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## THE ROLE OF PROVERBS IN PRESERVING ARCHAIC LEXICAL ITEMS AND EXPRESSIONS IN YORÙBÁ

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### **Abstract**

*Human languages have the characteristics of being flexible, mobile and constantly changing over periods of time. This is what Wardhaugh (2006:192) refers to as 'internal change' as opposed to external change that is conditioned by 'borrowing'. Sociolinguistically, some lexical items or expressions that are considered as being normal, elegant and acceptable at a particular point in time may become archaic or obsolete as soon as the concepts or the physical objects that are expressed by such lexical items or expressions are no longer in general use. On the other hand, proverbs and idioms are never considered as the speech forms of the conservative speakers of a language, but regarded as words of wisdom or truism in the culture of a given language. Thus, in Yoruba culture, like in any other culture, proverbs and idioms have the linguistic capability of retaining and preserving some lexical items or expressions that are no longer in common use. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to make a brief survey of such archaic words and expressions in Yoruba and exemplify with relevant Yoruba proverbs how such archaic words and expressions are kept in constant use. The paper also examines and brings into focus the*



*linguistic problems facing the younger generation of Yoruba speakers who are potential users of such proverbs. The paper concludes by recommending that the teaching of Yoruba proverbs be included in school curriculum as a deliberate policy and encourages Yoruba authors and language material developers to focus attention on the production of textbooks and other teaching aids that will enhance the teaching of proverbs in schools.*

## **Introduction**

Noting that the world is being transformed at an incredible rate, Grenoble and Whaley (1998: VII) observe that one particularly striking feature of this global transformation is the number of languages that will no longer be spoken 'within the next fifty to a hundred years'. In other words, such languages may have gone into extinction by that time. Speaking in a similar vein, Crystal (2000:1; II) remarks that to say that a language is dead is similar to saying that a person is dead as, according to him, 'a language dies when nobody speaks it anymore', though it may continue to exist in a recorded form either in writing or as part of a sound or video archive, but then it cannot be referred to as a 'living language'.

The significance of language death to mankind is underscored by this request to UNESCO from the International Linguistics Congress (ILC) at its 1992 sitting in Quebec (Crystal, 2000: VII):

as the disappearance of any one language constitutes an irretrievable loss to mankind, it is for UNESCO a task of great urgency to respond to this situation by promoting and if possible, sponsoring programmes of linguistic organizations for the description in the form of grammars, dictionaries and texts, including the recording of oral literatures of



hitherto unstudied or inadequately documented endangered and dying languages.

The call by ILC seems to give the impression that it is only the unstudied or inadequately documented languages that are endangered and are dying. Here in Nigeria, a typical multilingual country, the indigenous languages, including Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, the so-called three major indigenous languages that have been well studied and documented, are losing out to the English language, the foreign official language, at a rate perhaps unnoticed or noticed but ignored by those concerned.

While we subscribe to ILC's suggestion that UNESCO should promote and sponsor programmes of linguistic organizations aimed at describing the grammars and compiling dictionaries and texts, as well as recording of oral literature of endangered and dying languages, it is our view that the exercise should include the documentation of proverbs in the affected languages. Our position is premised on Holmes' (1992: 62-3) observation that one of the ways in which a language becomes extinct is through a gradual shift in functions. This refers to a situation in which the functions of a language, particularly a minority language, are being taken over by a dominant language. This consequently affects the native speakers' proficiency and competence in a language. Lack of proficiency and competence in a language can reflect at different levels of language use. One of such levels is the vocabulary of the language. The individual speaker's vocabulary in the affected language begins to shrink due to lack of constant use, as he or she substitutes vocabulary items in the dominant or winning language for those in the endangered or dying language.

This process begins gradually, starting with words and expressions that are regarded as archaic or obsolete in the language concerned. Words become archaic or obsolete and are eventually no longer used routinely by the native speakers of a language when the



referents of such words no longer exist in the cosmology of the speakers of the language or when words from the dominant language have been used to replace the indigenous ones hitherto used to refer to them. We believe that apart from storing them in dictionaries and other written forms, such words can also be preserved through their use in proverbs which serve as the repository of a people's folk wisdom. In support of our position, we shall make reference to proverbs in the Yoruba language and explain how such proverbs have preserved words and expressions that have become archaic or obsolete in the language and are no more in routine use.

