

Introduction

It is customary to translate the Yoruba *òwe* into English as “proverb,” a choice that is justified by the close correspondence of the verbal formulations the words designate in their respective cultures. Not surprisingly, therefore, scholars familiar with the English genre expect to find its features (or properties) and variations replicated in the Yoruba; in other words, they expect that a study of *òwe* will disclose a form in all essential particulars like the proverb. Accordingly, they expect discussion of Yoruba *òwe* to account for such subgenres of the English proverb as aphorisms, apothegms, Wellerisms, and so forth. Examples of such forms do occur in the huge corpus of Yoruba *òwe*—if not exactly as in the English, at least close enough to pass. But ferreting out Yoruba correspondences to the English subgenres, although a useful comparative exercise, has little relevance to understanding the Yoruba concept and usage of *òwe*, which do not exactly coincide with those of the English proverb.

ENGLISH PROVERBS, TRUE AND FALSE

Representative of the Western conception of the proverb is the view that it is an ancient and popularly accepted encapsulation of wisdom. Citing the Greek origin of the word and its literal meaning, “wayside saying,” Edward Hulme comments that the word is roughly equivalent to “adage,” and his use of the biblical passage “Israel shall be a proverb and a byword among all people” as an example suggests that a proverb may also be a *material* model (4). In addition, he invokes both Aristotle’s definition as quoted by Synesius—“A proverb is a remnant of the ancient philosophy preserved amid many destructions on account of its brevity and fitness for use—and also Agricola’s description of the form as “short sentences into which, as in rules, the ancients have compressed life” (5–6).

Jan Brunvand introduces a significant criterion for determining what is a proverb and what is not when he writes that “the true proverb is always a complete sentence,” thus distinguishing it from other (or false) proverbs, and further that the true proverb “never varies more than slightly in form, and usually expresses some general truth or wisdom” (52). Moreover, “the majority of true proverbs are metaphorical descriptions of an act or event applied as a general truth,” whereas false proverbs, in addition to not being complete sentences, are not fixed and “seldom express any general wisdom” (53). The latter include proverbial phrases; proverbial comparisons such as “greedy as a pig” and “clear as mud”; Wellerisms; miscellaneous proverbial insults, retorts, and wisecracks such as “Is the Pope Catholic?”; and euphemisms such as “It’s snowing down south” for “Your slip is showing” (54).¹

The customary inclusion of assorted metaphorical verbal formulations in collections and discussions of the proverb elicited the following complaint from Roger Abrahams: “The study of proverbs has been severely complicated by the grouping of conventional conversational devices that share almost nothing but their brevity and their traditional currency. Almost certainly this complication is due to the fact that proverb dictionaries were written not for the purpose of defining this genre but for storing any device useful in developing oratory techniques. Thus these compendia contained not only true proverbs but hyperbolizing devices, such as traditional exaggerations, that were useful in ornamenting extemporized formal speech” (123). The rhetorical devices that are mistaken for proverbs, according to Abrahams, are “formulaic intensifiers [which] exist for no other reason than to decorate speech. These are devices of hyperbole; they take an ongoing argument and lend it wit and color” (123–24).

The existence of several words in the English language that often substitute for “proverb” would seem to suggest that each one signifies a subtle or significant variation. In fact, though, that does not appear to be the case. Although Hulme, as we have seen, says that “adage” is “fairly equivalent” to “proverb,” he makes hardly any distinction when he uses the term “apothegm,” the word which, as he notes, Lord Bacon favored for his 1625 collection *Apothegms New and Old*. An example of the apothegms in that collection comes from Psalm 27:14, “He that blesseth his friend with a loud voice, rising in the morning, it shall be counted a curse to him,” whose import is, in effect, “Excessive and ostentatious praise amounts to denunciation” (Hulme 44). Dictionary definitions of the various designations support Hulme’s practice in this regard.²

The Wellerism, however, is a bona fide subgenre of the proverb with a distinguishing structural peculiarity: it comprises a direct quotation that is attributed to a person, plus a facetious tag specifying the context (or occasion) of the quotation. Abrahams describes it variously as a cliché, a “dialogue-proverb,” and a joking device (122), and Brunvand as a “quotation proverb” (53). According to Archer Taylor, the form is more ancient than the Charles Dickens character for which it is named, and its more recent examples tend to incorporate puns. Taylor cites among others: “‘It won’t be long now’ (or ‘That’s the end of my tail’), said the monkey when he backed into the lawn mower” (“Wisdom” 8). Another often cited example is “‘I see,’ said the blind man, as he picked up his hammer and saw.”

