

Proverbs and Taboos as Panacea to Environmental Problems in Nigeria, a Case of Selected Yoruba Proverbs.

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Abstract

This paper posits that proverbs, especially some Yoruba proverbs and taboos can provide adequate solutions for the myriad environmental problems daily confronting Nigeria as a nation. However, this can only be possible if the philosophies behind these proverbs and taboos are strictly adhered to. Besides, this paper is an attempt to situate Yoruba proverbs, as a panacea to environmental problems in Nigeria. The paper proceeds with an exposition of the general nature of proverbs, a brief history of the Yoruba of the South Western Nigeria, and further argues that Yoruba proverbs and taboos are a strong weapon that can be used to tackle myriad of problems some of which are beyond the purview of this paper. In view of the above, the paper was narrowed down to only environmental problems which have been canker worm to the development of the nation.

Keywords: Taboo, Yoruba, Proverb, Nigeria Environmental Problems, Urban Decay.

Introduction

In the traditional and modern African societies, proverbs are generally accepted as the quintessence in the passage and communication of ideas and ethics among both the old and the young. In fact, a scenario is best explained where a speaker encapsulates his thoughts in a suitable and appropriate proverb. Thus the saying, proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten (Achebe, Chinua, Things Fall Apart p. 25). Hussein (2005: 18) underscores the point made above when he observes that Africa is a continent known for its rich oral arts and that proverbs are the most widely used in the continents', long tradition of oral arts. Proverbs do not play an aesthetic role, they serve as the acceptable medium of passing or transmitting knowledge and convention from generation to generation (Hussein, 2005: 19). On this note, Lawal Ajayi and Raji (1995: 28) stated clearly the didactic functions of Yoruba proverbs especially for the younger generation.

The Yoruba, the subject of this paper, constitute the majority of people in South Western part of Nigeria and are also found scattered in diverse countries all over the world. One distinct feature of the Yorubas is their language, and how proverbs give it an aesthetic quality. Hence, the proverb, for the Yoruba, 'constitutes a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs'. Among the Yoruba, proverbs have become so interwoven with living speech that can be heard at anytime and occasion. Proverbs among the Yoruba also serve as means of achieving clarity and conciseness in discourse. For example, when a Yoruba proverb says that 'Owe l'esin oro, bi oro ba sonu, owe ni a fi nwa a', ('A proverb is the horse which carries a subject under discussion along if a subject under discussion goes astray, we use a proverb to track it'), this shows that in every statement made to reflect decisions taken by Yoruba people, proverbs are vehicles used in driving home their points.

Evolution and Functions of Yoruba Proverbs

From available literature, no single individual can claim authorship of any Yoruba proverb(s) as it's perceived to be a common-wealth. This wealth is, therefore, passed from generation to generation thus ensuring its continuity. However, the Yoruba believe that proverbs emanate from elders and the old. As a result, if young people must resort to use of proverbs, they must defer to the elders (Lawal, 1997: 637).

Two Yoruba proverbs that lend credence to this are:-

Enu Agba lobi i igbo -

That is, Kolanut, which metaphorically refers to proverbs/words, sound sweetest in the mouth of the very old. In other words, this proverb suggests that it is old people who determine ripeness of kolanut.

The second Yoruba proverb that is suggestive of the idea that the very old are the repository of proverbs is

'Agba ki i wa loja, kori omo tuntun o wo. Toto o se bi owe eyin Agba e dari jinni. That is, matters must not get out of hand where an elderly is present for it wants to go the way of proverbs. The latter part of the proverb is usually uttered as a permission to dwell in a place that is exclusively preserve of the old. To this request or permission, the elders present will reply, 'May you live long to use more proverbs'. Proverbs are used to show and sustain respect for elders (Lawal, 1997: 637). In a summary, Yoruba proverbs emerged or evolved

from traditional, socio-cultural, psychological, philosophical and cosmological belief systems.

The aesthetic functions of Yoruba proverbs are legion. The aesthetic value of Yoruba proverbs has made them indispensable in oral artistry. Thus the proverb: *Owe lesin oro, oro lesin owe, bi oro ba sonu owe la fi n wa*, meaning proverbs are the analytic tools of thought, when thought is lost, it is proverbs that are used to fetch it (Ojo-ade, 2001). In the same connection, Finnegan (1970: 390) quoted by Hussein (2005: 61) asserted that in so "many African cultures, a feeling for language, for imagery and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs.

