RESEARCH ARTICLE

YORUBA PROVERBS AS A MEANS OF COMPREHENDING YORUBA PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION.

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Abstract:
The Yorùbá value proverbs, philosophy and education very highly because they are deep-rooted in the culture of the people for instance, proverbs often occur informally in everyday discourse and in oratory to garnish, conceal or hint. The cultural affinity between the speaker and the audience makes the proverbial utterance meaningful to the hearer in the society. Like other people in universe, Yorùbá philosophy is ‘life affirming’. That is Yorùbá traditional philosophy has to do with life, perhaps in human beings, animals, rocks, soil and plants. The Yorùbá are very observant and the events in their immediate environment have a considerable impact on their mode of life. In Yorùbá society, the system of education is inherent in Yorùbá oral literature such as proverbs, poems, songs, folktales and riddles. The main function of Yorùbá orature is to influence the behaviour of one another in the society. The concept of ‘Ọmọlù́bí (the well-behaved one,) is very prominent, and it is on it that the principle of Yorùbá education is based. Since proverbs are said to represent people’s philosophy and instructions are given through proverbs, it means then that, proverbs can fulfill their philosophical and educational functions in the society.

Key Words:- Proverbs, Philosophy, Education, Oratory, Conversation, Oral literature, Culture, Wisdom lore, Responsible and Solution.

Objectives:-- Specific objectives of the paper:
(a) Identify and collect Yorùbá proverbs in Yorùbáland.
(b) Discuss the socio-cultural relevance of the genre
(c) Literary analysis of Yorùbá Proverbs.

Methodology:--
Data for this paper was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source included in-depth oral interviews with native speakers of Yorùbá Language such as elders both men and women. The secondary source included books, journals articles and library. The data collected was transcribed and analyzed.

Introduction:--
Proverbs, philosophy and education are universal themes of knowledge. They could be found in aspects of everyday verbal communication. The cultural affinity between the audience and the speaker or user of proverbs makes the proverbial communication highly meaningful because they are deeply-rooted in the culture of the people. Referring to the tradition of proverbs, Bryant (1945: 4), writes:

Proverbs, since the time of Aristotle, have been depicted as remnant saved from the “wrecks and ruins of ancient philosophy by reason of their consciences and cleverness”.

This idea is further elaborated by Whiting (1932: 273-307), who describes the proverb as:

A short saying of philosophical 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.
Sinclair (1944: 9) defines philosophy as:

*The attempt to understand the universal and ourselves and our place in the universe, whether for theoretical interest or for material practical purposes* is compatible with the concept of geography as the *philosophy of place*.

He explains further that all humans could be regarded as philosophers simply because they all have some views about the universe. In essence, philosophers abound in any culture and at all settings as well as in variety of disciplines. Awoniyi (1978:1) talks of education when he notes that:

*No educational system stands apart from the society which establishes it. It has purposes that must be achieved if that society is to continue in the right direction. Education is meant to be embedded in that society, drawing inspiration and nourishment from it, and in turn, contributing to societal opportunities for growth and renewal. Consequently, education may be formal or informal. Informal education is synonymous with traditional or indigenous education which has its pattern, and is flexible enough to conserve and transmit the culture, tradition and experience of the particular society.*

From the foregoing argument, education does not necessarily have to be culture and tradition oriented.

Some writers have worked on various aspects of Yorùbá proverbs. For instance, Agbaje (2010) discusses the functions of proverbial songs in Yorùbá society. Ajibola (1947) arranges samples of Yorùbá proverbs alphabetically. Some of his collections have English translations. Beier and Gbadamosi (1959) examine the ideas contained in some aspects of Yorùbá proverbs as reflecting the people’s philosophy or worldviews. Bamgbose (1968) discusses the form of Yorùbá proverb. Ogunwale (1998) illustrates the dynamics and mechanism of metaphor in Yorùbá proverb. Oladeji (1988) analyses Yorùbá proverbs as language signposts in Yorùbá pragmatic ethics. Owomoyela (1981) discusses Yorùbá proverbs as a means of exploring an African philosophy of social communication. While Yusuf (1994) examines the ethical value of women’s speech in Yorùbá proverbs. It is observed that none of the above writers attempts to discuss the role of Yorùbá proverbs in the understanding of Yorùbá philosophy and education. Therefore, this paper sets out to focus on this neglected area of study.

