

## PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES IN YORUBA PROVERBS

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper is a philosophical analysis of Yoruba proverbs. It argues that Yoruba proverbs have philosophical issues that cut across epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, logic, aesthetics and so on. Western philosophy has basically been classified into metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. In the same vein, Yoruba proverbs though, oral in nature, when critically analyze points to basic philosophy- to metaphysics, to ethics to epistemology and to socio-political character of the Yoruba people. An inquiry into Yoruba proverbs gives an insight to various philosophical issues. It also substantiates the fact that despite the absence of writing tradition, certain traditional thoughts justify the existence of African philosophy. Thus, like various issues of concern in Western philosophy intends, Yoruba proverbs provide philosophical means by which, unity, peaceful co-existence and good virtue can be promoted in the individual and this will lead to the attainment of social order in the society.*

**KEYWORDS:** Philosophy, Proverbs, Orality and Yoruba tradition.

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## INTRODUCTION

The fundamental question of the ontology of the existence of African philosophy has been answered in different ways by different thinkers. Some philosophers have claimed that there cannot be philosophy in the absence of tradition of writing. And since African thought lacks this misconstrued essential paradigm of philosophy, therefore, there is no African philosophy. The other argument on the non-existence of African philosophy is premised on the claim that African thought has no philosophical content. Thus, this thought cannot be regarded as philosophical in any regard. Concerning the debate on whether there is African philosophy or not Sophie Oluwole (1996: 18) asserts that: "The futility of the continuation of the debate on the existence of African philosophy is today generally conceded". Therefore, our interest in this paper is not in the debate whether there is African philosophy or not. Rather our concern is to critically demonstrate by concrete examples that Yoruba proverbs can pass muster as philosophy. The paper examines the notion of orality in general and scrutinizes the place of proverbs in Yoruba traditional thought in connection with the idea of African philosophy.

The first point we must state clearly is that it is significantly wrong to despise African traditional belief (or the belief of any race whatsoever) only because it is more often than not in oral communication. As a matter of fact, orality should be a veritable way of demonstrating the philosophy of a race. The earliest way of demonstrating a philosophical thought was via oral communication. This we found in the philosophical practices of the Milesian school that produces the thought of Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes.

The term 'orality' refers to "all kinds of unwritten communication. These include folklore, proverbs, myths, rationally and articulated ideas of intellectual significance" (Ogunba G. 1997: 21). Orality refers to the verbal dissemination of knowledge and information among the people before the advent of writing tradition. Thus, before the advancement of writing tradition, philosophy was transmitted from one generation to another by means of verbal communication.

Oral sources were therefore the main modes of disseminating ideas before the invention of writing. It appears now that in determining the relevance of issues and concept in our society we seem to have overpriced the relevance of literary writing. Although, writing is an indispensable means of delivering the intellectual heritage from one generation to another, however, it will not be fair to use the absences of tradition of writing to despise the existence of philosophy in any race and in African in particular. There have been influential philosophical ideas which for a long time remained verbal. This position is corroborated by Assertion that:

The Vedas were handed down from mouth to mouth from a period of unknown antiquity..... when the Vedas were composed, there was probably no system of writing prevalent in India...(Omogbe 1993: 227-228)

Accordingly, it was through oral literature that the philosophical idea of the Vedas was transmitted. Besides, Socrates, Buddha and a host of other philosophers did not write anything yet their philosophies are preserved. And, till today serve as the basis of philosophical discourse. If we grant this, it follows then that ideas or issues that are philosophical, though disseminated and preserved in oral form are subject of discussion in African philosophy. It is in this spirit that we discuss the concept of proverbs in Yoruba traditional thought.

The Yoruba valued proverb very highly, for they are considered to be the wisdom lore of the race. And because the proverbs are considered to be traditional and originate from the observation of natural phenomena and human relations, old people are regarded as repository of proverbs. Anyone who does not know, or cannot understand the application of proverbs is regarded as unwise (Olatunji, 1984: 170)

Among the Yoruba people in Nigeria, proverbs are considered to be the spirit and soul of the language use. A fact borne from such sayings as “*Owe lesin oro, oro lesin owe, bi oro ba sonu owe ni a o fi wa*” (Proverbs are the prongs of discourse and if a discourse is riddled with meaning it is proverbs that we use to lose it). Such statements as the one above who in themselves are considered proverbs affirm the assertion that culturally conscious Nigerians especially the Yoruba’s believe that the heart of nearly all conversational engagements is the use of proverbs.

