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## **PROVERBS, VALUES AND THE DEVELOPMENT QUESTION IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA: A CASE STUDY OF YORUBA PROVERBS**

**Abstract:** If culture is a veritable instrument of development, if language is a carrier of culture and if the relationship between language and culture is like that between two sides of the same coin, then the role of proverb as a metaphorical use of language cannot be overemphasized in any development discourse. The paper examines this invaluable nexus between language and development, with particular emphasis on how the use of proverb and its lessons could help revive moral/cultural values, and thus be used as a veritable instrument of development. This is done by taking as a foil a content analysis of some of Yoruba proverbs, particularly the proverbs whose subject matter is centered on development-related themes such as care for others and cooperation, leadership qualities, advice, reproach and punishment, conflict resolution and warning.

**Keywords:** proverbs, development, culture, language, contemporary Africa

### **Introduction**

Africa is trapped in serious socio-political cum economic problems that has firmly placed her among the group known 'underdeveloped' continents. Indeed, the living condition in Africa depicts every of the indices of underdevelopment, and there seems to be no way out of this menace that

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ranges from ethnic/religious violence, political unrest, lack of moral value, lack of visionary leadership and wanton poverty. Scholars have blamed the woe on Africa's colonialization (see cf. Rodney, 1981), while others have blamed it on leadership and followership (Obasanjo, 1993).

However, in her attempt to achieve the much needed development goals, African leaders and scholars on Africa have resolved to take a cursory look at the phenomenon of language pattern with a view to see if certain elements of it could be exploited to achieve the feat (Ali Mazrui and Alamin M. Mazrui 1998, Nguigi 1986). Within the confine of this intellectual tradition, the philosophers of language and linguist experts whose works have had serious take on the analysis of language as the sole occupation of philosopher laid emphasis on the explorative and utilitarian use of language in achieving development (See Eva Engholm: 1994, Sapir Edward: 1963, Ayo Ogunsiji: 2001 and Wallnock, J. 1969 and A. J Ayer 1969). The trust of their work is that language is key to the heart of a people and to appreciate a people there is the need to understand their language because it is the hallmarks of a people's identity, needed in boosting the self-confidence, motivation and innovation that drive development. Along this line, (Sapir:1963) argued that language does not exist independent of culture, the relationship of language with culture is dual in nature in the sense that language is part of culture as well as a vehicle for the expression of culture. As an essential part of culture, language is more than a means of communication. According to Wallnork (1969:12) language is used:

- i. For phatic communion i.e as a social regulator
- ii. As an instrument of action
- iii. To convey order and information
- iv. To influence people
- v. To enable self-expression, and
- vi. To embody and enable thought.

If this is the case, it becomes obvious that no human society can exist to experience development without effective, explorative use of and development of its language. In looking at the utilitarian value and explorative use of language, Ogunsiji (2001:165-189) opined that no other language can effectively displace one's mother tongue, and that there is obvious danger in over-blowing the importance of lingua franca at the expense of the indigenous languages.

Aside the efforts of linguistic school of thought, contemporary African philosophers are of the opinion that philosophy can only live up to its pragmatic role in social reconstruction in Africa if she takes cognizance of the importance of indigenous language. Thus, some African scholars/philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu and Olusegun Oladipo have argued for a serious need for development catalyst called conceptual decolonization (see Kwasi Wiredu:1995, Olusegun Oladipo:1995). It is this tradition that Nguigi Wa

Thiong'o belonged when he resolved to do scholarship solely in African language before being translated into other languages. The motivation for this is that, development can only take place within the social reality with which language is the sole determinant, obvious of this is how nations like China have had her development culture driven, thereby attaining such development feat with the deliberate and concerted help of developing her indigenous culture, tradition and language.

In the linguistic anthropology parlance, we agreed with the position that culture and Language are so intertwined in such a way that the death of language automatically mark the death of a culture that such language carried. If this is so, couple with the fact that culture is a prismatic paradigm for development, with the exclusive manner in which the indigenous language are being played down for the exclusivist employment of foreign languages, culture and value system, it is appropriate to conclude that there is a need for a radical revival of the indigenous language and its strong metaphorical used which include proverbs, which are supposedly endowed with the survival instinct and value of the people.

### **The Nature of Proverb**

Proverbs are the simple truths of life that contain the ethical, moral values of a society, (Taylor, 2003:13). Aside the aesthetic and figurative value in proverbs, it presents a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. Its beauty and some delight is that what it says is readily perceived and accepted as an incontrovertible truth. The truth presented in the proverbs is not logical, a priori or intuitive truth: it is often an empirical fact based upon and derived from the people's experience of life, human relationship and interaction with the world of nature (Yusuf, 1997:120).

