GASPING FOR BREATH: INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN YORUBA PROVERBS

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Among the Yoruba, a linguistic-cum-cultural group found in the Western part of Nigeria, knowledge production resides in the proverbial lore of the people. The generative capacity of the intrinsic resources of Yoruba proverbs is eminently visible across several frontiers of epistemological precincts. However, it has been increasingly difficult to exploit these resources for contemporary appropriation as a result of factors such as counter-culture, gaps in educational planning and the erosion of indigenous values by waves of modernisation. To fully understand the objective of this paper is to adequately locate proverbs in the knowledge production enterprise in African consciousness. Of course, owing to Africa’s non-scribal tradition, which compelled the transmission of communal ethics via oral means, it naturally follows that each society would naturally evolve oral forms to serve the multifarious purposes in the social equation.

Several scholars have dwelled on the significance of oral tradition/oral tradition among people of African descent. Scholars such as Ruth Finnegan in her ground-breaking work *Oral Literature in Africa* emphasise the uniqueness of various forms of oral art. Later scholars like Abimbola (1975), Ajuwon (1979) and Barber (1988), to mention just a few have demonstrated the vibrancy of the oral genres through specific studies on isolated forms such as *Ifá* Religious poetry, *Ijala* Yoruba Hunters’ Dirge, *Oriki* (Yoruba Praise or Descriptive Poetry), respectively. What comes out of these scholarly interventions is that the Yoruba possess a rich and almost inexhaustible repertoire of oral art. However, the focus of this paper on the proverb genre among the Yoruba is a direct consequence of its centrality in Yoruba epistemological processes. This is to say that, the diversity of proverbs and its unarguable penetrability makes it the form that best suits the knowledge enterprise, especially for production, transmission and diffusion across all strata of the social fabric.

This paper draws from a corpus of Yoruba proverbs, *in situ*, to instantiate the fact that the relevance of the verbal resources among the Yoruba people, as in several indigenous societies, extends beyond artistic and aesthetic appeals. Given the key role proverbs perform in pre-literate societies, it is stressed that knowledge production, articulation and...
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Proverbs become readily available to elders who guard the socio-cultural values of the society and point ways forward all the time. As the saying goes, agba ki l wa loja ki ori omo tuntun wo (when an elder is in the market, the new-born baby would not lack attention). Therefore, the role of elders in using proverbs as embellishments in genres like folktales is paramount. Perhaps one central area where the Yoruba deploy the intricacy of proverb dynamism is in the area of religion.

Owing to the structure of the Yoruba religious pantheon which accommodates several deities next to a supreme being, the use of proverbial sayings becomes an imperative. However, the centrality of Ifa, also called akerefinusogbon, akoniloran bi iyekan eni… (Ifa, the one whose wisdom is immense, the omniscient teacher like one’s relation…); particularly foregrounds the spiritual essence of oral and verbal resources. As oracles in Yoruba pantheons relate with devotees through riddles and proverbs, it becomes a question of religious imperative to interrogate proverbs. As a matter of fact, as the central source of Yoruba indigenous being is the Ifa literary corpus, the density of the messages requires great tact and mastery to penetrate them. This explains why the corpus is described as the storehouse of Yoruba philosophy.

Indigenous knowledge production among the Yoruba depends largely on the exposition of the proverbial lore. From the womb-to-tomb continuum, proverbs are strategically exploited to interpret existential positions and offer insights into challenges of individual and communal existence. Elders are saddled with the onerous task of using appropriate proverbs in this regard, since oro ki i tobi ka bi obe bu, (no matter how weighty a matter is, it must be discussed). In other words, proverbs are like diplomatic tools which ultimately endure across generations. What the Yoruba use to further enhance their societies and advance the cause of human-exploitation for human development are deeply enshrined in the rich repertoire of Yoruba proverbs. This paper highlights specific epistemological concerns, like health and ethical precepts, to suggest that the survival of oral artistic resources is directly proportional to the humanistic quest for advancement. From a literary analytical standpoint, for example, proverbs as essential thematic drivers are well represented in the corpus of written African literature. The argument we can deduce is that the epistemological lacuna and the disconnect between socio-historical realities and frontiers of knowledge find an explanation in the fate of under-explored orature in African’s drive for an epistemological order.
ity is inherently embedded in the proverbial lore. In fact, the Yoruba have proverbs which relate to each occasion and which further different epistemological ends. For instance, the admonition contained in the saying that *ilera loro* (health is wealth) indicates the importance of healthy living among the Yoruba, while *okunrun diwo n diigun, bowo ti mo ni oogun n mo* (when a sick person reduces the cost of service/medication, the medication is naturally reduced since the amount of money determines the volume/quality of drugs) implies that like all human societies, quality healthcare comes at a premium. In spite of the foregoing, however, about the numerous potentials of a rich verbal storehouse in Yoruba societies, the problematic herein is the seeming disconnect of its continued relevance in contemporary society. This development, as mentioned earlier, can be said to be the fallout of pseudo-literacy, counter-cultures and the sweeping effects of a globalised world.

