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A Khan near the Joppa Gate, Jerusalem.
(Edward L. Wilson, In *Scripture Lands*, London 1851).

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JOURNAL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES

The *JOAS* is an international academic organ, which claims to be an independent and pluralist review for the promotion of Asian and African studies. Contributions of scholars and scientists from all over the world are invited.

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S. A. SHITTU

AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF YORUBA PROVERBS OF ISLAMIC ORIGIN

Introduction

Proverb is one of Yoruba oral poetry that plays a very significant role among its speakers. It is a veiled language in which the moral intent is conveyed as well as the feelings contained in it. Scholars classified the oral literature into eleven categories¹, such as self-explanatory, allusive, semantically related, locally derived, deriving from Islam, Christianity and contemporary songs and those referring to body parts. Every language or tribe has its proverbs. Often the same proverb occurs among several different peoples or communities or races for instance "Patience can cook a stone" as cited on the internet as African Proverb of the Month for Dec. 2005² the proverb cut across Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan and Togo. Therefore proverbs are as repository of nature intelligence, code of moral laws and philosophy of both life and social justice.

This paper aims at studying Yoruba proverbs of Islamic origin. It will open its discussion by giving views of scholars on the definition of the proverb. Its significance whether it is a dying oral literature or not. Islam in Yorubaland follows the definition to determine the age of the coined proverbs of Islamic origin. Selected proverbs follow, in which the meaning of the proverb, usage and analysis of its origin from Islam.

The negative and positive impact of those proverbs on Islam and Muslims will end the main discussion while summary and conclusion and recommendation will end the article.

Definition of Proverbs

Omogbai defines proverbs as "a short well-known statements that contains advice about life in general"³ which means proverbs are words of

1. Olatunde O. Olatunji (1984), *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry*, Ibadan: University Press Ltd., p. 169.

2. *African Proverbs of the Month*: for December 2005. <http://www.AfricanProverboftheMonth.com> on 10/06/2006.

3. Anthony Osi Omogbai (2001), *Appropriate use of Figurative Expressions for Schools and Colleges*, Ibadan: Stiring-Hordens Publishers (Nig.) Ltd., p. 56.

admonitions. Wolfgang Mieder performed the interesting experiment of asking fifty-five educated non-experts to write their definition of a proverb on a piece of paper, the following "Composite definition" is based on words that occur from four to twenty times in the collected definitions:

"a proverb is a phrase, saying, sentence, statement, or expression of folk which contains above all wisdom, truth, morals, experience, lessons and advice concerning life and which has been handed down from generation to generation"⁴. This definition shows that proverbs are neither out of season or age.

Shittu gives a definition of Yoruba proverbs as "a short pithy saying in a common and recognized use; a concise sentence often metaphorical or alliterative in form, which is held to express some truth ascertained by experience and observation also familiar to all; an adage; a wise saw; it is also an oracular or enigmatical saying that requires interpretation; an allegory, a parable"⁵.

From the above definitions one would see that Yoruba proverbs are a criticism of life, product of mind which reflects in prevalent attitude. Yoruba proverbs which is known as *Owe*, is more serious and has a didactic intent. Basically associated with older people; especially men.

Proverbs occur informally in day-to-day verbal communication, their reference being a person or a situation known to both the audience and the user before they are uttered.

Yoruba community values proverbs very highly. 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. Whoever does not understand proverbs or its application is regarded as unwise among Yoruba society that is the reason why the Yoruba says:

*Bi owe bii owe la n lulu ogidigbo
Ologbon nii jo o
Omoran nii mo o*

Meaning:

*The war drum is cryptically beaten like a proverb
It is wise men that dance to it
It is informed men that know it.*⁶

4. Wolfgang Mieder (1993), *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season: Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 24.

5. S.A. Shittu (1989), *A Study of Aspects of the Rhetorical Imagery in Yoruba Proverbs*, M.A. Research Essay Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, p. 1.