Proverbs also constitute a repertoire of Yoruba ideological configuration on gender, politics, socio-economics, race, sex, etc. In recent times, language has ceased from being perceived as a medium of communication alone. It is perceived largely as a reflection of our total being. On this note, Ajolore, (1982: 1) observed that in a gendered society, of which Yoruba land is a potent part, language is used to express how groups should behave and relate to the external world and to each other. And that once they have entered into relationship of dominance and subordination, the social groups make distinctions among themselves through forms of signification.

Underscoring the above assertion, Hussein (2005: 61) wondered why little attention was being given to the ideological tones of proverbs in Africa. He emphasized that some proverbs relating to man-human relationship were interpreted within their generalized import, that within their sexist and thus ideological import. He opined further that if some African proverbs examined psychoanalytically, it would be discovered that "groups who occupy a subordinate or oppressed position in society invariably suffer from linguistic disparagement". (Kehinde, Ayo 2004).

Yoruba proverbs also serve as a potent instrument of social control. Deviant behaviour and social miscreants have characterized human society right from the twilight. The Yoruba society is not an exception in this regard. Language, therefore, serves as a means of ensuring social conformity. Proverbs, as an integral part of language aptly plays this role. On this note, Lawal, Ajayi and Raji (1997: 637) emphasized that proverbs are used to reinforce and sustain the traditional respect for elders and that they are also used as a potent means of social control where they become handy in settling quarrels and disputes.

Yoruba proverbs also play didactic and cosmological roles. Discussion on these may be apt in a study outside the purview of this paper. It should be pointed out at this juncture that the aim and contention of this paper is on the Yoruba proverbs that can provide succour to the myriad environmental problems in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

Data Analysis and Results

The proverbs that were analyzed in this study were collected from adult native speakers who are versed in the use of proverbs. Some of the proverbs were also selected by the author from Yoruba literary texts. The proverbs were analyzed using the social contexts they were meant for. Each proverb was rendered in its original Yoruba form after which a translation to English was done. In translating, attempt was made to present the local texture as much as possible without at the same time compromising the general linguistic acceptability of each proverb.

Obun -un r'iku oko tiran mo; oni ojo ti oko oun ti ku oun kowe.

This proverb is directed to an untidy woman who takes the customary mourning period for her husband as an excuse for not adhering to the requirements of personal hygiene. The impact of this proverb is to scold a dirty woman in the society, so that she will turn a new leaf and will imbibe a hygienic life.

Another proverb that relates to dirtiness is:

Ta l'oma f'obun s'aya; ki l'obun ma bi lai se obun.

Who will marry a dirty woman; a dirty woman can only give birth to dirty children. Women are the custodian of the house among the Yorubas. Women are the one to socialize the children to the proper ethics of the society. In view of this, it is imperative for women to maintain adequate sanitation. If not, the children she brought-up too will be dirty and this will invariably affect the society at large. The proverb is to create fear on the mind of dirty women of not being able to get husband unless she changed her dirty attitudes.

Moreover, it should be noted that the Yoruba people have a well established traditional/indigenous strategies for ensuring compliance with rules of basic hygiene and sanitation. Everybody is strictly monitored and violations of the rules attract appropriate sanctions. A person who does not follow the sanitary expectations of the community is regarded and tagged a dirty person ("obun", "oolorun") and such a person may lose affection and be despised.

There is the religious saying; "Mimo ni a nba ile awo" translated as "the house/shrine of a deity is ever clean". This means that priests must maintain clean surroundings. This explains why the room where "babalawos" (Ifa priests) carry out divination is ever tidy and their dresses are immaculate white similar to the dresses of "osun", and "orisanla" priests. By extension, the environments of compounds are religiously kept clean.

Furthermore, there are also in Africa taboos which deal with environmental health, and as Agbola and Mabawonku (1996: 79) inform us, elaborate religious rituals and taboos are used extensively in African traditional society to sustain the environment and keep it from all disease vectors. Taboos are prohibitions or strongly forbidden acts by social customs of the people (Oduyale 1985).

Taboo refers to the sacred character of people and things, and the uncleanness that follows violation of the prohibitions with which they are surrounded (Parrinder 1969: 178). Taboos which constitute the don'ts of a society; an abomination which attracts negative consequences on violators, is deeply rooted in religious beliefs and practices. They are extensively applied in African rural communities as regulatory mechanisms for maintaining good environmental health and sanitation and ensure compliance with sanitation rules. In African society taboos enter into the life of ordinary humans, surrounds his/her words, clothes, dressing, eating, names, oaths, living environment, recreation, social and even sexual relationships.