This paper is subdivided into five sections. Section 1 is the introduction. In section 2, we shall discuss proverbs in Yoruba, while in section 3 we shall discuss archaism as a sociolinguistic phenomenon with specific reference to Yoruba, with a view to highlighting words and expressions in them that no longer feature in the day-to-day vocabulary choices of Yoruba native speakers. In section 4, we shall present a list of words in Yoruba that are considered archaic and give the proverbs in which they are used. Section 5 will summarize our discussions, make some recommendations and conclude the study. Our belief is that proverbs are as crucial to the preservation of archaic vocabulary items and expressions in Yoruba and other endangered languages, just as the dictionary is.

## **Proverbs in Yoruba**

*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Volume 9 (1992) cited in Omoloso (2006: 4), describes proverbs generally as embodying superstitions or medieval advice held to be part of every spoken language and related to other forms of folk literature which have originated in oral tradition.

Proverbs exist in many forms across cultures and languages and they carry messages to guide the people. As Mele (2007: 246) points out, proverbs and some figurative expressions are intrinsically related to culture and reflect and safeguard a society's



way of life. As such, he continues, the proverb is valuable as 'it incorporates materials, social and ideological features of a culture such as technology, forms of social organization, values, beliefs and morals which are coded (linguistically) and passed down as tradition'. In fact, as Lawal, Ajayi and Raji (1997: 636) have rightly stated, 'proverbs across languages and cultures form part of the codes of behaviour and exemplify their use for the transmission of tribal wisdom and rules of conduct'.

The above statement can be supported by the following proverbs from English, Yoruba and Idoma, which mean basically the same thing- that people should do whatever they want to do in time:

**English:**

Make hay while the sun shines

**Yoruba:**

*Ìgbà ara là á búra, ẹ̀nikan kì í bú Sàngó lẹ̀ẹ̀rùn.*

(One should do whatever one wants to do at the appropriate time, as not doing so is like invoking the spirit of the god of thunder and lightning in the dry season.)

**Idoma:**

*Eko kpobonua anu we uwi ekoa.*

(Procrastination is the thief of time.)

Aesthetically, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* points out (cf Omoloso, 2006:5), proverbs have certain stylistic similarities, even if they originate from different cultures. They make use of hyperbole, rhyme, alliteration and colourful pictorial expressions. According to Burton (1981:84), proverbs could be included in a class that comprises origin myths, folktales and songs and they feature primarily in conversations between mature adults. Proverbs across cultures and languages, says Ojo-Ade (1980:63), are a reflection of the life of the people, what they do, what and how they think, how they live, what values they admire or hate and what constitute their joys and sorrows.



In summary, proverbs 'represent the quintessence of a people's collective wisdom sustained and transmitted from generation to generation' (Lawal, et al 1997:635) and they are 'a representation of an important facet of a people's cosmology' (Burton, 1981:90).

Structurally, 'the proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk....' (Mieder, 1985:119, in Mele, 2007:246) and, according to Omoloso (2006:187-193), the proverb-sentence can be simple, compound or complex just like ordinary sentences, especially in the Yoruba language. A proverb can also be a combination of any two or all of the three structural types to form what Omoloso (2006) refers to as serial or holistic proverbs.

As a repository of a people's collective wisdom and a representation of an important facet of a people's cosmology, proverbs qualify as important reference points in language use and in preserving words and expressions that have their roots in the transient cultural values of different language communities, since 'as long as there are speakers of a language, their culture will continue to live in their speech' (Mele, 2007:246.) This is why we are suggesting, in this paper, that proverbs should be considered as reliable and veritable tools, along with dictionaries and other texts, in preserving archaic words and expressions in Yoruba (and other languages that are considered endangered and are on the verge of extinction.)

In the Yoruba language (as in other languages), the deployment of proverbs implicates several aspects of the sociolinguistic profiles of the people, like the age, socio-cultural life, psychological as well as the cosmological beliefs of speakers and listeners. Appropriate use of proverbs is therefore a function of both linguistic and communicative competence. And since proverbs are rooted in the culture of the language community, their appropriate use and understanding are in the province of the elders who are the custodians of the people's linguistic, historical and cultural values, the sort that are, among others, coded by proverbs. In the section that follows, we shall examine archaism as a



sociolinguistic phenomenon and give instances of words and expressions that are archaic and are no more in routine use in the Yoruba language.

### **Archaism as a Sociolinguistic Phenomenon**

The word 'archaic' is defined by the *Revised and Updated Illustrated Oxford Dictionary* (2003:50) as 'antiquated (of a word, etc); no longer in ordinary use, though retained for special purpose'. The same dictionary defines 'archaism' as 'the retention or imitation of the old or obsolete, especially in language or art'.