6. Olatunde O. Olatunji, *op.cit.*, p. 170.

The Significance of Proverbs

Proverbs could be heard everywhere, spoken by everyone regardless of age, gender, locale, religion, status or education. And these short, pithy sayings were far more potent than longer explanations when it came to conveying meaning. Therefore,

- Proverbs provide an opportunity for people to be knowledgeable and experts in spoken ability.
- It provides an opportunity to learn about one's community, its culture and their shared values.
- It provides an opportunity to improve thinking and writing ability both provide and receive information.
- It provides a saving words and a short cut of brevity.
- It also the spices used to flavour conversations.

Proverbial expressions are simple folk sayings which carry deep behavioral and cultural meaning. Many proverbs seem to be age specific. For instance, young people use some expressions that older people would rarely use; I will carry water in a sieve at your wedding. Means: I'm deeply obliged to you and will do anything to pay you back. This expression is widespread among youth: rarely would older people say it.

Proximity of relationship also determines choice of proverbs. There are some expressions that you share only with friends for instance, it is considered impolite to sit with your back turned to someone. When you find yourself in such a situation and can't move your chair to accommodate that person who you may have offended, you try to ease the situation by apologizing. The person often replies with the set phrase:

A flower doesn't have a back or front.

Is it a dying oral literature form?

Proverbs in many cultures seem to be abandoned for adverts and commercial slogans. Many cultures are no longer using proverbs in daily conversation as they were in the past. Nevertheless, the impact of their messages is not automatically lost. Quite some of the basic ideas diffused by means of proverbs or previous generations are still present in the minds of innumerable young people today, consciously or sub-consciously.

The Content of Proverbs

Social Charters

Yoruba proverbs like the proverbs of other races, it serve as social charters, to praise what the society considers to be virtues and lauded in proverbs such as respect for elders, consideration for others, cooperation,

hard-work, tactfulness and regard for promises made. Laziness, interruption in other people's affairs without invitations are among the practices condemned.

"Agba ko si ilu ba je, bale ile ku ile da ahoro"

Meaning:

"When an elder is not around the town get confused, when a head of a family died the whole family became truncated".

The above proverb shows how Yoruba society holds elders in highest esteem in the community especially as the source of wisdom for young ones.

Yoruba Proverbs say:

"Agbojulongun faraa re fosi ta"

Meaning:

"He who waits for a legacy exposes himself to poverty."

The proverb praises hard-work and lampoon laziness because a man should not rely on what he can inherit from his relations if he wishes to avoid poverty. Therefore the following proverb gives a precise solution to the lazy ones:

"Atelewo eni kii tan ni i je"

Meaning:

"One's own palms do not deceive one."

Imagery in the Proverbs

There is imagery in proverbs this can only be appreciated when they are related to particular situations. According to Olatunji;

Any discussion of imagery in the Yoruba proverbs cannot therefore, but consider particular applications of the proverbs⁷

It means the literal meaning of a proverb must be firstly grasped through an understanding of the relationship that exists between the elements that occur in it. When the literal meaning is relate to an already known situation, then the full understanding of the imagery can be appreciated for instance.

"Atogun odun ti eko ti n lo aso, ihoho ni akara wa"

7. *Ibid*, p. 171.

8. *Ibid*, p. 174.

Meaning:

"Twenty years since the grilled maize pudding has been using clothes; It is in nakedness that the fried bean ball has been".

There are four main words that need to be comprehended in the proverb before the real imagery could be grasped namely:

"*Eko, l'aso, ihoho and akara*"

Every member of Yoruba society knows that **eko** (the grilled maize pudding) is always wrapped in leaves; while **akara** (fried bean balls) are naked. **Aso** (cloth) in the proverb indicates achievements in life while **ihoho** (nakedness) indicates yet to achieve something significant in life.

If a woman transgresses on another woman either by insulting her and the latter utters the proverb that she has made her name with a lot of achievements long time ago while the former has not distinguished right from left talk-less of achieving anything.

Islam in Yoruba Land

There is no specific date that can be upheld as the authentic age for the advent of Islam in Yoruba society. The penetration of Islam were due to a confluence of chain of activities and a number of moves both within Yoruba society and outside it⁹.

Shaykh 'Ādam al-Ilōri gave his own record on the appearance of Islam into Yorubaland, as the period of the first appearance of salt in Oyo-Ile that was during the reign of Mansa Musa of Mali. He adduced the term **imale** as evidence to support his view of the penetration of Islam through the far West of Africa¹⁰.

