

We recommend that parents and other agents of education should encourage the use of indigenous languages like Yorùbá and proverbs at home, in schools and in our daily activities. The paper also recommends that more textual and non – textual materials that can promote proper tuition of Yorùbá cultural heritage like proverbs in primary, post primary and tertiary institutions be produced for use in our schools. Establishment of institute of cultural studies should be encouraged in our tertiary institutions. Our youth should develop more interest in our indigenous language and culture. A man that is deficient in his mother – tongue and culture will eventually become a slave to foreign language and culture.

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