In the Christian religion, the Ten Commandments handed down to Moses by God are the "dos" and "don'ts" for Christians and the regulator of morality and behaviour. In the Islamic religion, the "Five Pillars" of the religion are considered as the equivalent of the Christian's Ten Commandments and the equivalent of taboos in African society.

There are taboos associated with disposal of all cuttings (for example hair, as in the story of Samson and the Nazirites in the Bible), excretions from the body (urine, placental, phlegm - "kelebe", faeces, menstrual discharge, umbilical cord, and sperm), sitting on the edge of a water well, sitting on pounding mortar ("iya odo"), spitting of saliva, vomit, standing at a cross - junctions, leaving refuse over-night, stepping on shells of melon, and locking the window of a room in which an unburied dead body is, or seeing the decomposing body of a dead animal.

Environmental Health/Sanitation-Related Taboos (“eewo”)

A number of scholars have, at different times, studied African taboos and were able to identify the objectives or intentions of such taboos (Mbiti 1969; Idowu 1973; Parrinder 1969; Oduyale 1985; Agbola and Mabawonku 1996; Foster, Osunwole and Wahab (1997). Following is a list of some environmental health and sanitation-related taboos commonly found in the Yoruba Community in Nigeria:

1. “No drawing of water from the well at night” as one could easily slip and fall into the well.
2. “No sitting on the edge or top of a well”, as one could release foul-air and pollute the well water.
3. “No drawing of water from a well while using a chewing stick”. The chewing stick could drop into the well and contaminate the water.
4. “No standing at a cross-junction or road, as doing so will disturb “esu”. Cross - junctions are traffic nodes with too many vehicles and one may be knocked down.
5. “A woman when observing her monthly menstrual period must not prepare meals”. This prevents food contamination with menstrual blood/discharge.
6. “No plaiting or shaving of hair along the passage and around cooking area. This will anger “eleda” - “the creator”. This is to prevent hair from getting into foods, drinking water or edible things and cause food poisoning.
7. “No leaving of melon peels uncleared over-night. Leaving them out will cause the housewife to have bad dreams in the night”. Uncleared melon peels attract many flies, which carry diseases.
8. “A pregnant woman must not go out at mid-day when the sun is at its peak, or at the dead of the night, as evil spirits will enter the womb and displace the foetus”. This is to prevent the woman from developing high temperature/headache from the burning sun, or falling down in the dark or being bitten by poisonous reptiles.
9. “No walking or kneeling on refuse heaps”. The germ infection on the knee called “kulatan” could develop from kneeling on refuse.

10. "No carrying of refuse with the bare hand. Doing so will cause the shaking or trembling of the hand". This prevent touching of contaminated/poisonous materials which may cause diseases.
11. "No eating of a food item that dropped on the floor. One will be afflicted with "segede" - the abnormal swelling of the check/neck". This is to prevent eating of contaminated food items.

Other Hygienic Practices are:

1. Faeces are to be covered. In rural farm communities, holes are dug in the ground into which a person passes excreta, and such holes are completely covered with leaves and grasses.
2. The right hand, which traditionally is used for eating, is never to be used to clean anus after passing excreta or to handle dirty objects. It is forbidden to eat with the left hand. Also, the right hand is not to be used to blow or decongest the nose. It is also true in Islamic teachings.
3. Cleanliness ("imototo") is the foundation for hygiene and having a bath per day is a compulsory routine. Not having a bath is believed to result in illness.
4. The first thing a person does in the morning is to clean the teeth by chewing stick ("orin") from plants having anti-bacterial properties. It is considered an insult for a young person to address an adult without having cleaned his/her teeth.

In African rural communities, females sweep the compounds, males hoe the surroundings regularly and both the trash and weeds are taken to the community dump ("akitan") for burning. The "akitan" is regularly raked, weeded and burnt. The degraded soil/ash is used as manure on farms.

The concept of cleanliness ("imototo") is supported by the following poems:

I mototo lo le segun arun gbogbo
 I mototo ile, imototo ara
 I mototo lo le segun arun gbogbo

It is cleanliness that can combat all ailments
 Cleanliness of the house, cleanliness of the body
 It is cleanliness that can combat all ailments.

And

I mototo b'ori arun mole, b'oye se n bori oru
Arun iwosi tinu egbin l'awa
I na ni now aso onida

Cleanliness suppressed ailments as harmatan suppressed hot
Bad ailments arouse from the dirt.
Lice enter the dress of a dirty person.