While Doi in his book¹¹ titled *Islam in Nigeria* suggested that, Islam had been in Yorubaland in whatever syncretic form or however scanty as far as fourteenth century due to the followings:

- a) Ahmad Baba of Timbuktu (died 1610) affirmed the existence of Islam among Yoruba community when he was writing his work titled *al-Kashf al-Bayan fi Asnaf Majlub al-sudan*. Since the author died in (1610 C.E.), it is an evidence that penetration of Islam into Yorubaland had been in early seventeenth century.

9. R.D. Abubakre (2004), *The Interplay of Arabic and Yoruba Cultures in South-Western Nigeria*, Ibadan: Intec Printers Limited, p. 129.

10. A.A. al-Ilōri (1971) *al-Islam fi Najiriyyah*, 2nd Edition Beirut: Darul 'Arabiyyah, p. 33.

11. A.R. I. Doi (1984) *Islam in Nigeria*, Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation Ltd., p. 109.

b) As-Shaykh 'Adam al-Ilori claimed that the first appearance of salt in Oyo-Ile which is the first contact of Yoruba community with Islam during the reign of Alhaji Mansa Musa (d 1337). It also denotes that Islam in Yorubaland could be also dated as far back as Fourteenth century.

The term **imale** was not used as an evidence of the date of Yoruba contact with Islam since some scholars held other views that **imale** denotes **imo-lile** meaning **knowledge by force** or **knowledge imparted in a forceful manner**. Therefore they refer to Jihadist who spread the teaching of Islam teaching in Yorubaland¹². The fourteenth century panacea is also affirmed through the claim of Peter Morton-Williams¹³. The first contact of Yoruba community with Islam may have been either with merchants from old Mali or with Mande Colony around Bussa, which was perhaps part of the migration referred to in the Kano chronicle in the time of Sarkin Kano Yaji reigned 1347 – 1385. Samuel Johnson suggests the spread of Islam among Yoruba society close to 18th century¹⁴.

Geoffery Paminder thinks that Islam came to Yorubaland in the latter half of 18th century¹⁵. Yoruba proverbs of Islamic origins can now be dated as from when Muslim preachers in Yorubaland began their duty to spread, the message of Islam or Qur'an. Shaykh Adam referred to these groups of people as "*ad Du'atul majhul*" "The unknown Preachers".

He says:

*Such was how Islam was found in Yorubaland in scattered places spreading rather slowly through the efforts of traders and travelers in the first instance and subsequently through the unknown preachers*¹⁶.

Since first mosque established in Oyo-Ile 1550 C.E. by Shaykh Muhammad Nufawi¹⁷. This date could be a period when Yoruba community have gained full awareness about Islam which any Yoruba Muslims could apply any of the proverbs of Islamic origin.

Yoruba proverbs of Islamic origin

These are proverbs coined after the penetration of Islam into of Yorubaland. The proverbs serve to praise virtues or condemn bad practices

12. *Ibid*, p. 110.

13. Peter Morton-William (1968), *The Fulani Penetration into Nupe and Yoruba in the 19th Century* see in J.M. Lewis (ed). *History and Social Anthropology*, London, p. 111.

14. Samuel Johnson (1921) *History of Yoruba*, London, p. 26.

15. A.R.I. Doi, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

16. See in: R.D. Abubakre, *op.cit.*, p. 135.

17. *Ibid*, p. 138.

such are the proverbs coined to disseminate the message of the Qur'an and to condemn attitudes of some people who had embraced Islam but practice haphazardly.

1. *"Eko awe kan o baawe je"*

Meaning:

A piece of the grilled maize pudding has not vitiated fasting.

Aawe is one of the five pillars of Islam, connotes total abstinence from eating, drinking and sexual intercourse which accompany prayer. It is enjoined on all true Muslims when the early preachers discovered that some Muslim Yoruba encourage their children to fast but due to the age and capability of the children, they now coin the proverb to let the child break the fasting. Although this kind of coinage seems to be negative to the tenets of Islam on fasting. But it is coined after Yoruba's contact with Islam. This proverb could be used for a small child of under the age of 10 to break the fasting after *Zuhri* prayer or *'Asr* prayer around 3 or 4 pm. Or it could be to serve as a jettison to someone who deceive people that is fasting after taking some light secretly because *eko* is not regarded as a real food but as a light refreshment.

