

The Need for Documentation and Preservation of Yorùbá Proverbs as Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Proverbs and sayings are an integral part of African cultures. They have been passed down through generations for centuries. To be precise, proverb is an important aspect of indigenous culture in Yoruba society. Yoruba proverbs reflect the cultural values, beliefs and wisdom of the people, providing insight into their history, customs and way of life. Yoruba proverbs are often used figuratively as a way of conveying messages, lessons and wisdom to listeners. As revealed by the recent happenings, Yoruba proverbs as an important cultural heritage are threatened and close to extinct. Investigation reveals that certain factors are responsible for its continuous disappearance among the Yoruba communities, in the language structure and creative speeches which give the unique identity to the Yoruba people. Among the factors responsible for its disappearance include: total assimilation of western culture, the nuclear family syndrome, absence of moonlight stories by the elderly, the concept of modernity and urban nature of Yoruba towns. This paper highlights the importance of Yoruba proverbs as means of expressing some socio-cultural identities as well as other functions as contained in the Yoruba ways of life. As strong tools for bringing out inherent traits that run through a group of people, the paper advocates for the documentation, promotion and preservation of Yoruba proverbs.

Keywords: Yorùbá Proverbs, Cultural heritage, Culture Preservation, Preservation, Documentation.

Introduction

Proverbs exist in many forms across culture and language and are used to convey messages which help to guide and control the sociocultural activities of those who understand them. Proverbs are short, concise and often rhyming phrases that contain significant meaning and wisdom. They are typically passed down orally from generation to generation and are deeply ingrained in African cultures. African proverbs reflect the cultural values, beliefs and wisdom of African societies and serve as a source of guidance and inspiration. The

significance of African proverbs lies in their ability to convey complex ideas and concepts in a concise and memorable way. They are often used to impart important life lessons, moral values, and cultural traditions to the younger generation. In many African cultures, proverbs are used to express emotions, solve conflicts, and offer advice. Proverbs are form of communication whose meanings can be hid but are easily understood by the members of the community, regardless of their level of education or social status.

In Africa, especially in the Nigerian context, expressions are not considered rich and intelligent except when they are duly laced with proverbs, which are many in our diversified cultures. This informs why a traditional African would constantly punctuate his speech with appropriate proverbs and aphorisms to drive his points home. (Lawal, 1997), Adeboye (2010) observes that proverbs promote Yoruba culture and customs and that they are vehicles through which social values are transmitted. In a likewise manner, Olademo, (2009) observes that the use of Yoruba oral genres which comprise praise-name (oriki), proverbs, stories, songs and Ifa oracular verses is not limited to transmission and propagation of culture. Salawudeen (2013) opines that the Yoruba proverbs form an important aspect of linguistic development, and more importantly, a major part of youth socialization. In the words of Awotundun (2013), Yoruba proverbs function in a variety of ways, as a storehouse of ancient of wisdom, a way of education, a weapon for national development and so on.

Proverbs sum up a situation, pass judgement, recommend a course of action, or serve as a secular past precedent for present actions. The Yorùbá people of Nigeria as well as other parts of the world are known for their rich, all-encompassing and unblemished cultural heritages. They have several ways of imparting ethical virtues in the younger generations. These virtues become the strong cords by which the young are identified with the older generations of the land. One of such way is the unique manner with which they dished out proverbs in all their life situations. They are equally popular in their use of proverbs to

solve related problems such as hunger, love, hatred, pleasure, among other things. (Makinde 2014). Salawudeen (2013), that Yoruba proverbs by nature are multi-faceted and contextual because they offer interpretations to different things at different times affirms this. Hence, Yoruba proverbs have been used differently to preserve the indigenous ways of life such as the people's diverse cultures, which are embedded in such things as practices, competencies, ideas, values, norms, ethics and the needed etiquettes of the land and the traditional beliefs of the people. All the above sociocultural variables are the source of ties that bind members of same societies together, especially the people of Yoruba, as they are identified with such practices and influenced by such as well. (Olarenwaju 2020). This point is affirmed in Makinde (2014), that the culture that we are embedded in inheritably influences our views for the fact that we all operate in similar behavioral background and linguistic level. Yorùbá proverbs are also used as means by which hidden facts and lessons are ditched out to younger generations without raising much dust. Proverbs are deeply rooted in all the fabrics of Yoruba culture to the extent that almost everybody who knows how to speak his/her indigenous language is an inherent speaker of proverbs. Adégbóyèga (2017) opines that among the Yoruba speaking tribes of Nigeria... proverbs are believed to be a “conversational condiment” used to flavor speech, taking into consideration its cultural and moral relevance.

