

## *The Place of Yorùbá Proverbs in the Understanding of Yorùbá Philosophy and Education.*

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The Yorùbá value proverbs, philosophy and education very highly because they are deep-rooted in the culture of the people. For instance, proverbs often occur informally in everyday discourse and in oratory to garnish, conceal or hint. The cultural affinity between the speaker and the audience makes the proverbial utterance meaningful to the hearer in the society. Like other people in the universe, Yorùbá philosophy is 'life affirming'. That is Yorùbá traditional philosophy has to do with life, perhaps in human beings, animals, rocks, soil and plants. The Yorùbá are very observant and the events in their immediate environment have a considerable impact on their mode of thought. In Yorùbá society, the system of education is inherent in Yorùbá oral literature such as proverbs, poems, songs, folktales and riddles. The main function of Yorùbá orature is to influence the behaviour of people in the society. The concept of 'Omólúàbí {the well-behaved one} is very prominent, and that the principle of Yorùbá education is based on this. Since proverbs are said to represent people's philosophy and instructions are given through proverbs, it means then that, proverbs can fulfil their philosophical and educational functions in the society.

### **1. Introduction**

Proverbs, philosophy and education are universal themes of knowledge. They could be found in aspects of everyday verbal communication. The cultural affinity between the audience and the speaker or user of proverbs makes such proverbial communication meaningful in the society. The Yorùbá value proverbs very highly because they are deeply rooted in the culture of the people. Referring to the tradition of proverbs, Bryant (1945) writes:

Proverbs, since the time of Aristotle, have been depicted as remnant saved from the "wrecks and ruins of ancient philosophy by reason of their conciseness and cleverness".

This idea is further elaborated by Whiting (1932), who describes the proverb as:

A short saying of philosophical nature, of great antiquity, the product of the masses rather than of the classes, constantly applicable, and appealing because it bears a semblance of the universal truth.

Sinclair (1945) defines philosophy as:

The attempt to understand the universal and ourselves and our place in the universe, whether for theoretical interest or for material practical purposes' is

compatible with the concept of geography as the 'philosophy of place'.

He explains further that all humans could be regarded as philosophers simply because they all have some views about the universe. In essence, philosophers abound in any culture and at all settings as well as in a variety of disciplines. Awoniyi (1978) talks of education when he notes that:

No educational system stands apart from the society which establishes it. It has purposes that must be achieved if that society is to continue in the right direction. Education is meant to be embedded in that society, drawing inspiration and nourishment from it, and in turn, contributing to societal opportunities for growth and renewal. Consequently, education may be formal or informal. Informal education is synonymous with traditional or indigenous education which has its pattern, and is flexible enough to conserve and transmit the culture, tradition and experience of the particular society.

From the foregoing argument, education does not necessarily have to be culture and tradition oriented.

Some writers have worked on various aspects of Yorùbá proverbs. For instance, Agbaje (1995) discusses the functions of proverbial songs in Yorùbá society. Ajibola (1947) arranges samples of Yorùbá proverbs alphabetically. Some of his collections have English translations. Beier and Gbadamosi (1959) examine the ideas contained in some aspects of Yorùbá proverbs as reflecting the people's philosophy or worldviews. Bamgbose (1968) discusses the form of Yorùbá proverb. Ogunwale (1998) illustrates the dynamics and mechanism of metaphor in Yorùbá proverb's as an extension of human capacity. Oladeji (1988) analyses Yorùbá proverbs as language signposts in Yorùbá pragmatic ethics. Owomoyela (1981) discusses Yorùbá proverbs as a means of exploring an African philosophy of social communication. While Yusuf (1994 & 1997) examines the ethical value of women's speech in Yoruba proverbs. It is observed that none of the above writers attempts to discuss the role of Yorùbá proverbs in the understanding of Yorùbá philosophy and education. Therefore, this paper sets out to focus on this neglected area of study.