We have earlier explained in section one of this paper that a word or an expression may become archaic when it is no longer in active use by ordinary speakers of the language. There are various factors that may render a vocabulary item or a linguistic expression to become archaic in the day-to-day repertoire of language users. Among these factors is technological development. For example, advancement in science and technology can completely change the standard of living and ways of life of a people. For instance, in the traditional Yoruba setting, before healthcare system became modernized, diseases were cured through the use of traditional medicine and because there was no modern method of preserving things, such medicines would be wrapped in leaves or kept in small gourds or bottles and hung by the fire place called *ààrò* (hearth) where cooking was done by the household. Stoves and other modern cooking materials have displaced the traditional *ààrò* (hearth) nowadays, especially in the urban centres, and the word is now less frequently used by Yoruba speakers, except in rural dwellings, thus becoming obsolete or archaic. Unless the word is preserved in a dictionary of the Yoruba language or in a Yoruba proverb, it will not be long before it dies completely out of the language.

Economic and social factors can also make a word or an expression redundant and eventually make it become archaic (Holmes, 1992:65.) For example, in the traditional Yoruba community, potable water was stored in clay pots called *àmù* for the



use of the household, and a small calabash, *ikéèmù*, would be put on the clay pot for people to use in taking water from the pot. Modern technology and improvements in the socio-economic status of Yoruba people have introduced the use of refrigerators and plastic containers to the people and these have replaced both the clay pot (*àmù*) and the small calabash container (*ikéèmù*) in most Yoruba homes, and these lexical items can only be saved from imminent death by being listed in a Yoruba dictionary or by being preserved in Yoruba proverbs.

*Bànté* is a piece of loin cloth wide enough to just cover the male's private part. It was commonly used on the farm and in farming settlements in the traditional Yoruba community. However, civilization and improvement in the social life of the Yoruba people have rendered the use of *bànté* as an uncivilized act, as they have been replaced by trousers of all fashions. As a result of this development, the word *bánté* has dropped out of the active vocabulary of the Yoruba language. It can continue to live only in Yoruba dictionaries or proverbs.

Fortunately, as we shall demonstrate in the section that follows, most of these archaic Yoruba words have been preserved through their use in Yoruba proverbs. We need to point out that the kind of limitations that general purpose dictionaries have with regard to preserving words and expressions in a language does not seem to affect proverbs. For instance, there is a limit to the number of entries that a book dictionary can accommodate. In fact, lexicographers are more likely to be interested in listing words that are in active use in their dictionaries than in listing those that are either extinct or are on the verge of being so. This kind of constraints does not apply to proverbs, whose creation and use in language are open-ended, like the ordinary sentences in the language, thus recommending proverbs as necessary complements to the book dictionary and other literary texts in the preservation of vocabulary items and other expressions in the Yoruba language.

## Data Presentation



This section is in three parts. The first part is an introduction. The second part presents a list of some archaic Yoruba words, while the third part contains Yoruba proverbs in which these words have been used.

### **Categorization of Some Archaic Yoruba Words Whose Use is Confined to Proverbs**

The words in this class have been sorted into the different themes that they address in the proverbs where they are used. Such themes include agrarian or rural theme, traditional artifacts, traditional religion or cult, socio-cultural beliefs, ecological matters, traditional healthcare or medicare, traditional architecture. We believe that sorting the words into such themes may assist us in understanding why the words may have become archaic in the repertoire of Yoruba native speakers, particularly the youth and urban dwellers who are observed to hardly comprehend the meanings of such words when they are used in proverbs or other Yoruba expressions and consequently, the meanings of the proverbs or expressions. The English meaning of each word is given in front of the word. In doing this, we rely on *A Dictionary of Yoruba Language* (2005) and our intuition as native speakers of the Yoruba language.