Rumide, (2013) affirms also that Yorùbá people believe strongly in the tradition of proverbs, hence they use them in their day-to-day activities. In fact, it is a common practice among the Yorùbá people that for communication to go smoothly, whether serious, like solving issues or casual, proverbs are used as tools to pass ideas and thoughts across to the people. Current observation reveals that proverbs are not being used as like before again. Many Yorùbá proverbs are preserved or hidden in textbooks, monograph, home videos, films and pastoral messages. This has not stopped the problem of lack of understanding of its usage, meaning and reasons for its extinction that may hinder its preservation for the

incoming generations. It is therefore the aim of this paper to call for renewal of attitude towards the use of proverbs. This can be done through different ways like the promotion of literary texts with proverbs, Yoruba language usage at different domains of communication and so on. This work concludes that the oral nature of Yoruba proverbs as a cultural heritage of the people can be revived and preserved for future generations when there is a conscious attempt to integrate or convert their traditional roles for present day realities and relevance in our social and educational needs.

Theoretical Explanation

The need to preserve the Yoruba proverbs as cultural heritage of the people is best explained through the functionalist perspective as enunciated by Bronislaw Mahinowski (1884 – 1942). Functionalist emphasize that society consists of inter-related parts which work for the integration and stability of the whole system. Mahinowski functionalism assumes that all cultural traits are useful parts of the society they occur. In other words, all customary patterns of behavior, belief, attitudes, and social structures perform a function within the society they occur. He emphasizes that social structures and social institutions exist in societies to meet or perform psychological and biological needs for the people.

Importance of Proverbs among the Yoruba People

Proverbs are known to be used by people from all parts of the world for transmission of their wisdom, knowledge, experience and feelings. (www.proverbios.com/intro.htm). This in turn has made proverbs to become current and innovative. In every speech community of a language in any part of the world, it may be said that proverbs are used to achieve certain purposes or objectives. A community where proverbs are not in use may be considered as a dead one. It is a common practice among the Yoruba people that for communication to go smoothly, whether serious, like solving issues or casual, proverbs are used as tools to pass ideas and thoughts across to other people. More importantly, the elders mostly use proverbs to prove to the younger ones that, it

is their exclusive right to use such to drive some serious points home. Hence, as Taylor (2013) observes, proverbs are the simple truths of life that contain the ethical, moral and sociological values of a society. He also claims that aside the aesthetics and figurative value in proverbs, they present a graphic statement that expresses a truth or experience. Based on this observation therefore, it is plausible to opine that the inherent beauty and delight in proverbs contain in their incontestable perception and acceptance. Thus, Akinmade (2012) and Okunola, (2023) agree that proverbs remain the most powerful and potent vehicle for culture dissemination from one function to another. In their opinion, it is difficult to find any human situation; joy, distress, happiness, agony, sorrows, distress that a Yoruba proverbial saying would not provide a solution. As the property of the society, Yoruba proverbs rely on the society itself and draw volumes of materials from observable relationships and experiences existing within the society; of human, animal and climate. Yoruba proverb like in many other African societies is used to embellish and support arguments during conversations and other oratory events. (Olujimi, 2012).

In the social life of the Yoruba People, proverbs constitute a powerful rhetorical devise for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions and beliefs. Yoruba proverbs focus various aspects of human endeavors as they are employed to encourage, empower, warn and upbraid where necessary. The values and virtues of Yoruba proverbs cut across religion, social, economic and traditional usage.

Different Domains of Usage of Yoruba Proverbs

As the wisdom core of the race, Yoruba proverbs occur daily in verbal communication to serve as social charters, to praise societal values and upbraid bad practices. As such, Yoruba proverbs are used at different domains of social and spiritual lives of the people that own them. Among such domains include; economic / entrepreneur / empowerment, religion, management, cultural identity, conflict management, philosophical thoughts and so on.

