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Sexually-grounded proverbs and discourse relevance: Insights from Yorùbá

Abstract

African languages thrive on the deployment of proverbs to ground the social import of numerous conversational exchanges. The Yorùbá people of Nigeria particularly employ these ‘bits of conversational condiment’ to flavour talk, regardless of the tenor of discourse [although not disregarding the cultural worth of such axiomatic turns of phrase]. However, certain Yorùbá proverbs sometimes offend the sensibilities of a few prudish members of the Yorùbá speech community, given the semantic content of one or two lexical items in the ‘offensive’ saying – especially when they are overly sexually explicit. Using data surreptitiously collected during numerous episodes of conversation among a sample of native speakers of the language, this paper offers a thumbnail examination of some ‘offensive’ Yorùbá proverbs that is geared at seeing if the production of bawdy imagery can cause conversation to overbalance, and whether the conversational value of such proverbs is sufficient for interlocutors to ignore their ‘distastefulness’.

Keywords: sexually explicit proverbs; conversational exchange; tenor; Yorùbá

1.0 Introduction

Proverbs exist in all the cultures of the world and have invariable application; as garments of thought, they imbue the speaker with the edge to make his or her expressions more ornate and more culturally relevant. However, despite the widespread availability of proverbs in all the cultures of the world, it may be said that Africans employ them in conversations to accomplish acts that ordinary words cannot realise. In fact, it may be said that proverbs are to African languages what the catwalk is to western fashion.

Among the Yorùbá and the Igbo of Nigeria, for instance, proverbs are the spirit and soul of language use – a fact borne by such ‘definitions’ as *Proverbs are the vehicle of thought; when the truth is elusive, it is proverbs we employ to elicit it* (Yorùbá) and *Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten* (Igbo). With such affirmative statements as these, it may be safely asserted that proverbs are at the heart of nearly all conversational engagements among culturally conscious Nigerian peoples.

But demarcating types and uses of proverbs is much less easy than defining them. Generally, proverbs are an indication of a people’s thoughts, beliefs, fears, aspirations, etc. and while there are those that clearly appeal to people’s fancies, there are also hosts of sayings that just make some folks uneasy – perhaps on account of citification, western education, or religious affiliation. Some of the proverbs that seem to offend such people are those that smack of obscenity or that, literally, present ‘verbal pictures’ of nudity. Proverbs found in this classification are generally de-emphasized by such members at talk, who may either not deploy them at all or employ other more socially appropriate ones – although such people need only to be reminded that the use and meaning of a proverb is defined by context.

However, rather than considering these proverbs socially distasteful or inappropriate, this paper discusses their contextual relevance, the situations that may warrant them, and their general conversational value. It also looks at a few (inter)personal reasons for which one might want to repudiate these valuable pieces of the culture as well as the social criteria for their deployment: age, tenor and field of discourse, etc. It is the opinion of this paper that the use of a proverb is determined by the requirements of ongoing talk; thus, it is the conversational relevance of the proverb that would determine its acceptability. Moreover, their use being a culturally bred practice, proverbs need not be frowned upon if produced with ‘dexterity’ – although the culture itself may impose certain unwritten ‘codes’ as regards their use in conversations, codes such as the speaker’s knowledge of his culture, setting, subject matter, mood, interlocutors and so on.

2.0 The culture of Yorùbá proverbs

The Yorùbá people are highly culturally refined, a fact that is attested by their conduct especially during face-to-face interaction across various age groups. So much is decorum a part of the Yorùbá culture that it is generally asked, whenever anyone seems to be inattentive to the dictates of the situation, *Are you not Yorùbá?* This kind of question is not a probe of the addressee’s place of origin (whether he is Hausa, Igbo, etc.) but an insinuation of a lack of cultural correctness befitting a Yorùbá member. Thus, the Yorùbá people have expectations concerning every aspect of life and living, not the least the use of the language.

In referring to parts of the body, for instance, the Yorùbá generally stash away expressions that may create curiosity in their children. Hence, parts such as the penis and the vagina are usually called by other names – terms with which the children are familiar and which do not present any difficulty in understanding. So that, in place of *okó* ‘penis’ and *òbò* ‘vagina’, many

adult Yorùbá members make their children to refer to these parts as *kòkòrò* ‘insect’ and *ìdí* ‘bottom’. So hard is this moral ‘code’ enforced in such family settings that children found using the adult forms (that is, *okó* and *òbò*) – no matter the demands of the situation – are instantly rebuked and [momentarily] tagged *onísokúso* ‘the producer of taboo words’! In fact, even among the older members, these parts of the body are usually invoked with some decorum and anyone flouting such a ‘maxim’ is cautioned, as in the conversational fragment below:

Fragment A

- Ìyábo: 27. Bí mo se jókòó lána re
 28. àfi ìgbà ti wèrè kan sọdà síbí
 29. t’ó gbókó jáde
 30. t’ó ñbèèrè pé taló fẹ.
 Bàbá: 31. Ìyábo, rọra;
 → 32. wọn kíí fi gbogbo ẹnu pe kinní yẹn.

Gloss:

- Ìyábo: 27. While I was sitting here yesterday
 28. an insane man crossed over to this side
 29. and without any shame brought out his penis,
 30. asking if anybody wanted it.
 Bàbá: 31. Iyabo, have a little restraint;
 → 32. no one talks about it so bluntly.

If Ìyábo is still a teenager, her unabashed mention of the penis (at utterance A:29) – without any euphemism that is usually associated with parts of the body – might draw Bàbá’s check (A:32), reminding her that the culture does not allow anyone to freely talk about such parts in public; however, no adult would be so reprimanded. To the Yorùbá, talking about sexual organs without some moderation is an example of *isokúso*, an exercise in taboo. In other words, the use of such expressions should be accompanied by some propriety; otherwise one’s linguistic performance would be adjudged obscene and consequently fail to achieve conversational success.