Examining the role and essence of proverbs, it is often said that, examining the connection by using proverbs is based on the belief that traditional proverbs are truly the prismatic verbal expression of the essence of folk culture" (see Nicolaisen 1994, Shimkin and Sanjuan 1953, Taylor 1981, Oladeji 1988 and Yusuf 1996). This perception of proverbs is related to Seitel's (1981:124) definition of proverbs as short, traditional statements used to further some social end (see also Egbemogbe 1980, Meider 1989). Also, (Adeyemi, 2005:60) noted that proverbs remain from time immemorial until today a very powerful and effective instrument for the transmission of culture, philosophy, social morality and values and the sensibility of the people.

In essence, their values do not lie only in what they reveal of the thoughts of the people; proverbs are models of compressed or forceful language that

make people behave according to norms and mores of the land. Other than their powerful verbal expression, proverbs have proved to be of great relevance/benefit to modern man. This is due to the fact that users with gifts of creativity who are familiar with its techniques may create new ones to avoid hackneyed expression. This point of view explains, perhaps, Chomskyan view that all normal native speakers are capable of generating novel sentences that they have never generated before.

The above reference to proverb is contextualized in metaphor, although the reference is more literary than linguistic, the import of the interactional nature of proverbs, its universal and experiential relevance is notable. Thus, Yoruba proverbs are seen as:

"products of people's socio-cultural, historical, philosophical and geographical experience. Proverbs are used by the Yoruba people not only as 'owe l'esin oro, oro l'esin owe, bi oro ba nu, owe ni a fi wa', meaning a proverb is a horse which can carry you swiftly to the discovery of ideas sought: this 'horse' is being constantly pressed into the service of elders during deliberations in council and at home settling disputes as a relevant proverbs throws light on the subject and drives points home: that proverb is not only the vehicle of the expression of truth, religion, morality, but also dominant occupation, and other practices which reflect their day-to-day living. (Adeyemi 2005:61; see also Adebayo, 1979:55-66, Isaac Delano, 1976:ix)

Numerous of such proverbs on which this study is based are from day-to-day anonymous sources. However numerous of the written collections of proverbs from Adebayo's *Owe in Yoruba fun Ile-Eko Giga* (1979:55-66), Delano's *Owe L'esin Oro; Yoruba Proverbs- Their Meaning and Usage*, and Charles Okwelum, 2004: *Drumbeat of Black Africa: a Collection of African Proverbs* are also employed. These hitherto unanalyzed proverbs are analyzed in this work with a view to see how they can be used as a foil to achieve the desired growth and development in Africa. And each of the proverbs is placed under one of the six categories, each of which has a relevant proposition. However, in general, we agree with (Fasiku, 2006:25) that:

"proverbs evolved with the growth and development of the society, it reflects diverse aspects of a people's culture. That indeed, proverbs encapsulate the worldview of a people, and serves as a means of arousing, defining, manifesting and establishing the expectations, aspirations and consciousness of a people. That proverbs serves as a linguistic confirmation of the totality of a people's worldview and the epistemic cognition of this worldview, linked to other aspects of Yoruba worldview".

Considering this and related views, this paper explored systematically the link established between development and language using the Yoruba proverbs; it also delved into how some of the pedagogical elements here can

be exploited for development. Proverbs are intricate part of the Yoruba language, a tonal Niger-Congo language spoken by over 35million people, the majority of who reside in southern Nigeria and southern Benin in West Africa. Yorubas can also be found in Togo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Cuba, Brazil, and Trinidad and Tobago.

### The Proverbial Proposition

**Proposition A:** On the importance of morality, character soundness/uprightness to personal and social development.

The first proposition underlying the moral value for personal and social development is couched thus

*Obinrin so iwa nu oni ohun o lori oko* (Adebayo, 1979)

A lady lacks good character; she claims that destiny avoids her of a husband.

**Implication:** The import of this is that morality/moral uprightness and character soundness is the chief determinant of success in life. It underscores the fact of the uncanny importance of morality to individual and the polity. And, that moral rectitude is the very bane of underdevelopment.

*Iwa l'ewa* (Okwelum, 2004:40)

Morality/character soundness is beauty.

**Implication:** this as well underscores the emphasis laid on moral uprightness.

*suuru baba iwa* (Anonymous)

*suuru se okuta jina* (Delano, 1976:8)

Patience is the chief among character traits.