Usage: The proverb is used to lure someone into an action he may not wish, or to unveil someone's trick on something.

2. *Isonu ogbon aawe a gbaagbaa kotan*

Meaning:

What an implicating fasting we fast it for along period and it has not ended.

This is a proverb of a new Yoruba Muslim who finds this pillar of Islam as an alien to his body. The duration of Ramadan fasting is not more than 29 or 30 but since the total abstinence starts from the dawn to the sunset, it has reduce enthusiastic manner of Yoruba to hard work. Because a farmer can not work in the farm than 3 O'Clock in the afternoon during this period.

Usage: This proverb is used when someone finds himself in a new situation which he or she expects to end.

3. *O ni ibi ti o nde, ito didami ninu awe*

Meaning:

It has its own advantages, the swallowing of the saliva during the period of fasting.

The phrase "*ito didami ninu awe*" (the swallowing of the saliva during the period of fasting) since fasting is total abstinence from eating and drinking. The Yoruba feels that even the swallowing of the saliva is also a

sigh of relief for Muslims who fast. Also a warning for a Muslim who tries to gather his saliva to swallow always:

Usage: This proverb could be used for some one who feels the Muslim fasting is too tedious there is no room for eating or drinking, then what of the relief of saliva that Muslims swallow, is it not a relief to an extent? It is also used for someone who complains unnecessarily on what is not worth while.

4. *Tani je aja ni Mosalasi*

Meaning:

Who is called dog in the Mosque?

In Islam, dog is an animal which Islam has a negative attitude to among other domestic animals. Therefore mosque is a place of worship for Muslims. If dog touch or eat from our utensil / bowl, it must be washed with soap and sand seven times. Therefore dog is a factor of impurity except for hunting in Islam. Dog is never seen in the surroundings of Muslims despite the worshipping place. The word "Masalasi" was used to coin a proverb for someone who thinks dog and cat can become friends and be housed in the same cage.

Usage: This could be said to a person in assurance that certain things will never happen as a dog would never be permitted a mosque.

5. *Tian tian ko ni eyin, ki Lemomu o sa ti le ri meji fi gbe mosa je.*

Meaning:

The teeth are not necessary to be many for an Imam just to have two in other to chew maize cake.

The word *Lemomu* is a loan word from Arabic word "*Imam*"¹⁸ this was known to Yoruba after their contact with Islam. *Mosa* (maize cake) is popularly known among Yoruba Muslims who gave it out on Thursday nights and Friday mornings as a sacrifice made for their dead ones. It is the belief of the Muslims that, the reward of the sacrifice will go to their dead one as in Muslim rites. *Lemomu* being the head of Muslims who leads prayer, use to be an elderly person who might have passed molar stages, few teeth that remain in his mouth. Since maize cake is not too hard to chew the remaining teeth of the *Imam* is enough to be among the beneficiary of the maize cake if it is a hard something he may just share everything to his congregation and stands at the disadvantage for his old age which had withdrawn all powerful fangs.

18. *Imam* means a Muslims Leader/Scholar that leads his community in prayer.

Usage: This proverb is used for someone who is trying to disqualify a person with unnecessary qualities after possessing enough quality which cannot spoil the position he acquires.

6. *Aluwala Olongbo a ti keran je ni*

Meaning:

Ablution of a cat is a trick to steal meat (from the pot)

Aluwala means Ablution in Islam. It is one of the first steps to be taken for purification before embarking on prayer or on any act of worship. *Olongbo* means "Cat" being a friendly domestic animal that Muslims accept unlike dog. It has studied Muslims very well and knew that once you join them in performing ablution they will have trust in you then you can now harm immediately they engage in prayer which he knows that their minds must not be divided. Before they finish, the assignment might be carried out.

The word *aluwala* is a word coined after Yoruba contact with Islam and the manner of cat is a similitude of some converts of Islam who trick to harm Muslims either to get their daughters married or to get worldly materials from a particular Muslim who will not render it unless you join him in his religion.