#### **(1) Rural or Agrarian Theme or Cosmology**

(i)	<i>adígbónnákú</i>	'death feigning insect'
(ii)	<i>àfòpiná</i>	'moth'
(iii)	<i>agódóngbó</i>	'foetus of an antelope'
(iv)	<i>àjànàkú</i>	'an elephant'
(v)	<i>akátá</i>	'a jackal'
(vi)	<i>àmúkùrù</i>	'flea'
(vii)	<i>èkùlù</i>	'deer'
(viii)	<i>ekùkù</i>	'silk-worm'
(ix)	<i>enini</i>	'dew'
(x)	<i>ẹ̀bìtì</i>	'trap'
(xi)	<i>ẹ̀ẹ̀kan</i>	'rhizomes'



(xii)	<i>ẹlírí</i>	'a type of mouse which is very small in size'
(xiii)	<i>ẹtà</i>	'a smelling leopard'
(xiv)	<i>gòngò</i>	'dunghill worm'
(xv)	<i>gbòòrò</i>	'pumpkin leaf'
(xvi)	<i>ídó</i>	'stakes'
(xvii)	<i>ìjímèrè</i>	'monkey'
(xviii)	<i>ìkamòdù</i>	'a type of smelling insect'
(xix)	<i>ikérègbè</i>	'young goat'
(xx)	<i>ìrẹ</i>	'cricket'
(xxi)	<i>ìtùfù</i>	'a flammable substance'
(xxii)	<i>kùkùtẹ</i>	'a tree stump'
(xxiii)	<i>òdú</i>	'a type of vegetable'
(xxiv)	<i>ògómò</i>	'palm frond'
(xxv)	<i>òpẹkẹtẹ</i>	'young palm tree'
(xxvi)	<i>pàpà</i>	'tape worm'
(xxvii)	<i>sèsé</i>	'beans'
(xxviii)	<i>tanpépé</i>	'fire ant'
(xxix)	<i>tete</i>	'leg'

**(2) Traditional Artifacts Theme or Cosmology**

(i)	<i>ààrò</i>	'hearth'
(ii)	<i>àmì</i>	'water pot'
(iii)	<i>bàntẹ</i>	n worn to cover the male private part'
(iv)	<i>ekùtù</i>	'a type of flute'
(v)	<i>fitílà</i>	'traditional lamp'
(vi)	<i>gúdúgúdú</i>	'type of traditional drum'
(vii)	<i>gbẹdu</i>	'type of traditional drum beaten in honor of a king or an important person'.
(viii)	<i>ìkèémù</i>	'calabash cup'
(ix)	<i>ìṣà</i>	'earthen pot'
(x)	<i>kele</i>	'a type of bead'
(xi)	<i>kèrègbè</i>	'a gourd'
(xii)	<i>òkẹ</i>	'a bag containing 20,000 cowries'
(xiii)	<i>tòbí</i>	'traditional skirt'

**(3) Traditional Religion / Culture Theme or Cosmology**

(i)	<i>alágbaà</i>	'chief's masquerade cult'
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- |       |                 |                             |
|-------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| (ii)  | <i>ológinní</i> | 'cat'                       |
| (iii) | <i>orò</i>      | 'bull roarer'               |
| (iv)  | <i>opa</i>      | 'a type of traditional god' |
| (v)   | <i>pàjé</i>     | 'a type of masquerade'      |
| (vi)  | <i>pààká</i>    | 'a dancing masquerade'      |
- (4) Socio-Cultural Theme or Cosmology**
- |        |                    |   |
|--------|--------------------|---|
| (i)    | <i>àbàjà</i>       | 'a type of facial mark'                 |
| (ii)   | <i>adiẹ-ìràná</i>  | 'sacrificial fowl'                      |
| (iii)  | <i>àgídímàlàjà</i> | 'type of diviner'                       |
| (iv)   | <i>eléeésú</i>     | 'thrift collector'                      |
| (v)    | <i>elémòsọ</i>     | 'another name for youth-leader'         |
| (vi)   | <i>ìwọfà</i>       | 'traditional pawn'                      |
| (vii)  | <i>kẹkẹ</i>        | 'type of facial mark'                   |
| (viii) | <i>ọbọrọ</i>       | 'unmarked, clean, without facial marks' |
| (ix)   | <i>osùn</i>        | 'cam wood'                              |
- (5) Ecological Theme or Cosmology**
- |       |                 |  |
|-------|-----------------|--|
| (i)   | <i>àbàtà</i>    | 'marsh land'                           |
| (ii)  | <i>ìròmi</i>    | 'water bug'                            |
| (iii) | <i>làbẹlàbẹ</i> | 'a river side plant with sharp blades' |
- (6) Traditional Healthcare or Medicare**
- |       |               |                       |
|-------|---------------|-----------------------|
| (i)   | <i>ifọn</i>   | 'rashes'              |
| (ii)  | <i>ògòdò</i>  | 'yaw'                 |
| (iii) | <i>òkígbé</i> | 'anti-cutlass amulet' |
- (7) Traditional Architecture**
- |       |              |            |
|-------|--------------|------------|
| (i)   | <i>àlàpà</i> | 'mud wall' |
| (ii)  | <i>pára</i>  | 'ceiling'  |
| (iii) | <i>pẹpẹ</i>  | 'shelf'    |

### Yoruba Proverbs with Agrarian Theme or Cosmology

The proverbs are presented with their literal meanings given in brackets after each proverb.