### **Philosophy and Yoruba proverbs**

Generally speaking, the term “Philosophy” tends itself to many interpretations, hence whatever definition or interpretation given by any individual is not only controversial but is apt to be personal. However, philosophy is something quite specific; it is a human activity of a particular kind not just a variety of speculating or debating. In spite of the many differences, among philosophers, the field itself is specifiable. Philosophy has as its purpose the identification and study of the most basic facts of reality and our relationship with them. Though, the enterprise we call philosophy began in Greece in the fifth century, but its activity has cut across all cities and continents of the world, be it Western world or Africa. Basically, philosophy in the Western world can be classified into metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, in the same way, ancient African philosophy is as sumptuously broken down into these branches. The Yoruba proverbs, in a very clear way points to basic philosophy - to metaphysics, to epistemology, and to ethics of the Yoruba people, as well as to their socio-political character.

Proverbs simply put are short well known sentence or phrase that states a general truth about life or gives advice or caution without actually being exhaustive in its meaning. Proverbs are

generally considered as tool for enhancing verbal expression and enrich the oral delivery of individuals to employ their usage in conversation. In Africa especially among the Yoruba speaking tribes of South West Nigeria in the region of West Africa, proverbs are believed to be ‘conversational condiment’ used to flavour speech taking into consideration its cultural and moral impact. It is a safe assumption that the use of proverbs imbue the user with the edge to make his or her expression more ornate, acceptable and culturally relevant. Thus, proverbs are considered as the prongs which are used to analyze situations. We can infer from the above that proverbs are analytical tools. Consequently, proverbs are philosophical. This position is premised on the fact that philosophy itself is an analytical tool of explaining phenomena of human existence. To corroborate this view we consider the proverb below:

*Asoro aiyen oro lo pa Elenpe isaaju to ni igba wuwo ju awo lo.*

(It was failure to be explicit that killed the king *Elenpe* who said that a calabash is heavier than dish).

The king *Elenpe* said that calabash is heavier than dish without being explicit that it is the fresh calabash that is heavier than the dish. Unfortunately for him when they went out to verify the truthfulness of his claim they saw a dried calabash and found out that the dish was heavier than the calabash. Thus, the people killed him and not being explicit was responsible for his death. Therefore, this shows that proverbs are justifiable, critical, and explicit. And, if philosophy is defined as critical evaluation, examination and justification of belief, institutions, practices that are design for human life, then it follows that proverbs in Yoruba thought system can pass muster as philosophy.

There are three branches of basic philosophy. These are metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. Metaphysics is regarded as the first philosophy and it is the comprehensive study of reality (Unah J. 2004: 3). Epistemology or theory of knowledge deals with questions of meaning, origin, certainty, scope and limit of human knowledge, error and skepticism (Owolabi K. 2007: 49). Ethics critically examines and evaluates human conducts in as much as they are judged good or bad, right or wrong (Omogbe J 1993: 4-5).

### **Philosophical relevance of proverbs in Yoruba traditional thought**

From the above, our discussion of proverbs in Yoruba thought system shall be based on the identified areas of basic philosophy, that is, metaphysics, epistemology and ethics.

#### **The Yoruba metaphysical proverbs**

There are considerable numbers of Yoruba proverbs that exposes metaphysical ideas, but we shall consider only a few of them. In western philosophy appearance, reality, causality are fundamental metaphysical issues, this is also contained in Yoruba proverbs. A number of Yoruba proverbs reveal that there is no effect without a cause. This is explicated in the proverbs below:

a. *Kokoro to n jo lebaa ona, onluu re n be ninu igbo.*

(The insect that is dancing near the road, its drummer is in the bush)

b. *Bi ko ba ni ‘dii Obinrin ki je kumolu bi obinrin ba je Salawu, yoo sanwo ori.*

(Without any reason, a woman cannot be called Kumolu, if a woman bears Salawu, then she will pay tax).

c. *Agbalagba to n sare ninu ekan, bi ko ba le nnkan, nnkan lo n lee.*

(An elder that is running in the thatch, if he is not after something, then something is after him)

The above proverbs simply indicate that there is no smoke without fire. They also emphasize the idea of cause and effect. That for every effect, there is a cause.

Moreover, a number of Yoruba proverbs teach that there is a difference between reality and appearance, and so counsel circumspection, as is demonstrated in the proverb below:

d. *Fi'ja sinu p'ete erin, pebi mo 'nu s'oju ayo.*

(Hold grudges and smiles in pretence, starve and pretend to be satisfied).

e. *Gbogbo ohun to n dank o ni wura*

(All that glitter is not gold).

f. *Idobale ko ni iwa, tinu n be ninu*

(Prostration is not good conduct; one's intention exists in the mind already).

