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The Postmodern Pulse of Postproverbials in African Cultural Space

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Abstract

The last few decades of the twentieth century witnessed influx of Western theories into African scholarship. This is gradually being deconstructed with preponderant discourse of decolonization, as a contemporary theme in postcolonial Africa. The practice of postproverbiality, which resonates during the same historical phase, indicates transgressive subversion of alternate creations that run parallel with postmodern temperance. This study, therefore, examines the postmodern pulse as a significant component of the aesthetics and values of postproverbiality pulse in contemporary African literary cum cultural space. The aim is to foreground the theoretical significance of postmodernism as the compelling forte of postproverbiality and in furtherance, to articulate the postmodern presence in contemporary African literary space. Part of the research objectives is to critically analyse the socio-cultural content and context of postproverbials and explore the postmodern pulse of selected postproverbial forms as the prostheses of conventional African proverbs.

Keywords

postproverbiality – postmodern pulse – African culture – alternate creations – transgressive paremiology

1 Of Postproverbiality and Postmodernism: A Postcolonial Background

With the fast-changing modern African society in view, the interrogation of the postcolonial has continued to generate intriguing perspectives. The efferves-

cent discourse of decolonization, as expressed in arrays of literatures, divulges among other issues the rhetorics of change/adaptation in postcolonial African space. Hence, African scholarship tilts towards either rejection or integration of Western civilizations, theories, and practices brought to bear on Africa by the advent of colonialism. Therefore, agency for direction in Africa's postcolonial space has long been tested and established by critics as far back as the mid-twentieth century till recent times. Having achieved political independence, postcolonial Africans must now pursue a more decisive liberation, which scholars have in the last few decades abrogated upon, i.e. the decolonization of African minds and societies.

However, in the same context of postcolonial Africa, the notions of postmodernism and postproverbiality became popularised during the same historical phase, the twilight of the twentieth century. The agency of colonialism and its aftermaths cannot be expunged from the origin of these phenomena. Charles Akinsete,¹ while citing Oscar Dathorne and Bernth Lindfors, further pontificates on the blitzkrieg encounter of the Western civilisation as the principal confluence in the schematisation of African literary and cultural proclivity in recent times. (2) Therefore, diverse literary forms (including cultural expressions such as music, sculpture, dance, painting, dressing and of course literature) that were produced in the twentieth century in Africa were heavily influenced by the fusion of Euro-Afrocentric experiences which dominated the black continent from the mid-twentieth century. Isidore Okpewho cited by Aderemi Raji-Oyelade² foregrounds the "awareness of new times which required new sensibilities" (37). These new sensibilities, in the context of this essay, are further interpreted as a form of neo-postcolonial experiences, or perhaps another postcolonial renaissance from which the significance of postproverbiality and postmodern resonates.

Consequently, the European contact with the black continent, which altered its primeval history, kick-started and stimulated another phase of African reality. This reality however becomes subverted and the outcome is a cultural variation which has now generated discourses and critical altercations about the presence/absence of novel cultural/literary acts (postproverbiality) and new stylistic and literary inventions (the postmodern) in contemporary African literary space. What is postproverbiality, and what is postmodernism? Does the

1 Charles T. Akinsete, "The Postmodern Temper in Selected African and African American Novels". A Thesis Submitted in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts University of Ibadan. 1–vii. (2018): 1–157.

2 Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, *Playful Blasphemies: Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yoruba Culture*. Tier. Wissenschaftlicher Verlag (2012).

phenomena of the postproverbial and/or the postmodern really characterise the explosion of an evolving African expressions beginning from the late twentieth century up to the next? Does the duo respond to the new cultural experiences in Africa? And do both, in fact, align in terms of characteristics, content and theoretical representations? How and to what extent? The questions are part of the research gap this paper attempts to fill.

Jay A. Ciaffa³ highlights the two antithetical positions of engaging modernization/Western civilisation within the context of contemporary African cultural/literary space. The first appropriates “cultural revivalism”,⁴ which champions ardent resurgence of African indigenous traditions in its diverse forms. The second school of thought, on the contrary, demands absolute severance from the pre-modern African past, arguing that “the revivalist project is fundamentally misguided and ill-suited to the challenges of contemporary Africa”.⁵ Either way, postcolonial Africa has become the ‘centre’ in substantive proliferation of its existing dynamism that cuts across different spheres such as literatures, cultures, music, languages, values and belief systems.