3.0 Who uses sexually explicit proverbs?

So, the question may be asked: *Who, then, can employ proverbs with sexually explicit content?*

From the discussion so far, it may seem as if proverbs which contain mentions of sex organs are not permitted in much Yorùbá discourse. No, this is not true by any means. Adults are generally adept at using such expressions – but not without corresponding situational constraints. Based on the data for this paper, these days, only youths in the villages who are still highly sentient about the pragmatic relevance of proverbs to talk are able to properly ground their conversational contributions with one or two sexually explicit proverbs. The city youth, on the other hand, hardly imbue their talk with down-to-earth proverbs, much less with sexually explicit ones – which may sound rather uncouth to them, since they are somehow alienated from the culture that utilizes proverbs to anchor talk. It is the observations accompanying the data for this paper, that people like these who feel offended or uneasy by the use of sexually explicit proverbs, especially in face-to-face interaction.

Among adult members, certain situations generally call for the use of these proverbs and other linguistic forms that may have overt mention of private parts. Such situations may include the relaxed atmosphere of the *ayò* ‘game/play’ session, during which there is so much banter and coarse talk to give the winning party the edge. At such a time, ribald talk, lewd allusions and uncontrolled, coarse jest give the setting the cultural ambience needed for a successful game session:

Fragment B

- | | |
|--------|---|
| Àláo: | 1. Mo k’ọta mo k’ópè o. |
| Àjàní: | 2. Ọta nje, òpè ò gbọḍọ fọ’hùn. |
| Sẹmíù: | 3. Ọba ò lè pé méjì l’áàfin. |
| | →4. O mọọ ta l’ò ñgbọn jinnijinni bí okó wèèrè látòórọ. |
| | 5. Sàà se fún mi, |
| | 6. ìyàwó àti ọmọ nbe ñlé. |
| Àjàní: | 7. Ógún rẹé, tí mo bá fi máa pa ẹ láyò bíi mọta lóni |

- 8. okó rẹ̀ kò ní gbérí f'ósù mẹ̀ta.
 Àlào: 9. Ènu l'ẹ̀yin méjèjèjì jọ ní bí t'ajàkàrà
 10. Ẹ̀ sáà se kíá;
 →11. ẹ̀pon ẹ̀yin méjèjèjì ni mo máa fì gbá ọ̀ọ̀lù lónií.

Gloss:

- Àlào: 1. Greetings to both the champion and the loser.
 Àjàní: 2. The champion greets you; the loser keeps mum.
 Sẹ̀míù: 3. There can't be two kings in the palace, my
 friend.
 →4. If you could play and win, why have you been
 restless like the penis of a madman all along?
 5. Well, it's your move next,
 6. I have my wife and children to attend to.
 Àjàní: 7. I swear by Ògún, by the time I defeat you three
 times today
 →8. you'll not have an erection for three months.
 Àlào : 9. The two of you are only good at boasting.
 10. Be quick with it, anyway;
 →11. I'll have both your scrota to kick today.

Among the Yorùbá, the setting of the game of *ayò* is an out-and-out sphere of relaxation and a typical fount of local knowledge and gossip. As such, the language tends to be not only untailed but also permissive of the candour expressible through ribald jesting. Furthermore, no member of the interactive encounter expresses displeasure at the language, as the occasion allows for every participant to out-jest any other. As a matter of fact, the density of a player's humour – usually containing slighting reference to the 'opponent's' private parts (but never to their family or relations) – can weaken the opponent's playing tactics and ensure the jester's victory.

But the use of sexual imagery, especially as found in proverbs, is not confined to instances of usage illustrated in Fragment B above. There are other situations of language use in which, despite their serious tenor, proverbs containing overt reference to the genitals are pragmatically deployed. The following sections exemplify a few of these situations.

3.1 *Caution*

To emphasize the need for caution, adults sometimes resort to imagery that can fully display to the hearer the import of the advice being provided. For instance, a father or mother hoping to make the best impact on a wasteful son or daughter may prefer to use a proverb like *A kii l'óyún s'ínú ká f'òbò t'orẹ* (Literally: *One who is pregnant should not give away her vagina*), as in:

Fragment C

- Solá: 16. Iyá mi, mo fẹ ra iwé tuntun fún idánwò t'ó nbọ yíi.
 Iyá: 17. Gbogbo iwé ti mo rà fún ẹ l'ósù tó kojá,
 18. àwọn dà?
 Solá: 19. Mo ti yá orẹ mi.
 Iyá: 20. Ìwà òpònú nì yẹn;
 →21. a kii l'óyún s'ínú ká f'òbò t'orẹ.
 22. Àfira, kí o lọ gbà wọn padà ní kía.

Gloss:

- Sola: 16. Mum, I'd like to buy new books for my coming examinations.
 Mother: 17. The ones I bought for you last month,
 18. what happened to them?
 Sola: 19. I lent them to my friend.
 Mother: 20. That's stupid;
 →21. no one who is pregnant should give away her vagina.
 22. Now, go and get them back!

The imagery of a pregnant woman giving away her vagina is a well-honed linguistic device to point out the folly in giving away a 'tool' that will be called into use 'soon'. Among the Yorùbá, it is unlikely that anyone would frown at the use of this kind of proverb even though it contains a graphic word, *òbò* (that is, *vagina*).

The need to be cautious often transcends profligacy arising from a sense of philanthropy.

Sometimes, one might need to take a cue from what happened (or, is happening) to other members of the society:

Fragment D

- Kàmọrù: 55. Taló se é gb'ọkàn lé láyé tí a wà yí gān?
 56. Àlào mú iyàwó rẹ lọ sí ọdọ onísègùn
 57. pé kí wọn fi bá òun se òògùn owó.
 Jimoh: 58. Lóòótọ?

59. Èni t'ó ñsọ fún mi níjeta pé kí nwá sin òun lọ s'ílu àwọn fún
 ọrọ kékeré kan t'ó nje òun l'òkàn.
- Kàmọrù 60. Àánú re se mí.
61. Sé o gbọ oun tí àwọn àgbà wí,
 → 62. pé tí èyàn bá ñlẹdí mọ ọmọ iyá re, ó yẹ kí ọbàkan sá
 fún un.

