

Proverbs: A Powerful Tool in Yoruba Indigenous Administration of Community Affairs in Selected Communities of Southwestern States in Nigeria

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Abstract. Yoruba proverbs are regarded as wisdom lore of the society. They are drawn from close observation of life and various experiences of the people in the society. They are regarded as in-controvertible authorities that are indispensable in various forms of verbal interaction and relationship of the people. This paper sought to identify the usefulness of proverbs in day-to-day administration of Yoruba community affairs in a formal system of governance. It also examined the relevance of proverbs among the Yoruba speaking people in the governance of community affairs in the selected communities. The paper analyzes some selected proverbs as they affect the administration of the community affairs in selected communities of southwestern states. These communities are: Ife, Ondo, Abeokuta and Ibadan. The study gave further insight into the knowledge of Yoruba proverbs and also added to the understanding of Yoruba sociology and system of governance as embedded in Yoruba proverb. The study found out that the Yoruba proverbs are also employed as a form of plain statement of fact or a warning to those in governance either to praise, or to guide them in the day to day administration of the community affairs. The study concluded that Yoruba proverbs are repertoire of knowledge and they are used in controlling the affairs of the communities for peaceful co-existence within the community and among communities.

Keywords: Proverbs; indigenous; administration; verbal interaction; and powerful tool

Introduction

Proverbs are wise sayings of the Yoruba in which many of their ideas of religion, morality and courtesy are woven. They are the poetry and moral science of the Yoruba nation. Proverbs are found in almost all verbal discourses, which are drawn from close observation of life and various experiences of the people in time perspective. In Yoruba community, it is believed that it is the vehicle of words hence the saying, “Òwe ṣesin òrò, òrò ṣesin òwe, bí òrò bá sọ̀nù, òwe la fi ń wá a” i.e. proverb is the horse of conversation; conversation is the horse of proverb; when the conversation droops, the proverb picks it up. That is why the Yorubas regard proverbs to have the ability of resolving issues in administration and teaching of the Yoruba social values through the applicability of appropriate proverbs as the case may be. Whitting (1932: 273-307) described proverb as:

A short saying of a philosophic 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.

In essence, proverbs are powerful instruments needed in the administration of community affairs among the Yorubas. Various scholars have worked on various aspect of Yoruba proverbs. Ajibola (1949), Ladipo (1955), Tubi (1955), Fasanya (1962) and Delano (1966) arranged samples of Yoruba proverbs alphabetically. Gbadamosi and Beier (1959) examined the aspects of Yoruba proverbs as reflecting the Yoruba philosophy or world-view. Shobande (1967) classified Yoruba proverbs into categories such as self explanatory, allusive, semantically related and locally derived.

Odunjo (1967) viewed and described the origin of proverbs as, observation of natural phenomena and human relations. Bamgbose (1968) discussed the form of Yoruba proverbs while Yusuf (1994) examined the ethical value of women’s speech in Yoruba proverbs.

Agbaje (2002) and (2006) analysed Yoruba proverbs as a strategy of resolving conflict in Yoruba society and modernization as an agent of neo-traditional Yoruba proverbs respectively. Ajibade (2006) discussed inscriptions of ethics of labor and productivity in Yoruba proverbs and Olujinmi (2012) examined the utilitarian value of Yoruba proverbs to entrepreneurship. This study differs from the previous studies by examining the relevance of proverbs among the Yoruba speaking people in the governance of community affairs in the selected communities of southwestern states of Nigeria, which has not been focused on by any of these scholars.

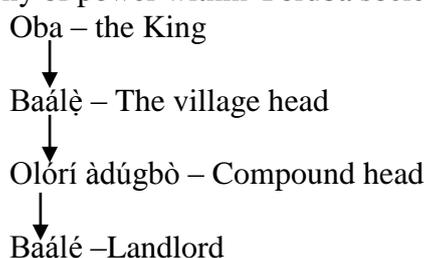
The Yoruba People of Nigeria

The Yoruba people are the largest single ethnic group in Nigeria with a population of about twelve million people out of the total population of about one hundred and fifty million Nigerians. Even some ethnic groups which are not regarded purely as Yorùbá trace their origin to the Yorùbá. Such ethnic groups include the Benin people in Edo State, the Kaba people in Kogi State, and a great part of Kwara State (Ilesanmi 2004: 36). Some groups of Yorùbá people can be found in pockets in Benin Republic, in Cuba, in Brazil, in Togo, Sierra-Leone, and some parts of U.S.A who were brought to these lands since the time of colonialism as slaves, but who today are free citizens of the Americas (Koelle 1854; Omamor 1982; Awobuluyi 1992).

