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- (b) The title of the article, but not the author's name, should appear on the first page of the text.
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Individualism and Communalism in Yorùbá Proverbs

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to gauge the extent to which Yorùbá society allows individual choice. The paper therefore examines Yorùbá social practices as taught in Yorùbá culture and its proverbial language to determine how and why constraints are set, the types of constraints that we accept from the society in which we live and relate them to what we do as individuals either obeying or flouting the social constraints. This is to see how language works through indigenous culture to promote communal practice and at the same time allow individual choice. The thrust of this paper will be based on Tschumi's (1978) theory of culture and Parson's theory of structural functionalism as used in McCarthy, Matthiessen and Slade (2002). The paper shows that Yorùbá society constructs traditional positive norms of behaviors around which language is built to aid societal growth in general, but this is not to say that man is denied his personal opinion about life. It concludes that the choice we make can make or mar the society and that it is better to temper foreign individualism with African humane individualism that has always existed in our psyche.

Introduction

One area that has received serious attention from scholars is the dangerous trend of borrowing ideas from intellectual and political factories of other societies without considering its suitability for our socio-cultural environment. The dangerous trend is not restricted to the political fields alone; the virus has eaten deep into the ideological fabric of the society. This is because oral traditions that provide useful memory bank

for the recording, preservation and transmission of Yorùbá philosophy is gradually being abandoned as a result of western civilization.

We cannot resist the change of tide that acculturation or enculturation has brought into our mode of interactions. It has affected our norms of interpretation and representations. Paramount is the practice of individualism that is taking over communalism. The rate at which the upcoming new generation imbibes the foreign concept of individualism against the moral reasoning of communalism in Yorùbá culture necessitates a study of the oral tradition and language that transmits the Yorùbá ideas on life, existence and knowledge.

First, we trace the genesis of individualism and communalism, followed by Yorùbá socio-cultural milieu, and then we examine language and proverb in theoretical perspective after which we analyse selected proverbs. We conclude with suggestions that can promote the use of proverbs.

Conceptualizing individualism and communalism

Ritzer (1996:77-103) posits that there is a double existence in man the innate human passion and the need to control this passion. If left unchecked, man's innate human passion overrules him. There are also two kinds of freedom, freedom of opinion, and freedom of belief. Freedom of opinion has to do with individualism, a kind of inner freedom that tends towards independence and self-liberation, when one acts against the interest of the community. Freedom of belief on the other hand is a situation when one acts in the interest of others.

Tracing the history of individualism, Yankelovich, (1998)) shares Joseph de Maistre's opinion that individualism is a new behavioral pattern that promotes the self over the well-being of the community. He notes that in the 15th century, the term referred to a 'person' while in the 17th century it referred to a person separate from the others, and who possess his/her own needs, goals and desires. The word 'individualism' acquired an entirely new meaning when it migrated from France and arrived in the American shores in the twentieth century, when individualism was glorified in the United State of America as a social ideal that contrasted

with socialism and communism of the old World. It was associated with freedom, dignity, uniqueness and personal ambition. In 18th and 19th century, capitalism as an economic concept intensified interest in the individual (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>).

The Marxist ideology that uses individual self realization to judge human relationship further intensified the shift in value and interest. Their belief in the importance of the individual, virtue of self reliance and personal independence evolved the "me culture". At the turn of the 20th century, American individualism focused mainly on the political domain: freedom to speak one's mind, to practise one's own religion, to live where one chooses to live extended it to personal liberty. In the modern time, America associates individualism with self-development.

On the other hand when one acts in the interest of the community, one's opinion converges with communal interest. It is a situation in a social and political context where one has responsibilities to others. In all human history, the well-being of the group mattered more than the well-being of an individual. Since no society can undermine the controlling factors and effective measures that ensure orderliness, each society constructs the instruments of culture that control interpersonal relationships. Ilésanmí (2004:12 & 21) opines that communalism arose from the need to control the innate human passion, that it is a mark of culturing a group of people instead of allowing them individually to wander around.