Gloss:

- Kàmọrù: 55. So who can one trust in this world?
 56. Alao took his wife to the herbalist
 57. and asked that she be used to make money.
- Jimoh: 58. Really?
 59. Just two days ago, he was imploring me to accompany him
 to his village for an important matter.
- Kàmọrù 60. I feel sorry for you.
 61. I'm sure you know what our elders say,
 → 62. If a man makes sexual advances to his sisters, even half
 sisters would avoid him.

As seen in the earlier proverbs, once the hearer is presented with a proverb such as the one at utterance D:62, the kernel of the discourse has been provided and he is therefore expected to heed the advice encoded in it. In the present situation, for a man to be as heartless as to offer his wife for a ritual, he would not feel any compunction doing the same to a mere friend.

The discourse relevance of the proverb at utterance D:62 above can only be fully realized in the light of the oddities and aberrations that are somehow engrained in the social consciousness of the peoples of Nigeria. For instance, what with the need to be rich at all costs, pre-modern Nigerians found it expedient to offer essential aspects of their life (e.g. virility in the case of men and (somehow rarely) fertility among women. Where poverty seemed to have been embossed on a member of the society, the poor folk might consult a herbalist, who would then require him to 'offer' his first – or other, usually favourite – child for a ritual that guaranteed instant mind-boggling financial breakthrough. In some instances, such people were required to bring their mother, wife or to agree to a severe shortening of their life to about a third – which might mean living in unimaginable opulence for a few years! According to oral tradition, the

spirits whom the diviner invoked on behalf of the wealth-seeking folk would see to it that he (or she) became fabulously rich within days, weeks or months of the ritual – depending, of course, on the weight of his sacrifice. Now, if the member had no kin to ‘put down as deposit’, he might kidnap someone else’s child, lure a friend, or ambush just anyone else. In this case, only the victim’s private parts (e.g. penis and testicles, or breasts) or vital parts (e.g. the heart and the eyes) are carved out and used for the ritual and the rest of the corpse thrown away. Nowadays, wealth-seeking folks take this option, if only to destroy the link between the death of a relation (e.g. the wife or child) and the consequent ‘arrival’ of the husband’s (or the father’s) extraordinary riches.

Although it is possible for the western world, however, to discount this kind of materialism as one old wives’ tale, the peoples of the different ethnic groups of modern Nigeria seem to be resuscitating the practice. Nonetheless, large numbers of people of each ethnic group in Nigeria are yet to bear out the veracity and efficacy of such a way of making money in view of the invasive civilization, industrialism and capitalism in the country.

So then, to underscore the gruesomeness of this kind of act, it is only appropriate for the culturally sensitive member of the Yorùbá community to liken it to a similarly repugnant practice – for instance, the incestuous preoccupation that would provoke obsessive sexual orientation towards one’s own sister. In the context of the discourse fragment, if a man could offer his wife for a *juju* ritual to make money, no one should be amazed if the same man would like to put down his friend as a deposit for the same hideous act. Following the hint in the proverb, therefore, a wise member would be wary of such a friend. Thus, among the Yorùbá, a situation that smacks of the ‘spread’ of a wild, wicked, or generally unacceptable social conduct especially

through the same human vector, is usually decried through the deployment of a proverb like the one in utterance D:62.

3.2 *Encouragement*

It could be asserted here that many proverbs that have obscene content are best used in conversational encounters involving a few culturally conscious members. The reason for this is that the producer might not be taken seriously if there are too many people listening to him.

Consider the use of the highlighted proverb in the next fragment:

Fragment E

- Òsìsẹ̀: 44. Àwọ̀n ọ́gá apáníyàn la ní o.
 45. Bí wọ̀n se nílò wá kò yàtọ sí bí a se nílò ẹ̀rù rárá.
 46. Láìpẹ̀, èmi a fẹ̀ ju ìwé sílẹ̀
 47. kí nìlọ wá isẹ̀ sí ibòmii.
- Onímọ̀ràn: 48. Má se bẹẹ̀.
 49. Àforítì ní èrè tirẹ̀.
 →50. Àti pé, bí olókó nlá bá ndóni, gbíngbin làá gbin.
 51. Gbogbo nkan, fún igbà díẹ̀ ní.

Gloss:

- Worker: 44. These managers are totally insensitive.
 45. They make us work just like slaves.
 46. I'm thinking of resigning soon
 47. and looking for another job.
- Counsellor: 48. Don't take such a step.
 49. There's reward in perseverance.
 →50. Moreover, when a man with a huge penis is having sex with a woman, let her simply groan all the way.
 51. All things are but for a while.

The imagery contained in the salacious proverb at utterance (E:50) can only be effective if the proverb is deployed in a conversational situation involving interlocutors co-constructing the discourse with sufficient cultural objectivity. Because of the gravity of the discourse, the producer might not be found offensive – unless his interlocutors are overly prudish. However, even if they find the proverb offensive, the assertion at utterance E:51 is enough to reassure them of the speaker's serious tenor.

3.3 *Forbearance*

The Yorùbá are always willing to give an offender a second chance – in a way biding their time to have a sweet revenge. With such a goal in mind, the proverb below may be *mot juste*:

Fragment F

- Olú: 103. Sé bí ayé se rí rée?
 104. Àlàbí ní kí nyá òun ní àpò kan fún ọṣẹ kan;
 105. osù kẹta rée t'ó ní f'òní d'òní f'ọla d'ọla.
 Báyo: 106. Ìwọ máa wò nítiẹ.
 → 107. Àwọn àgbà ní, ẹni t'ó d'óbò lẹkkan t'ó jùú l'ẹṣẹ,
 okó rẹ á tún le.
 108. Ó sì ípadà bọ.

Gloss:

- Olu: 103. How curious!
 104. Àlàbí borrowed two hundred naira from me, promising to return it within a week;
 105. for three months now he's been giving me excuses.
 Bayo: 106. Let it not get to you.
 → 107. As the elders say, the man that has sex once and punches the vagina will soon have another erection.
 108. He'll come back.

The portrait of the inconsiderate lover (F:107) returning to make love to a woman whom he has punched in the vagina quite supports the 'counsellor's' recommendation of patience in dealing with ingrates. Naturally, not many women would be eager to do such a man any sexual favour again; hence, the direct significance of such a proverb in dealing with the errant member's ingratitude.