One consensus requirement for a proverb seems to be that it must be short and to the point, in other words, that it be pithy, succinct, terse, or brief. Thus Hulme (6–7) quotes Chambers to the effect that “proverbs are pithy, practical, popular sayings”; Annandale, that it is “a short and pithy sentence”; and the dictionary compiler Worcester, that it is “a common or pithy expression which embodies some moral precept.”

THE YORUBA ÒWE

Yoruba language and speech practices do feature forms that are practically, if not exactly, identical with the English proverb, but not all of them will qualify as *òwe*

for the Yoruba speaker. On the other hand, some verbal forms that come under the general rubric of *òwe* in Yoruba do not have equivalents in the English proverb corpus. Perhaps the best approach to understanding the Yoruba concept of *òwe*, therefore, is to begin with an etymology of the word.

Òwe seems to be formed from the contraction of *ò-wé e*, literally “something that wraps it.” The root is the verb *wé* (wrap [something] around [something else]). The initial *ò* is the vowel prefix that in Yoruba lexicology converts a verb to a noun, the particular vowel depending on the particular verb; it functions like the English suffixes “-ist,” “-er,” and “-or.” The phrase *wé e* (wrap it) becomes *we* in the contraction characteristic of everyday speech. I am suggesting that the word is *òwe* rather than *òwé*, a combination of *ò* (an agent that . . .) and *wé* (wraps), because the object pronoun “it,” in this case the midtoned “e” is appended to the combination. (Yoruba is a tone—or tonal—language with high, mid, and low tones. These are indicated on the vowels and the nasals *n* and *m* by acute and grave marks for the high and low tones respectively, the midtone carrying no mark.)

To say in Yoruba that one thing may be compared with or to another, one says “*fi* (noun 1) *wé* (noun 2),” literally “use (n1) to wrap (n2),” or, more idiomatically, “wrap (n1) around (n2).” The formulation reveals an important Yoruba view of what happens when one likens something to something else: one brings the two items into as close proximity as possible in order to make their qualities observable side by side or in (virtually) the same space; one intertwines them, in other words. Corroboration for this suggestion comes from the term for another verbal genre that has close affinities with *òwe*: namely, *àlò*, the riddle. The root of *àlò* is *lò*, which also means “wrap [something] around [something else],” and in this case the initial nominalizing vowel is *à*. What the riddle does, of course, is to describe some essential feature of an object or situation (the answer to the riddle) in terms of a different thing or situation that shares that feature (the clue). For example, for a person’s two eyes a Yoruba riddle offers as its clue a set of twins that inhabit the same house without ever seeing each other. (Folktales are also sometimes termed *àlò* because they are parables for occurrences other than those they literally narrate.)

Reduced to its essence, therefore, *òwe* is a speech form that likens, or compares, one thing or situation to another, highlighting the essential similarities that the two share. In Yoruba usage it is always at least one *complete* sentence. Although the language is rich in phrases, descriptions, and idioms that resemble some of the false English proverbs cited above, the Yoruba do not recognize these as *òwe*. For example, the epithet *Şámúgà, eléyín ọkọ* (*Şámúgà*, with hoes for teeth), often used with the elaboration *kòróun fálejò ó wayín sáwo* (lacking the wherewithal to entertain a visitor, he scoops teeth into a dish), which refers to a person with protruding teeth, is called not *òwe* but *eébu*, insult. The same is true of this chant (in Ifon dialect):

Máà gbédòn yún óko,
àíké orí è ó tóó lagi
 [Don’t carry an axe to the farm,
 the axe on his head will do for splitting wood.]

Other figurative idioms that parallel the English pseudoproverb but would not qualify as *òwe* (true or false) in Yoruba include such sayings as *kóyán láì dúró gbòbè* ([to] take some pounded yam but not tarry to receive some stew) and *bá ẹ̀sẹ̀ sòrò* ([to] engage in conversation with one's legs), both of which mean “to make a hasty exit from a threatening scene”; and *fi àáké kórí* ([to] hang an axe on one's head), meaning “to assume a rigid and unyielding position in a discussion.” The Yoruba speaker would also distinguish between *òwe* and both *àfiwé* (comparison, such as *Ó ga tópe*: he, she, or it is as tall as a palm tree) and *àpèjúwe* (description). I have, however, included formulations that, even though they seem at first glance to lack the requisite qualities of one, actually make proverbial statements. An example is entry 5235, which makes a statement about maidens.