How do we choose between the two types of freedom? Following Audson (2001), an assessment of the moral reasoning of a given society depends on the ability of a sociolinguistic researcher to possess the technical know-how required for such assessment. Moral reasoning of communalism as well as the concepts of individualism have always existed in Yorùbá culture. The society constructs lores, mores and beliefs around which language is built to control human passion.

The Yorùbá socio-cultural milieu

The society constructs measures in the form of elaborate code of norms, etiquettes, mores, laws, lore, taboos and social practices that are

handed down from generation to generation as a means of guiding human relations. Observance of the measures helps to reduce the strains and frustrations of interpersonal relationships. A breach of the codes tragically disrupts the rhythm of the society. The culture of a society is their conception about life. Oladipo (2007) describes the broad outlines of the philosophical ideas at the heart of a society's culture as a system of values and attitudes which guides lifestyle and conduct. In the Case of Yorùbá, their philosophy includes their idea on life, existence, reason, knowledge and the likes as embodied in the language and oral tradition of the people, and exhibited in their social practices.

Unlike the animal community that is governed by the basic biological needs of subsistence and survival, man is a divinely ordered being. According to Ilésanmí (2004:11, 21) and Abimbólá (1975:390) the Yorùbá existence is based on Ifá divination oral poetry (Odù literary corpus). This corpus provides the basis for healthy communal living through the concept of 'ìwàpèlẹ́'. It is a major source of value-laden norms and it provides the law and guidance that man needs to live a harmonious life. Odù corpus, Ìròsùn Ìwòrì reveal that human beings are destined to exist together in clusters, that those living in clusters are the beings appointed (ẹni a yàn) to convey goodness to the earth. These scholars maintain that Yorùbá philosophy is not simply a body of ideas, it is a means by which the world and the twists and turns of human experience are explained.

Human society is built on communal co-existence. The coexistence constitutes a civilized society subject to self-imposed rules and conventions. Such a belief system that recognizes the systemic hierarchy between the Supreme Being and human beings ascribes power to the rulers and leaders who constitute the authority, and are regarded as the representatives of the Supreme Being on earth. A culture that admits the existence of an authority capable of imposing an order on the environment enforces this goodness.

The norms of interaction, mode of representation and interpretation in the Yorùbá society as explained in this paper encourage communalism. The Yorùbá society has always seen the individual in relation to the

community. The nuances of these laws, mores and etiquettes are mainly communicated in language.

Nature of Proverb

One distinct feature of Yorùbá is their language and proverb constitutes a powerful rhetorical device that gives the language a distinctive quality. The proverb is an aspect of language that has come to be recognized as a very effective literary tool that expresses African mind. It always reflects the socio-cultural milieu and thus enables its users to give an authentic portrayal of African life and experience. Values, thoughts, religious beliefs and social practices are succinctly put in proverbs. Proverbs are the simple truth of life and contain the ethical or moral values of a society, hence Fásíkù (2006:52) notes that proverb serves as charter of social and ethical norms in human interaction. It extols what the society considers to be virtues and condemns antisocial pattern of behavior.

According to Rattray in Fásíkù (2006:52), the proverb encapsulates the world view of a people and serves as a means of arousing, defining, manifesting and establishing the expectations and consciousness of a people. It consists of people's thoughts which are expressed in words and are expected to be recognized at once as something which they knew very well and which all their instinct, their thoughts and tradition tell them to be true to their own nature. Consequently, proverbs serve as linguistic confirmation of the totality of a people's world view.