3.4 *Envisioning a resolution*

At times, when certain social events seem to be getting out of hand for the members, the wise folks take solace in waiting for a sure resolution of what may look like a knotty issue at the present time. For instance, in 2006, at the time that the nation's president (Chief Olusegun Obasanjo) and his Deputy (Alhaji Atiku Abubakar) had a serious standoff, with each of them boasting that he would expose the other's misdemeanour, members who did not know what to do

or what to expect, employed a sexually explicit idiom to express their confusion and to underscore their hope for a definite resolution of the issue thus:

Fragment G

- Ọtunba: 64. Wáhálà Ọbásanjọ ati Àtíkù yìi dẹ ti ñpoju.
 65. Ojoojúmọ ni àwọn méjèèji ñlérí pé àwọn máa d'ójú ti ara àwọn.
 66. Bí gbogbo nkan se ñlọ yìi, kò sí ẹnì t'ó lè sọ pátó pé òun mọ ibi tí gbogbo rẹ yíò kángun sí.
 Kàrímù: →67. Sebí àwọn Yorùbá ló máa ñsọ pé okó ñlérí, òbò ñlérí, ipàdé d'orí ẹnì.
 Ọtunba: 68. O rí'yẹn sọ.

Gloss:

- Ọtunba: 64. This face-off between Ọbásanjọ and Àtíkù seems to be getting out of hand.
 65. Every day, each of them promises to disgrace the other.
 66. Given the present set of circumstances, no one knows how it all might end.
 Kàrímù: →67. The Yorùbá say that the penis brags, the vagina swanks; a meeting in bed will resolve their altercation.
 Ọtunba: 68. That's a good one.

The cultural import of a saying like the one at utterance G:67 somehow justifies the need to patiently look forward to the resolution of thorny issues. Among the Yorùbá, the future holds a lot of hope for the individual as well as for the entire community; hence the expectation that the rift between these two would be resolved soon – a situation graphically illustrated in the meeting between the penis and the vagina at the demilitarized zone: the bed.

3.5 *Self-confidence*

The Yorùbá may sometimes come across to the people of other tribes as excessively confident and self-assured. This cultural trait is found in many proverbs – some of which are deployed as discourse markers. In other words, as soon as such proverbs are produced, the interlocutor cannot be in doubt as to the member's boldness, confidence, or self-reliance:

Fragment H

- Onílé: 28. Ọgbẹni Àmọ́, láìpẹ láìjinnà, máá fẹ fi kún owó ilé.

29. Iwọ náà mọ bí gbogbo nkan ti nílo
 30. èyàn o de le ní oko k'ó máa fi owo kó'mí.
 31. L'oro kan, owó ilé máa tó lo s'ókè.
 32. K'ènikankan má sọ p'áwọn ò gbọ s'íle.
 Ayálégbé: 33. È sé, Baba.
 34. Àti èyí tí ẹ sọ, àti eyí tí ẹ kò sọ, gbogbo ẹ ló yé mi
 yékéyéké.
 35. Bí eyin fúnrara yín se mọ,
 → 36. à kii f'okó nlá d'ẹrù ba arúgbó.

Gloss:

- Landlord: 28. Mr. Àmọ́, before long, I'd like to increase the rent.
 29. I'm sure you're aware of the prevailing economic situation
 30. and one can't ignore using one's own resources to deal with the
 times.
 31. In a few words, rent will go up soon.
 32. That's for your information.
 Tenant: 33. Thanks,
 34. I understand you very well.
 35. As you know it yourself,
 → 36. no one can frighten an old woman with a large penis.

As a discourse marker, the proverb deployed by Ayálégbé (*Tenant*) at utterance H:36 puts paid to the conversation between him and Onílé (*Landlord*). A proverb such as this is never employed as an ordinary pair-part in a conversation, but as a 'terminator' – signalling a lack of willingness to advance the interaction and a generally rude discourse strategy to inform the addressee that the speaker is undaunted by the hearer's threat. Also, such a bold attitude demonstrates unequivocally to the landlord that the tenant has the money to pay off the increment. Among the Yorùbá, no culturally wise member would be found enlarging the discourse at this point – unless, however, to understand the pair-part as disrespect and respond to it as such.

4.0 **Graphic proverbs as discourse markers**

Sexually explicit proverbs can be used to achieve conversational impact and forcefulness, particularly when they function as discourse markers. For instance, sexually explicit proverbs that suggest finality during a turn at talk have the unusual function of bringing such talk to an

abrupt close. Consider the use of *A kii sọ pé nítorí kí ọmọ má kú, kí o máa fi epon bàbá rẹ seré* (Gloss: *We would not allow a child to turn his father's scrotum into a toy all because we would not like the child to die*) in a conversational situation like the following:

Fragment I

- Ọgá: 74. Àwé, mo fẹ kí o mọ wípé gbogbo iranù rẹ yìi kò bá mi n'ílé.
 75. Ìwọ̀nba ni imẹ̀lẹ̀ nímọ̀ l'ẹ̀nu isẹ̀ onisẹ̀.
 76. Tí o bá mọ pé o kò fẹ́'sẹ̀ ní'bí mọ,
 77. jẹ́ kí nmọ́ kí nlè tètè gba ẹ̀lómíràn.
 78. Mi ò ní gbà k'ẹ̀bí kankan ba'sẹ̀ jẹ́ fún mi.
 79. Ìwọ̀ náà mọ,
 →80. aò ní sọ pé nítorí k'ọmọ má kú, k'ó máa f'ẹpon bàbá rẹ seré.

Gloss:

- Boss: 74. My friend, I'd like you to know that I can't condone your lackadaisical attitude any longer.
 75. There's a need for you to be more serious especially when you work for others.
 76. If you're no longer interested in working here
 77. I'd like to know so I can employ someone else.
 78. I won't allow any relation to create stumbling blocks for my work.
 79. As you know,
 →80. we won't allow a child to turn his father's scrotum into a toy all because we wouldn't like the child to die.