Usage: This is used for a person that has ulterior motive in doing what someone likes, to let him realize that his mission was understood under the pretext of his action.

7. *Kekere ni Imale ti ko omo l'aso*

Meaning:

Right from the childhood the Muslim teaches his child the act of silent recitation.

The word *imale* is a word that Yoruba people called Islam as earlier explained the view of scholars on its connotation. Yoruba proverbs in this content refer to it as Muslims that takes his small children to the mosque to learn how to pray, to recite by copy and committing into memory what he sees and hears from the Imam and the congregation in the mosque. Also from the childhood Muslims send their children to Muslim scholars to learn art of Quranic recitation. By the time he grows up he would have accustomed to all these obligations without any fatigue. The word *aso* could denote five daily prayers that Muslims observe congregationally in the mosque.

Usage: The proverb is used to someone who is encouraging someone to acquaint himself with something from its grassroots no matter how it takes time. But when gets well acquainted with it became a master.

8. *Ibi ti a nlo ni aa koju si, Oku Imale*

Meaning:

We face or focus where we aim at as for Muslim corpse.

Yoruba proverbs condemn interruption in other people's affairs without invitation. This coined out this proverb that once your focus is on a direction, digression is an act of indiscipline which is abhorred in Yoruba culture.

Oku imale (Muslim corpse) in Islam when a Muslim died, it is enjoined to do the following: The corpse will be brought to outside, and made to face *Qiblah* with the followers¹⁹. Nobody would face any other direction. Also after the prayer while taking the corpse to his last abode (grave) all the mind, focus and attention should be on the corpse taking to the grave, no side talk nor any action that could distract people's attention from what they aim at achieving –the word *Oku-Imale* was coined from Islamic manner towards Burial rites in Islam, despite *imale* is a word coined after Yoruba contact the Muslim burial rites which give respect of last tribute for humanity also became proverbial.

Usage: The proverb is used for who is not serious on his good focus or disrupted with a lot of unnecessary digressions.

9. *Aafa to ni iyan o mu, omo re o ni je tira*

Meaning:

"A Muslim scholar who pronounces a drought (should remember that) his son will not eat Arabic Text Book".

Aafa denotes a well versed scholar of Islam who lays emphasis on the drought that may become his community if they do not change their attitude. Instead of him to pray that the drought should not occur because if the drought eventually happens, the Muslim scholar has no farm except Arabic texts which he uses to teach children. He (the Scholar) lies his livelihood on what the people on bring to him from their farm product. If he did not avert the drought through any means he knows, he should remember that his children will not eat Arabic text books as food. The word *Aafa* and *Tira* are the words that the proverb was coined after Yoruba contact with Islam.

Usage: The proverb is used for someone who warns a man, that fold his arms on what concerns him or lay emphasis on what he can correct but ignorantly feels exonerated.

10. *"Alakoba kii Salamo"*

Meaning:

Someone with evil mission does not take permission to enter.

Salamo denotes a way that Muslim stranger seeks permission to enter a house "*as-Salam 'alaykum waramatullahi wabarakatuhu*". It is one of

¹⁹. The direction which Muslim face during the five canonical daily prayers.

mannerism of Muslims to seek for permission before he or she enters into a house, a place or a gathering. In the tenets of Islam if a Muslim says it and heard no reply he must return to where he comes from. The meaning of *Salamo* connotes Peace upon the household he intends to enter. Therefore if an evil doer apply the *Salamo* on the household he intend to descend upon, they will take alert or take caution for not answering him so he can return to where he comes from. Also the *salamo* accompany positive since *salamo* accompany negative statement the larger class consists of *kii* (does not).

Usage: The proverb is used for a person who is put on care free attitude on everything that he should be careful and be at alert because destruction or danger does not alerts before it befall on anybody.