**Implication:** The underlining principle here is that patience is a virtue that could help solve numerous problems that we confront in our day-to-day activities.

*iwa lorisa ti a ba ti hu si ni fii gbe ni* (Adebayo, 1979:57)

Attitude is god, the way we act determines the kind of support he, the god, gives us.

**Implication:** That destiny is closely connected to the sacredness of behavior, that we get rewarded according to the character of our behavior.

*olofofu kii gba egbaa, ibi ope l'omo* (Adebayo, 1979:59)

Gossiping does not put money into anybody's pocket; all he gets is a thank you.

**Implication:** that it does not pay to be a back-biter, that back-bitterness is a vice. This proverb admonishes that we should shun the bad act.

*agba to je ajeiwehin, yio r'eru re dele* (Adebayo, 1979:59)

That elderly man that refused to be spendthrift must be ready for the poverty laden consequences that come after.

**Implication:** It holds that the elderly must always take cognizance of the needs and right of the young; the young can therefore accord them their due respect.

*ile ni a tin k'eso rode* (Okwelume, 2004:40)

Charity begins at home /or

It is from the house that we take fashion and trend to the town

**Implication:** what this meant is that behavior (good or bad) is learnt from home. Worthy of home is that Yoruba has a clear idea of a difference between house and home, as home is taken to be synonymous to family. This proverb is usually said to shun bad habit from home. It shows the kind of emphasis that the Yoruba laid on the importance of family institution: that family served as the foundation or the prismatic compass for moral upbringing of a child.

*omo ti ko ni iberu nii baje* (Anonymous)

A child that does not have fear remain spoilt.

**Implication:** this means that a level of discipline is needed from a child to be well brought up, so as to help build the moral life of the child.

**Proposition B:** On advice and encouragement

*akii bo sinu omi tan, ki atun maa ke otutu.* (Delano, 1976:155)

You don't get immersed into water and still complain of cold.

This encourages us to face our problem squarely, that man should take the bull by the horn and then find solution to the problem.

*Eni maa j'oyin inu apata, ko nii woe nu aake* (Anonymous)

He who must eat the egg located within the rock must not spare the sharp edge of the axe.

**Implication:** we are encouraged to succeed no matter how rough and tough the road to success is.

*Egan ko ni ki oyin ma dun* (Delano, 1976:158)

That you mock honey does not make it bitter.

**Implication:** that our success would be envied, but we should be steadfast in not allowing it to deter us from making the best out of the situation.

*Orisa tin gbole ko si, apa eni nii gbe ni* (Adebayo, 1979:58)

There is no god that supports a lazy man.

This goes with the Standard English equivalent as 'heaven helps those who help themselves.

*Ogbon j'agbara* (Anonymous)

Wisdom is powerful than might.

**Proposition C:** On Reproach and punishment.

*Eni ti ko ni iya kii da egbo eyin* (Adebayo, 1979:63)

He who does not have a mother must not nurse a wound on his back.

**Implication:** we should not bite more than we can chew and that we should be careful at all instances; and be meticulous about our choices.

*Ohun ti oye ni lo ye ni, okun orun ko ye adiyé* (Anonymous)

What is befitting must be adorned. It is not appropriate to use chain for hen.

**Implication:** that we must endeavour to take cognizance of the social expectations and values that other lay on us.

*Ile ti aba fi ito mo, iri ni o wo* (Anonymous)

The house built of saliva instead of water, would be blown away by mere morning dew

**Implication:** what this translates into is that we should endeavour to make success through legitimate means; it therefore warns that a ill-gotten wealth would always not last and thus we should be wary of success attained via these means.

*Ise loogun ise, apa lara igbonwo ni iye kan eni, bi a koba reni feyin ti, bi ole laari, bi ako ba reni gbokan le, a tera mose eni* (Delano, 1976:12)

Work is the curative medicine for poverty, hand is ones family, arm is ones support, when you don't have support you it seems one is lazy, then it is wise to get hardworking.

**Implication:** this advises us to be hard-working and be self-reliant. In fact, it underscores the hallmark of the philosophy of self-reliance that scholars like Ogunmodede admonishes as a panacea to African problems. (see Ogunmodede, 2001)

*Bi iyawo ole ba dagba, olowo nii gbe* (Delano, 1976:128)

*Olowo gba iyawo ole, ole nse laila* (Anonymous)

When the wife of a lazy man grows old, a rich man takes it.