To expatiate a little: by pseudo-literacy, one refers to the fact that despite the assumption that the society has transited to the scribal tradition, a vast majority of the population is still unlettered. They are lost between the poles of literacy and illiteracy; and are unable to adequately accommodate the cultural ethos replete in proverbs which make a mockery of both tradition and modernity. In other words, while indigenous resources gasp for breath and beg for attention, the reality is their utter neglect by society, so much so that a supposed elite tribe cannot further the values of the traditional society mirrored in proverbs.

Counter-cultures which negate the *ise loogun ise* principle (hard work as the antidote to poverty) also lead to chaos in the cultural space. The contemporary society contends with the evils of acute materialism, neglect of values and the tendency to ignore noble achievements. Ordinarily, the indigenous wisdom replete in proverbs would have sounded a caveat on this development that *oun ti a ko jiya fun ki i to ojo* (anything not laboured for does not last); but the reality is that life is now lived as *bo ti gba*, not *bo ti to* (the expedient way, not the right way). In other words, the emerging society hardly pays attention to the values promoted hitherto and instead celebrates ephemeral issues which are antithetical to the ethos represented in traditional societies.

As the Yoruba would proverbially admonish, *agbajo owo la fii so aya* (it takes a clenched /total palm to beat the chest), the evolution of an appropriate and beneficial epistemological order in contemporary society depends on how prepared and accommodating the forces of modernity can be. The fact that *omo to so ile nu, o so apo iya ko* (when a child forgets the home, s/he should await a looming danger) implies that the politics of knowledge production which frustrate the inculcation of cultural values and virtues is bound to suffer a setback, as is currently being witnessed in the visible chaos in the public space. The fate of proverbs in contemporary society, therefore, is like that of the forgotten stone which ironically has the capacity to be the cornerstone.

My impression is that the society which emerges from the present epistemological contraption faces a critical loss of direction. The issue is that the foundation of social values has long been consigned to the dustbin of pseudo-Westernisation, which in itself is not adequately imbibed. For proverbs to wriggle out of this suffocation, a reorientation which transcends mere aesthetic colouration would be required since, as the
Yoruba would say, *omo to so ile nu, o so apo iya ko* (a child that jettisons the home is a disaster waiting to happen). To succinctly capture the knowledge politics as it affects the place of proverbs among the Yoruba, the proverb that, *arakun laso gbaga, ko si eno to rin ihoho de ibe* (going to shop for a new fabric at Gbagi market is only to add to one's wardrobe, no one goes to the market naked), aptly captures the situation.

### Proverbs in the knowledge equation

Yoruba epistemological equation oscillates among the cycles of knowledge (*ogbon*), wisdom (*imo*) and understanding (*oye*). For Falola, the relationship between these key signposts is not only interwoven, but is also interdependent, just like a mathematical equation. To fully appreciate the significance of knowledge as the first pillar in the epistemological process, there is a need to analyse proverbs that feature knowledge as their thematic thrust. It should be emphasised that this becomes pertinent given what the Yoruba conception of proverbs “as a storehouse of Yoruba knowledge” (Abimbola).

To start with, the Yoruba proverb that *Ogbon ologbon ki i je ki a pe agba ni were* (someone else’s knowledge does not earn the elder the sobriquet of being mad) indicates that experience and the ability to sift through different viewpoints are the qualities of being an elder. This directly relates to the place of elders in the Yoruba pantheon. They serve as interpreters and disseminators of indigenous epistemology, using proverbial language to intervene in matters considered intractable, hence the proverb *agba ki i wa loja ki ori omo tuntun wo* (it is not possible to have an elder in a market where the newborn’s head would be bowed). In this regard, the proverb just highlighted relies heavily on the place of elders not only as purveyors of sound judgments, but also as being central to the maintenance of law and order. In fact, when a child or even someone considered to be childish in conduct transgresses, it is common among the Yoruba to proverbially insinuate that *ko ni agba nile or a o ran an sile* (there is no elder in the person’s family/the person needs to take a message back home). Such messages are usually indictments of whether the person is *abiiko* or *akoogba* (born and not trained or trained but unbowing). It should be noted that in this regard, emphasis on training or education points, interestingly, to indigenous and not Western/formal education. This implies that in a situation where someone is seen to lack the requisite knowledge base, the indictment goes back to the domestic setting. This is the scenario on the home front.