Among Yoruba *òwe* there are formulations that, like Wellerisms, combine direct quotations and contexts, albeit not always in exactly the same manner as in the English versions. Two examples: “*Ọlórún má pèé o gbòkan*,” *àdùrà olè* (“‘God, don’t let on that you heard a thing,’ the thief’s prayer”); and the colonial-era “*Háó fò duù?*” *lòyìnbó fì ñjèbà l’Orígo* (“‘How for do?’ is the white man’s resigning rationalization for eating *ẹ̀bà* at *Origo*”). *Ẹ̀bà*, a starchy food made from cassava grains, is a plebeian staple among the Yoruba, much less favored than such elites among foods as *iyán* (pounded yam) and *ìrẹ̀sì* (rice). And *Orígo* is a station on the Yoruba stretch of the Lagos-Kano railway line; being an inconsequential stop, it did not rate a government guesthouse like the ones dispersed strategically around the colonies, provided with some basic necessities for the comfort of touring colonial officials, and maintained by cook-stewards competent to offer close imitations of European culinary fare. The expression *Háó fò duù?* is a Yoruba rendering of “How for do?” itself a pidgin version of “What to do?” or “What is one to do?” or “What option does one have?”

Here are five other possible candidates for the designation of “Welleristic” *òwe*:

- “*Mo m’Ọ̀bàrà, mo m’Ọ̀fún*,” *tí kò jé kí eyelé kò àparò nífá*. “I know Ọ̀bàrà, I know Ọ̀fún,” which discouraged the pigeon from teaching Ifá to the partridge. (Because the partridge claims, falsely, to know it all, he blocked his own opportunity to learn Ifá from the pigeon.)
- “*Sún m’òhùn-ún, a ó sòrò ilé-e wa*,” *tí kò jé kí àlejò di onilé*. “Make room, we are about to perform our lineage ritual,” which keeps the sojourner from becoming a permanent resident. (As long as citizens exclude immigrants from full participation in civic activities, the latter will not become fully integrated into the population.)
- “*Òní ló ñmo*,” *ìjà òlẹ̀*. “It will all end today,” the lazy person’s fighting motto. (The lazy person enters into a fight with the consoling knowledge that it will end sometime.)
- *Òní “Mò ñlọ,” òlẹ̀ “Mò ñlọ,” tí kò jé kí àlejò gbín awùsá*. Today, “I am leaving”; tomorrow, “I am leaving,” which keeps the sojourner from planting *awùsá*.

(*Awùsá*, usually translated as “walnut” (wall-nut), is the fruit of a tree that takes years to mature and bear fruit.)

- “*Kò dùn mí, kò dùn mí,*” *àgbàlagbà mbú opa lẹ̀mefà nítorí iyán alé àná.* “It does not bother me, it does not bother me,” yet a grown man curses by invoking *opa* on account of last night’s pounded yam. (The person concerned was obviously excluded from the meal the previous night, and his injured behavior belies his protestation of nonchalance.)

In proverbs of this sort the phrase *tí kò* (meaning “that prevents” or “that keeps . . . from”) is sometimes replaced with *kò* (prevents) alone.