In spite of the fact that things and events are unique, some Yoruba proverbs show their interdependence:

g. *Bi oni ti ri ola o ri be, lo mu babalawo to fin difa ojojumo.*

(As today is, tomorrow may not be, which makes the priest to consult with Ifa everyday)

In the same vein, while some proverbs proclaims that human beings are free, others show that there is determinism, the first proverb below teaches freedom and the last two teaches determinism:

h. *Bo se wu ni la n se imole eni.*

(One choose how to carry out one's affairs).

i. *Omi ti eniyan yoo mu ko ni san ko ja re.*

(The water that a person will drink will never flow past him).

j. *Aja ti yoo sonu koni gbo fere ode.*

(The dog that will be lost will never hear the hunter's whistle).

One important proverb that emphasizes the idea of destiny among the Yoruba like the above mentioned ones is; *Bi a ba n gun yan ninu odo ti a n se obe ninu epo epa eni ma yo ayo.* (If we pound yam in a leaf and cook the soup in a nutshell, those that will get filled up will certainly do). This literarily means whatever the circumstances that surrounds human situation, what will be will be.

The analysis of the above considered Yoruba proverbs can be structured as follow; the ideas of appearance and reality, the idea of causality or cause and effect, the idea of free will and determinism and the idea of destiny. All these are fundamental concepts in metaphysics. The philosophical analysis being carried on these and many other metaphysical concepts is corroborated by G. J. Wanjohi (1984), assertion that these metaphysical insights must surely stem from experience followed by reflections.

### **The Yoruba epistemological proverbs**

Epistemology as the branch of philosophy specifically investigates the grounds of all knowledge. It investigates the process of cognition and problems associated with its acquisition and justification. Knowledge in simple term can be described as the cognitive aspect of consciousness in general, and to know means to perceive or apprehend or to understand or comprehend (Owolabi, 2000: 50). Thus, epistemology concerns itself with the reality of the processes of perception and other modes through which human beings intersect with external objects.

Given the above understanding of epistemology, it is clear that epistemological processes are not restricted to a particular race, culture and tradition. Its process can be seen in any human society. In this regard, it is common among the Yoruba to express items of knowledge through proverbs. In Yoruba thought for instance there is no absolute knowledge, wisdom or truth because. This is expressed in the proverb below:

*Ogbon odun yi were emii ni.*

(The wisdom of this year is the madness of the next year).

What this suggests is that wisdom is relative to circumstances.

Also we have:

*Ogbon ologbon kii je ki a pe agba ni were.*

(Someone else's wisdom does not make one call an eldewra mad man).

Corollary to this proverb is: *Owo omode o to pepe, ti agbalagba ko wo akeregbe*

(The child's hand cannot reach the altar, while the elder's hand cannot entre the gourd)

The above three proverbs therefore can be said to be a reflection on knowledge. Consequently, it can lay claim to being philosophical. Another aspect to the proverbs is that it is an indirect criticism against those who claim to be omniscient and despise others as knowing things. Thus, this foreshadows epistemological relativism, a contemporary trend in philosophical inquiry which rejects 'The' knowledge and embraces the possibility of 'This' knowledge.

Furthermore, the proverb; *Aigbo 'Fa la n woke ifa kan osi ni para.*

(It is not understanding the *Ifa* message that makes one to look up, since the *Ifa* is not on the ceiling).

The literary epistemological interpretation of the above proverb is that "Whatever you don't know is difficult to guess." This underpins the epistemological claim that acquisition of knowledge goes beyond opinion and belief. The proverb further emphasizes the reality of

knowing. The point is you can only be sure of what you know or that it is either you know something or not. In a nut shell the Yoruba employs such proverb as this to educate one another on the fact that there is no short cut to knowledge or that knowledge is all inclusive. This is a fundamental issue in epistemology

### The Yoruba ethical proverbs

Ethics is that branch of philosophy that critically inquires into human conducts in as much as they are judged good or bad, right or wrong. Through Yoruba proverbs people are warned to be conscious of their behavior to one another, hence the saying; *Adiye irana kii se oun ajegbe* (The funeral fowl cannot be eaten and forgotten). The simple interpretation of this proverb is that whatever you sow you will reap. Also, through proverbs human conducts are assessed ethically and among such proverbs include:

a. *Bi oju ko bat i ole, oju n ti ara ilee re.*

(If the thief is not ashamed, his mates are).

b. *Eni a ba feyin ti ka mu didun osan, kikan lo nka fun ni.*

(He who one would have relied on for sweet orange, alas, gave out sour ones)

c. *Eni ti a ni ko kin ni leyin, o f'egun s'owo, eni a ni ko feni loju, ata lo fi senu*

(He who we ask to sponge one's back wear thorns, he who we ask to blow away the speck in the eye puts pepper in the mouth)

d. *Eni to ya egbafa ti ko san, o dina egbeje.*

(He who borrows one thousand, two hundred and refuses to pay has blocked one thousand, four hundred)

This proverb clearly emphasis, that when we borrow anything from somebody, we are morally obliged to return or repay it. But, this proverb is saying more than this, although it is making the whole issues of duty and obligation the primary concern of its inquiry. The consequence of the investigation is that one cannot regret having settled one's debt even though doing so is a big sacrifice. It also implicitly emphasizes the need for honesty.