**The Yorùbá Perception of Proverbs, Philosophy and Education:**

**Proverbs:**

In Yorùbá language, unlike some other languages of Africa, a succinct distinction does exist in terminology between proverb and other types of literary expression. Proverbs often occur informally in day-to-day discourse/conversation. The cultural affinity between the speaker and the audience makes the proverbial utterance/expression meaningful to the hearer in the society. In face-to-face interaction the spoken word acquires extra influence. Thus the Yorùbá proverbs says that “Eyin lọrọ, bí bà ti balè, yóò fò” (Speech is an egg, when dropped, it shatters). Yorùbá people hold proverbs in high esteem because they are regarded as constituting the wisdom lore of the society. This is attested to by Olatunji (1984: 170) when he says:

*Because the proverbs are considered to be traditional and originate from the observation of natural phenomena and human relations, old people are regarded as a repository of proverbs.*

Therefore, anyone who cannot apply proverbs effectively is considered to be unwise. Hence, the popular saying that:

*Bí ọwé bí ọwé là à lulu ògídìgbo; ológbōn lọ ò jọ o; òmòran níí mọ òn*  
(The war drum is cryptically beaten like a proverb; it is wise men who dance to it; it is informed men who know it)

It is worth noting that when problems seem intractable, people often bring in proverbs to resolve them. For instance:

*Òwé léṣin órọ; bí órọ bá ọsínà, ọwé là à fí i wá a*  
(Proverbs are horse-footed to solve a problem; when the truth is elusive, it is proverbs we use to discover it).

From the foregoing statements, one notices the Yorùbá perception of the proverb as a functional as well as an aesthetic device which often becomes an agent of vitality in the realm of verbal discourse. Besides, like other
people elsewhere, the use of proverbs is not restricted to verbal communication. In Yorùbá culture, proverbial discourse may be set in motion through the drum and other instrumental media. For example, visual symbolism in clothes, wall designs, walking-stick of a chief or royalty, may be attributes of proverbs.

**Philosophy:-**

The Yorùbá people philosophize in various contexts. As a people, the Yorùbá view the universe and their place in it from their own traditional perspectives. Ojo (1966: 194) is of the opinion that Yorùbá philosophy, for the sake of exemplification may conveniently be divided into three parts: geosophy, material philosophy and linguistic philosophy. Like other people in the world, Yorùbá philosophy is ‘life affirming’. That is, Yorùbá traditional philosophy has to do with life, perhaps in human beings, animals, rocks, soil and plants. In order to have a clear understanding of the universe, there arise some questions relating to the immediate Yorùbá environment. An attempt to answer such questions may compel the Yorùbá to be very observant of their environment. The events in the immediate Yorùbá environment have a considerable impact on their mode of thinking. This fact is expressed in Denneth (1910: 209) when he wrote:

> By the fear of death and the desire to propagate and live, the Yorùbá’s thought were driven to the study in nature of the phenomena that caused death and helped him live and propagate...

Viewing the whole thing, one can see today that, through scientific observation, the study of nature has caused a firm relationship between the environment of Yorùbáland and the philosophy of is people. The Yorùbá traditional philosophy has reached a remarkable level because of the social structure of the society which is a guarantee of freedom, peace, stability, law and order, and the flourish of a class of elders, the repositories of the society’s wisdom and knowledge.

