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PROVERBS AND MARRIAGE IN YORUBALAND

Adeyemi Abiodun Adeyinka (Ph.D)

Abstract

Proverb is a very important oral genre among the Yoruba. It embellishes the traditions, values and customs of the people. This paper reviews the works of scholars on what proverb is, its form, how it reveals the socio-genetic nature, ethical values and philosophy about labour, family, friend etc of the Yoruba nation. A cursory look is taken at Yoruba proverbs relating to marriage. Twelve of such proverbs are collected, analyzed and discussed to reveal the sacredness and sanctity of marriage institution among the Yoruba. The paper observes that a matured is expected to marry, the in-laws should be revered, love and understanding should be the hallmark of a happy home while sexual promiscuity is detested. The paper offers recommendations on how to revive this moribund oral genre by teaching and examining it at primary and secondary schools and it concludes that knowledge of proverb helps to foster peace, unity love and progress in the Yoruba society.

Introduction

Proverb in Yoruba society is an important oral genre, which dates back to the Yoruba race. Record about Yoruba proverbs started in 1852 with the work of Late Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther titled, *A Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language* where he wrote over five hundred collections of Yoruba proverbs (Ogunsina, Adeyemi and Adesola 2001:1). Many scholars and authors have attempted works on Yoruba proverbs. While some merely collected Yoruba proverbs and translated them, some arranged them alphabetically and few offered the historical antecedents of the proverbs collected.

Notable works on Yoruba proverbs include that of Vidal (1852), who compares the parallel features of Yoruba proverbs with the Hebrews; Gbadamosi and Beier (1959), who examine the Yoruba philosophy in their proverbs and Delano (1966), who classifies Yoruba proverbs into five. Other works on Yoruba proverbs while Sheba (2005), explains philosophy about labour, family, friend, fornication etc. and how these could be indicated in the children.

Review of Related Literature

Many scholars have attempted to offer concise definitions of proverbs. Mention could be made of Whiting (1932:273), who defines it 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.

This definition attests to the fact that the existence of proverb in any race dates back to the existence of the race and that it is a portrayed of the way of life of the people. This definition was further expatiated by Taiwo (1967:26), when he writes that:

Proverbs are the stock in trade of old people, who use them to convey previous moral lessons, warnings and advices since they make a greater impact on the mind than ordinary words.

This definition points out the fact that elders are the repositories of wisdom and knowledge among the Yoruba and they explore these through proverbs to direct the affairs of the community.

Mieder (1989), defines proverbs as 'short, witty, traditional statements of experience which are used to further a social end'. Proverbs are often associated with truth and wisdom hence, the World Book Encyclopedia (1996:820), defines proverbs as a brief saying that presents a truth or some of the useful wisdom.

Yusuf (1996:4), writes that a proverb is a short, repeated, witty statement or a set of statements of wisdom, truth and experience which is used to further a social end. In the view of Doyle (2001:58), a proverb is a brief, pithy expression, often (though not always) metaphorical, that occurs in oral tradition.

From these definitions, some facts are derivable from what proverb is and the first is that it is concise, it is a short statement that is pregnant with meanings. Also, a proverb is an old saying full of wisdom and used to drive home points. A proverb is an expression of universal truth and it is constantly applicable to the occasion it applies to.

Proverb as a Reflection of Yoruba Worldview

Proverb as a traditional Yoruba oral genre is a reflection of its users because it emanates from the daily activities of the people. Every activity that takes place among a group is virtually reflected in its proverbs hence, it reflects the philosophy of life as expressed in its science, technology, political, social, economic and cultural lives.

Philosophically, all aspects of Yoruba life are reflected in its proverbs. Issues such as death, life, and religion, the Supreme Being etc are exemplified in Yoruba proverbs and they are used to emphasize the words of the wise. Everything that the Yoruba believes in is that life is what you make out of it and it is continuous. It is also a belief that nothing was brought into this life and nothing will be taken out of it. It is therefore, not surprising to listen to a proverb that says:
Iku o dojo, arun o dosu (Death does not appoint a day; ailment does not appoint any month)

On science and technology, there are Yoruba proverbs indicating that the Yoruba have indigenous technology before modern invention. Balogun (2005:9), asserts through some Yoruba proverbs that:

Scientific knowledge is implicitly demonstrated in traditional Yoruba proverbs and that these enabled the traditional Yoruba to understand events and interpret phenomena in their environment.

For example, a proverb like: Lala to roke, ile lo n bo (What goes up must come down) fits perfectly into Newton's second law of motion in Physics

Yoruba Proverbs Relating to Marriage

Marriage generally and among the Yoruba is an age-long institution which is highly revered. It is mandatory for a man to marry and a woman to be married once they are matured in Yorubaland (Ladele 1986:101), although in the olden days, the Yoruba society did not bestow the right to choose who to marry on the lady (Adebowale 1999:4). It is the sole responsibility of parents to arrange marriage for their children and it is usually in phases until the final solemnization, when the bride goes to the groom's family, takes place.