We must also assert here that certain Yoruba proverbs emphasizes that human character cannot be hidden, thus, people are encouraged to behave morally. For instance, the following proverbs underscores the above assertion:

e. *Eefin ni iwa, bi a ba boo mole, yoo ru jade.*

(Behaviour is like a smoke, if you cover it up it will rise up).

f. *Kos i bi ao ti se ifa ti ko ni hu wa ekuro.*

(There is no way we can prevent the *Ifa* from showing the conduct of palm kernel).

g. *Kos i bi ao ti se Ebolo ti ko ni run igbe*

(There is nothing that we can do to the *Ebolo* vegetable that it will not smell like faeces).



Aside the above, the following proverbs emphasize humility and hard work as good conduct:

*h. Bi isu eni bata, a n fowo boo je ni.*

(If one's yam grows well, one always covers it with one's hands while eating).

*i. Eni ti ko se bi alaaru l'Oyingbo, ko le dabi Adegboro l'Oja Oba*

(He who does not behave like a porter in Oyingbo cannot be like Adegboro at the kings market)

But then, we must point out that while in basic philosophy the distinction is made between individual and social ethics (Adegboyega O. 2010). For instance, while individual ethics can be said to consist in regulating the life of an individual, social ethics consist in regulating the conduct of an individual vis-à-vis another in a society. Some Yoruba proverbs also recognize this distinction, as shown in the following proverbial sayings:

*j. Igi kan kii da igbo se*

(A tree cannot make a forest)

*k. ka f'owo we owo ni owo fin mo*

(Washing hands together makes the hands clean)

*l. Agbajo owo la fi n so 'ya,*

(It is with a gathered hand that one beats his chest)..

From the above proverbs, *j* emphasizes the relevance of socialization and need for peaceful co-existence among people. This was also an important philosophical idea in Aristotle's politics when he points out that no one is self-sufficient. Also, *k* and *l* above teach cooperation among individuals and also, that wealth comes by mutual working together).

From the above, it is evident that there are many philosophical issues in Yoruba proverbs. This therefore, is a justification of the idea that philosophical issues persists in African thought, as against the claim of the critics of African philosophy. At least it should not be a dispute whether Yoruba proverbs are African. Yoruba proverbs are qualified to be regarded as African thoughts or ideas because they are peculiar to Yoruba cultural belief. This is not to say that all Yoruba proverbs are philosophical and it does not imply that we cannot have philosophical ideas through other means. What we have been able to demonstrate is that the fact that African lacks tradition of writing does not mean that it lacks philosophy that is peculiar to her culture. Of course philosophy anywhere is a product of its own circumstance. The Yoruba thought system has package its proverbs in such a way that if it is properly considered one will see them as being critical, justifiable, explicit and therefore philosophical. Therefore to say that orality cannot constitute philosophical enterprises will be a self-contradiction and such argument will be self-defeating.

Besides, Oluwole (1996: 17) contends that:

There are no a priori rules against the adequacy of presenting a philosophic treatise in any specific literacy form. What this means is that critical philosophy can occur in the oral or written form... the new claim that philosophy is best promoted in the written form is a point to be accepted with a pinch of salt. Apart from the fact that transcriber do not always remain

faithful in recording the thoughts of other, philosophers who codify their own works in writing sometimes produces irrational and inconsistent tenses. Many provide 'biased' justifications of non-absolute positions in efforts present them as universal ideals.<sup>9</sup>

Oluwole has therefore explicitly and lucidly stated in the above quotation that being oral does not make a thought less-philosophical and being written does not make a piece a philosophy. What is more important is that the content of an idea or a thought, for it to pass muster for a philosophy, it must be critical and reflective of people's thought. And since Yoruba proverbs are critical, reflective and justifiable they have philosophical imports, either they are written or not.