Yorùbá is the second largest spoken language in Nigeria. It is been spoken by some states in the country. Such states are Lagos, Èkiti, Edo, Delta, Kwara, Ògún, Ondo, Òsun and Òyó. It has a standard orthography which is from time to time up-dated to meet the need of changes and to incorporate the metalanguage for various disciplines. The language is the vehicle for conveying all the messages for the various cultural disciplines (Ilesanmi 2004: 36).

The Indigenous Administration in Yoruba Land

The Yorùbá community has an intricate mode of government with the Oba and the Chiefs at the top; the Baálè takes charge of small settlements while the Olóri àdúgbò (compound head) also known as Mọgaji in Ibadan community looks after some compounds and the baálé takes care of the extended families. The oba is appointed through the spiritual consultation of Ifa and through the consensus or the majority decision of the Afọbajè (the king makers) and never enthroned through the process of election by the populace, but this decision is never extended to those born outside the royal lineage. However no king rules alone, Yoruba kings rule in a cult council and in the council of chiefs and through various cult organizations (Ilesanmi 2004: 36-37). The position of the Baálè is higher than that of the Olóri àdúgbò and the Baálé. The Baálè also have some chiefs under him. He is expected to solve any problem that is beyond the power of the baálé and the compound head, if it is more than his own power also, he will then, take it to the king who is the highest authority in the town. The king has power to overrule any law in Yoruba community. And whatever decision taken by him is binding. The king is the one that chooses the Baálè, the village head. The olóri àdúgbò and the landlord (Baalé) are responsible to the village head. In short, the hierarchy of power within Yoruba society vis a vis:



At any level of power within the Yoruba community, proverbs can occur informally. This has to do with the situation on ground. And, it is usually so because, Yoruba people do not like to waste words; hence they speak in proverbs.

Yoruba Proverbs and their Usage in Administration

Yoruba proverbs as it has been earlier said is the wisdom lore of the ethnic group. It occurs informally in day-to-day verbal communication (Olatunji 1984: 169). This will take us to its uses as it occurs in our day-to-day communication. Yoruba proverbs are useful in various forms and in different stages of administration. Some of these uses include: mediation, respect, warning, co-operation, teaching, praise etc.

Mediation

In Yoruba administration, proverbs are tools used in mediating between two or more people, or communities which are in rancour. This will enhance a peaceful co-existence among the people; such mediation is usually made at the kings palace before the advent of the Europeans. Nowadays there are customary courts which are being controlled by the traditional rulers where rifts or conflicts are settled either for friends, couples, people in the communities and so on.

During such periods the elders may say:

(1) “Àgbà kì í wà lójà kórí omọ titun wó

An elder should not be in the market place and allow a child’s head to hang”.

A young child is carried on the back of its mother and at times its head droops. Someone who sees it warns the mother and adjusts it. This proverb is used to illustrate the duty of elders to ensure that a quarrel is settled without delay. And it is also to allay the fears of the people to know that since the case has been brought to the elders, the matter is going to be settled amicably, that the elders here, that is, the king and his chiefs are for the good and progress of the society. Another proverb says:

(2) “Àgbò méjì kii mu omi nínú koto

Two rams cannot drink from the same calabash”

This proverb can be said by the elders when settling a rift for two people who are not of the same age. This can be said to them to know that there is no room for two pugnacious people in the same place. One has to bow for another, meaning the younger person must bow down for the elder. And this will give room for peace. This can come in form of an appeal to the two of them especially the younger one. This is also seen in another proverb which says:

(3) “A kì í rí arémájà, a kì í sù í rí ajàmárèé

There is nothing like friends who never quarrel and enemies who never reconcile”

This is another proverb which is used in appealing to the fighters in order to give room for peace and to settle their rift amicably. There are other proverbs in this category. One of such proverbs says:

(4) “Ahón àtenu a má a jà

Tongue and mouth equally fight”

This also shows that as close as the tongue and the mouth are, they still fight and settle it within a short period, so also, these two friends or couple should settle their dispute within a short interval.

In another proverb, we can say:

(5) “A kì í tó ni bá gbé kí a má tó ni í bá sòrò

If you are fit to live with a person you should be fit to talk to him”.

When we are living together, and the person’s behavior is bad, we should be able to correct the person to stop such a behavior. If we do not tell him, when trouble comes, we may share from it. And if in the process of telling the person, he/she turns it to a quarrel, the

people around will tell the person that once they are living together, they should be able to advise each other.

Respect

Yoruba people have much respect for their elders and they believe that where there are elders, there must be peace, hence the proverb:

- (1) “Àgbà kò sí ilú bàjé
Bale ilé kú ilé dahoro

When there are no elders in the town, there would be destruction; when the head of the family dies, the house becomes desolate”.

