

Contradictions and Inconsistencies in Human Nature: Evidence from Yorùbá Proverbs

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Abstract

Yorùbá proverbs, and by extension, proverbs in every culture and clime, show the beliefs, philosophy, traditions, and norms of every society. There is no community or society where proverbs are not in use. Proverb is a phenomenon that aligns with the wisdom of people living within a community. The Yorùbá race holds proverbs in high esteem. They see it as a culture that cuts across all the strata of the society. For every deed, action or interaction, there is always a make-ready proverb that matches it. This paper examines Yorùbá proverbs but in a different perspective. It looks at the seeming contradictions observed in Yorùbá proverbs and brings to the fore the implications of such contradictions. The paper also examines the paradox of these contradictions and affirms that the nature of man calls for the different proverbs that match the behaviors of people. The paper also asserts that this phenomenon is to exemplify the dynamics, functions and usages of language in general and of the Yorùbá language in particular. The paper concludes that the seeming contradictions observed in Yorùbá proverbs portray the nature of inconsistencies and contradictions in man. The paper, therefore, opines that it is not that proverbs are contradictory on their own, but that the proverbs portray unpredictable behaviors that are found in human nature.

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Introduction

Proverb is a social phenomenon that cuts across all the cultures of people all over the world. There is no social setting of human beings where proverbs are not found. Proverbs can be regarded as one of the aesthetics of language. When a proverb is said, it portrays the beauty of the language. Yorùbá are the people who relish in proverbs and appreciate the genre so much. Hardly can

an elderly person utter few sentences before bringing in proverbs to buttress his/her point. The Yorùbá believe that it is the wise that say proverb. That is why proverb is said to be the sayings of the wise. Buttressing the value Yorùbá people place on proverb, Olatunji (1984, p. 170) says:

The Yorùbá value proverbs very highly, for they are considered to be the wisdom lore of the race. And because the proverbs are considered to be traditional and originate

from the observation of natural phenomena and human relations, old people are regarded as a repository of proverbs. Anyone who does not know or who cannot understand the application of proverbs is regarded as unwise.

Therefore, because of the belief that everyone should have the understanding of proverbs in Yorùbá society, hence, the saying 'bí òwé bí òwé là ń lùlù ògìdìgbó, ọlọgbón ní í jó o, ọmòràn ní í mọ ọ' translated loosely to mean that 'the war drum is characteristically beaten in the form of proverb, it is the wise that dances to it and it is the informed that knows the meaning.'

Proverb is part of the philosophy of the Yorùbá people. It shows their belief, philosophy, and tradition. This is the reason, Finnegan (1994, p. 34) opines that "proverbs serve as insight into the philosophy of the people. Grobler (1994, p. 93), also claims that "proverb consists of a people's accumulated wisdom formulated out of years of experience and practice." Fasiku (2006, p. 25) claims that "proverbs serve as a linguistic confirmation of the totality of a people's world-view and the epistemic cognition of this world-view." Abiodun (2018, p. 60) while writing on proverbs makes the following observations:

Òwé jẹ àkojọpọ afẹ tàbí gbólóhùn tí ó Ẹfihàn irírí, ìgbàgbó, èrò, ìtàn, یشه àtí àkòónú ohun wòn-òn-nì tó jẹ mọ àwùjọ àtí àyíká. Òwé jẹ irúfẹ afẹ tó fí ọgbón ìjìnlẹ àwùjọ hàn nípá àyíká wòn, àṣepọ wòn àtí àfojúsùn wòn.

Proverbs are the collection of statements or sentences that show the experience, beliefs, thoughts, stories, acts, and contents of those things that relate to the society and its surroundings. Proverbs are the sayings that show the depth of societal wisdom, their interaction and focus.

Fayemi (2010), while commenting on proverb as part of the Yorùbá philosophy, believes that proverbs are the axiomatic regimentation of formal logic in African philosophy. Therefore, for anyone to know what the philosophy of the Yorùbá people is, he must know of their various proverbs. It is

in Yorùbá proverb that we understand their beliefs, norms, culture, tradition, and social activities. As has been noted by scholars, proverbs can be used to resolve conflicts, to give warnings to people, to advice, and to caution, among many other things (Adegoju 2009, Daramola, 2004; Salami, 2004 and Asiyanbola, 2006). Because of the multi-dimensional usages of proverbs, Fakoya (2007) opines that "it may be said that Africans (and Yorùbá especially) employ them (proverbs) in conversations to accomplish acts that ordinary words cannot realize."