Before the twilight of the twenty century, new forms of cultural expressions gave rise to unfamiliar stylistic, thematic and theoretical innovations evolving from and somewhat peculiar to the African cultural space. Specifically, the two key terms, which eventually give purposive objectivity to this paper, are post-proverbiality and postmodernism. It is on this note that this paper examines the postmodern pulse as significant to the aesthetics and values of postproverbiality, which today is conceived as a corresponding measurement of literary advancement in contemporary African space. The aim therefore is to foreground the theoretical significance of the postmodern as the compelling forte of postproverbiality by critically engaging selected postproverbial texts emanating from different social contexts across Africa. These postproverbial illustrations are subjected to critical analysis. However, an attempt towards the understanding of the nature, characteristics of and postproverbiality and the postmodern, vis-à-vis the comparison of their theoretical assumptions will next be discussed in this paper.

3 Jay A. Ciaffa, J.A. “Tradition and Modernity in Postcolonial African Philosophy”. *Humanitas*. 21. 1 & 2 (2008): 121–145.

4 Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

5 Ciaffa, “Tradition and Modernity in Postcolonial African Philosophy,” 122.

2 Postproverbiality and the Postmodern: Of Characterization, Content and Theoretical Classification

Emergent discussions on postproverbiality and postmodernism have generated corresponding criticisms and rebuttals about the presence/absence vis-à-vis the significance of postproverbiality and the postmodern within the purview of African literary space. In fact, critics also have strongly viewed the postmodern as totally tangential to the philosophy of postcolonial literature. For instance, Lewis Nkosi states that, postmodernism, in theory and practice, has very little to offer African writers, who are still preoccupied with nationalist agenda. Akinsete⁶ however affirms “the confirmation of postmodern stylistic features in contemporary African and African American literature”. (141)

On the part of the postproverbial, some critics, whose positions will be discussed later, assert that the canonical decree of decolonization is being maliciously subverted by the presence of the postproverbial. And as such, it appears that postproverbiality and the postmodern do not only share a historical phase. They also bear the brunt of parallel criticisms, some of which would be addressed in the course of this paper. Nonetheless, it is, at this point, essential that we begin with an attempt at understanding of the origin/nature/essence of the postproverbiality vis-à-vis the postmodern. Hence, this part is dedicated to the exploration of the characterization (description), content and theoretical classification of postproverbiality and the postmodern, with the view to shedding more introspection on the different questions/issues raised earlier.

It is indeed the continuous applicability of paremiology (that is the study of proverbs) that undoubtedly engineered the consciousness of the postproverbial. Raji-Oyelade in the pioneer book of postproverbial entitled *Playful Blasphemies: Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yoruba Culture*, first foregrounds this significantly, with the author articulating and explaining his novel phenomenon, now popularly referred to as postproverbiality or postproverbials. References to European scholars on proverbs such as Alan Dundes, Wolfgang Mieder, Ruth Finnegan, William Bascom as well as their African counterparts, Bishop Ajayi Crowther, Isaac Delano, Ayo Bamgbose, Oyekan Owomoyela, Oluwatoyin Jegede, among others, substantiated both nature and

6 Akinsete, “The Postmodern Temper in Selected African and African American Novels”. A Thesis Submitted in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts University of Ibadan. i-vii. (2018): 1-157.

significance of proverbs. Raji-Oyelade concludes that proverbs are “philological evidence of the verbal ingenuity and intellectualism of non-literate African societies” as well as “the nucleic repository of the cultural heritage”. This expression clearly negates the criticism of Raji-Oyelade as being antithetical to the significance of proverbs.

However, Raji-Oyelade’s deviation from, or in fact ingenious extension of, paremiological studies stems from the established *presence* of the evidence of new imaginations and alternate speech acts which materialised in the late twentieth century and manifests significantly in postcolonial African space. Raji-Oyelade⁷ rightly argues that the inflexible structure of the proverb has been and is being subverted, given rise to the synchronic imagination of alternate creation, borne out of neo-postcolonial experiences.

Major scholarships on African proverbs have sustained the idea of the sacrosanct structure of the proverb text. I want to argue that the notion of the fixity of form is almost contradictory to the original idea of the dynamisms of societies and cultures, that it is impossible not to recognize a certain radical shift or the transgressive force in the making and use of proverbs in recent times.

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Adeyemi J. Ademowo and Noah O. Balogun⁸ clearly misrepresented the definition of postproverbial as projected by Raji-Oyelade. In their joint essay, they conclusively referred to postproverbials as “new proverbs” (11) with unsubstantiated consciousness of incompatibility. But a close reading of Raji-Oyelade pontificates that postproverbials do not and cannot exist as an independent structure. Akin to the relationship between modernism and postmodernism (however strained), the existence of the postproverbial depends entirely on the (mother) proverb. Hence, postproverbials are not just oppositions, but at times serve as parallel subversions to traditional proverbs. Ademowo and Balogun timidly explore a fraction of the nature of the postproverbial. Therefore, the conclusion on the import of postproverbiality as merely “capable of giving distorting values and orientations to the native wisdom” (proverbs) is not just half-baked and completely deficient.