In the function of a discourse marker, the proverb at utterance I:80 forcefully brings to the fore Ọgá's point all along: there is no room for slapdash work. A less graphic proverb (e.g., *Mi-ò-lè-wá-kú, kì nǝ'oyè ilé bàbá rẹ* – English: *Anyone who fears being killed would not inherit his father's title*) is not likely to stress the point as much as that at I:80. One observation here, however, is that such a proverb has the cultural backing of Ọgá occupying the [+higher] status in the conversation. The receiver of such a fragment is very much unlikely to miss the point of Ọgá's deliberate use of such a proverb. However, it is equally unlikely that he would use such a proverb in his turn – well, except to show disrespect.

5.0 Can [these] proverbs misfire?

The simple, sincere answer is: *Yes, any proverb at all can misfire*. There are conversational exchanges that would not allow for certain members to use proverbs, which is one of the reasons for which the use of proverbs among the Yorùbá usually follows certain culturally organized formats that should be appealed to whenever members [intend to] use proverbs particularly in face-to-face interaction. Moreover, by virtue of some details of ongoing discourse, proverbs containing sexually explicit words can misfire. The tenor and mode of communication notwithstanding, an interactive discourse inundated with such proverbs is headed for condemnation. Even when the communicative event is not suffused with such proverbs, the decorum and propriety required of the participants at talk may cause the interaction to overbalance.

In other words, conversations and other socially based activations of language (e.g. interviews, counselling, trade, (courtroom) judgements, etc.) are potentially an opportunity for a speaker to put these indices of sagacity into use; but although the general discourse value of a proverb is the reason for its use, the tenor of situation as well as the sensibilities of the receiving members will ultimately determine its deployment. For instance, if, during a [serious] television interview the guest feels a compulsion to employ a proverb that contains blatant sexual imagery, the *formal* tenor of the situation more than even the potentially febrile sensibilities of the watching public would direct him to use some other socially agreeable pragmatic correlates. Consider a proverb such as *Mélòó ni a máa dó l'óbò tí a fi máa máa gbà'dùrà pé kí ilẹ̀ má mọ?* (Gloss: *How much pleasure can we hope to derive from the vagina, to make us pray that the day will not break?*):

Fragment J

- Olótu: 201. Kòmíṣonà, kínni ẹ́ rí s'ọ̀rọ̀ owo Nigeria ti o nsa te'le ti America l'ojoojúmọ̀ yí?
 202. Ojoojúmọ̀ l'a tún ńgbọ̀ pé inú àwọn òsèlú kánkán tiẹ̀ ndùn pé owó wa ti bàjẹ̀ pátápátá.
 203. Ìdí ìbàjẹ̀ yẹn ni àwọn kan tiẹ̀ ti nrí owó tí wọn nkó lọ sí òkè òkun lati lọ fi pamọ̀ sí'be.
 204. Sé ó yẹ́ kí a máa gbàdúrà pé kí owó wa máa bàjẹ̀ síi kí àwọn kan lè máa rí dollar ná?
 205. Kínni ẹ̀yin rí sọ̀ síi?
 206. Sé ó dáa ẹ̀ẹ̀?
 Kòmíṣonà: 207. Àgbẹ̀dọ̀!
 208. Oriburúkú ni pé owó wa kò ní'yì ní'lu wa,
 209. a tún wá ńgbàdúrà pé kí ó máa bàjẹ̀ síi,
 210. kí a lè máa ríi sẹ̀ sí owó America.
 → 211. Mèlòò ni a máa dó l'òbò tí a fi máa máa gbà'dúrà pé kí ilẹ̀ má mọ̀?

Gloss:

- Interviewer: 201. Commissioner, what's your view about the naira chasing the dollar everyday?
 202. We even hear it daily that some politicians are happy that the naira is greatly devalued.
 203. In fact this devaluation allows some of them to launder money.
 204. Is it sensible for us to pray for devaluation so that we may stash away the naira in dollars?
 205. What's your own view?
 206. Do you think it's in order?
 Com'sioner: 207. Never!.
 208. It's unfortunate that the naira has no value in Nigeria;
 209. worse, that we pray for further devaluation
 210. all for the purpose of being able to convert it to the American currency.
 → 211. How much pleasure can we hope to derive from the vagina, to make us pray that the day will not break?

Kòmíṣonà's deployment of the proverb at utterance J:211 in the fragment could be said to flout social propriety on a number of grounds. First, as a public figure, his speech is expected to be grounded in social etiquette. Second, television interviews, even when conducted in the most informal manner, call for the utmost sobriety and decorum, because the medium is for an undefined audience, even when the topic is largely restricted. Third, if a phrase in the speaker's

speech offends the receiver, it might bring about a change of attitude towards the producer. Thus, the producer is continuously expected to look for alternative expressions that would not only enhance language receivers' good disposition but also keep his own personality and integrity in their good books.

6.0 Sexually-grounded proverbs and members' aversion

The reaction to many sexually explicit proverbs may be rooted in a lot of social, psychological, religious and attitudinal factors. According to a recent observation by Salami (2006):

The Yoruba people ... do not often describe the genitals by their technical terms. It is also, taboo, for example, to mention women's menstrual activity by name. Although swearing (*èébú* in Yoruba) may be revolting, it is not considered as bad as using vulgar or obscene words (*orọ́ rírùn*) among the Yoruba people. Thus, it is possible for a Yoruba speaker of English as a second language to react more negatively to such taboo words relating to genitals than to such swear words as 'bastard' and 'bitch'... (p.1).

Furthermore, Salami observes a remarkable difference between men and women in their use of language containing vulgar or obscene expressions – and, by extension, sexually-grounded proverbs:

...in many cultures severe taboo is associated with words connected with sex, it must be mentioned that there is likely to be significant variance among societies and within groups in a given society in terms of use and attitudes to such words. One important aspect of this variation in use is that it is believed that men and women differ in their usage. The literature shows that the belief that women's language is more polite and more refined is very widespread and has been current for many centuries (Coates, 1986: 19; see also Jespersen, 1927; cited in Gramley and Patzold, 1995). Thus the use of vulgar language is often less associated with women. As noted by Gramley and Patzold (*ibid*: 266), a number of studies show that men are more likely, than women, to use obscene expressions (p.2).