**Education:-**

It is the general belief of the Yorùbá people that life commences from the womb. Thus education oral traditions such as the use of proverb, poems, songs, folktales and riddles start right from there. To ensure the well adjusted membership of the Yorùbá society, right from the womb, the Yorùbá parents talk to their children and educate them. They want the child to grow up and be an “Ọmọlùwàbí”. According to Awniyi (1975: 354-365):

> To be an Ọmọlùwàbí is to be of good character in all its ramifications. Good character in the Yorùbá sense includes respect for old age, loyalty to one’s parents and local traditions, honest in all public and private dealings, devotion to duty, readiness to assist the needy and the infirm, sympathy, sociability, courage, and itching desire for work and many other desirable qualities.

The sole focus of Yorùbá education has always been to foster good character in the individual and to make him or her a responsible member of the society. Borrowing the words of Mounouni (1968: 29):

> Traditional education, therefore, embrace character-building as well as the development of physical aptitudes, the acquisition of those moral qualities felt to be an integral part of manhood, and the acquisition of the knowledge and techniques needed by all men if they are to take an active part in social life in its various forms.

It is worth noting that in the Yorùbá cultural setting, traditional education is a life-long process.

**Analysis:-**

Some proverbs will be analysed here to show the interrelationship that exist between them on one hand, and between them and philosophy and education.

ényí yóò joyin inú ọpáta kí i wo ẹnu ààké

(He who would extract the honey embedded in a rock should take no notice of the wear and tear of the axe-blade used).

The above proverb indicates that no great success can be easily achieved. The Yorùbá are of the opinion that ‘rock honey’ is the sweetest thing that could be found. Therefore, it could be compared to success which cannot also be easily come by. The Yorùbá equally regard the rock as the hardest object in the environment. Permanence is
consequently symbolized by it. The graves of ancestors and sacred spots were marked by rock. This proverb is often used to educate people in the society that for one to achieve great heights in life, one needs to endure and be hardworking. Also, the above proverb represents a people’s philosophy. It also reveals the experience gathered in ones environment over the years.

Émiàbàtàní à múodò à sàn
(The influence of the swamp makes the river flow).

The above proverb is an indication that the Yorùbá people traced rivers to their sources. They also realize that there could be no rivers without springs. The Yorùbá believe that the spring is the source of the river. The above proverb can be regarded as a philosophical representation of people acquired over the years. The experience thus gained over the years in the environment is often used in the education of people in the society. It is established in the above proverb that one needs the support of others in order to achieve ones goals in the society.

Bí ẹye kò bá ní fín ẹye niràn
Ojú sànmà ń ó yè fó lái farakanra
(if a bird would not provoke the other, the sky is wide enough for both to fly without hindrance).

From the foregoing, it could be realized that as there are countless birds, so also is there sufficient space or provision for each of them to move freely in the sky. In the Yorùbá society, this type of proverb is often used to educate people to shun whatever act of violence that may disturb the peace and progress of others. This philosophical view is garnished in Yorùbá proverb and put into practice for the smooth running of the society.

Ọrọ pìpò kò kún agbọn
(Many words do not fill a basket)

The above proverb shows that action speaks louder than voice. This type of proverb is often applicable to people noted for making empty boasts. In the Yorùbá society, those who are not organized or are with aimless endeavours are often called back to their senses so that they can be up and doing. Experience has shown that people without concrete aims and plans can hardly achieve much in life. The philosophical thought inherent in this kind of proverb accounts for its acceptability in traditional education in the society.

Bí owó kò bá te èèkù idà, a ki i bèèrè ikú tó pa baba eni

The above proverb indicates that the adequate preparation is highly necessary before one tries to attempt any venture. In other words, one should not boast of anything until one has positioned him or herself in the environment that is conducive to success. This type of proverb is used in the society to educate people with premature aims and objectives on certain things.

Vnití ó báììtètàn, tíkòníìtàn, kònípëtàn
(Whoever has early opportunity and fails to make good use of the opportunity will never have good history/records)

The above proverb connotes that one should make use of early opportunity in life. That is, the proverb teaches us that one should “make hay while the sun shines”. This is because if one loses opportunity at the early life, he may not likely come across such opportunity again. The above proverb is born-out of people’s philosophy acquired all over the years. In essence, the Yoruba believe that “opportunity comes but once”.