Furthermore, marriage institution among the Yoruba involve family members, relations, friends and well-wishers and while some are directly involved in the marriage process, some are

indirectly involved. This paper will examine some Yoruba proverbs on marriage and point out the Yoruba worldview on issues relating to the process. These will be explained based on the following Yoruba proverbs on marriage.

1. Yoruba: Bi ko si iyo lobe a date, bi bale ile ko ba ni obinrin loode, a deni yepere.
English: If there is no salt in a soup, it becomes insipid, if the grown-up man has no wife, he becomes a useless person.
2. Yoruba: Aponle ko si foba ti ko lolori
English: There is no respect for a king without a queen.
3. Yoruba: Ekun ni ana, ko see gbená wo loju
English: The in-law is a leopard, you dare not behold his eye.
4. Yoruba: Ore kitikiti, iyekan katakata, bi ore kitikiti ba ku, iyekan katakata ni yoo gbe e sin.
English: Abundant friends, wisely dispersed relative, when a close friend dies, a distant relation will bury him.
5. Yoruba: Ki okunrin ri ejo, ki obinrin pa a, ki ejo sa ti ma lo.
English: If a man sees a snake and a woman kills it, the most essential is that the snake does not escape.
6. Yoruba: Atife iyawo o tejo, owo obe lo soro
English: To marry is not difficult; the difficulty is money for soup.
7. Yoruba: Obe ti bale ile kii je, iyaale ile kii se e
English: A soup detested by the husband is not prepared by the wife.
8. Yoruba: Agba obinrin kii se ogberi oko dido
English: An old woman is not a novice in co-habitation.
9. Yoruba: Ileke nii jogun idi omo eni nii jogun eni.
English: Beads inherit the buttocks; one's children inherit one
10. Yoruba: 'N o ni fe okunrin tenikan n fe, obinrin bee ko ni ya fe okunrin ni.
English: 'I will not date an engaged man' such a lady will not get married.
11. Yoruba: Iyawo loko meji o fi okan pamo o ni bile ba baje, ibi kan laa fabo si.
English: A woman has two husbands she hides one and says when the home spoils one would retire somewhere.
12. Yoruba: Oni, n o lo ola, n o lo lobinrin fi n deru ba oko.
English: Today, I will go, tomorrow, I will go, is used by a woman to frighten her husband

Marriage among the Yoruba brings honour to a man such that he is considered responsible as soon as he marries. On the contrary, if a matured man remains single among the people, apart from being debased, harassed and molested by all and sundry, elderly ones around would begin to suspect him as being a eunuch. This is because, he has reached the age of responsibility when he stops carrying out some activities like sweeping, fetching water and cooking at home. Proverbs (1), above explains the importance of a married woman in the home.

In Yoruba political set up, leadership is usually based on maturity, experience and marriage hence, a young man who is yet to marry is not made the traditional head of a town. Proverb (2), above reveals how important a woman is to a man. He commands respect because he is seen as someone who can control his home.

In Yoruba land however, marriage is regarded as the relationship between two families because the parents take every stage of the ceremony most times, without the knowledge of the

would-be bride and groom. This union between the two parents brings high honour to the two parties. No member of either party dares misbehave to the other. Proverb (3), points out the metaphorical power of an in-law. The in-laws must be present and give their consent at every meeting before and during marriage and whatever they agreed upon is binding hence, they are highly revered as this proverb reveals.

Related to the importance of in-laws in marriage is the case of other relation. No matter how distant a relation may be to a couple, proverb (4), shows that the cord of relationship binds much more together than that of a friend. Friends may be very close to a person but once the person dies, it is the distant relation that is legally allowed to bury him.

When a man marries a woman, it symbolizes oneness and unity because it is a life-long relationship that normally ends when one dies. As long as the husband and wife live, Yoruba society expects them to be mutually compatible. They are expected to be united in everything they do, hence proverb (5), signifies the kind of oneness and unity that should permeate the home. No one should claim honour for anything even though each of them has responsibilities to carry out in order to make the home peaceful and progressive.

Be that as it may, Yoruba society through its proverbs on marriage expects each party to contribute towards peaceful co-existence. The husband, who is the head of the home, is by obligation expected to provide money for feeding the home. It behoves a man to seriously consider this before he goes into marriage because it is a responsibility that he is expected to singularly shoulder for life. As far as preparation for marriage and marriage itself are concerned, parents, relations and allies usually rally round to make it a success but immediately after that, it is the duty of the husband to fend for his home. Proverb (6), therefore, points out an important responsibility that a husband is expected to carry out.