There is a consensus in Yorùbá society that proverb signifies long time truth that has been tested and trusted by members of the community. Lawal, Ajayi and Raji (1997) are of the conviction that the proverb may be 'cynical and inconsistent' because for one that asserts a truth there will be others that contradict it. The fact remains that there is a change in the meaning attached to some concepts like individual, community and social norms. Many scholars have warned on the danger of a subtle erosion of the African cultural heritage, especially its rhetorical device that gives the language a distinctive quality. Şoneye (2009:81) points to the trend in which upcoming youths are acquainted with distorted version of Yorùbá proverbs than the original. Raji-Oyelade (1999:74) confirms that a

glottophagic process is underway when "on the tongue of its users the traditional proverb loses the sanctity of its structural fixation and is replaced with modernist alternatives". This is what he regards as "playful blasphemy", while Şoneye (2009:81) labels it "painful blasphemy" and Lawal (2006) sums it up as "linguistic suicide".

The reality on ground today shows the tendency in the new generation of users to align with negative views expressed by some scholars. One of such ideas is that of Gifford in Mcilenna (2004:154-155) that sees proverbs as medley empty rhetoric that uses logic to transform mankind into mere types through dogmatic acceptance of social codes. He describes proverb as vapid cliché designed by the powerful minority to enslave the unsuspecting majority to aid leaders in control of the society. (The danger this portends is that the new generation of proverb users has the tendency to misinterpret proverbs). The rate at which indigenous ideologies are being replaced by new ideologies calls for concern. There is a tendency for users to favour proverbs that teach individualism against those that teach communalism in their choice making. This is either because they lack the necessary cultural experience to interpret the language or they have been influenced by socio-historical changes. Interpretations that suite the new mode of interaction whereby individual self interest is placed over and above communal interest is now in vogue.

Language and proverb in theoretical perspective

To the linguists, language is a body of knowledge guided by rules that is used to communicate meaning (Labov cited in Hudson, 2001:1). Language is a sign or symbol that functions by signifying or replacing something with signs to divert attention from it. Language communicates, signifies or replaces experience content. Therefore language is a system of representation, a means of sorting and manipulating the abundance of information that deluge us throughout our lives. The work of insertion into a language situation has its origin in experience, without which it has no content to carry. Ritzer (1996:77-103) notes that to transform language into an authentic experience, (i. e. for language to be meaningful), there must be an experience, the experience of the recipient in the cultural environment opens up to receive a seed and makes it germinate otherwise

the genetic information is irremediably lost. When a message is received in order to be communicable it must be taken into a recipient prepared to receive it. A cultural situation attempts to return the received message to the impulse, which has produced it, either recognizing that impulse or denying its authenticity. Its acceptance or denial depends on individual knowledge and initiatives.

One's experience in the culture of the society dictates the interpretation one gives to language. According to Tischumi's (1978:176) theory of culture, man as a social animal has no constraint over his speech and action because both are constrained by the society. Hudson (2001:19) also opines that one cannot act independently of culture. To use language appropriately and interpret it well, it is important for one to have good knowledge about the social force of language i.e. context. Hence Bright as cited in Milner (1996:20) says language is an avenue for cultural communication. It makes possible the development, the elaboration, the transmission and the accumulation of culture as a whole. This implies that language can only be deciphered correctly if we have the sociological, cultural and ideological experience or background. Language therefore has no meaning on its own except that which culture constructs or designs.

Discourse analysis is concerned with the relationship between language and the contextual dimension that determine our use of language. In the view of Hymes as cited in McCarthy, Matthiessen, and Slade, (2006) one cannot know the meaning of a word or sentence independently of this socio-cultural context. He calls it ethnographic approach that allows us to focus on language events, that is, the situation, the use, the pattern and functions of speaking. It holds that we must consider the occasion where the speech is made, the participants; addresser and addressee, the purpose or ends of the speech, the norms of interaction and interpretation within the cultural and belief system.

We hereby examine Yorùbá proverbs in the context of Yorùbá mode of interaction and interpretation to show that Yorùbá society is not dogmatic. Proverbs that express freedom of choice and those that caution this freedom and promote communalism are analysed.

