

Language, culture and the conceptualization of character in selected Yoruba proverbs

Abstract

This paper investigates the cultural import of proverbs in contemporary Yoruba society in Nigeria. Proverbs are short, witty, popular expressions that contain morals, truth, socio-cultural precepts and heritage of a particular group of people. They often address the heart of a discourse in any given context truthfully and objectively. Every ethnic group in Nigeria (and indeed the world over) has its set of proverbs, maxims and popular sayings formulated and collected over several generations. Proverbs are carriers of culture; building blocks for wise living and good moral life. They convey nuances of culture and through their transmission from one generation to another, ensure the continued relevance of such nuances (Ademilokun, 2014). Proverbs keep us grounded and give us insights into wise living and help us make good decisions thereby satisfying the concept of moralities in African realities. One common thread that runs through world religions and cultures is the universal affirmation of the cultivation and practice of “good character”. This concept, popularly known in the Yoruba milieu as “omoluabi” is believed to be responsible for fundamental contributions of morality to the overall human flourishing and wholeness of Yoruba societies and people. Proverbs are an important cultural element in Yoruba ideology. It is a veritable component of ‘ways of speaking’ among the constituents of Yoruba speech communities across age groups, as well as social and occupational categories of speakers. Yoruba proverbs are one of the tools for communicating, negotiating and practising moralities. They constitute the foundation on which moral positions can be taken and established. Using, sixty purposively selected proverbs that deal with the Yoruba concept of “Omoluabi” (good character), this paper employs a socio-cultural linguistic approach to show how the rhetorical force of the proverbs can help reveal the ills in our society and reclaim some of the virtues of “Omoluabi” which have hitherto been lost to forces such as globalization, unfettered individualism, toxic ambition and nonchalant attitude.

Introduction

Nothing defines a culture as distinctly as its language, and the element of language that best sums up a society's values and beliefs is its proverbs. Proverbs are short, witty, popular expressions that contain morals, truth, socio-cultural precepts and heritage of a particular group

of people. They often address the heart of a discourse in any given context truthfully and objectively. A proverb is a piece of folk wisdom expressed with terseness and charm and characterized by the economic use of words, sharpness of focus and a touch of literary/poetic beauty. Proverbs reflect the community's world view by projecting her beliefs, moral, attitudes and inner life.

A proverb is an unquestionable statement, transmitted by tradition from one generation to another. Proverbs are believed to be inherited from the ancestors and used to communicate a dogmatic wisdom. Proverbs constitute one of the privileged deposit of popular wisdom and philosophy. They are the library of general African Culture (Tchimboto, 2017:7) A proverb is a simple and concrete saying popularly known and repeated. It expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity, and are often metaphorical.

The Importance of Proverbs in the African Culture

Every ethnic group in Africa and the world over has its set of proverbs, maxims and popular sayings formulated and collected over several generations. Proverbs reflect the community's world view by projecting her beliefs, moral, attitudes and inner life. They are found in every language community and constitute a very important category in African folklore. African proverbs offer wisdom and poetry in just one sentence. Even though proverbs are universal and everyone can relate to them, they are also uniquely African and provides insight into African cultures. African proverbs can convey wisdom, truth, a discovery of ideas, as well as life lessons.

The Yoruba are mostly found in the South Western region of Nigeria even though, over the years, they have migrated to other parts of the world – Togo, Benin Republic, Cote D’voire and some parts of Brazil, among other places. Proverbs are the poetry and the moral science of the Yorùbá nation (Ajibola, 1979). Yoruba proverbs are not only just a significant part of the daily life of the Yorùbá people, they constitute a rich integral part of the linguistic repertoire of the speech community (Ehineni, 2016). The importance of proverbs in Yoruba context is underscored in the Yoruba proverb that says "Owe l'esin oro, bi oro ba sonu, owe ni a fi nwa a" (A proverb is a horse which can carry you swiftly to the discovery of ideas sought). During deliberations among elders in council and at home settling disputes, a relevant proverb throws light on the subject and drives home the points. In the Yoruba society, no one can be considered educated or qualified to take part in communal discussions unless he is able to quote the

proverbs suitable for each situation. (Delano, 1976). According to Sheba (2006), Yoruba proverbs are a condensed form of the wisdom of the people accumulated over the ages through a careful observation of everyday experiences involving human beings, animals, nature, natural phenomena and social events.