- (i) *Àìní ọrá gòngò, a kò ní fí wé ti adígbonnákú.*  
 (Even if the **dunghill-worm** is lean, it still cannot be compared with the **death-feigning-insect**)



- (ii) *Àfòpiná tí ó ní òun yóó pa fitílà ara ré ni yóò pa.*  
(The **moth** that insists on putting out a lit lamp would end up killing itself).
- (iii) *Agódóngbó inú etun bá etulo.*  
(The foetus of a pregnant antelope goes everywhere with its mother).
- (iv) *Bí èse kò bá se àjànàkú, enìkan kii rí orí erin rà lórí àte.*  
(If a calamity does not befall **an elephant**, you cannot get its head to buy in the market).
- (v) *Ojú akátá tí ó yowó adíe kò gbodò fi se yèyé*  
(A fowl cannot ridicule the **jackal** on account of the cataracts in its eyes.)
- (vi) *Pèlèpèlè ní à á pa àmúkùrù epòn.*  
(Care should be taken in killing a **flea** that alights on one's scrotum)
- (vii) *Ní àìkú èkùlù, a kii fi awo rè se gbèdu.*  
(We do not use the skin of the **deer** to make *gbèdu* drum while the deer is still alive.)
- (viii) *A kii torí àbínúkú ekùkù gé ìgí arère.*  
(We do not because of the sudden death of the **silk-worm** cut down the silk-tree.)
- (ix) *Nó gbé ọ gbọ́n eni ẹ̀yìn rè ni yóò fi la ìgbé.*  
(One who insists on soaking another with **dew** will first clear the bush with his back.)
- (x) *Bí ẹ̀bìtì kò pa eku, a fi ẹ̀yìn fún ẹ̀lẹ̀yìn*  
(If the **trap** would not kill a mouse, it should leave the palm-nut fruit (used as bait) for its owner.)
- (xi) *Eré inú ẹ̀ẹ̀kan kii se asán; bí a kò bá má a lé nnkan, nnkan a sì má a le'ni.*  
(One does not run through **rhizomes** for nothing; if something is not pursuing one, one must be pursuing something.)
- (xii) *Ẹ̀lírí kii se ọmọ eku, bí iran rè se é mọ ni.*  
(The **ẹ̀lírí** is not a litter, it is just that genetically it is not a big animal.)



- (xiii) *Bí a bá ni ẹran oní tete ni yóó pani, bíí ti ìrẹ̀ kọ́.*  
(If we say we would be killed by an animal that has **legs**, it is not the likes of the **cricket**.)
- (xiv) *Asín kú età rù ú, ìkamòdù n ké ofe.*  
(The smelling mouse dies, the **smelling leopard** carries it, and the **smelling insect** prods on the smelling leopard.)
- (xv) *Ọ̀rọ̀ kò dun gbọ̀ọ̀rọ̀, a fẹ́ ẹ ní òwúrọ̀, ó rú ní alẹ́.*  
(The **pumpkin leave** is insensitive to insults, it was plucked in the morning and it sprouted again in the evening.)
- (xvi) *Ìhàlẹ̀ àgbẹ̀ tí ó gbin kókò tí n sọ ìdó.*  
(The farmer that puts **stakes** in a cocoyam farm has merely presented himself as a braggart)
- (xvii) *Bí a kò pa ìjímèrè han ìjímèrè, èrù kò nù ba omo ìjímèrè.*  
(Unless we kill a **monkey** in the presence of another **monkey**, the offsprings of **monkeys** will not know how to be careful.)
- (xviii) *Adiẹ́ ńjẹ́ yangan, ó n mu omi, ó tún n gbé òkúta mí, ó tún wá n sunkún àilẹ́yín, ìkérégbẹ̀ tí ó ní éyín sẹ́ ó n jẹ́ irin ní?*  
(The fowl eats corn, drinks water and swallows pebbles, yet it continues to lament that it has no teeth, does the **young goat** that has teeth eat stones?)
- (xix) *Eni tí ó bá se nnkan ìtùfù níí kíyè sí ẹhìnkùlẹ́.*  
(It is somebody who has a **flammable substance** behind his house that keeps watch over his backyard.)
- (xx) *Bí ó ti wù kí omodé tètè jí tó oko ni yóò bà á kùkùtẹ́.*  
(No matter how early a child rises, he will meet the **tree stump** on the farm.)
- (xxi) *Òdú kii sẹ̀ àimọ̀ olóko*  
(The **òdú vegetable** is not a stranger to the farmer.)
- (xxii) *Àsẹ̀sẹ̀ yọ ọ̀gómọ̀, ó ní òun yóò kan òrun.*  
(The **palm frond** is just sprouting and it says it would reach up to heaven.)
- (xxiii) *Ọ̀pẹ̀kẹ̀tẹ́ n dàgbà, inú omo Ádámọ̀ n bàjẹ́.*  
(The **young palm tree** continues to grow and human beings continue to be sad on account of its growth.)