Analysis of Selected Proverbs

The dangerous trend is to interpret the following Yorùbá proverbs in plain individualistic terms if one has no knowledge about the cultural and historic force behind these proverbs:

1. **Orúkọ tó bá wu ni là á jé lẹyìn odi, Gbàdàmọsí dé Kánò ó d'Àbóókí**

One adopts a suitable name away from his social setting/vicinity; Gbadamosi gets to Kano and becomes Àbókí.

The experience of the recipient in the cultural environment determines the interpretation that one may give to this proverb, it suggests that once an individual leaves the vicinity of his society he is free to adopt anything as name, even if it does not conform to his societal dictates. The philosophy behind this proverb is that one's society has a hold on one but despite all norms one is free to make his choice. We can see that the philosophy behind this proverb favors individual choice. It is the social, cultural and psychological importance attached to names and naming in traditional society that will guide one. It is believed that the type of name one bears manifests the type of personality he grows up to be. Hence a catalogue of Yoruba proverbs express the opinion that name moulds character and forms attitude:

2. **Orúkọ ọmọ ní ń ro ọmọ:-** A child's name influences his personality
3. **Orúkọ isọmọ ní ń mọmọ lára:** A child's name sticks forever
4. **Orúkọ ọmọ ni ijánu ọmọ:** A child's name is his control
5. **Orúkọ rere sàń ju wúra àti fàdákà:** A good name is better than gold and silver.

Therefore the name that the nuclear and extended family bequeath to one contributes in no small measure to control social behaviours. While proverb 1 allows individual choice, proverbs 2 - 5 stress the traditional spirit of upholding the family's good name, which will make his choice converge with the community.

The next sets of proverbs confirm or emphasize individual freedom to take decision or make choice.

6. Orúkọ tá á sọmọ ẹni inú ẹni ní í gbé

One never divulges the name to be given to one's baby

Usually the context in which it is used are instances when one wants to act against peoples' advise.

According to yet another proverb:

7. Inú lókó ẹyẹ n gbé.

A bird's penis remains within

This proverb is used when one is pressurized to go against one's heart's desire. The saying implies that one is free to keep his decisions secret from others. Another proverb further confirms this spirit of individualism.

8. Gbogbo nkan ló yí padà bí n o ẹ ẹ nkan mi niyí ò yí padà.

/Ẹnikan kí í gbón tó bí n o ẹ ẹ nkan mi niyí.

No other wisdom supersedes one's choice or decision/All things may change but one's choice of doing things does not.

These proverbs show that one has control over the choice one makes when one is coerced to do something against his wish.

9. A le fípa mẹnjin rodò ni a ò lè fípa mú u momi

You can force a horse to the stream but you cannot succeed in forcing it to drink water

This proverb shows that human beings have ways of rejecting oppressive communal values, it shows that one has power over external pressure even when one's choice is against communal wish. The spirit of individualism is further enhanced in the next proverb.

10. *Ọkàn ẹni lálúfàà ẹni.*

One's mind is one's diviner.

In the Yorùbá religious setting, premium is placed on divine guidance, therefore people seek the opinion of spiritual heads in making choice. However, the Yorùbá allows an individual to make a choice based on conviction. What these proverbs translate into is that what matters most in decision making is an individual's heart desire. One is the architect of one's life. Other peoples' opinions including that of the spiritual head does not overshadow the will to choose. The validity of this proverb is reinforced by another set of proverbs.

11. *Bó ẹc wu ní là á ẹ̀mòlẹ ẹni, a dífá fún Lẹ̀mòòmù tí n fapá ẹlédè jẹ sààrì.*

One practices one's Islamic faith the way one wants, which justifies a cleric's choice of pork arm as pre-dawn meal in Ramadan.