## **2. The Yorùbá Perception of Proverbs, Philosophy and Education**

### **2.1 Proverbs**

In Yorùbá language, unlike some other languages of African, a succinct distinction does exist in terminology between proverb and other types of literary expression. Proverbs often occur informally in day-to-day discourse/conversation. The cultural affinity between the speaker and the audience makes the proverbial utterance/expression meaningful to the hearer in the society. In face-to-face interaction the spoken word acquires extra influence. Thus the Yoruba proverbs says that "Eyin lòrò, bó bá ti balè, yòò fò" (Speech is an egg, when dropped, it shatters). Yorùbá people hold proverbs in high esteem because they are regarded as constituting the wisdom lore of the society. This is attested to by Olatunji (1984) when he says:

Because the proverbs are considered to be traditional and originate from the observation of natural phenomena and human relations, old people are regarded as a repository of proverbs.

Therefore, anyone who cannot apply proverbs effectively is considered to be unwise. Hence, the popular saying that:

Bí òwe bí òwe la ní lùlù ògídìgbo; ológbón ní jó o; omoràn ní mò ón  
(The war drum is cryptically beaten like a proverb; it is only the wise who dance to it; and the informed who can decode it).

It is worth noting that when problems seem intractable, people often bring in proverbs to resolve them. For instance:

Òwe lesin òro; bí òrò bá sonù, owe la a fii wá a  
(Proverbs are horses mounted to solve a problem; when the truth is elusive, it is proverbs we use to discover it).

From the foregoing statements, one notices the Yorùbá perception of the proverb as a functional as well as an aesthetic device which often becomes an agent of vitality in the realm of verbal discourse. Besides, like other people elsewhere, the use of proverbs is not restricted to verbal communication. In Yorùbá culture, proverbial discourse may be set in motion through the drum and other instrumental media. For example, visual symbolism in clothes, wall designs, walking-stick of a chief or royalty, may be attributes of proverbs.

### **2.2 Philosophy**

The Yorùbá people philosophize in various contexts. As a people, the Yorùbá view the universe and their place in it from their own traditional perspectives. Ojo (1966) is of the opinion that Yorùbá philosophy, for the sake of exemplification may conveniently be divided into three parts: geosophy, material philosophy and linguistic philosophy. Like other people in the world, Yorùbá philosophy is 'life affirming'. That is, Yorùbá traditional philosophy has to do with life, perhaps in human beings, animals, rocks, soil and plants. In order to have a clear understanding of the universe, there arise some questions relating to the immediate Yorùbá environment. An attempt to answer such questions may compel the Yorùbá to be very observant of their environment. The events in the immediate Yorùbá environment have a

considerable impact on their mode of thinking. This fact is expressed in Denneth (1910) when he wrote:

By the fear of death and the desire to propagate and live, the Yorùbá's thought were driven to the study in nature of the phenomena that caused death or helped him live and propagate... I am wonderstruck that man, governed more or less by his senses and environment, should have instinctively built up trains of thought and ways expressing them that have led native philosophers to divide their mythology into certain well-defined categories.

Viewing the whole thing, one can see today that, through scientific observation, the study of nature has caused a firm relationship between the environment of Yorùbáland and the philosophy of its people. The Yorùbá traditional philosophy has reached a remarkable level because of the social structure of the society which is a guarantee of freedom, peace, stability, law and order, and the flourish of a class of elders, the repositories of the society's wisdom and knowledge.

### **2.3 Education**

It is general belief of the Yorùbá people that life commences from the womb. Thus education oral traditions such as the use of proverb, poems, songs, folktales and riddles start right from there. To ensure the well adjusted membership of the Yoruba society, right from the womb, the Yoruba parents talk to their children and educate them. They want the child to grow up and be an "omoluwabi." According to Awoniyi (1975):

To be an omoluabi is to be of good character in all its ramifications. Good character in the Yorùbá sense includes respect for old age, loyalty to one's parents and local traditions, honest in all public and private dealings, devotion to duty, readiness to assist the needy and the infirm, sympathy, sociability, courage, and itching desire for work and many other desirable qualities.