- (xxiv) *Pàpà n pa ara rẹ ó ní òun n pa ajá. Bí ajá bá kù tán, pàpà náà yoo lẹ ọrun.*  
(The **tapeworm** is killing itself and says it is killing the dog, once the dog dies, the **tapeworm** will follow suit.)
- (xxv) *Kàkà kí eku májẹ sẹsẹ, a fi sẹ àwàdànù.*  
(The mouse would rather waste **beans** if it would not be able to eat them.)
- (xxvi) *Ìwọ̀n ni tanpépẹ gbìjà ẹyin rẹ mọ.*  
(There should be a limit to the ferocity with which the **fire ant** defends its eggs.)

### Yoruba Proverbs with Traditional Artifacts as Theme or Cosmology

- (i) *Òògùn tí a kò bá fi owó sẹ, ẹyin ààrò ní í gbé.*  
(The medicine that we acquire free normally ends up behind the **hearth**.)
- (ii) *Ẹlẹnurírùn ni ó ni àmù iyá rẹ.*  
(No matter how smelly a person's mouth is, he still has authority over his mother's **water pot**).
- (iii) *Àifinipeni àifèniyàn-pèniyàn ní í mú ará oko sán bànté wo ilú*  
(It is disrespect that makes a rural dweller come into town with an **apron** round his waist.)
- (iv) *Kí ní n yá àpọ̀n ní orí tí ó fi isulẹ iná tí n fọn ekùtù pé 'bí mo tí n sẹ ni n bí wọ̀n nínú.*  
(What is the source of a bachelor's pride that makes him put yam on the fire and begin to blow a **flute** singing: 'it is my way of life that people envy'.)
- (v) *Ọ̀rọ̀ kò sẹ́ é sọ ní fítilà àfi bí iná bá kú.*  
(Discourse cannot be free when there is **light**, but when the light is out.)
- (vi) *Àìgùn kó ni àidàgbà, gúdúgúdú kì í sẹ ojúgbà dùndún.*  
(Shortness is not synonymous with age, **gúdúgúdú drum** is not in the same class with **dùndún** drum.)
- (vii) *Ní àikú ekùlù a kii fi awọ rẹ sẹ gbèdu.*



- (We do not use the skin of a deer to make **gbèdu drum** while the deer is still alive.)
- (viii) *Ẹnu kìì sìn lára afókèémù* (*ẹni tí ó fọ̀ ikèémù*).  
(People never cease talking about somebody who broke the **calabash cup**.)
- (ix) *Ìsà kì í bù újinná tán kí ó tún gò.*  
(The **earthen pot** does not go bad once it is almost baked in the fire.)
- (x) *Ilèkẹ̀ pọ̀ lójà kí sàngó tó wo mó kele.*  
(Many beads about in the market, yet **sàngó** prefers the **kele** bead.)
- (xi) *Owó omodé kò tó pepe, tí àgbàlagbà kò wo kèrègbè.*  
(A child's hand cannot reach up to the shelf, that of an elder cannot enter a **gourd**.)
- (xii) *Fìrì ní ìdí Ọ̀kẹ́ alọ́ kí oníhun kígbé.*  
(Somebody passes by a **bag containing 20,000 cowries** and the owner begins to lament over its (the bag's) disappearance.)
- (xiii) *Bí ọmọ kò bá jọ sòkòtò yóò jọ tòbí.*  
(If a child does not resemble a pair of trousers, he will resemble a **skirt**.)