Yoruba Proverbs and Economic Empowerment

Business embraces all human activities activated for the hope of making profit. The Yoruba people are the most urbanized group not only in Nigeria but throughout the African continent. They are found everywhere in Nigeria and are involved in all the major business activities of their host communities (Aluko 1993). Every Yoruba community is known for a peculiar job. For instance, *Iseyin* in Oyo state is known for notable traders and businessmen and women who specialize in *aso oke* attire, while Abẹ̀òkúta is known with *adire* clothes. In the past, the Yoruba were a self-sustaining culture with self-sufficient economies. Their essential needs such as food, clothing and housing, were produced locally. Every individual was involved in one or the other aspect of the society economic growth. For each and every one to be actively involved and encouraged on the need to be hardworking, some proverbs like the following are used:

1. *Iṣé Lòdògùn iṣé*

Work is the antidote to being impoverished.

This proverb serves to advise an individual to embrace work and be enterprising to avoid suffering because an indolent person is not respected, as such is doomed to die in poverty

2. *Iṣé ré ọmọ àṣejèrè*

Òwò rèé, ọmọ àṣelà

Here is work, the sibling of prosperity

Here is trade, the offspring of breakthrough.

From the above proverb, an individual is said to be aware that both work and trade can earn a person prosperity and breakthrough; hence, people are encouraged to be apt in their chosen career.

The concept of being hardworking with one's hand by appropriating one's energy for proper reward is encouraged, as it is believed that any work done by an individual must surely earn him or her a living. Such proverbs like:

3. *Àtẹlẹwọ ẹni kii tan ni jẹ*

One's hand does not deceive a person.

Are there to encourage people to engage in profitable ventures.

Yoruba Proverbs and Religious Belief

Godliness and faith in God form part of Yoruba life. As part of their way of life is to impart the faith and the fear of God in the life of their younger generations. As a way of bringing them up, some proverbs serve to encourage them to be truthful as their creator derives pleasure in their being obedient. Not only that, there is a reward for every deed on earth. Such proverbs like the following are put in place to inculcate the fear of God in the lives of their siblings:

4. *Olódótò kíl léní, sùgbón ko ní í ku sípò ìkà*

A righteous person may not have followers, but will not die as a wicked person. This proverb is to encourage a Yorùbá child to be truthful no matter the situation. A righteous person may not be recognized in the community for saying the truth, but his aftermath is worthy of emulation, therefore, everyone should be encouraged to live righteously.

5. *Bóniń tì rí ọ̀là kì í rí bẹ̀ẹ̀ ló mù babaláwo máa dífá ọ̀rọ̀rún.*

Not every day is the same, this informs the reason an oracle priest makes periodic consultation.

The above proverbs is to encourage a Yoruba child to be dynamic, active and prudent in all his ways. Room should be made for eventuality, as life is not as straight forward as an electric pole.

6. *Mààlùù tí kò ní rù, Ọ̀lórún Ọ̀ba ní bá a lé eesin*

A tailless cow will rely on God to drive away flies.

This proverb shows that the Yoruba people believe in the existence of God. Here, God is seen as the helper of the helpless. As a cow without a tail will find it difficult to drive away flies, somebody without relations or acquaintances will have to depend on God for assistance. The proverb then serves as an encouragement to the depress and helpless people to put their trust in God.

Yorùbá Proverbs and Economic or Social Management.

The Yoruba have a large repository of wisdom in their proverbs that can be utilized to empower individuals to be successful in their businesses, family and social endeavours. For instance;

7. *Ojú olójú mẹwàá kò lè jojú ẹni*

The stranger's presence cannot be the same as that of the owner.

The idea promoted in the above proverb is the need for an individual to be up and doing in his or her career. Every individual on his or her business to be able to achieve success in business must provide constant oversight functions. Often times, subordinates, trusted colleagues, or business partners have taken over or embezzled the money of their benefactors. To avoid such, the proverb serves as a warning for the individual to be alert and up and doing in his chosen work.

8. *Ẹ jẹ á pàjùbà sílẹ̀ de lẹ̀lẹ̀ (Ìgángán)*

Ká wóhun tó dára sílẹ̀ dọmọ ẹni

Let us make provision for the crawling yam

Let us keep good fortune for our children

Investing and planning for future purposes in business is also promoted in Yoruba proverbs. Futuristic proverbs like the above are beneficial for promoting prudence and the spirit of preparing for the raining days. This also reveals the belief of the Yoruba in leaving a good legacy behind for one's offspring. One should endeavor to leave behind him or her good name, affluence or wealth behind as inheritance for the children.

9. *Ọdájú ló bí owó*

Ìtìjú ló bí gbẹ̀sẹ̀

Strictness leads to prosperity

Shyness leads to debt.