Knowledge production in the larger society is only different when the setting is taken into account. In this case, knowledge sharing, principles of collective responsibility and democratic ethos hold sway. Therefore, when the Yoruba declare that *Ogbon o di igi* (*knowledge does not tie logs of wood*) and *Oro sunnukin, oju sunnukun ni a fi n wo* (*a serious matter requires serious pondering*), the caveat being sounded is the fact that knowledge requires serious pondering, and no one can claim to have a monopoly over same. In other words, consultation is necessary in tackling such issues; after all, *Ologbon kan o ta koko omi seti aso ri* (*no matter how knowledgeable someone is, he/she cannot tie water in a knot, and isin wo, isoririvo wo, oun ti a ba jijo wo, gigun lo n gun* (*when all parties consider an issue, there is bound to be progress*)

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The fact that proverbs are vehicles of knowledge and are central to knowledge production and, in fact, strategic in the knowledge equation is indubitable. In fact, “proverbs are regarded as the core of “traditional” knowledge because the metaphoric representations conveyed through them become useful sources of lessons that have to be learned.” (Kazeem, 2009, 12).

This necessarily derives from the oral nature of indigenous society, where knowledge is transmitted across generations. As rightly noted by Akoma (2007):

…oral narratives were not regarded as flights of fancy but as a body of the community's cultural and philosophical thoughts, even as the actual performance of these narratives was equally aesthetically and emotionally pleasing. Thus, the narratives were rigorously composed and kept alive in the consciousness of the citizenry through memorization and ability to recall… (14)

Hence, the non-formal transmission of knowledge among the Yoruba can be said to have implications for its continued survival. The corollary of Western education can only be found in specialised knowledge among the Yoruba. In this regard, Ifa and Isegun readily come to mind. Ifa (Yoruba god of divination) and Isegun (medicine/healthcare practice) are specialised forms of knowledge base that are disappearing, or at best, they exist in diluted, corrupted forms. These forms of specialised knowledge belong mostly to awo (cults), and are held sacred and revered in Yoruba culture. Thus, the knowledge of both epistemologies requires not only a specialised training, but also a formal initiation. This ultimately means that although oogun ti ko ba je, ewe e lo ku ikan (when a herbal preparation is non-effective, there is a constituent ingredient missing), the reality is that there is a knowledge gap that is created as a result of the cultic nature of indigenous healthcare practice. The implication is that indigenous medicinal plants and the knowledge of their efficacy or even dosage gets lost in oral transmission, or in deliberate acts associated with cultic esotericism. Gbadegesin (2007) laments this development when he says

that “the secret of its efficacy is not revealed by its practitioners”, then “it becomes impossible to develop it...”(121)

The point being stressed is that indigenous epistemology among the Yoruba is suffering and gasping for breath as a result of several factors. Though the Yoruba place knowledge in a prime position in the equation, the challenge of knowledge production is that both its producers and transmitters are contaminated by several forces. Modernity and globalisation are the most recent agents of decimation of indigenous knowledge, given the way values have been relegated to the background and that society now adores materialism and ill-gotten wealth. This is contrary to the jealously-guarded principles of indigenous conducts of decency, hard work, integrity and honour. Daramola acknowledges proverbs as a site for enshrining these values when he states that Among the Yoruba, proverbs and maxims are traditionally frequently used to teach moral and honourable behaviours known by the people as iwa omoluabi. This may be in the form of a (an) corrective, didactic, abusive or even eulogistic measure. Whichever way proverbs are used among the people, there is always a message to be passed across and a lesson to be learnt. (121)
As depicted above, since the Yoruba believe that, as a member of the larger society, an individual is morally bound to carry himself/herself with self-respect. After all, bi oju ko ba ti ole, oju a ti ara ile re (if a thief lacks shame, the members of the household would be ashamed). In other words, ill-gotten wealth cannot be adored in a society where it is generally believed that e ri oju ole e o mu, omo yin o se agbafo o n ko aso wa sile (what further evidence does one need to identify a thief when a child is not a launderer, yet he/she comes home with clothes).

There is of course a larger debate in the above connection, especially regarding the mode of instruction in the received Western education curriculum. The arguments range from the adoption of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction to the infusion of cultural education in the school curriculum (Dasylva, 2005). Akinyemi (2004) champions proverbs as the basis of a sound moral education. For our purpose here, one notes that it is not a matter of a medium of instruction of content of the school syllabus, but the general buy-in of all stakeholders on the need to re-establish the sound cultural foundation of indigenous society, which enables a seamless knowledge transmission. The fact therefore is that in order to wriggle out of the present epistemological conundrum, contemporary aspirations must continue to reflect on, and relate to proverbs, given the realisation that, “The proverb is regarded as a noble genre of African oral tradition that enjoys the prestige of a custodian of a people’s wisdom and philosophy of life. (Ssetuba, 2002, 1), and also the fact that ‘proverbs evolved with the growth and development of the society, it reflects diverse aspects of a people’s culture, beliefs, traditional, social and political institutions, ethics, commerce, health.’ (Adewoye, 1987, 1).

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