The use of the English term “Wellerism,” although it certainly serves a useful purpose in comparative discussions, may give pause to African and Africanist scholars leery of possible charges that they are subscribing to the representation of African forms in Western terms. Alan Dundes’s essay on the subject is of particular interest in this regard. His primary intention is to demonstrate, with Yoruba examples, the widespread (perhaps worldwide) incidence of this type of proverb. With the aid of the Yoruba informant Ayodele Ogundipe, he lists ten examples that qualify as Wellerisms by virtue of their containing direct quotations. Most of them do incorporate direct quotations in the original Yoruba, and some are close enough in form to English Wellerisms to pose no difficulties. For example, in his number 7 — “*Şé kí nfidí hẹ?*” *láfomó fi nídi onilé* (my transcription), which he translates, “‘Shall I sit awhile?’ says the parasite before becoming a permanent dweller” (116) — the translation is adequate, although it would be better rendered “‘May I perch awhile?’ is the ruse that eventually makes the parasite the homeowner.” In other instances, however, the proverbs are forced into the category, inasmuch as the direct quotations the author and informant attribute to them are absent in the original Yoruba. For example, for the Yoruba original *Adiẹ ñjokà, ó ñmu omi, ó ñgbé òkúta pé-pè-pé mì, síbè-síbè ó ní òun ò léhín* (again, my transcription), they provide the following translation: “‘I have no teeth,’ complains the chicken which eats corn, drinks water, and swallows pebbles” (114), whereas the correct translation is, “The chicken eats corn, it drinks water, it swallows small pebbles, and yet it claims that it has no teeth.” Obviously, the Yoruba original has undergone some radical manipulation in order to make a Wellerism out of it.

In addition to what we might describe as “true” *òwe*, the Yoruba have a popular verbal form whose title includes the word *òwe* as a modifier: the allusive songs known as *orin òwe*, literally “proverb songs,” which make indirect and usually disparaging references to unstated targets. They are normally expressions of antagonism, as the meta-proverb *Ìjà lò dé lorín òwe* (“It is the commencement of a quarrel that turns a song into a proverb”) makes clear. Although such songs most often characterize domestic quarrels, especially among women, they also feature prominently in popular entertainment songs—for example, in the lyrics of *jùjú* music. Professional rivalry among *àgídígbo* musicians in the 1960s gave rise to the following lyrics:

Kélégbé megbé
Kélégbé megbé
A jùmò gbálùmáyà pò
Kélégbé megbé
 [Let cohorts know their equal
 Let cohorts know their equal
 We may all, alike, wrap our bosoms around drums
 Yet, let cohorts know their equal]

The target of the song, though not named, would have realized that he was intended, as would those privy to the quarrel. The following was an interlude in a high-life dance number a few years later:

Òfófó ilé yìí á yera
Òfófó ilé yìí á yera
Ká má gbòdò sòrò
Ká má gbòdò jenu wúyè
Òfófó ilé yìí á yera
 [The tale bearer in this household must make way
 The tale bearer in this household must make way
 One dares not talk
 One dares not whisper
 The tale bearer in this household must make way]

Also akin to Hulme's usage of the term "proverb" to designate a material model is the Yoruba usage of *òwe* as in the saying *Ikú tó pa ojúgbà ẹni-í pòwe mọni* ("The death that kills one's age mate speaks to one proverbially"). The *òwe* in this case is not a verbal statement but a visible phenomenon or an event from which an observer can draw a lesson.

Another difference: the constant in the definitions of the English proverb that it is pithy, concise, succinct, brief, terse, and so on, is not *always* true of the Yoruba *òwe*, which is sometimes quite long-winded. For example, there is nothing pithy about the following: *Gbogbo eranko igbé pé, wón ní àwọn ó fi ikokò ẹ aşıpa; nígbà tó gbó inú è-é dùn; sùgbón nígbà tó ẹ, ó bú sékún; wón ní kí ló dé? Ó ní bóyá wón lè tún ro òràn náà wò kí wón ní kì íse bẹ̀ẹ̀ mó* ("All the animals in the forest assembled and decided to make Hyena their secretary; he was happy to hear the news, but a short while later he burst into tears; asked what the matter was, he replied that perhaps they might revisit the matter and reverse themselves"). The import, depending on the user's intention, could be either that even in times of good fortune one should be mindful of the possibility of reversal, or that one should not so focus on the negative as to be incapable of enjoyment.

THE AESTHETICS OF ÒWE

Isidore Okpewho, one of the most influential scholars of African traditional verbal artistry, has decried the tendency on the part of non-African scholars to minimize

the aesthetic properties of these texts, a tendency he blames in part on their limited or sometimes nonexistent command of the pertinent languages. His *African Oral Literature* is an elaborate illustration of the sophisticated artistry in African traditional texts, including brief forms such as the proverb.