The rich snatched the wife of a lazy man, the lazy man screams god! God!!

**Implication:** this proverb spurs us into action, it opens one's eye to the fact that the punishment for laziness is ridiculous and difficult to bear.

**Proposition D:** On Warning.

*Ati kekere laati pa eekan iroko, toba d'agba tan apa onii ka* (Delano, 1976:137)

An Iroko tree is better uprooted when it is still young, for it becomes a serious problem and threat when it is allowed to grow old before we think of uprooting it.

**Implication:** at the suspect of a problem, we must endeavour to nip it in the bud before such problem becomes a major crisis in our lives. This implies that people must not watch over a problem to build up. It therefore encourages us to be steadfast in making sure that we live a peaceful and trouble-free life.

*Igi ganganran ma gunni loju, okeere laa tin yee* (Delano 1976:127)

For a dangerous stick not to make me blind, I must endeavour to dodge it from afar.

**Implication:** this means that we must avoid trouble whenever it is sighted. We must not be myopic but visionary.

*Omode o mo oogun o n pe l'efo* (Anonymous)

A kid does not recognize a concoction, he calls it vegetable.

*Sebi o ti mo, elewa sapon* (Adebayo, 1979:55)

Cut your coat according to your size.

*Agada o mo ori alagbede* (Delano, 1976:129)

A sword does not recognize the head of a smith.

*Agboju l'ogun fi ara re f'sin ta* (Anonymous)

He who bank on inheritance, leave himself to the mercy of poverty.

*Aguntan toba ba aja rin yio je igbe* (Anonymous)

A sheep that flock with goat shall eat faeces.

*Eni leku meji a p'ofu* (Delano: 1976:9)

He that chase two rat shall lose the two.

**Implication:** that we should endeavour to be focus, because lack of focus is the root of failure

*Ina esisi kii joni leemeji* (Delano: 1976:12)

Once bitten twice shy.

**Proposition E:** On Cooperation, care for others and the interdependence of individual and corporate group.

*Omode gbon agba gbon lafi da ile ife* (Oladipo, 2006:79)

*Owo omode o to pepe, t'agbalagba o wo kengbe* (Oladipo, 2006:79)

Ile-Ife, the cradle, was founded based on the wisdom of both the young and the old.

**Implication:** That the world is what it is to satisfy the yearnings of all, not taking into consideration of shortcomings age, sex and race. Worthy of note here is that, the idea of universal adult suffrage, human rights and justice finds



relevance in this wisdom. Also, it underscores the importance of the democratic ideals which has cooperation and tolerance as its values.

*Agbajo owo ni a nfi so aya*

Unity is strength.

*Ajeji owo kan ko gberu dori*

*Eni kan kii je awa de* (Oladipo, 2006:79)

A single hand cannot lift a luggage to the head.

An individual does not make a community.

**Implication:** These underscore the concept of the communalist programme in the traditional African setting; implying that, the welfare of others is a responsibility of all members of a community.

*Ai kowo rin ejo ni n fi iku pa won* (Oladipo, 2006:79)

Lack of unity in the community makes it susceptible to danger

*Bi odede odun bii igbe ni ilu ri* (Oladipo, 2006:79)

If the home front is not good, the township would be a mess.

*Ti aba ta ara ile eni lopo, ao le ri ra l'owon* (Delano, 1976)

*Ti aba s'oko s'oja, ara ile eni nii ba* (Delano, 1976)

When you deceive your brothers so as to sell them off cheaply, you cannot afford it even when you are to buy it in higher price.

When you throw stone into the market place, it hits your neighbour.

**Implication:** these exhaust the sacredness of brotherhood; they underscore the fact that the first principle of humanity is to be our brother's keeper. It exhausts the gains accruable when we take note of the fact that we should be our neighbours and fellowmen as ourselves; that any evil deed done to another person is likely to come back to that person. They can be likened to the law of Karma as well.

*Ajoje o dun bi enikan oni* (Delano, 1976)

Sharing is not sweet when one of the parties is lacking.

**Implication:** this emphasizes the underlining law of reciprocity that underpins every relationship; and that each and everyone must have something to contribute to the pool of what to share, not just a receiver but also strive to be a giver.

**Proposition G:** On Responsive Leadership.

*Agba kii wa loja ki ori omo titun o wo* (Adebayo, 1979:59)

The elders cannot be present in the market place and still experience a phenomenon of wrong child birth.

*Enu agba ni obi tin gbo* (Delano, 1976)

It is on the mouth of the elderly that the kola gets ripe.