Many scholarly works have been done on Yorùbá proverbs. But each of these works has a different focus. For instance, Abiodun (2000) sees proverb as the prerogative of the elders. He argues that the young do not normally say proverbs where there are elders. If he has to say proverb at all, he must acknowledge the elders that are present. The implication of this is that Yorùbá believe that elders are the custodians of proverbs because they are regarded as wiser than the young.

Olumuyiwa (2012) and Akanbi (2015a) wrote nearly similar papers on Yorùbá proverbs. However, while Olumuyiwa (ibid.) looks at the interrogative aspect of Yorùbá proverbs, Akanbi (2015a) looks at proverbs in the perspective of its syntactic structure. Olumuyiwa argues that some interrogative proverbs are rhetorical in nature, and that it is the individual that gives answers to the questions manifested in such proverbs. He concludes that the answers given may vary; depending on the angle the person views the question.

The focus of Akanbi (2015a), even though similar to that of Olumuyiwa, (since both papers are syntactic based), is in the structural analysis of proverbs. Akanbi (2015a) argues that Yorùbá proverbs have syntactic patterns they follow. He thereafter brings out among other types, four construction structural types on which Yorùbá proverbs are premised. These are (i) interrogative structure type proverbs (ii) focus construction structure type proverbs (iii) relative clause construction structure type and (iv) subjunctive clause construction structure type. Akanbi (2015a) concludes that

the various syntactic structures that are followed by Yorùbá proverbs bring out the aesthetic value of the proverbs. It also shows, according to him, that Yorùbá proverbs are not just wound together haphazardly but in a grammatically patterned form.

In the work done on proverbs by Akanbi (2015b) he looks at some Yorùbá proverbs that are said in a sexually explicit manner. Even though Yorùbá people frown at utterances that are vulgar in nature, yet no one raises eyebrow when a person says proverb in this vulgar manner. He concludes that using sexually explicit Yorùbá proverbs ...should not be regarded as violating the restriction on taboo words but should be seen as driving home a point of argument in a way that the hearer will grasp the import of what is said in an understandable manner without frowning on the sexually explicit manner in which the proverb is rendered.

All these and many more scholarly works have contributed immensely on the significance of Yorùbá proverbs in academic ways. However, the focus of the aforementioned scholars and many others has not been on the clearly observed contradictions found in Yorùbá proverbs, which of course portrays the nature of human beings; and this, exactly, is what this paper focuses and discusses.

The theoretical framework that we observe suitable for the analysis of Yorùbá proverbs selected in this work is the one proposed by Lado (1957) known as The Contrastive Analysis. This framework is adjudged better than that of Liepzig glossing rules common in linguistics, which in our view is more appropriate when working on the analyses of syntax, phonology, or semantics of a particular language. Lado's framework is appropriate in that it is one that compares and contrasts two phenomena. However, while Lado's theory is basically concerned with how two languages and cultures can be compared and contrasted in terms of their similarities and differences, we shall use it, not to compare two languages, but two different sayings that appear contradictory. The main concern of this paper therefore is to observe how two contradictory

positions can converge and then arrive at a positive phenomenon from out of it. Our interest is also to find out why would the Yorùbá have two contradictory sayings in term of proverbs and still be able to show that the proverbs are germane in the day-to-day activities, manner and behaviour of the people.

Methodology

The data used for this work were collected from two main sources, the primary source and the secondary source. The primary source contains the recording of proverbs as said by the elders in the society. The various recordings were done during community meetings, settlement of rift between two or more people and those that are said during contest of *Ayo* game. The proverbs were recorded incognito without allowing those involved to have the awareness of the recordings. The secondary source considers the proverbs lifted from various Yorùbá literature books both prose and poetry. Other secondary sources include proverbs found in books like primers, Yorùbá story books and books on collection of proverbs. All there were consulted. Some of the proverbs relevant to the paper were then culled out and gathered for analysis.