Another proverb that relates to environmental sanitation is: *Ti a ba gaba ile, ti aba gba ita, akitan ni a dari re si*. If we sweep both inside and outside of a house, we dump the refuse into a refuse dump. The proverb is pointing to the importance of dumping refuse in the appropriate places. This, if done will prevent various diseases and afflictions associated with refuse. In actual fact this proverb affects mostly urban dwellers where residents usually dumped refuses indiscriminately even in cases where government made available facilities for refuse dump.

In view of the above, other problems in the urban centres have been of great concern to the policy makers and technocrats. This is because of the role urban centres play in the economic, social and political developments of the country. These include housing, transportation, utilities and security. The dimensions of these problems, their frequency and devastating consequences, have enmeshed policy makers and professionals, especially town planners, sociologists and estate surveyors and valuers. These problems have a common root in what is called urban obsolescence, urban blight or urban decay. Abumere (1987) and Okoye (1979), defined urban decay as a state of urban squalidness and overcrowding, characterized by decrepit structure, poor sanitary conditions, overcrowding, under provision of amenities and general deterioration of urban environment. A more comprehensive description of urban obsolescence or decay was volunteered by Chapin (1957). He summarized the dimension to the declining situation of cities under three main categories: physical, economic and social characteristics. The physical aspect of obsolescence has to do with "missing sanitation facilities, structures in elemental maintenance, presence of trash and rubbish, adverse environmental influences such as noise, odour and dust, inadequate community facilities such as schools, play grounds, public water and swage systems as well as street and drainage facilities". The economic manifestation of urban obsolescence has to do with declining property values, prevalence of tax delinquent properties and abnormally large buildings centres.

On the social side, there are many problems associated with high rate of juvenile delinquency, venereal diseases among others. Hence the proverbs: omo ti ako ko ni yoo gbe ile ti ako ta. An improperly socialized child will eventually sell the house we built. The above proverb is to prevent juvenile delinquencies.

Abi-iko, ako-igbo, ode ni won ti nko ogon wa'le. Untrained and intractable children will be corrected by outsiders. The important of this proverb is that we need to properly train our children, but if we failed in this responsibility, the children will be corrected by outsiders and this may be a form of embarrassment.

Eni gba'le ni ile nmo fun

The surrounding of a person that swept his/her surrounding will be cleaned. The proverb is a warning to the dirty and praise to the clean people. The proverb extols those who make sure that their surroundings are clean so that the dirty can follow suit.

Ariwo gee ko l'aye jije

Too much noise does not translate to enjoyment.

Many people usually play their tape recorders and radio at a very high volume. This constitutes noise pollution. The sound we hear is a form of noise pollution. In 1966, Peter Enahoro in his book, *How to Be a Nigerian*, made satirical reference to the 'Nigerian noise' when he wrote:

"In the beginning, God created the universe then He created the moon, the stars and the wild beasts of the forests. On the sixth day He created the Nigerian and there was peace But on the seventh day while God rested the Nigerian invented noise."

Enahoro has certainly got a firm grip of the Nigerian's behaviour with regard to noise making, but it is fair to point out that this is essentially a city problem. In fact, it appears the dictum holds that the bigger the city, the bigger the mess. Excessive noise like excessive heat or cold has many degenerating effects on human life. Studies on environmental noise show that these effects range from interference with speech communication and sleep to psycho-social stress and loss of hearing. Indeed, urban noise pollution has been found to have

contributed to reduced efficiency and bizarre behaviour of workers. In 1984, the head of the Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) Unit in Lagos University Teaching Hospital gave a warning that more Nigerians might lose their hearing in the next few decades as a result of continuous exposure to urban noise (see the Guardian, 21, March 1984). He based his warning on the increasing number of his patients who complained of hearing loss in recent years.

Conclusion

In line with Toyin Falola's (2007:31) suggestion that, "The humanities must search for Africa in Africa and elsewhere," it is useful and valuable for the African historians, especially the Yoruba, to always explore and exploit available oral traditions such as the proverb to revisit the past and its cultures, as it has become clear that past cultures have shaped present cultures, which is why we have, at the same time, elements of the primordial and civic competing within the same space" (Falola, 31). As illustrated above, the Yoruba proverbs and taboos have not succinctly captured the historical experiences of pre-colonial and post-colonial societies. The different examples cited in this paper have given an apt insight into a number of issues which history burdens itself with.

Besides, the Yoruba proverbs and taboos also shed some light on the solution to the myriads of environmental problems daily confronting us as a nation.

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