It suffices to say here that logic, which has been defined as the science of reasoning is the universal tool of philosophical activity. But one may ask: is logic applicable to Yoruba proverbs? If the answer is negative, then, one may conclude that proverbs in Yoruba thought are not philosophical. And if the answer is affirmative, how does logic come in? Although, Yoruba proverbs may not be so rich in terms of logic, nevertheless, we do find among them example of conditional syllogism, of which we shall consider only one example.

*Eni ti a fe iya re lomo re n wu ni*

(It is one who we love his mother that his child is also pleasing).

This can be re-phrased as "To love a wife implies loving her children." This is not a complete syllogism, but a truncated syllogism, that is, an enthymeme. To make this a full-blown conditional syllogism one would have to say that:

(1) If I love a wife, then I love her children

I love a wife

Therefore, I love her children

This can be symbolically represented as

$P \rightarrow q$

P (by law of Modus Ponens)

Therefore q

(2) If I love a wife, then I love her children it is not the case that I love a wife.

Therefore, it is not the case that I love her children. Symbolically this would be:

$p \rightarrow q$

not q (By law of modus Tollens)

Therefore not p

The two syllogisms are valid when compared to the fallacies of affirming the consequent and denying the antecedent respectively (Fadahunsi and Adegboyega, 2010: 68-70)



One of the problems of oral source is that we are face with the problems of cross-examination of what is being said. But this seems not to be big problem in Yoruba proverbs as there is a way of cross-examining a proverb by another proverb. One fundamental problem that may be encountered in accepting proverb as one source of African philosophy is the problems of translation. If a proverb is not properly translated then it loses its significance. Although, one does not face this problems if one does not attempts to interpret the proverbs in foreign languages.

## CONCLUSION

A critical examination of Yoruba proverbs as done above underscores the Yoruba belief in concepts such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and so on, that are considered as basic Western philosophy. It should be reiterated here that proverbial sayings are not mere expression of the people's believe in philosophical concepts. Rather, they teach specific lessons, and serve as advice and instructions that can enable the individuals to face the challenges and realities of life. For instance, the proverb *Obinri- in so iwa nu o ni oun ko mori oko wale*, (A woman lost her manners, she said she did not have good luck in choosing a husband), simply expresses that good manners (*iwa*) is fundamental for a woman to sustain her marriage. This, and other Yoruba proverbs generally helps in molding the individual thought and also enhances the mastery of nature, socio-economic and political environment. The proverbs: *Agba kii wa loja, ki ori omo tuntun wo* (An adult cannot stay in the market, and allow the new born baby's head be bent); and *Agba ko si ilu baje, bale ile ku ile d'ahoro* (The elder is absent and the city is defiled, the householder is absent the house become a desolate) simply expresses the responsibility of elders in the society in ensuring good life and peace in the society. Also, while such proverb as *pele la n fi pamukuru pele* (meaning soft words begat soft words) and *Agba ti ko binu ni omo re n po* (It is the elder that is not vexed that has a lot of children). Meaning an elder must be accommodating and tolerate the younger ones). And, *bi a ba ni ka ro didun ifon, a hora de egungun* (If one thinks of how painful an itch is, one will scratch one's body to the bone) remain very essential in conflict resolution. Such proverbs help in guiding against the need for exhaustive and time-wasting explanation. Thus, in one or two proverbs, the message would have been stated and the need for harmonious relationship emphasized. Other proverbs like *Ati gbeyawo o ja, owo obe losoro*, (to get married is not a problem, but to support the home is) aims at expounding the human mind to the need to uphold their social responsibility. Marriage as we know is a tradition that cannot be overemphasized in virtually all tradition and culture and these proverbs warn intending bachelors to be sure that its financial implication is not ignored.

Proverbs educates the mind on after life and makes man to see the need to live an exemplary moral life, as well as creating an atmosphere conducive for peaceful co-existence. The essence of this is to enhance social order and promote good life among the people in the society.

From the foregoing, it is evident that what constitutes concepts and fundamental issues in basic philosophies are also issues in Yoruba proverbs. It can therefore be argued that Yoruba proverbs are philosophical. However, we must reiterate that the issues of Yoruba proverbs as sources of African philosophy require further investigation. This paper has only succeeded in examining the philosophical import of some Yoruba proverbs. It does not pretend to have said final word on the phenomenon of proverbs in Yoruba thought. It is through research into proverbs, aphorisms, folk-tales, songs, religious doctrines, as they are experienced in African

thought system that we can build a firm foundation for African society and hence African philosophy. Otherwise we would only succeed in given anthropological history of Africa. For instance, a proverb is the ornament of speech, and a speech without proverb is like food without salt. Therefore, proverbs must be exploited in order to have more understanding of its values that can enhance the development and growth of the society.

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