Results and Discussion

We shall consider twelve (12) pairs of Yorùbá proverbs among many others which we view as contradictory in this section. The reason for selecting the twelve proverbs is based on the view that they are representative of the other contradictory-like proverbs that are not put here but are still found in Yorùbá language. The twelve selected proverbs cut across the various socio-cultural settings of the Yorùbá people. Following Asiyanbola's (2007) method of translation, we shall translate the proverbs into English in the form in which their meaning and essence are not lost. Two modes of translations as seen in Olorode (1987) and Adegbite (1988) are normally employed in translation. They are a parallel word-to-word translation (PWT) which goes along the line of Liepzig glossing rules; and the normal sentential translation into English (NST).

These two modes of translations are normally adopted to enable the readers have a thoroughly clear understanding of Yorùbá sentences translated and presented in English. We shall make use of the normal sentential translation for the proverbs selected in this paper. This will be done so as not to confuse the readers in getting the literal meanings of the proverbs chosen for our analysis. In translation, two approaches are normally employed. Translation can be either word-for-word versus sense-for-sense. Sense-for-sense translation is defined by Rabin (1958) quoted in Baker et al. as

a process by which a spoken or written utterance takes place in one language which is intended and presumed to convey the same meaning as a previously existing utterance in another language. It thus involves two distinct factors, a 'meaning', or reference to some slice of reality, and the difference between two languages in referring to that reality (Rabin, 1958, p. 123).

This paper will make use of the latter approach in translating the proverbs to the English language. As mentioned above, twelve proverbs are selected for analysis in this paper. In selecting the proverbs for analysis, there are no criteria followed, neither is there any reason why the proverbs used for analysis were chosen as against those not chosen. In the body of the paper, each proverb is taken at random. The proverbs are selected in pairs; the (a) proverbs in the data are negated by their (b) counterparts. Though, there are some of the proverbs that have more than two contradictory variations, we have limited ourselves to using two of the variations for proper analysis.

In the proverb numbered as (1) below, the one in (a) is giving information about interaction among people within a community as it regards to invitation to meal. It is the opinion of the Yorùbá that when one is invited to meal, it is not due to lack of what to eat on the part of the person being invited but it is an act of socialization; a kind of phatic communion or interaction. The second proverb in the pair does not take cognizance of this fact. The data is presented.

1. a. Dídùn lódùn tá n bá ọrẹ jẹkọ, tilé ogé tóge é jẹ
It is for the sake of interaction and friendliness that one eats with a friend, the food in one's home is enough to satisfy.
- b. Àjọjẹ kò dùn bẹnikan kò ní
Eating with an acquaintance is not proper, if one does not have food in his own home.

Contradiction in the proverb above is evident. First in (a) the proverb is soliciting for friendliness and togetherness with one's neighbors or acquaintances; the second proverb is advocating getting one's own food before joining the other person in taking meal. A person who does not have food at home before joining the other person in taking meal is counted as a covetous person. Therefore, he will not be normally welcomed by the neighbors at another time he comes to their house. The implication of this is that the cord of friendliness cannot be strengthened and strong if such activity is one way and not the other way round. However, the contradiction in the proverb is pointing to the fact that there are those who always want to receive but not wanting to give out. It is for such people that the proverb aims at. This is to show the inconsistency in human behavior.

The proverbs in (2) also show a kind of antithesis in human behavior. While the (a) proverb is insinuating that people do not reveal their intention to others, the second proverb in (b) is emphasizing openness. Consider the two proverbs.

2. a. Màrìwò kì í wí fúnra wọn tẹlẹ kí wọn tó ó yọ
Mariwo¹ does not tell each other before it grows out.
- b. Ọrọ hanniyàn hànnyàn, èyàn la fí í hàn
The matter that should be exposed must not be kept secret

Yorùbá believe that many people like to keep issues or to themselves. By so doing, whatever achievement they made will

manifest suddenly. This, they do, in order to forestall the achievement being truncated or frustrated by 'evil' people. The other proverb in 2(b) goes against this kind of behavior. This type of proverb is advocating that it is not all the time that it is good to do things alone, there are matters that one must just let other people know about and make use of their wisdom through their contributions and advice. Thereby, doing so will enhance the total success being achieved. Therefore, it is not the proverbs that are contradictory per se but the way human beings view situation.