The above proverb reflects the worth of the elders in the communities. It means that the affairs of the communities are usually controlled by the elders, that is those in the authorities like Baálé, Baálè, the kings and his chiefs. It shows when these ones are no where to be found, the affairs of the state would run into chaos. Another proverb suggests:

- (2) “Àìfì àgbà fẹ̀nikan ni kò jẹ́ káyé rójú

Failure to respect a leader is not conducive to the peaceful existence of the community”.

When there is no leader in a community things will turn upside down; there will be disorderliness within the society. That is why we usually have the king in towns and Baálè in the villages; anyone who is chosen in this position, not minding the age, has come to the position of a leader, and must be accorded the due respect. Another proverb says:

- (3) “Aròbafin lẹ̀bà n pa

It is the person who shows disrespect to the king that he kills”.

The kings in Yoruba land are fathers to everybody. They don't want their people to suffer but when one shows disrespect to the king, the king will deal with the person. He may order his chief to kill such a person in order to instill fear into the hearts of the rest. This will serve as an example to others who lack respect as well. Therefore, if someone is highly placed, in the society, the Yoruba people believe that they are to be given their due respect hence, the proverb which says that honour should be given to whom honour is due.

Warning

Proverbs are also used for warning people, either to warn people in authority or the community. This warning will be helpful in guiding those in authority to discharge their duties effectively without sentiment and discrimination. In addition, this proverbial warning will enhance faithfulness on the part of the community resident in respect of any vow made. Example:

- (1) “Bí ojú bá yẹ́jú, kí àdéhùn má tà sẹ́

When eyes miss each other's eyes, let not the agreement fail”

Power, at times makes people to misbehave. An attempt to make people in the administration to be faithful to their words is recommended in the above proverb. This is to remind them that they should not because of power forget the promises they made to the community at the time of their coronation. It can also be used within two people who have struck a bargain or exchanged promises to stand by their words and distance should not be an excuse for breaking them (Olatunji 1984: 173). Another proverb goes thus:

- (2) “Ogboqobon ni àgbàlagbà fí í sá fún málúù

It is with wisdom and circumspection that an elder runs away from a bull”.

This proverb above warns the people in administration to be careful, and to know how to tactfully dodge a difficult situation. They should know how to save their heads and avoid interference in any knotty situation when necessary. Other proverb use in warning also goes thus:

- (3) “A kì í fí ní joyè àwòdì kí a má lè gbádiẹ
One who is called a hawk should not fail to carry a chicken”.

Another proverb akin to this

- (4) “Àikúkú joyè sàń ju ẹnu kò ká ilú
It is better not to be a king than to be a king, and not being able to control the town”

The above proverbs are warning the administrators to be in charge. The administrators are to be able to control the affairs of their communities perfectly. They are not to be cowards or mere figure heads; but they should be up to the task so that they will not be kings without authority: “Eni tó jòba, tí kò láse ọba lẹnu”.

Another area where proverb is used in warning those in authority is by telling them not to abuse their position especially, when they are found mis-behaving or over using their authority. The relevant proverb to explain this is:

- (5) “Àşẹşẹ yọ ọgómọ, ó ní ọ̀un ó kan ọ̀run, àwọ̀n aşáájú rẹ̀ ní wọ̀n ẹ̀ bẹ̀ẹ̀ rí
The young palm-leaf says he will reach the sky. Have any of his predecessors ever done so ?.

Also, another proverb says:

- (6) “Àdánwò ní pò, ẹ̀ jẹ̀ ka ló ó re
A position is but a test, we must make good use of it”

This is warning the leaders that the position occupied is for a short time and therefore take precaution of the way they make use of the position. It is to remind them that many leaders have come and gone and that while in office, they should aspire to build a good legacy that will stand the test of time after living office or position to note that the position they are today is for a time, some people have been there, and others will still be there after they might have gone, hence, they must use their time to do good.

Co-operation

Among the Yoruba communities, co-operation is one of the essential tools they use in relating with each other. They believe in existence of corporation within the family, and communities. They also believed that the people in authority, that is their administrators should co-operate with each others in order to move the society forward. The under listed are the proverbs in this category:

- (1) “Àgbájọ ọwọ la fí í sọyà
We use closed fist for tapping our chest”

This proverb means unity is strength. When there is unity among the king and his chiefs in the community, whatever they agree upon will be jointly done and this will give room for peace and progress in the community. This belief is seen in another proverb which says:

- (2) “Àjẹjẹ ọwọ kan kò gbégbá dóri
A single hand cannot lift up a full calabash to the head”.