Discussion of the proverb in Western folklore scholarship has characteristically acknowledged the aesthetic aspects of the form. Roger Abrahams describes proverbs as “among the shortest forms of traditional expression that call attention to themselves as formal artistic entities.” He goes on to illustrate their use of “all of the devices we commonly associate with poetry in English: meter, binary construction and balanced phrasing, rhyme, assonance and alliteration, conciseness, metaphor, and occasional inverted word order and unusual construction” (119). Brunvand also observes that “proverbs exhibit most of the stylistic devices of poetry. They have *meter . . . rhyme . . . slant rhyme . . . alliteration . . . assonance . . . personification . . . paradox . . . parallelism . . .* and several other poetic characteristics” (56; original emphasis). To these he adds figures of speech, which occur in proverbs as well as in “proverbial comparisons.” Also worth mentioning is Alan Dundes’s essay “On the Structure of the Proverb.”

With regard to the Yoruba *òwe*, Ayo Bamgbose, the dean of Yoruba scholars, and Olatunde Olatunji have written seminal essays on its artistic qualities and especially on its structure; both point out that it shares central aesthetic features with Yoruba poetry in general. Since my earlier collection *A Kì í* includes a brief discussion on the subject, what follows only advances my argument in that work, elaborating upon and clarifying some of its assertions and qualifications.

Bamgbose highlights the use of lexical contrast and lexical matching in Yoruba proverbs (and poetry), which he explains as “the bringing together of two or more lexical items in such a way as to exhibit a semantic contrast or correspondence” and offers examples (*Grammar* 83, 84, 85). The contrasted items, which occur in identical locations in parallel sentences, are sometimes antonyms and sometimes synonyms (or items that belong in the same semantic range), and sometimes they are unrelated. For example, in the formulation

Ó mú ọ̀kùnrin
 Ó sì mú obìnrin
 [He captured *men*
 He also captured *women*]

ọ̀kùnrin (men) and *obìnrin* (women) are antonyms. In the following,

Èhìnkùlẹ̀ lẹ̀tá wà
 Ilẹ̀ laṣeni ñgbé
 [The *enemy* lives in the back yard
 The abode of the *person who inflicts injury* is the home]

lẹ̀tá (enemy) and *aṣeni* (inflictor of injury) are synonyms (*laṣeni* is contracted from *ni aṣeni*), or at least exist within the same semantic range.

At times the proverb takes advantage of the existence of different words in the language that designate the same thing more or less exactly, resulting in the sort of wordplay in

Àjànàkú kì í ya aràrá
 Èni erin-ín bí erin ní ñjò
 [The elephant does not turn out dwarfish
 The child sired by an elephant takes after an elephant]

The lexical item *Àjànàkú* (elephant) in the first part matches *erin* (elephant) in the second, with the difference that the first word carries the suggestion of mightiness. But in

Ohun tówá lọ sí Şókótó
 Wà nínú àpò-o şòkòtò

Şókótó (a city in northern Nigeria) and şòkòtò (trousers) are unrelated.

Olatunji, for his part, lists as the main features of Yoruba proverbs: a prescriptive function (meaning the outlining of rules of conduct); a characteristic sentence form (which might be simple, complex, sequential, or parallel); a high incidence of lexical repetition and contrast; and terseness (175). In addition, he cites “tonal counterpoint”: that is, contrast in the tones of lexical items that occur in identical locations in parallel sentences. In the example already cited above,

Èhìnkùlè lètá wà
 Ilé laşeni ñgbé

the high tone of the final syllable in the second line contrasts with the low tone of the corresponding syllable in the first sentence. Another good example is,

Ohun tí a ní kí ogbó gbó ni ogbó ñgbó
 Ohun tí a ní kí ogbà gbà ni ogbà ñgbà
 [Whatever we tell ogbó to hear is what ogbó hears
 Whatever we tell ogbà to accept is what ogbà accepts]

The high tones on the pair *ogbó* and *gbó* in the first line give way to low tones on *ogbà* and *gbà* in the second.

One characteristic of proverbs that comprise three lines is that the first two follow a parallel construction, whereas the concluding line deviates. Characteristically, the first two lines repeat a concept as a lead-in to the real message of the proverb, which the third line delivers with a flourish, as it were. Here are examples:

- Èní da eérú leérú ñtò
 Eléte lète ñyé
 Ohun a bá şe ní ñyéni

[The person who throws ashes is the one ashes follow
 The person who proposes is the one to whom the proposal is understood
 What one does is what one understands]

- *Ìhín ilé*
Òhún ilé
Òjò kì í rọ́ kó pa ọmọ adìẹ
 [Here a home
 There a home
 The rain does not fall and drench a chicken]
- *À ñkólé ikin*
À ñyòdèdè imò
Hòrò nilé àgbékẹhìn
 [Although we build a house of thatch
 Although we construct a porch of palm leaves
 The grave is the final home]

In each of the three examples the burden of the saying, its main thesis, is couched in the last line: “What one does is what one understands”; “The rain does not fall and drench a chicken”; and “The grave is the final home.”