Another point made by Salami is how, these days, the average Nigerian has become alien to his culture – as a result of a combination of factors:

With the Nigerian society becoming more and more assimilated into the global village, college and university students are increasingly influenced both by the cultural values from the west and the middle-east, including movies (on videos, satellite television and the internet), Pentecostalism, and fashion, as well as the spread of Muslim fundamentalism. As observed by Wannagat (2002: 359), the emergence of English as the ‘New Latin’ directly supports the process of globalisation and as a means of communication, it contributes to the global dimension of cultural values and institutions and the flow of images and data.

Considered in depth, all of these factors – and quite a lot of others – account for the invasive loss in many Nigerian languages and cultures, especially as observed in the speech of the members that live in the cities. By and large, on account of the all-encompassing influence of western education and as a result of the impact of colonialism, a lot of Yorùbá people (especially the urbanized ones) have lost touch with their cultural roots and prefer to speak English for its bread and butter spin-off.

But then, several Muslims and Christians who shun ‘sexually transmitted’ proverbs in their native language use taboo expressions generally considered vulgar in English, e.g. *fuck* (also: *fucked, fuck-up, fucking, motherfucker*), *shit, arsehole, dick, dickhead* and *cunt*. Many of these priggish members even think that *effing* is a socially acceptable word, ignorant of its root (*fuck*)! In line with much post-colonial misconception, some members argue that since these expressions are from a supposedly superior culture, they must be better at expressing the meanings they encode than words of similar pragmatic value in their own language – confirming some critical objections to globalisation, regarded by many as the Macdonaldisation, Americanisation or Cocacolonization of cultures (see Axel Specker’s article “European Culture in the Age of Googlisation” available at <http://www.talaljuk-ki.hu/index.php/article/articleview/210/1/60>, accessed on 18 December 2006).

Whichever way one looks at it, the obvious fact is that numerous native members are alienated from their traditional way of life and now look to another culture for guidance, so that anything contrary to the living styles recommended by the worshipped culture is regarded as contra-culture. Hence, Yorùbá proverbs and idioms – especially the sexually explicit ones – may now not be popular because so many social, religious and economic realities do not support them. For the religiously inclined, for instance, there are several wise sayings in the Bible or the Koran to augment conversational logic and effectively ground arguments. For the secular-minded individual, there are ‘pure’ proverbs that would do just as well as the ‘unpopular’ sexually explicit ones.

7.0 Sexually explicit proverbs and pragmatic correlates

As noted above in section 5.0, given certain social, religious and interpersonal factors, some proverbs can misfire. For instance, a sexually-grounded proverb might be improper at a (Christian) religious gathering, and owing to the growing moral and spiritual requirements attending the day-to-day lives of Yorùbá speakers, more and more people – especially in the urban and city centres – are turning away from using proverbs that contain graphic details of genitalia and deploying more refined ones, sometimes even preferring to quote from the Bible or the Koran.

What reasons may necessitate the search for alternative proverbs, especially decent ones? First, the density of sexually explicit proverbs in a single conversational exchange may project the producer as a libertine. Look at this fragment, for instance:

Fragment K

- Ọgá: 1. Kíló jẹ kí o rò pé ọrẹ rẹ kò lè darí ilé isẹ yíí l’ásìkò yíí?
 Àbú: 2. Ọgá, òótọ l’àwọn àgbà sọ,
 →3. ẹsin nílekó, òròmọ adìe ñgàdí.
 4. Kí gǎngǎn ni Múkáílà mọ t’ó fi máa sọ pé ọgá ti kan òun nǎ?

5. Kíí se t'ẹ̀gàn,
 →6. tí a bá sọ pé k'ẹ̀lẹ̀pọ̀n máa j'ẹ̀pọ̀n,
 7. onípa l'ó máa kọ̀kọ̀ yó.
 8. Mo mọ isẹ̀ ju Múkáílà lọ
 9. mo sì já fáfá jùú lọ pẹ̀lú;
 10. Nítòótò, a jọ dé'bi 'sẹ̀ yíí l'ọjọ kan nā ni
 11. àmọ mi ò kii s'ẹ̀gbẹ̀ Múkáílà ní ọ̀nà púpọ̀.
 →12. Awọ̀n àgbà sọ pé okó t'ókó, ẹ̀pọ̀n t' ẹ̀pọ̀n, àmọ aawọ̀
 ẹ̀pọ̀n yí ju'ra wọ̀n lọ.
 13. Bì ñkan se rí ní sáà yíí, èmi l'ó yẹ̀ kí nwà n'ípò t'a nwí
 yíí...
 Ogá: 14. Dúró ná, sé kó sí òwe míran ju àwọ̀n t'oloko ati
 t'elepọ̀n yíí ni ?

Gloss :

- Boss : 1. Why do you think your friend can't direct this business
 at this time?
 Àbú: 2. Sir, the elders are right when they say that
 →3. the horse is having an erection and the chick is making
 ready for penetration.
 4. What skills does Mukaila possess that call for his
 becoming the next boss?
 5. Without any hint of envy,
 →6. if we asked everyone to eat their scrotum
 7. he who has orchitis* would have more to eat than
 anyone else.
 8. I'm more skilled than Mukaila,
 9. and I'm also smarter.
 10. In truth, we got employed on the same day,
 11. but I surpass him in many ways.
 →12. The elders say that no matter what, penis is penis, and
 testicles are testicles, but the tensile strength of the
 scrotum varies from man to man.
 13. On account of the present circumstances, I should
 occupy the post in question...
 Boss: 14. Come on, aren't there other proverbs than these
 reprobate ones?

(***Orchitis** – *ìpá* – is an inflammation of the testes. The scrotal sack becomes unusually large, hence the suggestion that the 'victim' would have a lot to eat should there be such a need.)