**Implication:** what this meant is that the elders are respected for their wealth of experience. This experience is needed in the market place of existence so as to be able to tailor the affairs rightly. Thus, greatness can be achieved by an idiot just as immortality can be achieved by a nonentity. But true greatness and worthwhile immortality can be achieved by selected few who make use of the experience of others.

*Ti omode ba ni aso bii agba, ko le ni akisa to agba* (Anonymous)

If a child has clothe like the old, he can not have rags than the old.

Experience is the best teacher.

*Inu ikoko dudu l'eko funfun tin jade* (Anonymous)

It is from the black that produces white pap.

*Alagbara ma mero baba ole* (Delano, 1976)

The powerful but less thoughtful is the chief among the lazy ones.

**Implication:** the proverbs above emphasized the power and the importance of knowledge in development strategies. Like Francise Bacon, it says that knowledge is power.

*Ori ade ni iyonu* (Anonymous)

Head crown has trouble.

Uneasy lays the head that wears crown.

**Implication:** there are a lot troubles and responsibilities that come with the position of leadership.

## On Proverbs and African Development

African proverbs should be studied with the intension to show their logical structure with the assumption and their implications for development, (see Oladipo, 1992:20, Oladipo 2009:105). Looking at the interconnectedness of culture, language and development, we cannot but reiterate the essential role of culture/language in development as identified by Wilhelm Abraham (1963) that, culture function as a catalyst for development in these distinct ways.

- a. as a means of creating order
- b. as an instrument of the achievement of social integration
- c. to make events in human experience intelligible and significant and as regulator of change.

Thus, worthy of mote is that, it is Africa's inability to come to terms with these intricate cultural and historical elements that has contributed immensely to rendering her developmental quest a futile exercise; because no continent can develop without its cultural values. Thus, there is an urgent need for a rejuvenation of the cultural elements that would enhance development, if Africa would cease to be a dark continent. This would fade the argument of

those who argued against African moral and rational capacity, and underscore the fact that Africa has a value system that is capable of making its world humane and worth living.

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing reiterate the truth about proverbs that, it not only makes the people conform to desired rules, mores and tradition of the land as well as teach a method of expressing life which is aesthetically flavoured but also that, if more research and documentation is carried out on proverbs, a good level of development would be achieved, (Osakwe 2013:30). Soyinka (1998:19) also corroborated this position when he underscored the need to deliberately inculcate and imbibe right social values as sine qua non for people-centered development; in his words, "culture is produced and the producers of culture at all levels should endeavour to make culture work for the purpose of development". Thus, use of proverbs should be encouraged, and as such, producers of culture must endeavour to entrench the pedagogical aspects of proverbs in the day-today activities of young and old Africans. We agreed with Adeyemi (2008:30) that, proverbs enabled people to conform to desired rules, mores and traditions of the land as well as teach method of expression of the realities of life with aesthetic flavor. Conclusively, Olubunmi (2010:16) was right to have noted that, proverbs essentially emphasized the values of good conduct, respect for elders, warning and advice, cordiality and cooperation for peaceful co-existence which are hallmark of ingredient for development. Thus, we cannot but hold that, the foregoing extrapolations on Yoruba proverbs is a reaffirmation of the fact that, if concerted efforts are made to entrench effective pragmatic teaching and learning of Yoruba proverbs in homes and in schools across levels, they would be veritable ingredients and instruments in quenching our thirst for quality, people-centered development.

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**IZREKE, VREDNOSTI I PITANJE RAZVOJA U SAVREMENOJ  
AFRICI: SLUČAJ JORUBA POSLOVICA**

Ako je kultura instrument razvoja, jezik nosilac kulture, a odnos između jezika i kulture kao odnos dve stranice istog novčića, onda ni uloga poslovice kao metaforičke upotrebe jezika ne može biti prenaplašena ni u kom diskursu o razvoju. Ovaj rad se bavi neprocenjivom vezom između jezika i razvoja, sa posebnim naglaskom na tome kako se upotreba poslovice i njihove pouke mogu iskoristiti da pomognu u oživljavanju moralnih/kulturnih vrednosti, i kako mogu biti vredan instrument razvoja. Ovo se može učiniti tako što bi se kao matrica uzele one Joruba izreke koje se tiču tema bliskih razvoju poput saradnje, liderskih sposobnosti, brige o drugima, saveta, kritike i kazne, razrešenja sukoba i upozoravanja.

**Ključne reči:** poslovice, razvoj, kultura, jezik, savremena Afrika.