As a way of management, an entrepreneur is admonished to be wary of granting credits facilities that may cripple a business enterprise. No wonder then, that the

management team of a business enterprise is always firm and tactical in granting credit as explicated in the above proverb.

Yorùbá Proverbs and Cultural Identity

The Yorùbá people are traditionally inclined with the items such as:

Ebòlò, èkùrò, ifá, èéfín and many more which are culturally identified with and peculiar to Yorùbá tribe that hearers easily acclimatize to as soon as they are mentioned anywhere. These items are culturally bound. Yoruba proverbs serve as an archive for the preservation of such items as seen in the following proverbs.

10. *Èéfín ni iwà, bí a bá bò ó mólè, yòò tún rú jáde*

Behavior is like a smoke/fume that defies covering up, as it is pliable to coming up again

11. *Kò sí bí a ó ti ẹ ifá, tí kò ní hùwà èkùrò*

There is no way we can prevent the oracle from exhibiting similar traits like that of a palm kernel

12. *Kò sí bí a ó ti ẹ ebòlò tí kò ní run ìgbé*

There is no how an *ebòlò* vegetable is prepared, that it will not maintain its pungent smell (like faeces)

From the above given proverbs, it is evident that the Yoruba proverbs are culturally bound as they give a detailed picture of the people as how to behave, what they should do or not at a particular time, their overall belief, policy and preoccupations at all time. The above proverbs therefore emphasize that human characters cannot be hidden, so people are encouraged to be morally behaved.

Yorùbá Proverbs and Conflict Management

Like every other culture and tribe all over the world, the Yoruba people find themselves in one conflicting situation or the other. Crystal (1989:112) opines this:

As long as human beings interact with each other, conflict is to be expected. This is simply because human beings are intrinsically different and in diverse proportions – in

<https://journals.unizik.edu.ng/jtese>

character, experience, moods and interest. Also very importantly, we are imperfect at best.

As part of an effort to maintain cordial relationship and bring about peace among the warring parties, many proverbs are employed;

13. *Bí a bá n jà, bí i ká kú kò*

We should not fight to kill each other.

14. *Ìjà ló dé ni orin di òwe*

When there is misunderstanding, the normal song becomes a proverb

15. *Kò si arémájà, kò sí ajàmárẹ́ẹ*

There is no friendship without misunderstanding

All the above proverbs are pointers to the fact that Yoruba proverbs are used in curbing or settling conflicts or bringing peace in a conflicting situation.

Values and Morality in Yorùbá Proverbs

African concept of life, especially value is coded in proverbs for the Yoruba people, values are taken to be a set of institutional ideas, which guide and direct the patterns of life.

In order to inculcate the moral virtues in the children, the Yoruba always try to choose the mean in their actions as good examples. (Lawrence, 2004)

Yoruba by the use of proverbs, prescribed, described and modified the character of their people. Societal unacceptable actions are discouraged in everyday proverbs. For instance, in advocating for caution, Yoruba use proverbs like:

16. *Awòlúmátẹ́ẹ, iwòn ara rẹ ló mọ*

He – who – enters – a – town – and – never – gets – disgraced is only cautious.

17. *Ení mọ iwòn ara rẹ, kìí tẹ*

A cautious person is never disgraced

18. *Ò n re Ọyọ ò n kánjú, Aláàfin o re bikan*

You are going to Ọyọ and in a haste, the King is going nowhere

Ìwà, for the Yorùbá includes moral uprightness, good conduct and good character. A moral person is called *omólúàbí*. The above examples of Yoruba proverbs are there to train the Yoruba child in the way and manner accepted in the society. The essence of Yorùbá traditional education that is mainly oral and practical is to develop one into an *omólúàbí*. Good character for the Yoruba includes respect for old age, loyalty to one's parents and local traditions, honesty in public and private dealings.

Yorùbá Proverbs as Source of Moral Epistemology

In Yorùbá traditional social settings, laws and moral norms are not documented as a body (like a document or constitution). However, every individual living in a particular society setting is expected to abide by this moral law acquired. The conception of a person as a rational autonomous and free willing human being is expected to indicate this capacity to seek morality. According to Hallen (2000), "the history of epistemology is characterized in the most part of a persistent attempt by man to capture his temporality in his thoughts". This is where Yoruba proverbs come in, in Yoruba traditional setting as a source of moral epistemology. They are readily available means to the moral principles.