The sole focus of Yorùbá education has always been to foster good character in the individual and to make him or her a responsible member of the society. Borrowing the words of Mounouni (1968):

Traditional education, therefore, embrace character-building as well as the development of physical aptitudes, the acquisition of those moral qualities felt to be an integral part of manhood, and the acquisition of the knowledge and techniques needed by all men if they are to take an active part in social life in its various forms.

It is worth noting that in the Yorùbá cultural setting, traditional education is a life-long process.

### **3. Analysis**

Some proverbs will be analysed here to show the interrelationship that exist between them on one hand and between them and philosophy and education.

1. Eni tí yóò jeoyin inú àpáta kì í wo enu àáké

(He who would extract the honey embedded in a rock should take no notice of the wear and tear of the axe-blade used).

The above proverb indicates that no great success can be easily achieved. The Yorùbá are of the opinion that 'rock honey' is the sweatiest thing that could be found. Therefore, it could be compared to success which cannot also be easily come by. The Yorùbá equally regard the rock as the hardest object in the environment. Permanence is consequently symbolized by it. The graves of ancestors and sacred spots were marked by rock. This proverb is often used to educate people in the society that for one to achieve great heights in life, one needs to endure and be hardworking. Also, the above proverb represents a people's philosophy. It also reveals the experience gathered in one's environment over the years.

2. Èmí àbàtà ní ímúodò ní sà.  
(The influence of the swamp makes the river flow).

The above proverb is an indication that the Yorùbá people traced rivers to their sources. They also realise that there could be no rivers without springs. The Yorùbá believe that the spring is the source of the river. The above proverb can be regarded as a philosophical representation of people acquired over the years. The experience thus gained over the years in the environment is often used in the education of people in the society. It is established in the above proverb that one needs the support of others in order to achieve one's goals in the society.

3. B́í eye kò bá ní f́óye ní r̀an.  
Ojú s̀ánm̀a t́o eye f̀o láifara kanra.  
(If a bird would not provoke the other, the sky is wide enough for both to fly without let or hindrance).

From the foregoing, it could be realised that as there are countless birds, so also is there sufficient space or provision for each of them to move freely in the sky. In the Yorùbá society, this type of proverb is often used to educate people to shun whatever act of violence that may disturb the peace and progress of others. This philosophical view is garnished in Yorùbá proverb and put into practice for the smooth running of the society.

4. Oro p̀úp̀o k̀o k̀un agb̀on.  
(Many words do not fill a basket).

The above proverb shows that action speaks louder than voice. This type of proverb is often applicable to people noted for making empty boasts. In the Yorùbá society, an unorganised person, or someone with the tendency to be aimless in his or her endeavours might be called to order with such proverbial expression. It has been argued in some quarters (see Afolayan, 2004) that philosophical thoughts inherent in this kind of proverb accounts for its acceptability in traditional education in the society.

5. B́í owó k̀o bá te è̀èk̀u ida, a k̀í bè̀èr̀e ikú t́o pa baba eni  
(Until a man has seized the hilt of a sword, he should not enquire into the cause of his father's death).

The above proverb indicates the adequate preparation is highly necessary before one tries to attempt any venture. In other words, one should not boast of anything until one has positioned him or herself in the environment that is conducive to success. This type of proverb is used in the society to educate people with premature aims and objectives on certain things.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The philosophical view inherent in the proverb makes it acceptable and functional in the Yoruba society. Abstract issues are expressed by the Yorùbá through proverbs based on the familiar ideas taken from their immediate environment. Also, the Yorùbá often display their skills at coining philosophical and poetical proverbs around such things as hills, rivers, birds, animals and domestic tools. This invariably makes proverbs represent the essence of the people's worldview. That is, proverbs simply represent the totality of the people's folk life. It is also realised that sometimes Yorùbá proverbs are potentially known to the individual hearer and are equally free for all to use on suitable occasions. This process makes it easy to give instruction through proverbs and consequently to provide formal education as well as transmit cultural tradition through the words of the mouth. Without any doubt, we know that proverbs fulfil philosophical and educational functions in the Yoruba society.

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