One common thread that runs through world religions and cultures is the universal affirmation of the cultivation and practice of “good character”. This concept, popularly known in the Yoruba milieu as “omoluabi” is believed to be responsible for fundamental contributions to overall human flourishing and wholeness of Yoruba societies and people. Proverbs are an important cultural element in Yoruba ideology. It is a veritable component of ‘ways of speaking’ among the constituents of Yoruba speech communities across age groups, as well as social and occupational categories of speakers. The Yoruba people are moralistic. Many of the Yoruba ideas on religion, morality and courtesy are woven into proverbs. It is therefore expected that many Yoruba proverbs will be laden with thoughts on good living and high moral standards.

Functions of Proverbs

Proverbs remain a most powerful and effective instrument for the transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people from one generation to another. The reason for this efficacy of proverbs is that it is an aphorism, a wise saying based upon people's experience, and is a reflection of the social values and sensibility of the people.

A collection of the proverbs of a community/nation/society represents the ethnography of the people, capable of providing a penetrating picture of the people's way of life, their philosophy, their criticism of life, moral truths and social values. Through proverbs, the tradition culture and norms of a group of people can be preserved. Not only are proverbs used to make effective points, they are also used to embellish speeches and add colour to everyday conversations (Akanbi, 2015). Proverbs are essential to life and language. Without proverbs, language would be like skeleton without flesh; body devoid of soul (Ashipu, 2013:11)

Whenever there is doubt about an accepted pattern of behaviour, doubt about a stipulated line of action, or traditional norms are threatened, there are always proverbs and indeed tales or myths to vouch, illuminate and buttress the wisdom of the traditional code of conduct. Proverbs help to strengthen tradition and contribute to the life continuity of the given society, and the

individual who lives in it. Proverbs are carriers of culture, they convey the nuances of culture and by their transmission from one generation to another, they ensure the continued relevance of such nuances (Ademilokun, 2014).

A proverb is a tool to teach people to practice ethical value and sociable behaviours. Proverbs constitute one of the privileged deposit of popular wisdom and philosophy. They are the library of general African culture (Tchimboto, 2017:7). Proverbs can be used to ‘...recall particular events in the life of the community which created them and in which they are used’. These events include wars, battles, famines or pestilences and other social experiences that are characteristic of such a community (Delano, 1973:77).

Literature Review

A number of scholars have made fruitful efforts to demonstrate the value and the importance of proverbs among the Yorubas and other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Delano’s (1973) paper makes a passing reference to the significance of Yoruba proverbs as one of the sources of Yoruba history. Udoidem’s (1984) paper examines the epistemological significance of proverbs among the Ibibios in Nigeria. Using an eclectic approach, Ojoade (2004) classifies Yoruba proverbs under religious, moral and psychological, environmental and climatic proverbs, oriental and occidental borrowing of proverbs. Adeleke’s (2009) study illustrates the value of proverbs to Yoruba historiography, using the concept of globalisation as a launch pad.

Using Eco’s concept of ‘semiotics of Metaphor’, Daramola (2013) attempts an exploratory categorization of aspects of the semiotic systems of English and Yoruba. Ademilokun’s (2014) paper focuses on Yoruba proverbs and the anti-corruption crusade in Nigeria. Dickson & Mbosowo (2014) paper examines the semantic import of African proverbs about women and their status as depicted by selected proverbs and wise sayings from several ethnic groups across the continent. Ehineni’s (2016) study, a discourse and structural analysis of Yorùbá proverbs collected from oral interviews and native Yorùbá texts, shows that proverbs are a culturally and linguistically rich significant part of the Yorùbá speech community.

Objectives

This paper aims to:

Examine the knowledge of Yoruba proverbs which can help Yoruba people get a better moral commitment;

Analyse the traditional wisdom deposited in Yoruba proverbs in order to proffer solutions for current social and cultural problems.

Investigate Yoruba proverbs that can be appropriated as a tool for promoting and improving good morals and ethics.

Methodology

Proverbs used for analysis in this study were drawn from written text and journals. In addition, different informants volunteered some proverbs, while the researcher also took advantage of being a native speaker and user of Yoruba.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical anchor for this study is Cultural Linguistics. Cultural Linguistics is a field of research which explores the interrelationship between language and cultural conceptualizations (Sharifian, 2011, 2017a, 2017b) providing insights into the nature of, and the relationship amongst, cultural cognition, cultural conceptualizations, and language. The analytical framework of Cultural Linguistics provides a number of analytical tools (cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors), referred to as ‘cultural conceptualizations,’ and explores how they are encoded in certain features of human languages and language varieties.