Yorùbá proverbs also function as preserving ideas or describing situation in pictorial or challenging ways. In actualizing these functions, some proverbs often recall particular events in the life of the community which created them and in which they are used. Such instances are wars or battles, famines event, pestilences as well as particular social experiences. The following proverbs are examples:

19. *Bí o bá láyà o sàkà, bí o bá rántí ikú Gáà, o sòótọ*

If you have the mind to be wicked, if you hear about Gáà's death you will be truthful.

20. *Eni tí ó bá rí eyín ọyà, yóò tí mò pé oko lo fì n jẹ*

Anybody who has seen the hedgehog's teeth will know it cuts grass with it.

21. *Bí ògiri kò lanu, aláńgba kò lè ráyè wòbè.*

If the wall does not open up, the lizard will not be able to enter.

Apart from the important areas of proverbs usage in the traditional Yoruba society as mentioned above, in recent years, African proverbs have gained attention in the marketing and branding word as a powerful tool for connecting with customers. Brands are increasingly looking for ways to differentiate themselves and connect with customers on a deeper level, and African proverbs and sayings provide a unique way of doing so.

Documentation and Preservation of Yorùbá Proverbs: Prospects and Challenges

Oral tradition is the body of information concerning history, culture and environment of a people at any given time and space. It is also a set of verbally transmitted pieces of information about the experiences and worldviews of a people. These experiences and worldviews are preserved in the memories of the group of people and are transmitted from one generation to another. (Ogundele, 2000:14). Yoruba proverb as an aspect of the Yorùbá oral tradition remains an indispensable cultural heritage of the people and the need to preserve it cannot be overemphasized. Proverbs as a non-material or intangible cultural heritage of the Yoruba needs to be preserved for promoting collective consciousness in terms of unity, oneness, nationalism and fostering peaceful co-existence not only among the Yoruba but also among Nigerian as a nation.

It is pertinent to stress that like some other Nigerian cultural heritages, Yoruba proverb is threatened due to faulty efforts at preserving and conserving it. It is true that efforts are being made by various scholar to write down or document the Yorùbá proverbs, but this is not enough. Considering the system of education in the southwestern part of the country, where much emphasis is laid on being expert in the acquisition of English at the expense of the indigenous

language of the area, the use of Yorùbá proverb is reduced to the barest minimum. The presence of private schools in every nook and cranny of the area has gone far in endangering the use of Yoruba proverbs. The National policy on Education statement that emphasizes on the use of mother tongue in the initial stage or primary education is like a toothless dog as no effort is put in place for its implementation or any penalty stated for non-compliance.

Another challenge facing the use of proverbs among the Yoruba is ignorance. Many Yorùbá youths of nowadays are ignorant of the importance of Yoruba proverbs. They are ignorant, as they do not see the need for its usage. To them, Yorùbá proverbs belongs to the elders, so it is archaic. They embrace modernity and civilization at the expense of their culturally enriched proverb. It is true that these proverbs are written down in textbooks and manuals, but the youth prefer listening to modern day foreign music and jingles.

Western education is another challenge facing the use of proverbs in Yoruba setting. The type of Education that promotes the use of modern technology that has globalized the whole world is preferred by the modern-day youths. Everybody wants to engage in any type of education or training that guarantees employment or good job. This is usually available through the modern-day western education.

Social change is also a threat to Yoruba proverbs. This implies an alteration, modification or shift in behavior, attitude, social institutions and social structures. Most Yorùbá social structures and institutions such as family, marriage and kinship systems are threatened by the wave of modernization, technology development and globalization.

For instance, the value system as contained in Yoruba proverbs has gradually been eroded as issues like respect for elders, chastity, integrity and morality are considered archaic, while wrong values like disrespect, nudity, fraud, kidnapping and abduction, corruption are enriched in the society. All these and many more are the negative effects of non-usage of Yorùbá proverbs.

Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, the essence of speech communication among Yoruba with applications of proverbs is targeted at modulating societal actions. In addition, as such, the importance of proverbs lies more on its being compressed traditional truth and ideologies easily transmitted and con-currently in use. With many benefits attached to Yorùbá proverbs, all hands should be on deck to ensure its preservation. Documenting Yorùbá proverbs in textbooks, memoirs and other electronic gadgets is not enough. Efforts should be made to enforce its usage in the day-to-day activities, especially among the youths.

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