The semantics of the proverbs in (3) comes close to those in (2). However, while the proverbs in two have to do with neither suspicion nor lack of confidence in the other person, the one in 3(a) is done because of suspicion of the other person's supposed evil intentions. In (2), we have a situation where one person is trying to surpass the other in a way to elicit surprise; (3) is a case of suspecting the other fellow as having bad motive towards one's progress. We consider the proverbs.

3. a. Bánúso má bèníyàn sọ, ènìyàn ò fẹni
fọ̀rọ̀ à forí ẹni
*Keep your matters to yourself because
human beings do not wish others well.*
- b. Ísín wò, ìkòrò wó, ohun a bá jìjọ wò,
gígún ní í gún
*The matter that is considered in
unison normally ends well.*

As a matter of fact, it is not everybody in a society that wishes the others well, though they may appear superficially as if they have interest in the progress of others. There are those whose minds towards their fellowmen are evil, hence the proverb in (3a) under consideration. The belief is that when one tells others what he intends doing that can result in progress for him, there is every likelihood that evil people in the society may want to hinder such progress. Since there is no tag on people that shows who a person is, the best is to keep one's plans to himself/herself. But the other proverb in (3b) is a negation to this kind of attitude. In (3b) there is a belief that when you allow others to know your plan, their contributions may

enhance and hastening the success of such plan to have a productive outcome better than when it is a lone consideration.

We now consider the proverbs in (4).

4. a. Bí ẹyẹ kò bá ní fín ẹyẹ níràn, ojú òrún
téyẹ ẹ fò láí fapá kan ra.
*If birds will live in harmony, the air
space is enough to fly without the
wings touching the other.*
- b. Ọba kì í pé méjì láàfin, ìjòyè lè pé
mẹfà láàfin
*The palace cannot take two kings;
chiefs can be as many as six in a place.*

The pair of proverbs in (4) is also another contradictory set. The one in (4a) is insinuating that there is enough space that could contain as many numbers of people as have interest in living together. Therefore, except somebody is trying to foment trouble that is when he would say that he has no sufficient space to accommodate others. The second proverb (4b) is an antithesis of (4a). The king's palace is always very wide, big and spacious, yet only one person (so to say, and that is the king) can stay there. Chiefs do not normally live in the place; they only come there to hold meetings with the king. The palace (as big as it is) could not contain two kings at a time, or else, pandemonium will set in. The implication of this is that no matter how spacious an abode can be, there could still be conflict if more than one person is there without mutual agreement among themselves. Another proverb to consider is the one in (5).

5. a. Ẹni tóbá dami síwájú, yóò tẹlẹ̀ tútù
*He who pours water in front will
match on wet ground.*
- b. Ẹnu kò le gba dòdò, kó tún gbòdodo
*One cannot receive without playing
along*

The proverbs in this pair have to do with social interaction where taking and receiving bribe is rampant. There is no doubt that this practice is very common in some societies. The first proverb (5a) is sort of admonishing giving and receiving gratification. The

underlying meaning here is if one wants to curry the favor of another person, he/she must be ready to grease the palm of the person in charge; without which one cannot be able to court any favor. Therefore, in a subtle way, there is an advice to give gratification. However, the second proverb (5b) is surreptitiously advising against what the proverb in (5a) is advocating, albeit, in an indirect way. The point being made in the proverb in (5b) is that gratification is not good. The reason for its not being good is that it will not allow the receiver to hold on to the truth. When one receives bribe, he will pervert judgment, he will compromise, and he will not be able to hit the nail on the head in terms of saying the truth when the need arises.

In the data numbered as (6) below, the proverbs in (a and b) are opposite in their semantic interpretation. While in (6a), we have a situation where pride is condemned; (6b) appears to encourage pomposity.