The proverb above means that certain things require the assistance of second person. So also, the Yoruba administration requires the co-operation of the king and his chiefs in order to achieve their goals. They need to work together to achieve things easily. The following proverb also corroborates with this:

- (3) “Ààrò méta kì í yẹ ọbẹ sí iná
Three lumps of clay set to support a vessel over a fire does not pour the soup away”.

This also is showing us the power in co-operation that is, when three people came together to take decision, there will be better solution than a single person’s decision. Another proverb which also conveyes the same idea :

- (4) “Àdàşẹ ní i hun ní, àjọşẹ kì í hun ní

Taking a decision alone makes one solely responsible for its consequences, but one man cannot be held responsible for a joint action”.

Yoruba people believe that we come together to be wise, hence the proverb:

(5) “Pípé là á pé gbón, a kì í pe gò

We gather together to be wise, we don’t gather to be foolish”

Therefore, they have the belief that when joint decision is being taken, or we do things together with other people, it makes such a decision to be binding and it also brings good outcome.

Teaching

Yoruba culture and beliefs are passed from one generation to another through proverbs. They do this by bringing out their life experiences in teaching their younger ones. Example of such are the followings:

(1) “Agbójúlógún fí ara rẹ̀ fòsì ta

He who relies on inherited wealth is on the road to penury”

This proverb teaches the younger ones to be industrious in order to avoid wretchedness. This is conveyed in a proverb below:

(2) “O ò sàgì lógbẹ̀, oò ta ògùrò lófà, o wá dédíí ọ̀pẹ̀, o gbénu sókè; ọ̀fẹ̀ níí ro, ògùrò àìdà?”

You didn’t cut a tree; neither did you tap from a palm tree. But you got to the palm tree expecting palm wine. Is it without labour that you get palm wine?”

This proverb is referring to human labour in various forms. It is then teaching us that if any individual fails to work, he/she can not live a good life. And whatever you don’t work for, cannot be easily gotten. Another proverb in line with this says:

(3) “Iṣẹ̀ loògùn iṣẹ̀

Hard work is the antidote for poverty”.

This also teaches that anyone who refused to work will become poor and wretched.

Other proverbs used in teaching moral lesson and culture of the people are stated hereunder:

(4) “Olofofo kò gba ẹgbẹ̀wá, ibi ọ̀pẹ̀ ló mọ

The tale-bearer does not receive two thousand cowries but only thanks”.

This is to tell us that there is no gain in gossiping. So, you as a person should mind your own business. Another proverb akin to this says:

(5) “Fálàná gbọ̀ tire, tara ẹ̀ni là á gbọ̀

Falana, mind your own business, people should attend to their own affairs”.

Praise

Proverb is used in praising people among the Yorubas. It is used in appreciating those who do well in the society; whether they are young or old, kings or chiefs. Such include:

(1) “Ọ̀mọ̀ àjànàkú kì í ya irá, ọ̀mọ̀ tẹ̀ ẹ̀kùn bí ẹ̀kùn ní yòò jọ

The child of an elephant can not be a horse, a leopard child will always resemble the leopard”.

It is believed in Yoruba land that a true child will always resemble his parent, both in thought and in action, therefore, anyone that does well will be praised in the society by saying that he has resembles his ancestors. Another proverb says:

(2) “Kí kéré labẹ̀rẹ̀ kéré, kì í ẹ̀ se mími adiyẹ

The needle is only small, it is not to be swallowed by the hen”.

Anyone that does well in the society, will be showered with an encomium. They will say that he/she has done greatly and that nobody can match him/her. Another proverbs goes thus:

(3) “Ọ̀lá àbàtà ní í módò san, ọ̀lá baba ọ̀mọ̀ ní í mú ọ̀mọ̀ í yan.

The marshy place makes the river flows, a child boasts in his fathers honour”
This is used to appreciate the leaders of the community for the benevolence being enjoyed by their subject. This explains the fact that people of the community are appreciative of their leaders’ selfless commitment to the course and comfort of subject under them.

Conclusion

In this paper, the researcher has attempted to show the relevance of proverb, as a powerful tool for administration among the Yoruba community . We are able to see that Yoruba proverbs contain a lot of powerful statement that can help individuals to imbibe good characters through the teaching of moral values. It has been noted that different values such as respect, warnings, co-operation and different teachings are learnt from Yoruba proverbs and all these are being taught either directly or indirectly in daily administration of the Yorubas to give room to promote peaceful co-existence within the community and among the communities. And to also guide those in governance in this daily administration of the community affairs. This paper therefore concludes that Yoruba proverb is a repertoire of knowledge, full of Yoruba philosophy and world-view which is thereby used as a powerful tool in Yoruba administration of the people of Ife, Ondo, Abeokuta, Ibadan and so on.

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