According to Sharifian (2017b), cultural schemas (and sub-schemas) are instantiated and encoded in many aspects of language as they capture beliefs, norms, rules, and expectations of behavior as well as values relating to various aspects and components of experience. Cultural schemas may also provide a basis for pragmatic meanings, in the sense that the knowledge underpinning the enactment and uptake of speech acts, which is knowledge that is assumed to be culturally constructed and therefore shared, can be said to be largely captured in such schemas. Cultural schemas capture pools of knowledge that provide the basis for a significant portion of the encyclopaedic and pragmatic meanings in human languages, and a substantial

foundation for the “common ground”, that is, the knowledge assumed to be shared by the members of a speech community.

Cultural categories (and subcategories) are those culturally constructed conceptual categories (colors, emotions, attributes, foodstuffs, kinship terms, events, etc.) that are primarily encoded in the lexicon of human languages, making particular relationships either more or less salient for the users of any particular language. In English, the word food refers to a category, and a word such as rice is an instance of that category. Usually, categories form networks and hierarchies, in that instances of a category can themselves serve as categories with their own instances (for instance, white rice, jolof rice, ofada rice, etc are all sub-categories of rice).

Cultural metaphors are cross-domain conceptualizations grounded in cultural traditions such as folk medicine, worldview, or a spiritual belief system (see Sharifian et al, 2008). For example, temperature terms, in particular the terms garm ‘warm’ and sard ‘cold’, are used as cultural metaphors in Persian to categorise not only edible things (fish is “cold”, but walnuts are “warm), such as food and fruit, but human nature as well. Thus, individuals may also be characterized as having a hot or a cold “nature”. These categorisations have provided Persian speakers with a kind of folk medicine approach to people’s health problems. Thus, people diagnose each other’s rather mild illnesses as due to a kind of temperament imbalance, such as having had too much “cold” or “hot” food, and the opposite type is often recommended as a kind of remedy. For example, someone may feel lethargic and that can be attributed to the result of eating beef, which is categorised as a “cold” food. The person may then be advised to have some “warm” food to rebalance their digestive system. This advice is consistent with Iranian Traditional Medicine (ITM) and the theory of the four humours, in which temperature concepts play a pivotal role.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Proverb: Iwa ni orisa; bi a ba ti hu u si ni ifi gbe 'ni

Translation: Good character is a deity; it favours one as it is exhibited.

Interpretation: If you have good character, you will benefit from it. As you sow, so will you reap.

Cultural metaphor: In traditional African religion deities are supreme beings that elders regularly pour libations and offer prayers to, giving thanks to them and seeking their blessing. They are also highly venerated and considered guardians of the moral order. To equate good character with a deity, therefore, is to say good character is something to be desired, hallowed and sought after, the same way we seek God.

Proverb: Apa Lara, Igbonwo ni iyekan; bi a o ri eni fehinti bi ole li a nri; bi a ko ri eni gbojule, a tera mo ise eni.

Translation: A man's arms are his relatives, his elbows are his brothers and sisters; if we find no one to lean on, we are like a Lazy man; if we find no one to rely on, we apply ourselves to our work.

Interpretation: people should apply themselves to their work instead of hoping for help from others. (it extols hardwork)

Cultural metaphor: In the traditional African setting, relatives/family are the people you maintain close ties with, exchanging visits, phone calls, letters and email, holiday or birthday gifts and turning to one another for assistance in times of need. Family members are the ones who provide socialization, affection and emotional support. Their functions also include economic, protective, educational, religious and recreational ones. By saying 'a man's arms are his relatives', we are more or less saying that the same way one depends and counts on ones relatives for all manner of support, one should consider ones hands as dependable and reliable tools of labour that will never fail one.

Proverb: Ibi gbogbo ni iro adaba l'orun.