A corollary to the point above is the responsibility of the wife to her husband. As the husband provides money for soup, the wife should reciprocate by satisfying him with the dishes he relishes. Proverb (7), is a warning to any wife in Yoruba society to study her husband very well in order to avoid quarrel in the home.

When a man and a woman, one of their responsibilities is to co-habit and as Sheba (2000:35), points out, the only reason for co-habiting between a husband and wife in Yoruba society is for the purpose of childbearing. As a woman grows old, the issue of co-habiting is no longer strange to her more so she must have given birth to children who are also parenting children. Thus, proverb (8), is alluding to the fact that some issues are no longer new or news to an old person in a system.

The wish of every parent is to have children to inherit them hence, proverb (9), points out the concept of inheritance in the Yoruba society. Usually, when a parent dies, the property of the deceased is shared among the children and the younger brothers and sisters, depending on the extent of the property. However, it should be pointed out here that there is a protocol to follow in doing this, if peace would reign in the family.

In Yoruba society, a man is allowed to marry as many wives as he likes hence, women usually have no say on their status. It is merely a great honour and respect for a woman to be the first in the home and whoever comes later queues and gives honour to her senior. Seniority, in the home in this respect is however, not measured in age but one's position. Proverb (10), explains the fact that Yoruba society is a polygamous one and a woman should expect this when she is preparing to settle or else, she would remain single for life, society does not permit this hence, the spinster is persuaded to marry any willing man because the ultimate is to bear children.

As free as Yoruba society is on the issue of marriage, it detests promiscuity and a lot of disciplinary measures are meted out any offender. The essence of keeping a concubine as proverb

(11), reveals is to forestall any eventuality. The fear of the unknown leads a woman to take the option and the reason for this is not unconnected with the fact that Yoruba society detests a married woman coming back to pick a room in her father's house. It is a shame, both to the victim and the family except if it is for the reason of life and death.

One reason why the issue of concubine prevails in Yoruba society is because of quarrel or misunderstanding between husband and wife hence the statement in proverb (12). When a wife begins to threaten her husband that she wants to pack out, it is expected that a reasonable husband who wants to keep his home, would seek peace and possibly forsake whatever is bringing the quarrel in the home. It is assumed that when either of the two parties neglects his or her responsibilities in the home, things will fall apart and the center can no longer hold.

Marriage among the Yoruba is an important institution that brings respect and honour as these proverbs revealed. The proverb encapsulate the institution of marriage in Yoruba society as something that entails a lot of intricacies and something that should be guarded jealously because it consists of the essence of Yoruba cultural unity. It involves a lot of people, who have roles to play in order to make or mar it and it is the avenue through which our tradition, customs, values and morals are passed on to coming generation.

Recommendations

Having considered proverb as the armory of everything that a people is made up of all over the world, it is expedient that the importance be emphasized through all levels of education.

- i. At primary school level, reading texts containing simple proverbs should be introduced into their rhymes. This is a call to stakeholders in education to accord due respect to the use of the language of the immediate environment as a medium of instruction throughout primary level as against the prevailing situation of using it in Basic 1 to Basic 3 (National Policy on Education 2004:10 – 11).
- ii. At secondary school level, proverb should be in the curriculum while examination bodies like WAEC and NECO should reintroduce questions on proverbs now that Yoruba language and literature had been merged as a paper.
- iii. Texts that are of standard in language use should be recommended for use and candidates' understanding of proverbs should be tested.
- iv. With many government and private media houses, freelance broadcasters should be encouraged to give quality time to testing people's understanding of Yoruba proverbs.
- v. Adults and scholars who are versatile in proverbs could be invited to explain proverbs and questions could be asked from the audience and prizes attached in order to develop interest in it. Publishing houses and individuals could be explored for sponsorship.
- vi. More researchers should be conducted on other aspects of human life that proverbs cover. This is a with a view of unraveling the mysteries surrounding our science, technology, social, economic and cultural life because literacy got to Yoruba society late, most of its traditions, values and customs are embellished in its oral genres, one of which is proverbs.

Conclusion

The few Yoruba proverbs examined in this paper are evident of the fact that Yoruba society cherishes peace, love, harmony and progress. The society upholds marriage legally and accordingly and it supports the parties concerned living up to their responsibilities in order to forestall misunderstanding.

Also, these Yoruba proverbs have revealed that Yoruba society supports polygamy but abhors sexual promiscuity. Any person found guilty of sexual promiscuity is warned, fined or excommunicated from the community depending on the regularity of the occurrence and gravity of the offence. In all, marriage in Yoruba society is an institution that is cherished and respected by all and sundry because it helps to foster peace, unity and progress.

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