7 Raji-Oyelade, *Playful Blasphemies: Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yoruba Culture*. Tier: *Wissenschaftlicher Verlag* (2012).

8 Adeyemi J. Ademowo and Noah O. Balogun, “Postproverbial Constructions and Selected Sex-Related Yoruba Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions”. *Antropologija* 15. 2. (2015): 9–22.

It is quite understandable that Ademowo and Balogun, while attempting to toe the conventional line of Obi Wali, choose to identify with the second school of thought, which demands absolute severance from the pre-modern African past, as stated by Hountondji⁹ (48). But again, let me restate that this revivalist project, as originally opined by Ciaffa,¹⁰ is quite unadventurous and “fundamentally misguided and ill-suited to the challenges of contemporary Africa”. (122) Chinua Achebe,¹¹ in his work, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, did envisage the future of African literary/cultural space. He criticizes the ignorance of “overlooking the complexities of the African scene” (93) in the attempt at defining African literature vis-à-vis other cultural expressions, adding that colonialism, despite its adverse effects, constituted an avenue for more “exciting possibilities” (99). Hence, it will be difficult for critics such as Ademowo and Balogun to either understand or foresee the significance of postproverbials beyond the theme of blasphemy. But for non-conformists, it immediately registers, that postproverbiality, in its blasphemous state, accounts for neo-postcolonial agency of change and modernity that Achebe intuitively alludes to, which in turn enhances the production of new cultural materials in contemporary African cultural/literary space.

At this juncture, it is important to also stress that the notion of blasphemy transcends mere distortion of traditional proverbs. As the fierce touch of bush-fire becomes central to the blossoming of fresh forest, postproverbial, through rupture or suture, further generates multiplicities of interpretation/meaning within the grand narrative of traditional proverbs. Raji-Oyelade identifies the users of postproverbial as post-independence generation of Africans, whose contextual knowledge have deeply been influenced by different spheres of postcolonial African settings i.e. popular culture, music, literature, politics and so on. Hence, the content and context of postproverbials cannot be carelessly dismissed. Rather, these are material evidence of hyper-reality, post-rationality and spontaneity of a postmodern era in African cultural space. I will simply justify this assertion with the illustration by Ademowo and Balogun¹² whose portentous assertion ended with an erroneous conclusion that the interpretations of postproverbiality simply “show lack of wisdom”. (13)

9 Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

10 Ciaffa, “Tradition and Modernity in Postcolonial African Philosophy,” 122.

11 Chinua Achebe, *C. Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*. (London: Heinemann, 1973).

12 Adeyemi J. Ademowo and Noah O. Balogun, “Postproverbial Constructions and Selected Sex-Related Yoruba Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions”. *Antropologija* 15. 2. (2015).

Original Proverb: Aye loja, orun nile (the world is a marketplace; heaven is home)

Philosophical Meaning: It is better to do good always because we shall all die someday.

Postproverbial: Aye loja, amo, e fimii le soja (the world is a market place; so, leave me in the market)

Meaning: Who cares if existence is temporal! Just let me have fun and do as I like!

Ademowo and Balogun argue that postproverbials are not attuned to any philosophical leaning. This statement is fallacious and I shall come to that later. But first, the notion of being ignorant of the complexities of neo-postcolonial culture is evident. As a matter of fact, the universal theme of disillusionment and disenfranchisement, which is one of the principal thrust of diverse literary works across the globe in the latter part of the twentieth century, stares us right in the face as rock-solid philosophical interpretation of the above-mentioned postproverbial.

There is a compelling deconstruction (not a replacement) of the meaning of the original proverb as interpreted by Ademowo and Balogun. The fear of death has never completely justified the ‘civility of man’, whether in the traditional past (even pre-colonial times) or especially in contemporary times. Evil still remains in this world and it is worthy of note that if Ademowo’s and Balogun’s *philosophical interpretation* of the traditional proverb is completely unassailable, perhaps the First and Second World Wars, Holocaust and so on would have been prevented in the twentieth century. A philosophical interpretation of this postproverbial is that the grand narrative of religion/morality has not successfully procured peace or civility to the world. While proverbs are noted for insights and wisdom, postproverbials are not without wisdom. Rather, they are transformed, or ‘twisted’ as averred by Wolfgang Mieder and Anna T. Litovkina.¹³

Attention needs to be drawn to how Raji-Oyelade¹⁴ extends on this notion by exploring the concept of the “logic of illogicality” (79) in postproverbials. Using the Yoruba postproverbials as template, the writer specifically explores the typology of eponymous postproverbials as a product of “creative imagination ... driven by the self-conscious intelligence of contradiction and counter-

13 Wolfgang Mieder & Anna T. Litovkina, *Twisted Wisdom: Modern Anti-Proverbs*. (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 1999).