Now, among the culturally mature members of the Yorùbá speech community, there would be a great appreciation of Abu's ornate response to Oga's primary question: *Why do you think your friend can't direct this business at this time?* (utterance: J1). Nevertheless, on account of the

formal details of the interaction, Ọgá (who has a higher professional status than Àbù) is compelled to indirectly request other pragmatically workable proverbs than the sexually loaded ones (at J: 3, 6, and 12). As seen in the fragment above, Ọgá's question (at J:14) is sufficient evidence that though the three proverbs might offer the conversational turn some interactive fulcrum, their density (that is, their frequency of occurrence) in one conversational exchange might make them totally unworkable. If, however, Àbù's turn had been less fecund with such proverbs, Ọgá might not have cautioned him at all, since most African proverbs have the discourse function of underscoring one's view of the situation, minimizing talk and accentuating interlocutors' ratiocination. But then, were the interaction to be between people of equal conversational power (e.g. between Àbù and a friend), the question at J:14 might be regarded as a formal aberration, since talk-power symmetry forbids that an interlocutor dictate the pace or direction of talk. Again, this fact would hold true only in the absence of certain considerations between the interlocutors: religious convictions, social biases, etc.

Thus, the use of sexually explicit proverbs may sometimes call for some discretion. In this connection, we may reconsider Kọmíṣọ̀nà's contribution in Fragment H above. Being a politician, the need to protect his interests would override his desire for speech that is predominantly decorated with sexually explicit proverbs, like the one at H:211. This kind of consideration for one's audience's sensibilities dovetails nicely with the requirement for political correctness in certain situations. In a mixed gathering, for instance, one should be mindful of the presence of women for several reasons, especially since most Yorùbá sexually oriented proverbs are somehow misogynistic.

In sum, for the sake of ethical and social propriety, demands of one's faith and the requirements of tenor, the *excessive use* of sexually explicit proverbs may be de-emphasized in

certain communicative situations – however apt they may seem. Of course, such proverbs are an integral part of the Yorùbá culture; nevertheless, since they may be found offensive at times, it is unwise to deploy them excessively. One way of avoiding this dilemma is for the speaker to find pragmatic correlates to express his thought or to ground his contribution during talk. However, it would be wide of the mark for anyone to expect that such proverbs would be expunged from the language; like other figures of speech, sexually grounded proverbs do not constitute stumbling blocks for the successful execution of Yorùbá communicative interaction and even for the sake of their discourse value, they may be used and received with the objectivity attending less offensive proverbs.

8.0 Pragmatic correlates for graphic proverbs

From the analysis in the last few paragraphs, it may be said that sexually-grounded proverbs, while sometimes lacking in situational decorum, do not present any problem to conversations conducted between culturally conscious interlocutors. However, looking for alternative forms to avoid the use of sexually ornate proverbs might be somehow injurious to the growth of the language as a mirror of the Yorùbá culture. In other words, since the culture breeds these proverbs, why would members want to erase them from the language? Admittedly, if the tenor is serious (as in religious worship) or formal (as in a speech event between two socially unequal members, e.g. a boss and an employee), there may be a need to *filter* one's proverbs to adapt them to the demands of the situation.

However, there are numerous non-formal, casual instances of language use that may not warrant any intrusive adherence to propriety – instances that serve as a showcase for the culture and its linguistic contents – as seen in the interaction among members at play, among folks at outdoor communal pastimes, and among friends at talk. At such times, even if the speaker's turn

is dense with sexually oriented proverbs, no one would be offended – a point that stresses the fact that Yorùbá proverbs are dictated by context, mood, subject, relationship between interlocutors, age, audience, etc.

Still, it should be pointed out that there are numerous proverbs that may substitute for any other, should the member see the communicative need for the replacement. For instance, the proverbs in the fragments above can all be replaced by the ones cited with them below:

1. A kií l'óyún s'ínú ká f'òbò t'ọrẹ 'No one who is pregnant gives away her vagina' ~ B'íná ñjóni jó ọmọ ẹni, t'ara ẹni làà kọ gbọn 'If one is aflame and one's child is also aflame, one would first put out the fire on oneself'
2. Bí olókó nlá bá ñdóni, gbíngbin làà gbin. 'If a man with a large penis is having sex with a woman, she should try and groan through it' ~ Oun tí ntán l'ọdún eégún; Ọdúnlámí á padà s'óko 'The masquerade festival always comes to an end, and the extortionist will go back to farm'
3. Ẹni t'ó d'óbò lẹkan t'ó jùú l'ẹsẹ, okó rẹ á tún le 'The man that has sex once and punches the woman's vagina will have another erection' ~ Ojú á túnráí, ọwe Àkàlà 'We shall meet again, says the Akala bird'
4. T'èyàn bá ñlẹdí mọ ọmọ iyá rẹ, ó yẹ kí ọbàkan sá fún un 'If a man makes sexual advances to his sisters, even half sisters would avoid him' ~ Àrísá iná, àkòtagiri ejò; àgbà t'ó r'ẹjò tí kò sá, ara ikú l'ó nyá a 'A fire creates aversion, the snake causes fright; an elder that disregards a snake is prepared to die'
5. Okó ñlérí, òbò ñlérí, ipàdẹ d'orí ẹni 'The penis brags, the vagina swanks; the bed will decide' ~ Kángun, kàngun, kángun, á kángun sibi kan 'Soon, we shall see which way the wind is blowing'
6. A kií f'okó nlá d'ẹrù ba arúgbó 'No one frightens an old woman with a large penis' ~ A ò rí' rú eléyíí rí, ẹrù la fí ñdá bá'ra wa 'If we say 'we have never seen a sight like this' we only succeed in frightening ourselves'
7. Mélòó ni a máa dó l'óbò tí a fí máa máa gbà' dúra pé kí ilẹ má mọ? 'How much pleasure can we hope to derive from the vagina, to make us pray that the day will not break?' ~ Ìwòntún ìwònsì ni gbogbo nkan 'One needs to consider the pros and cons of issues'
8. Tí a bá sọ pé k'ẹlẹpon máa j'ẹpon, onípa l'ó máa kọkọ yó 'If we asked everyone to eat their scrotum he who has orchitis would have more than anyone else' ~ Dídùn l'ódùn là mbá ọrẹ jẹ'kọ; t'ilé oge t'óge jẹ 'On account of good disposition, one may share a friend's meal; one has enough to eat in one's own house'