6. a. Àgbá òfífo ní í pariwo, èyí tó lómi
nínú kì í dún
*Empty barrel makes the loudest noise,
the one that has content does not
make noise.*
- b. Alára ní í gbára á ga, adìyẹ́ n bẹ̀rẹ́ kó
tó wo pàlọ́
*If you do not praise yourself, nobody
will praise you*

It is pertinent to say that each view expressed in the two proverbs is correct and normal. In most cases, a person who has nothing is the one that will boast much in order to intimidate those who might want to look down on him. But the danger inherent in this type of attitude is that when the status of such a person is known, he becomes degraded and demeaned. However, the other proverb in (6b) views the matter in a way that if one does not praise himself, he might not see anybody to praise him. Nevertheless, if one will praise himself, he must have something worthy of praise so that he will not be looked down upon when the chips are down.

The data in (7) below expresses another contradictory view, we consider the proverbs.

7. a. Èni tí à ní gbéyàwó bọ́ wá bá, kì í
gbórí ògiri garùn
*He to whom a wife is coming should
not be peeping through the wall.*
- b. Ojú àwo làwo fi í gbòbẹ́
*Be at the point of distribution, don't
allow anyone to represent you.*

The essence of the proverb in (7a) is to discourage anxiety. Once something is meant to be given to one, he needs not be anxious about the thing. Since the wife is coming to the home of the husband, why will the husband stand on a dilapidated wall and be peeping? No need for such a suicidal attitude. Whatever the husband would want to see in his wife can be seen when she arrives at home. However, the other proverb in (7b) is antithetical to that in (7a) in that (7b) is advocating one to be there. A kind of see it even if it is still far. In other words, if one does not want anyone to cheat him, he must be there, at the point of action.

We take other proverbs for consideration.

8. a. Akọ̀ni kì í gba idà lẹ̀yìn
*A warrior does not receive a wound
on the back*
- b. Mọ̀jà mọ̀sá niyì akíkanjú, akíkanjú tó
mọ̀jà tí kò mọ̀sá ní í bógun lọ
*To fight and run is the beauty of
bravery; a brave person who knows
how to fight but does not know how
to retreat will perish in the battle.*

The proverb in (8), like others is antithetical and paradoxical. In (8a), the warrior is enjoined not to run away from the battle front. The proverb suggests that a brave person will have to fight, and die in battle, if needs be. The proverb also insinuates that it is a shame for a warrior to receive wound (either through gun or arrow) at his back side. What the proverb is aiming at is to instill courage in a warrior. However, the proverb in (8b) looks at the issue from another angle; an angle which contradicts what the meaning is in (8a). The meaning of the proverb in (8b) is not to terrify or intimidate a fighter but it is to

advise that he who fights and run lives to fight another day. The proverb, therefore, is a piece of advice that if the battle is not won today, it could be won another time. There is no need dying in battle if there is a way of escape.

We consider another proverb in (9) that appears contradictory.

9. a. Inú lokó ẹyẹ ní gbé
The penis of a male bird is hidden inside it.
- b. A kì í fi ọwọ tí ní dunni bọ abé aṣọ
One does not hide his problem from those who will solve it.

The proverbs in (9) have to do with human problems. In (9a) it is being advocated that one's secret should be kept to oneself while the other proverb in (9b) advises that one's problem should not be kept secret because doing so will make solution to elude the one that has the problem. Even though the two proverbs appear contradictory, they serve some benefits to whoever that will adhere to them. The proverb in (9a) implies that one does not allow others to know about his or her problem, because '*Ojú la rí ọrẹ ò dénú; gbogbo aláàmù ló dakùn délẹ, a ò mèyí tínú n run*'. That is to say "only the facial appearance is seen, we do not see what is in the mind and that it is all lizards that prostrate, we do not know the one that has belly ache." If one allows others to know his problems, they might turn around to use it against him or make jest about it. While it is commendable to do that, the proverb in (9b) is advising against such attitude. The proverb is advocating openness. It is an advice that what constitutes a problem to a person should be made known to those who can solve it.

We consider the proverbs in (10).

10. a. Ojú olójú kò jọ ojú ẹni
Another person's eye is not like one's own.
- b. Ojú kan ní í bímọ, igba ojú ní í wò
Only one person bears a child, many people nurture him/her to maturity.