### Yoruba Proverbs with Traditional Religion / Cult Theme or Cosmology

- (i) *Ohun tí í tán ni odún eégún, alágbàà yóò padà ra àkàrà jẹ, èkọ.*  
(The masquerade festival does not last forever, so the **masquerade leader** will eventually have to buy beans-cake to eat his cold-pap.)
- (ii) *Awo rí awo, ológinní rí ọmọ ẹkùn*  
(A cult-man meets another cult-man, the **cat** meets a tiger's cub.)
- (iii) *Èniyàn ní n bẹ ní ìdí orò ní orò fí n ké*  
(The **bull roarer** is able to roar because human beings are behind it.)



- (iv) *Kò dùn mí, kò dùn mí, àgbàlagbà n bú opa ní èmefà nítorí iyàn àná.*  
(An elder maintains that he is not annoyed, yet he swears on **opa** (a traditional god) because of stale pounded yam).
- (v) *Èni pàjé nà ní kùmq mēfà tí ó ní òkòkan kò ba òun, sèbí ara rẹ ní ó wà!*  
(Somebody who was hit six times with a rod by the **pàjé masquerade** claimed that none touched him. Is it not he who would feel the pain?)
- (vi) *Àilásq̄lórùn pààká, àjmq̄ wq̄n nínú awo ni.*  
(The nakedness of the **pààká masquerade** is the conspiracy of cult members).

### Yoruba Proverbs with Socio-Cultural Theme or Cosmology

- (i) *Bí a sá kéké ogún, aájò ẹwà ní a fì se, bí a bu àbàjà ogbón, aájò ewà ní a fì se, bí a sí fì èrèké silè ní òbòró, aájò ewà ní a fì se.*  
(If we make twenty **kéké** marks on the cheeks, it is for beauty, if we make thirty **àbàjà** marks on the cheeks, it is for beauty. And if we leave the cheeks **unmarked**, it is also for beauty.)
- (ii) *Àgídímàlàjà, awo Ilé-Ifẹ; awo níí gbé awo ní ìgbónwó, bí awo kò bá gbé awo ní ìgbónwó, awo a tẹ.*  
(**The diviner** of Ilé-Ifẹ; a cult-man ought to assist another cult-man, otherwise cult-men would be shamed.)
- (iii) *Bí ọrẹ eléèésú bá kó tán, ọtá rẹ náà yóò kòó.*  
(After the **thrift collector's** friend has collected his own money, it would eventually come to the turn of the **thrift collector's** enemy.)
- (iv) *Kí á dàgbà kí á má nìí adìe-ìràná, bí a bá kú ní ẹlémòsọ ó yẹ ní.*  
(It is more glorifying to die in **youth** than to die in old age and not have the **sacrificial fowl**.)
- (v) *Eégún iwòfà kò rí òwùrò jó.*  
(A **pawn's** masquerade cannot afford to dance in the



morning.)

- (vi) *Kò ní tán nínú igbá osùn kí á má rí fí pa ọmọ ní ara.*  
(No matter how empty the **cam wood** container is, we will still get enough to rub on a baby.)

### Yoruba Proverbs with Ecological Theme or Cosmology

- (i) *Àbàtà ta kété bí ẹnì pé k'ò bá odò tan*  
(The **marsh land** stands aloof as if it has no relationship with the river).
- (ii) *Ìròmi tí n jó lójú omi, onílùrẹ wà ní ìsàlẹ odò.*  
(The **water bug** dancing on the surface of the water has its drummer beneath the water.)
- (iii) *Akì í se òrìsà ní odò kí làbẹlábẹ má mọ.*  
(We cannot celebrate a god by the riverside without the knowledge of the **grass that grows by the riverside**.)

### Yoruba Proverbs with Traditional Healthcare or Medicare Theme or Cosmology

- (i) *Bí a bá ro dídùn ifẹn a ó hẹ ara dé eegun.*  
(If we get carried away by the pleasantness of scratching a skin infected with **rashes**, we will scratch the body to the bones.)
- (ii) *Àrà tí ó bá wu ògòdò ní í fí imú olówó rẹ dá.*  
(**Yaw** can choose to do anything with its victim's nose.)
- (iii) *Ìwà ọmọ ní í mú ọmọ se òkígbẹ.*  
(It is a child's character that makes him wear **anti-cutlass amulets**)

### Yoruba Proverbs with Traditional Architecture Theme or Cosmology

- (i) *Ọjò tí ó pa alàpà ni ó sọ ọ di àmúgùn ewúré*  
(It is rain that beats a **mud wall** that reduces it to the height a goat can climb.)
- (ii) *Àìgbọfá ni à n wòkè ifá kan kò sí ní párá.*  
(It is ignorance about **ifá** divination that makes one gaze up.