A Syllogistic Quirk

Another feature that is not peculiar to proverbs but characterizes Yoruba rhetoric represents a logical non sequitur which Yoruba usage, however, accommodates. Consider this proverb:

Pípé là ñpé gbọ́n
A kì í pé gò
 [Assembling is what we do in order to be wise
 We do not assemble to become foolish]

Roughly comparable in its import to the English saying “Two heads are better than one,” it asserts that a certain problem is not amenable to individual tackling but demands the pooling of communal wisdom: we must put our heads together if we wish to come up with a wise solution and not a foolish one. The proverb thus recommends assembling, *pípé*, as opposed to its opposite, which would be *àdàṣe*, as in *Àdàṣe ní ñhunni; àjọṣe kì í hunni* (“Going it alone is what gets one in trouble; collaborating with others does not get one in trouble”).

We might conceptualize the argument as follows: the desired end is wisdom (arriving at a wise decision), and the means recommended is assembling (*pípé*), not unilateral action (*àdàṣe*). One would expect the argument to be as follows: *Assembling* is what people do in order to be wise, not *going it alone*. Let the goal (*gbọ́n* or *gbígbọ́n*) be *x*, the means (*pípé*) be *y*, and the alternative not recommended (*àdàṣe*)

be z ; thus, in order to achieve the end x , the means must be y , not z . We may then represent the argument as follows:

$$y \text{ -----} \rightarrow x$$

$$z \text{ ---//---} \rightarrow x.$$

But the proverb does not follow that reasoning. It says, *assembling* is what people do in order to be wise; people do not assemble *to be foolish* (*gò*), or w . Schematically, therefore,

$$y \text{ -----} \rightarrow x$$

$$y \text{ - - // ---} \rightarrow w$$

The last phrase it offers as the undesirable eventuality is not a contrast to the action being recommended, *assembling*. It would fit better, logically, in the formulation:

Gbígbon là ñpé gbón
A kì í pé gó
 [Wisdom is what we achieve by assembling
 We do not assemble to achieve folly]

Humor (or Wit)

A further inescapable quality characterizing Yoruba *òwe* is the humor many of them display. It derives, as in other texts and other cultures, from a variety of devices: different forms of ironies (situational, verbal, and others), hyperbole, understatement, deliberate shock (especially in vocabulary), and so forth. Often it is a result of tongue-in-cheek cleverness, as in

A gbó tajá
A gbó tẹran
Èwo ni tàgùntàn lórí àga?

The literal translation is

We hear that of the dog
 We hear that of the goat
 What about that of the sheep on a chair?

Alternatively,

One could understand if it was a dog
 One could understand if it was a goat
 But what about a sheep on a chair?

Idiomatically it says, “One can tolerate the eventuality in the case of a dog, and one can tolerate it in the case of a goat, but who ever heard of a sheep on a chair?” The fact, though, is that not even a goat or a dog is conceivable, or acceptable, on a chair. The proverb refers to, and plays on, the expression *tajá tẹran*—literally “dogs and goats inclusive”—the Yoruba equivalent of the English “every Tom, Dick, and Harry.” One would usually employ the phrase to indicate that all comers had (for example) taken advantage of a situation to intrude into one’s affairs, even (and especially) those whom one would exclude as being no better than dogs or goats. One reluctantly suffers them, therefore, as unwelcome necessities imposed by misfortune. The enormity of the outrage implied in the situation the proverb describes, likened to a sheep’s usurpation of a chair, is easily conceivable. The proverb’s statement that one can tolerate a dog, or even a goat, on the chair is not to be taken seriously but seen as tongue-in-cheek.