The proverb in (10a) indicates that matters are viewed in different perspectives. In other words, others will not border about a matter like the person concerned. This means that one cannot rely on the judgment of others to reach a logical conclusion about a matter. While the proverb gives advice, it also gives warning to people that are too trusting not to completely believe the judgment of others without verifying the matter him/herself. However, the (10b) proverb appears to contradict that of (10a). The implication of the proverb in (10b) is that allowance should be given to others to have a say in a matter that concerns oneself. The Yorùbá people say *àgbajọ ọwọ la fí n sọyà, àjẹjẹ ọwọ kan kó gbẹrù dórí*. That is to say "it is the combination of all fingers that beats the chest, just one hand does not put a load on the head."

The proverbs in (11) discuss another issue.

11. a. Bí òwe bá jọ òwe ẹni ta ò bá lè sọrò, ẹrù ljà ló n ba ni.
If a discussion relates to one's matter and we do not talk, it is due to cowardice.
- b. Yíyó ẹkùn bí i tojo kọ.
Stillness of a tiger is not due to fearfulness.

The two proverbs in (11) also show the dynamics of language. The proverb in (11a) expresses fearfulness while that in (11b) counters fearfulness. The proverb in (11a) depicts a situation where a person would not talk in spite of the fact that he or she is being threatened. But in the other proverb (11b), the stillness of the tiger is not a result of cowardice but a result of looking for how he can accomplish what he is aiming at.

In (12), the proverbs look at wisdom in disseminating information. Consider the two proverbs.

12. a. A kì í ti ojú oníka mèsàn án kà á.
One does not talk of expressing a person's weakness in his presence.

- b. Pònúń là á sẹ́fòn bí ó bà ọ̀mì kó
ọ̀mì bí ó bà sẹ̀jẹ́ kó sẹ̀jẹ́
*Say it as it is, whatever be the
consequence does not matter.*

The two proverbs in (12) are antithetical. The one in (12a) is advocating circumventing talking on issues that could bring acrimony, especially in the presence of the affected person. It advocates that a person should not be frivolous in talking so that unity and not disunity will be engendered. The proverb in (12a) therefore, is insinuating that even if the weakness of another person be mentioned, it should not be at his presence. But the other proverb (12b) would rather want issues to be confronted headlong. In other words, proverb in (12b) is advocating saying it as it is or that one should hit the nail on the head. When this is done, in line with the proverb, heaven will not fall. And even if heaven falls, the truth has been disseminated.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated in this paper through some selected Yorùbá proverbs that language is dynamic. We have also shown that Yorùbá proverbs are not of one face, they are multifaceted. What seems to be positive will always have its negative counterparts. However, it needs be said that the contradictory nature of the proverbs presented for analysis, and others like them, does not suggest that Yorùbá has contradictory and inconsistent philosophy or world-view. The apparent 'contradictory proverbs' are the apt reflection of the contractions and inconsistency in human nature, human activities, human general disposition to life and to the environment. It also shows the contradictory nature of the world at large. One can therefore conclude that Yorùbá proverbs are not contradictory; rather, they show the Yorùbá power of observation and analysis of human nature and human affairs. It is humans that are contradictory and inconsistent; and Yorùbá are capable of describing them in proverbs; thus, the proverbs are 'mistakenly' regarded as contradictory.

It can also be said that proverbs are content dependent; each proverb is

understood or semantically interpreted based on the context or situation that gave birth to it. When the Yorùbá observe a situation, they coin a proverb that describes what they observed. Should a contradictory situation arise, they coin a new proverb to describe the contradictory observation without discountenancing the earlier one. Ability to do this shows the wisdom of the people and how pragmatic the language is.

The paper also shows that there is no situation that does not have a proverb that supports or negates it. It is on this premise that the Yorùbá say *Ẹnu tí aráyé fì pe Adégún náà ni wọn fì ní pe Adéògún* (the same mouth that commends is the one that condemns). It is also pertinent to say that *tibi tire la dále ayé* (the world is a mixture of good and bad) and that *ohun tó kojú sẹnikan, èyìn ló kọ sí ẹlómíràn* (what is positive to one is negative to the other). This paradox of contradiction also shows that for every situation Yorùbá always find a proverb that matches it. It is also to be said that this phenomenon of seeming contradictions in Yorùbá proverbs shows the aesthetics of the Yorùbá language and by extension, all languages.

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