14 Raji-Oyelade, *Playful Blasphemies: Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yoruba Culture*. Tier. Wissenschaftlicher Verlag (2012).

point,” submitting that postproverbiality is “made possible by the deconstructive break, an overturn and extension of the cognitively sanctified proverb” (79). In sum, the prescriptive narrative of postproverbials as basically ‘anti-proverb’ undermines the intellectual/philosophical vantage which postproverbiality underscores in contemporary African epistemics. Postproverbials assert new sentiment(s) which is/are never completely deprived of philosophical undertones. Hence, Raji-Oyelade’s description of the postproverbiality as critical study of the transformation/alteration of standard or conventional proverbs as a result of the agency of modernity underscores new research interest in twenty-first century African scholarship, but of course for researchers with unimpeded imagination.

Having established certain basic characteristics, it is relatively uncomplicated to understand the contents of the postmodern pulse of postproverbiality. By content, reference is made to the ideological inclinations that govern the theoretical practicability of postproverbiality vis-a-vis postmodernism. Obviously, the two are relatable. While postproverbial thrives on the new imagination and speech acts in postcolonial African space as defined by Raji-Oyelade, postmodernism is a “powerful configuration of new sentiments and thoughts” (David Harvey¹⁵). The evidence of postmodernist thought in African is confirmed by the reality of postproverbiality in the last decade of the twentieth century. While postproverbials challenge and break (alter) the order of conventional wisdom (traditional proverbs) as defined by Raji-Oyelade, postmodernism is viewed as a reaction against capitalist narrative of modernism, hence Jean Francois Lyotard’s¹⁶ definition of incredulity athwart metanarratives. It is further described by Stephen Hicks¹⁷ as a new intellectual age. Therefore, similarity in content establishes an ideological link between postproverbiality and the postmodern. From this relatable ideology comes a parallel distinction in theoretical approach.

The theoretical practice of postproverbiality is distinctively governed by different structural patterns; typologies et cetera that have been methodically and systematically proposed by Raji-Oyelade (2012). However, the discourse of postproverbials aligns with and is also driven by deconstructive impulse of the postmodern. In sum, Postproverbiality thrives on the rejection of fixed forms

15 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1990).

16 Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, 1984 (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

17 Stephen Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*. (Tempe: Scholargy Publishing, 2004).

(*Pop* Type 1b) and the Parallel (*Pop* Type 1c). Reference is however made to Category II, with explanation, in the last example of this study.

Raji-Oyelade, using Yoruba proverbs as template, validates this transformation through the processes of superimposition (deposal), excision (deletion) and annexation (appropriation). This paper, while starting with Yoruba example with the view to giving philosophical interpretations using theoretical assumptions of postmodernism, further extends the critical analysis to other African linguistic spaces, specifically Luganda, Luo and Shona. These post-proverbial texts were drawn from the postproverbial online database, <https://postproverbial.com>, an initiative of the Postproverbial in African Cultural Expressions (PACE) in collaboration with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

(Please note: P1 illustrates traditional proverbs, while P2 represents postproverbials)

Example 1

P1: Málúù tí kò nírù, Olúwa ní ba l' ésin.

As for cow that has no tail, God is its repellent against flies.

P2: Málúù tí kò nírù, ó wà n Sabó.—*Postproverbial*

As for cow that as no tail, it is located in Sabó.

The above excerpt is an example from Yoruba language, and it belongs to the Category 1 of the *Pop* Type 1a, which strictly adheres to the tenet of basic structure. This is because there are two proverbemes and the rupture (in form of excision) occurs at the level of the completing clause. Hence, the traditional ideology of the completing clause in P1 (traditional proverb) is deleted and replaced by another, thus entrenching alternate creations. The question here is, what kind of new ideology does the second proverbeme foreground? The metaphor of a tailless cow illustrates its helplessness against the irritation of incessant flies, hence the necessity of God's intervention for relief. The complete deletion of the completing clause of P1 (postproverbial) theoretically foregrounds the deconstruction of the presence of God in times of man's dire needs. These postproverbial expressions foregrounds postmodern tenet of the denial of the transcendent is also buttressed by kitsch, a literary technique in postmodern literature which challenges the veneration and sacredness of the God-entity, hence the notion of playful blasphemy. Due to a certain degree of disillusionment, the nature of the Supreme Being is demystified; the power and reverence usually ascribed to the Supreme Being, in the postproverbial is radically subverted. This example is a kind of postpro-

verbal kitsch which relates to Frederick Nietzsche's reference to the denial of the transcendent.