No divination exists in the **ceiling**.)

- (iii) *Qwó qmódé kò tó pepe, ti àgbàlagbà kò wọ kèrègbè.*  
(A child's hand cannot reach up to the **shelf**, that of an elder cannot enter a gourd.)

### Summary, Findings and Recommendations

In this work, we expressed the fact that many languages in Nigeria are being threatened and stand the risk of imminent extinction. We observed that the threat is such that if something is not done to stem it, most of the indigenous languages stand the risk of dying over the years. We pointed out that the process of language death starts with the loss of vocabulary items in the affected language and that vocabulary loss sets in when a particular vocabulary item is either no longer routinely used or is not used at all.

We acknowledged the fact that the dictionary is one way of preserving the lexical items in a language from total loss. However, the dictionary has some limitations. One of these is that it has limited capacity for storing the limitless words in a language. Secondly, the lexicographer may not be interested in including words that are not in current use in his dictionary. We then recommended that proverbs will complement the dictionary in preserving the words in a language, particularly the obsolete ones, whose use nowadays is found to be confined to proverbs.

In section 2, we discussed the nature of proverbs in human language in general and in Yoruba in particular. We expressed the fact that language and culture are very closely related and that proverbs constitute one of the avenues for expressing a people's cultural beliefs and could therefore be one of the ways in which these beliefs could be preserved. In the third section, we examined archaism in general as a sociolinguistic phenomenon and gave some of the reasons which may account for the words in a language becoming archaic or obsolete.

In section 4, we gave a list of some words that are considered archaic according to the themes that they addressed, viz: whether



rural or agrarian, traditional artifact, socio-cultural, etc. themes or cosmologies. In the same section, we featured Yoruba proverbs in which such archaic words are used.

## Findings

We discover that the words in our data are mostly used in proverbs, though they may also be found in folksongs, poetry, folklores, etc. They hardly feature in every day routine discussions. Though our list is not exhaustive, we notice that most of the words listed refer to agrarian themes (29), followed by traditional artifacts (13), socio-cultural (9), traditional religion (6), ecological (3), traditional health (3), and traditional architecture (3). We observe that most of the words have become obsolete or are no longer in routine use because of the change generally in the social, economic and cultural lives of the Yoruba people as a result of their exposure to western values and concepts.

## Recommendations

We subscribe to Mele's (2007: 245) view that proverbs be integrated into the educational curriculum, though not just to 'bring about a comprehensive understanding of other culture's history, values and world views' as he has suggested, but also to preserve archaic words and expressions that stand the danger of dying out of the affected languages over time. The fact that '...the proverb is a (short) generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form which is handed down from generation to generation' (Mieder 1985: 1 19, in Mele, 2007: 246), further recommends Yoruba proverbs for being included in the school curriculum. By implication, teaching Yoruba proverbs in school means teaching the grammatical components of individual proverbs. This will consequently afford the learners the opportunity of comprehending the meanings and the appropriate usage of the archaic words. We believe, as Mele (2007: 247) that when proverbs are included in the teaching scheme, learners would not feel



alienated from the subject, 'as the focus of proverbs are realistic down-to-earth aspects of existence, such as domestic life (marriage, birth), health matters (diseases, remedies, death), emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, worry) and interpersonal relationships (love, hate, cooperation, hospitality), among others'.

To aid the process of incorporating proverbs into the school curriculum, language material developers and writers on Yoruba culture should publish books that address Yoruba proverbs from the linguistic, cultural and literary view points. After all, as Duranti (1997: 23-46) in Bhuvaneshwar (2003: 1.) says, culture is a system of signs, 'a representation of the world, a way of making sense of reality by objectifying it in stories, myths, descriptions, theories, proverbs...'; thus culture is communication.

Authors of Yoruba books on proverbs should endeavour to illustrate such archaic words that refer to objects like animals and artifacts with appropriate pictures and diagrams to enhance their understanding by students.

It is our belief that this will not be an unachievable task, since books already exist on Yoruba proverbs and all that remains to be done is to redouble efforts in this direction and consciously address the issue as one aimed at salvaging our dying languages as a matter of a deliberate language policy in education.

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