Comparable to the foregoing in facetiousness, in incorporating an ironic twist that somewhat undercuts what the proverb professes to assert, is

Kàkà kí gbajúmò jẹ òpòlò

Eni tí yó pa kònkò fún un yó jàáde

[Rather than that a popular person would have to eat a toad
Someone who will kill a frog for him or her will emerge]

The idea is, of course, that worthy and well-respected persons will never be reduced to suffering indignities, because people will rush to their aid. The indignity the proverb chooses for illustration is the eating of a toad, a disgusting if not abominable prospect. The relief it suggests, though (the eating of a frog instead), is in Yoruba thinking just about equally disgusting. The point of the proverb is made, but tongue-in-cheek.

This next example differs somewhat in structure but also incorporates the tongue-in-cheek element:

Àgbààgbà ilú kì í péjò kí wọn jẹ ifun òkété

Àfi iyán àná

[The patriarchs of a town will not assemble and eat the intestines of a bush
rat

Only stale, day-old pounded yams]

If the prospect of venerable patriarchs eating the intestines of a bush rat is belittling at best, their eating stale pounded yams is not much better.

The type of humor in the foregoing examples is familiar to students and speakers of Yoruba in such ironic praises as

Ó lóhun tóyìnbó ò ní

A-biná-kọ-n-du-létí-aşo

[He or she has what even the white man lacks

Blessed with plump lice in the seams of his or her clothing!]

YORUBA PROVERB USAGE

In Yoruba culture a great deal of importance attaches to whatever utterance issues out of the mouth. Speech being the highest form of utterance, the Yoruba approach it with deliberate care, taking great pains to avoid careless, casual, or thoughtless statements whose damage might outlast lifetimes. The proverb

Eyin lẹ̀rò
Bó bá balẹ̀, fifọ ní nífọ
 [Speech is an egg
 When it drops on the floor what it does is shatter]

bears witness to this concern. In addition, the Yoruba speaker strives to ensure that the idea he or she wishes to communicate reaches its target ungarbled and in as unmistakable a form as possible. If an explanation for such care is necessary, one need only remember the importance of relationality in close-living communalism, especially when speech also happens to be the most available and therefore most common transactional medium. In such a context, to paraphrase another proverb, the judicious — not simply correct — application of speech causes the kola nut to emerge from the pocket, whereas careless use brings out the sword from its scabbard.

Resort to proverbs is the most important and most effective strategy the Yoruba have devised to optimize the efficaciousness of speech. The culture's richness in them, of which this collection provides evidence, bears out the Yoruba insistence that bereft of proverbs, speech flounders and falls short of its mark, whereas aided by them, communication is fleet and unerring. Accordingly, the Yoruba assert,

Òwe lẹ̀sin ọ̀rò
Bí ọ̀rò-ọ́ bá sọ̀nù, ọ̀we la fi nńwá a
 [The proverb is the horse of speech
 When speech is lost, the proverb is the means we use to hunt for it]

Proverbs, often incisive in their propositions and terse in their formulation, are deduced from close observation of life, life forms and their characteristics and habits, the environment and natural phenomena, and sober reflection on all these. Because proverbs are held to express unexceptionable truths, albeit with some qualification, their use in a discussion or argument is tantamount to an appeal to established authority. This is one reason for their virtual indispensability in formal and informal verbal interactions in Yoruba society. They accordingly pervade all other major forms of verbal texts, whose effectiveness their presence enhances.

Just as the formulation of proverbs involves considerable creativity, so does their application — a fact that is sometimes discounted in exercises that attempt to assign definitive applications to specific sayings. Creativity in their use transcends simply knowing a great number of proverbs and the “correct” situation(s) in which to apply them. Such competencies certainly count for much, but competence is a

far cry from effectiveness, which comes, in part at least, from the ability to deploy proverbs in ways that are not only appropriate but also demonstrate some ingenuity on the part of the user in seeing applicability where others might not. An original application causes a momentary disorientation on the part of the hearer, followed by an intimation of some affinity between the subject (or situation) under discussion and the content (or proposition) in the proverb, and finally a recognition of the brilliance of the analogy involved.