Muslim faithful do not toy with the Islamic belief that forbids pork consumption, not to talk of eating it to fast in the month of Ramadan. For this message to be communicable it must be taken into a recipient that understands the pragmatics of fasting in Islam. The social context in which the proverb is used is when an individual is going against societal ethos. The combination of (1): eating what is forbidden, (2): in the holy month of fasting, of all periods and (3): by a person who symbolizes the faith, the religious leader, reinforces the individualism at the extreme. This proverb shows a share determination to go against the statusquo. It confirms the practice of individualism; it shows that one should not be surprised at anybody who contradicts communal ethos. Only those who understand the religious context can discern the implication of breaking the taboo against pork in Islamic injunctions. Apart from the person's health being at risk, his fast is a futile exercise in idiocy and same will not be accepted as an act of worship by the law giver, God.

All these proverbs show that Yorùbá culture allows individual personal opinion, if one lacks the proper cultural experience there is a tendency to shun communalism and embrace individualism as the above proverbs imply.

For a healthy continuity of the community the spirit of communalism is still jealously guarded by language and customs. There are appropriate maxims that serve as reminders for anybody who wants to contest this communal solidarity.

Examples of such proverbs are:

12. *A kì í pé kí ọmọdé má dètẹ̀ tó bá ti le dágbo gbé.*

You need not warn a child against leprosy, once he can live an isolated life in the bush.

13. *A kì í pé kí ọmọdé má hu chin ganngan tó bá ti le rẹ̀tẹ̀ fi bò ó.*

You need not warn a child against growing teeth that extend beyond his mouth, once he has the lips to cover it.

Freedom of opinion to do what one wishes is allowed but the repercussion should be considered. The society is not expected to watch an individual fall into any calamity since they may share in the repercussion. A proverb therefore warns:

14. *Bí ará ilé ẹnì bá n jẹ̀ kòkòrò búburú tí a kò bá tètẹ̀ wí fún un hùrù-hẹ̀rẹ̀ rẹ̀ ò ní jẹ̀ kí a sùn lóru.*

If a neighbor engages in consuming armful insect, and we fail to warn against it on time we shall share the discomfort of a sleepless night when the repercussion comes.

An individual may desire something but because he is not independent of the surrounding that he lives in, he must let his choice conform to the society's ideal. In its dual characteristics, cultural experience provides the amendment to balance the choice as the next few proverbs will show.

15. *Ẹ̀nikan kì í jẹ̀ àwa dé:* No single person can be represented of many

16. *Àgbájọ ọwọ̀ lá fí n sọyà:* The chest can only be beaten with the open palms.

17. *Igi kan kò lè dàgbó ẹ̀:* A tree does not make a forest"
18. *Owọ́ ọmọdẹ̀ ọ̀ tó pẹ̀pẹ̀, tàgbà ọ wọ kẹ̀rẹ̀gbẹ̀:* A child's hand can not reach the roof, while an elderly hand cannot go into the gourd.

These proverbs stress the interdependence of all organisms upon each other. According to the proverbs, an individual cannot be separated from the society, therefore it is important that there is cooperation between the members of any community,

Conclusion and Recommendation

We have been able to show that an understanding of the language and culture of a society provides a firm intellectual foundation for the determination of conceptual choices that are available to members of the society. Yorùbá notion of being recognizes uniqueness of the individual, as a creature who is free to make a choice. It however constructs cultural norms which are expressed in language.

Proverb is an aspect of language that expresses the shared ideological experience of Yoruba society to act as checks and balances for the people. To understand all the nuances and cultural loadings, feelings and emotions required by particular Yoruba proverb knowledge about the norms of interaction, representation and interpretation of the society is necessary.

Yorùbá philosophy can be very useful in our attempt to cope with the challenges of the contemporary world. Rather than see proverbs as vapid empty rhetoric, we should emphasis the role of proverb as a scale of balance between the culture of communalism and the practice of individualism, the choice it offers should be espoused. There is no sense in sacrificing native humanistic values for modernity. The uncritical adoption of western values can only lead to perdition. We therefore suggest that maximum support must be given to indigenous language and culture in all media establishments and all levels of education to create awareness in indigenous languages and culture to promote the wisdom, philosophy, ideology and ethics of the society.

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