Example 2

- P1: Eni tó jìn sí kòtò, ó kó ará iyókù lógbón.
 He who falls into a pit becomes a lesson for others.
- P2: Eni tó jìn sí kòtò, *ojú re ló fọ́*.—*Postproverbial*
 He who falls into a pit must be blind.

The second Yoruba example also belongs to the Category I, Simple (*Pop* Type 1a). Note that the signal classes in p1 and p2 are constant, just like in Example 1. However, the transgressive subversion occurs again at the level of the completing clause. The ideology inherent in P1 (traditional proverb) inspires the propinquity and expediency of reason in man's actions which would serve as a preventive measure against unexpected calamity or downfall. Therefore, the excision of reason in this P1 is, no doubt, blasphemous against the wisdom and values inherent in traditional proverbs. But is the postproverbial variant devoid of meaning? Or does it herald a certain degree of ambiguity / plurality? Palpably, there is a simulation of postmodern insistence against the Age of Reason championed by Immanuel Kant's in his work *The Critique of Pure Reason*. The satirical butt of the alternate creation in P2 introduces a strong ironic essence, a satirical import directed at the individual to curtail the prevention of a downfall, rather than the individual serving as a mere scapegoat to others. This concept is referred to as postproverbial irony. Therefore, a close reading of this proverbial reveals a parallel ideology of prevention, using the alternate creation of the postproverbial.

Example 3

- P1: Abasoma bayita
 He who reads excels
- P2: Nabasoma bagwa
 Even those who read fail

The third example is from Luganda, one of the major languages in Uganda. The structure the Category I of the *Pop* Type 1a which strictly adheres to the tenet of basic structure. This is because there are two proverbemes and the rupture (in form of excision) also occurs at the level of the completing clause. Here, the notion of postproverbial irony comes better illustrated in this example.

Irony remains one of the latent techniques of postmodern literature. Its evidence is laid bare in the philosophical interpretation of the postproverbial (p2) of Example 3. It is important to note, at this juncture, that the interpretation of postproverbial must not be limited to the impulses of the traditional proverbs. The expression “even those who read fail” is suggestive of the high level of social, economic and of course academic competition experienced in contemporary times. Therefore, the irony in the statement is not just a reality of a more conflicting generation, but a strong admonition which demands extra effort, in this present time, for success to become reality.

Example 4

- P1: Akupa zanzi ndewako
 He who gives you advice is a friend
- P2: Kupa \$ ndewako
 One who gives you USD notes is a friend

The final example in this study is drawn from Shona, a language in Zimbabwe, Southern Africa. In terms of postproverbial structure, this example is different in the sense that it applies to Category II of Pop Type 11b, whereby, according to Raji-Oyelade,¹⁹ the rupture (change) takes place at the signal clause, rather than the completing clause (57). The motif of change is well expressed in the sense that traditional speaking, good advice is a sign of quality friendship. The replacement of ‘good advice’, not just with money but specifically the US dollars foregrounds the cultural context of techno culture and hyperreality in present day Zimbabwean community. The effect of Fredric Jameson’s concept of late capitalism, (whereby the society moves from previous age to information age), is evident on contemporary African cultural space and reiterated in the p2, postproverbial variant of the traditional proverb. This is indeed no coincidence but a vivid example of postproverbial techno culture that is being expressed in the speech acts of the Shona people.

In conclusion, postproverbial is a budding phenomenon in contemporary African literary space, which has a systematic and methodological foundation. To foreground the impression of the postproverbial on any seeming expression, the structure, according to Raji-Oyelade, is the fulcrum. Hence, not all expressions qualify as postproverbials and the methodology of identification

19 Raji-Oyelade, *Playful Blasphemies: Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yoruba Culture*. Tier. Wissenschaftlicher Verlag (2012).

lies in the pattern and manner of transformation, structural identity as well as philosophical interpretations. Against the notion of lack of wisdom/ sedentary blasphemy, postproverbial offers much more in showcasing the strain of double consciousness in and imaginative/linguistic competence of new generation of African youths. Hence, postproverbial is not a study/translation of proverbs. It is a critical evaluation/interpretation of the structural transformations of standard or conventional proverbs, and of the study of changes and modernities in contemporary African cultural space.

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