Translation: The dove finds everywhere comfortable (the dove is noted as a bird of peace).
Symbol of peace

Interpretation: A peaceful man is likely to find peace where ever he goes; it is the state of his own mind and thoughts which determine the situation in which he is likely to find himself. (an advice to be a peace-loving individual)

Cultural Metaphor: The dove represents love and peace. A person that is referred to as a dove is usually loving and kind with a good understanding life and problems that others may be having; also very devoted to their goals and loved ones and would go to any length to ensure that others achieve their goals; sacrificial and altruistic nature.

Proverb: Aguntan ti o ba ba aja rin yi o je imi.

Translation: The sheep that moves in the company of dogs will eat excrement (dogs, although very useful in Yoruba land, are considered to be low animals because of their habit of eating human waste. In the olden days many mothers kept dogs specially for the purpose of eating the excrement of their babies)

Interpretation: This is a warning to avoid bad company.

"Evil communications corrupt good manners"

Cultural Metaphor: In Yoruba culture, the sheep is known for its gentility or a times, its sheer stupidity or sluggish intellect while the dog is known for being an uncritical follower (strays easily); also for sexual incontinence/ promiscuity and lack of table manners.

Proverb: Alaso ala ki ilo iso elepo.

Translation: One is clad in fine white clothes (apparel) does not go the stall of a palm-oil seller.

Interpretation: If you have a good name it is unwise to move in bad company. (If you have a good character (alaso ala) you won't hang out with people of questionable or dubious character (elepo))

Cultural Metaphor: In African, including Yoruba culture, white ('ala' or 'funfun') symbolizes purity, innocence and all that is good. The Hausas, for example, believe that white is a symbol of positive and desirable things. In Yoruba colour classification, 'funfun' represents the category of colours which include white (other colours in this category are turquoise, blue, silver, chrome and other icy colours) that connotes peaceful feeling. White is seen as a replica of purity. Therefore, white attire is worn by people who are not expected to participate in or do evil. The gods and goddesses that are described and represented with 'funfun' colours are practically accepted as the 'good ones' In contrast, pupa (which is the colour of palm-oil 'epo') refers to a category of colours that encompasses colours that relate to hot, fiery characteristics such as orange, dark yellow, gold, etc. The colour of fire (as well as palm oil) is red which connotes danger and fearful individuals or creatures. 'Pupa' (red) has the psychological dimension of a dangerous personality who possesses a trait of wickedness and lacks mercy; someone who is passionate about evil, gets angry very easily and whose second nature is evil. The associated deities are the ones involved in carrying out evil. Buildings that

are not meant for the general public (e.g. shrines) are painted red. Examples of such buildings in Yorubaland are the buildings of Orisapopo in Ogbomoso, Obatala in Ila, Oya in Jebba and Irele in Ikirun. (see Oluwole, Ahmad & Ossen, 2013)

Proverb: Fila ko dun bi ki a mo o de; ki a ri owo ra eleya ko to ki oye 'ni

Also: Gele odun bi ka mo we, ka mo we ko to ki oye ni.

Translation: Having a cap is not so pleasant/ as important as knowing how to wear it. Having money to buy eleya cloth is not as important as the fit of apparel on the wearer (There are different ways of wearing a cap in Yorubaland; Eleya is an expensive native fabric).

Interpretation: To reach a position of honour and regard is less important than to know how to maintain the dignity such a position requires. Looking like a dignitary is less important than having dignity that befits the office. Don't just look the part, have the character.

Cultural Metaphor: In Yoruba culture, it is expected that respectable, responsible and wealthy men and women would dress in expensive attires complete with caps (for men) and headpieces (for the women). But we all know that it is not the clothes that make a man or woman. This proverb delves into the core of Yoruba value system, reminding one that the real beauty is the inner beauty and not the outer one. Thus, to emphasize the importance attached to good character, the Yorubas would say: “bíbíre kò se fowó rà” (that is good character/reputation cannot be bought with money).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the inherent principles of ‘omoluabi’, as reflected in selected Yoruba proverbs. The main thrust of the paper is that a cultural re-orientation of Nigerians towards the ideals of the Yoruba philosophy of omoluabi (good character) would bring about positive effects in remoulding the Nigerian society towards a moral path. If the society can go back to the basics, by integrating courses that will teach young Nigerian citizens at the primary and secondary school levels aspects of the Yoruba notion of good character, emphasizing virtues such as patience, respect for elders and constituted authority, selflessness, contentment, dignity in labour and hard work, etc, reflected in many of the Yoruba proverbs, it is very likely that many of our youths will grow up with the right attitude.

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