Eni tó bá à wá ayé, tí ó bá ráyé tàn kò ni ràáyè mọ
(Whoever tries to acquire various powers and if he succeeds, he may not be able to enjoy his much labored efforts).

The above proverb connotes that whoever tries to acquire all things of life may eventually run foul or loose out. It teaches us that one should not try to be everywhere at all cost. The philosophy of life does not support ‘do or die’ principle of life. It is acquired from long experience that ‘jack of all trades, master of none’.

Ọní kù, ọlà ń sunkún àsunidabọ, wón ní kí lọ de è? Ọ nú ta ni kò mọ pé ikú tó pa ọnì, ọ ń bọ wá pa ọlá
(Today dies, Tomorrow weeps continuously. And people asked him why crying? Then, he answered that, don’t you know the death that occurred to Today will surely occur to Tomorrow)

The above proverb indicates that whatever happens to your neighbor may likely be your turn in future. An experienced man is always conscious of the happenings of his environment, so as to learn his lessons. It is embedded in Yoruba philosophy that one must always be at alert in regards to what happens in his society. In essence, the above proverb teaches us that whatever happens to your counterpart is indirectly a pointer to the fact that one may have the same bitter experience in the future.

Eni tó bá te etí ara rè mọlẹ, bí ó bá rí tí ẹlọmírán yóò fà á ya
(Whoever steps on the edge of his own dress, if he sees another man’s dress he/she will tear it.).

The above proverb indicates that a man who does havoc to himself will not hesitate to destroy another man’s property. It teaches us that we should be careful of a person who doesn’t think of any good about himself. Also, this type of person may be a clog in the wheel of another man’s progress. The philosophy embedded in the above proverb is gathered out of long experiences acquired from the Yoruba socio-cultural life.

Omi ighọ ríbi dọ sí, ó ní óun ó ní ní, ópẹ ẹlùjù ríbi dọsí ó ní óun ó jàjìànjìmá. Atare rènì gbá idí rẹ ó ní óbùrọ ẹsẹn, óbùrọ i ba rènì gbá idí i rè, i bá sàn ju atare bọ.
(Bush river has good source and she is proud of it. Palm tree settles on fertile land and becomes proud of it. Alligator pepper grows on fertile land and makes jest of óbùrọ pepper. If óbùrọ pepper is opportuned to grow on fertile soil, it will flourish better than alligator pepper).

It is inherent in the foregoing proverb that if one is opportuned, he should not use it to look low on others. The above proverb is in use to educate people that one can make good use of any chance that comes his way. The philosophy that is encompassed in the above proverb is that one can make good use of any good assistance at an appropriate time.

Conclusion:-

The abstract of this paper was presented to have an insight into the study of the work. Also attempt were made to define the word proverb. Review of the previous works on proverbs was attempted.

Besides, the key words were pointed out. The objectives of the study were clearly stated while the methodology adopted in the work and the reason for adopting it was mentioned. Furthermore, some proverbs are randomly selected as a strategy to understand Yorùbá philosophy and education.

The philosophical view inherent in the proverb makes it acceptable and functional in the Yorùbá society. Abstract issues are expressed by the Yorùbá through proverbs based on the familiar ideas taken from their immediate environment. Also, the Yorùbá often display their skills at coining philosophical and poetical proverbs around such things as hills, rivers, birds, animals and domestic tools. This invariably makes proverbs represent the soul of people. That is, proverbs are said to represent people’s views of life. It is also realized that sometimes Yorùbá proverbs are potentially known to the individual hearer and are equally free for all to use on suitable occasions. This process makes it easy to give instruction through proverbs and consequently to provide formal education as well as transmit cultural tradition through the words of tile mouth. Without any doubt, we know that proverbs fulfill philosophical and educational functions in the Yorùbá society.

References:–