9. Mímì ní èpòn àgbò máa máa mì; bíi kó já kọ ‘The ram’s scrotum may dangle; it won’t snap off’ ~ Kò sí nkan kan t’ó mbọ lát’òkè t’ìlẹ̀ ò gbà ‘The ground is ready for anything that may fall from above’
10. L’ójú ajọkọdó, bíi kó sì wà l’èwè ‘To the promiscuous woman, she should still be a young girl.’ ~ L’ójú amọkòkò, bíi k’ìlẹ̀ ó d’amọ ‘To the potter, the whole earth should become clay’

Well, any hasty user or analyst of the language might think that the use of these alternative proverbs would give the user better pragmatic efficiency than the sexually explicit ones. This is not essentially so. At best, these alternative forms would only satisfy the demands of the *current* communicative situation. Given a different set of circumstances (defined by new tenor, fresh participants and other interactive rites), the sexually grounded proverbs may be more effective in showcasing the culture of the language.

9.0 Summary and conclusions

The points made in this paper may be summarized as follows:

- I. As a cultural expression, proverbs mean differently across cultures. For instance, proverbs to the African people are a rich resource of wisdom, wit, and candour to the extent that proverbs constitute the heart of much conversational interaction. As it is always affirmed among the Yorùbá, *Ọrọ kii wúwo k’á f’ọbẹ biú* – a proverb that hints at blunt frankness (Literally ‘*A word cannot be so weighty that we would need a knife to cut it up*’; English gloss: Whatever happens, a proverb would resolve conversational glitches very easily’). Among the various cultures of Africa, conversational success often hinges on the interactional pillars erected to support the turns making up the discourse. At each turn, a proverb deployed by one interactant might be enough to stimulate other participants’ ratiocination; at other times, a proverb might be all that is required to register one’s concession or objection. In fact,

it may be said here that among the Yorùbá as well other peoples of Nigeria, there is almost no instance of social involvement that cannot be captured by at least two proverbs. Such proverbs may be at variance in their pragmatic content, but they would be seen as presenting and representing the [Yorùbá] acknowledgment of duality of thought: any view of the situation at hand is available – and defensible – at any time.

- II. To the Africans, especially the Yorùbá of Nigeria, sexually explicit proverbs are available as much as ‘decorous’ ones, to augment speech and make meanings and intentions clearer. However, on account of tenor and numerous factors that bear on propriety, the use of too many of such proverbs in certain speech events should be controlled lest the user be tagged libertine because of the picture they bring up.
- III. Given the dictates of communal mores especially as these may apply to communication, interlocutors may deploy less lascivious proverbs in order not to offend the sensibilities of their audience. However, since proverbs are socially and culturally propagated, the producer of ‘libidinous’ types may add a little hedging, laughter and ‘incompetence’ to make their production less obtrusive. By ‘incompetence’ here is meant the production of language like a novice, for special effects. Indeed, with such grounding devices, the audience would be better disposed and more responsive to these otherwise bawdy elements.
- IV. A culture is not an unthinking gadget but an autonomous, dynamic aggregate of long-standing wisdom, philosophy, and consciousness of its people; as such, no culture should be judged by the standards of another. A norm in one culture may be an aberration in another; therefore, no culture can be called superior to another. This

point has direct bearing on the highly westernised consciousness of the citified Nigerian folk, whose cultural roots seem to be at cross-purposes with the realities of their day to day life and living. In a way, it may be said that on account of the names borne by most of the members within this spectrum, they may be called Yorùbá, Hausa, or Igbo, depending on their ethnic provenance; yet, their total cultural output – the language of choice in several conversational situations, their attention to the details of their own mother tongue, their ‘smugness’ about a few presumably distasteful elements of their linguistic/cultural origins, etc. – calls for immediate overhaul. Put another way, these folks seem to have an excessively globalized cultural stance which gives them away as modelling their own culture on a foreign one, or adopting an unfamiliar culture as behavioural yardstick within a highly localised domain – facts revealed, for instance, by their avoidance and criticism of proverbial and idiomatic elements like the ones considered in the paper.

- V. Ideally, to validate their cultural competence, members need to understand the conversational dynamics that would justify the use of sexually explicit proverbs. In line with the observation presented in (iv) above, members who demonstrate an uncanny knowledge of their language are sometimes adjudged deep, circumspect and full of native intelligence – even by their citified critics. In many cases, conversations conducted strictly in a foreign language by three or four Yorùbá members do overbalance, whereas this is not easily the case with discourse grounded in the people’s ethos. As second language users of a foreign language, speakers might not be very well versed in certain idiomatic norms of the language and so their attempt to use that language to resolve certain ‘local’ issues might misfire – a possibility that [in

2003-2007] informed the Ogun State Government of Nigeria to allow the State House of Assembly to hold at least one of its weekly sessions in the immediately relevant language, Yorùbá. Curiously, the House is fuller on such days, and people have attested more successful deliberations on account of members speaking to one another in a language that is available to one and all. The general import of all this is not to deprecate English or any other foreign language in Nigeria; it is to stress the sociolinguistic values inherent in the [forgotten] details of Nigeria's indigenous languages. To this end, it may be said that proverbs and similar idiomatic features of Nigeria's indigenous languages have pictorial value and pivotal relevance that should be greatly regarded rather than unconsciously discarded.

10.0 **Implications for linguistic research**

The 'distastefulness' that some members erroneously attach to instances of the use of sexually elaborate proverbs may intensify the ongoing erosion of the languages and cultures of Nigeria and Africa in general. Without sufficient understanding of the use of these linguistic devices, it is easy for the young generations to think that the proverbs are no good, or that they are elements of degenerate minds; but far from that, the proverbs are useful in domains other than those that education, westernisation or globalisation can define. Being a part of a living culture, proverbs are, generally, evidence of the vitality of the people's philosophy and consciousness, their moral demands and their ethical standards. That a proverb is sexually graphic does not present the culture or its people as uncouth. In a few words, therefore, studying these elements of discourse in detail may create a better understanding of the anthropological heritage of a people and their culture.

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Profile

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