The influence of the Proverbs on the Muslims and Islam

The proverbs analyzed are sententious sayings in which a larger message is compressed, rather than expressed. They contain particular references to Islamic ideas and doctrines, either in a negative way or positive. Message of some proverbs are something of an innuendo to the Muslims, its usage are Muslims for instance:

"Aafa to ni yan o mu omo re o ni je tira"

Means: *A Muslim scholar who pronounces a drought (should remember) his son not eat Arabic Text Books.*

While some Yoruba Proverbs were coined to make jest of Islamic doctrines and Muslims but unknowingly became positive to the message of the Islam²⁰. Such as:

"Ebi o pa Ijesha o ni ohun o je eko Oyo, ebi pa Sule o jobo"

Meaning:

If an Ijesha man did not suffer from hunger he discriminates not to eat grilled maize pudding made in Oyo.

Sule was suffered of hunger and ate monkey.

If an Ijesha man did not suffer from hunger he would discriminates that he would not eat grilled maize pudding made in Oyo due to inter-ethnic clash between them likewise a Muslim (Sule) will never eat monkey because it is among the prohibited animals that Muslim should not consume. Therefore the two involved key names; Ijesha – Oyo, Sule – Obo is a jest of someone who had vowed not to do something but with inevitable reason

20. P.O. Ogunbowale (1978), *The Essentials of the Yoruba Language*, 3rd edition, London: Hodder and Stoughton, p. 129.

pushed him to do it. But unknowingly that Islam permits Muslims to eat unlawful things either food or drink owing to necessity as in the Qur'an²¹.

Alufa jona e nbere irungbon

Meaning:

"A Muslim scholar involved in a fire accident you are asking about his beard".

This kind of proverb is a total negative against Muslim preacher who preaches against idol worshippers and when he (Muslim scholar) is being afflicted with a calamity denounces his faith, the proverb is used to deride other people who might engage in such illustrious service of Allah²². This kind of proverb at the beginning was commonly used among non-Muslims. On the other hand, many of Yoruba proverbs aided Muslim Preachers in disseminating the message of the Qur'an such as

"Oju imale o kuro l'oti, o so omo re ni Umoru maha"

A Muslim has not totally withdrawn from drinking alcohol he nick-named his child "Umar wine cup"

This really buttress the gradual prohibition of the Qur'an drinking alcohol until it finality²³, many Muslim preachers often use the proverb to curb Muslims from all syncretic practices they indulged in. this kind of proverbs are numerous which the writer intends to build up a book for reading for populace.

Summary and Conclusion:

Having seen the significant role of proverbs on promoting language and culture, also serve as the spices used to flavour conversation. Its connection with Islam and Muslims should not be underestimated. The period of Yoruba contact with Islam could be regarded as the date the Yoruba proverbs of Islamic origin were coined. Since proverbs are proverbial expressions handed down from generation to generation, the common use of those proverbs could be dated from the period when Islam spread or had a firm sit among Yoruba community in the year 1550 C.E (when the first mosque was built). Appreciation of imagery related to particular situations coined those proverbs of Islam tenets while some expose the level of Yoruba Muslims towards the understanding of Islamic doctrines as at that period.

21. Qur'an 2:172.

22. M.M. Jimba (2005), *al-Islam wal Muslimun fil mathali Yorubawi*, NATAIS, Proceedings of the 21st National Conference of the Nigeria Association of Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies, p. 175.

23. Qur'an 5:91.

In conclusion, proverbs as regarded as a dying oral literature by some scholars, Nigeria policy on education aids the situation by giving them enough preference to language based courses to promote its culture and prevent promiscuity which is the vogue of the day through proverbs that serve as social charters, to praise and condemn bad practices in the society. There are more to explore on the relationship between the Qur'an and Yoruba proverbs. The study will give a clear picture that Islam did not condemn any community's culture but only modify un-Islamic ones. The great impact of Yoruba proverbs on the Qur'an will also manifest.

SUMMARY

Proverb; a phrase, saying, sentence, statement or expression of the folk which contains above all wisdom, truth, moral, experience, lessons and advice concerning life and which has been handed down from generation to generation, or an oracular or enigmatical sayings that require interpretation. An allegory or a parable, since proverbs are useful as spring boards for discussions of the implications and ethical dimensions of literature, the significance of Proverbs among Muslim in Yoruba communities and types of proverbs. 10 Yoruba Proverbs of Islamic origin with critical analysis, coupled with its meaning and usage. The influence of the proverbs on Islam and Muslims which aided the rapid spread of Islam among Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria was examined.

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