Discussion of the rhetorical *raison d'être* of proverb use speaks incidentally to their utility or function. Writing about proverbs in the Nigerian context, John Messenger lists what I describe as their “active” roles — “as a means of amusement, in educating the young, to sanction institutionalized behavior, as a method of gaining favor in court, in performing religious rituals and association ceremonies, and to give point and add color to ordinary conversation” (64). The Yoruba scholar Olowo Ojoade, focusing on what I term their “passive” functions, describes them as “an open sesame for the workings of the native mind, manners and customs, traditional wisdom, religion, ideas and ideals, feelings, modes of thought, principles of conduct, and philosophy” (20). Another scholar, William Bascom, summarizes all the foregoing into four functions — passive and active and all positive — that proverbs perform for society: they mirror its culture; they afford its members a means of psychological and emotional release through venting otherwise prohibited expressions; they aid in education and socialization; and they maintain conformity to accepted patterns while validating institutions, attitudes, and beliefs (“Four Functions” 279–98).

The eminent Yoruba art scholar Rowland Abiodun offers an example of a proverb that connects in obvious and not so obvious ways with the values of its culture:

Kójú ó má rìbí
Èṣẹ̀ loḡùn-un rẹ̀
 [For the eyes to see no evil
 The legs are the medicine]

(“Medicine” here means something like “talisman.”) The import is that the legs bear the responsibility of transporting the eyes (and their owner, of course) away from locations that might harbor evil. The saying echoes others such as *Kò sẹ̀ni tó mọ̀ ibi tí orí mbá ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ẹ̀ rẹ̀* (“There is no person who knows where the head will accompany the legs”).

The proverb, Abiodun points out, is a discursive explanation of a phenomenon in Yoruba (and African generally) figurative sculpture: the preference for full figures over busts. Whereas in some traditions it is permissible for the artist to represent a subject with a bust, the Yoruba figure must include the torso (the chest), the hands, the legs, and the feet, for all these parts are indispensable to the integrity, and the fortunes, of the person represented. Moreover, whereas in Western iconography the human form is represented according to the Aristotelian idea of beauty, in which the proportions are as close to real-life ones as possible, in African portraiture the representation of the human body answers to a different aesthetic

principle, one that can be described as “metaphorical”: it assigns relative size to parts of the body on the basis of their metaphysical importance. Accordingly, the head, in reality usually about a seventh of the body in size, takes up as much as a third of the total height of the sculptural image. The same theory explains the disproportionately large breasts of female images.

Finally, the relative brevity of proverbs in comparison with other traditional verbal texts — tales, epics, panegyrics — gives them a functional advantage over the more complex ones. Their characteristic conciseness permits easy recall and versatile application — at any time and on any occasion. Since their use in effect represents an invitation to pause and enter a laboratory where the matter in hand can be scrutinized under the lens of the wisdom of the ages, it offers individuals an opportunity to engage in what Victor Turner says the whole group does on liminal occasions, proverbs playing the role of the “performative genres” or “social dramas” that characterize those occasions (99–106).

GENDER AND PROVERBS

Certain proverbs raise questions concerning a most important issue: gender. The presence in the Yoruba *òwe* corpus of derogatory (at least on the surface) statements about women deserves some comment.

Students of Yoruba culture are familiar with the reverence with which the Yoruba regard womanhood. It results from the importance they attach to the practically absolute dependence of human existence on the woman: she is the only pathway through which people come into existence, and whatever a man’s contribution to the process, it cannot compare in importance or in the awesome psychic implications of the truth that every human being begins incarnation as an anatomical part of a woman, concealed in the protection of her body, drawing sustenance from her, and relying completely on her for some nine months. Not even the test-tube innovations of science have succeeded in doing away with the woman’s contribution. The newborn’s dependence on her continues long after birth, for unlike the offspring of lower animals, those of humans require years of nurturing before they can survive on their own. Writing about the earliest stages in the history of hominids, Gerder Lerner observes, “Only the mother’s arms and care sheltered the infant from cold; only her breast milk could provide the nourishment needed for survival. Her indifference or neglect meant certain death” (40). The mysteries and perils of pregnancy, fetal development, and parturition also play a crucial role in determining the Yoruba apprehension of womanhood — with awe, humility, and profound appreciation. As one would expect, therefore, Yoruba folklore — proverbs no less than tales and other forms — testifies to this reverence and awe for *womanhood* and — to a lesser extent, admittedly — for women.

Nevertheless, the casual observer might point to Yoruba social practices and to such elements of folklore as irreverent and facile references to women and female genitalia as proof that the Yoruba woman is no more than a despised object, tolerated only insofar as she can give pleasure and satisfaction to men. But that conclusion is at variance with the reality and inconsistent with the reverential regard