Review article
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Aderemi Raji-Oyelade (ed.). *Postproverbials at Work: The Context of Radical Proverb-Making in Nigerian Languages.* Osijek: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, 2024, 347 pp. ISBN 978-953-314-217-3, (eBook), https://nakladа.ffos.hr/knjige/index.php/ff/catalog/view/26/32/60

Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, the editor of this book, has focused scholarly attention on "postproverbials", proverbs that have been twisted and changed. Postproverbials are what Wolfgang Mieder and others have called "anti-proverbs", though Raji-Oyelade reflects more on the motivations behind the creation of these derived proverb forms: "Postproverbials are radicalized proverbial utterances which subvert the logic and patterns of conventional proverbs" (Raji-Oyelade 2012:49).

"Postproverbials" is a word Raji-Oyelade coined and introduced in his 1999 article, "Postproverbials in Yoruba Culture: A Playful Blasphemy" (1999). He has used it again in a book and journal articles (2004, 2012, 2022, 2023).

Postproverbials / anti-proverbs have been used since ancient times. The Greek musician, Stratonicus of Athens of the 4th century, used a postproverbial to mock a singer who had been nicknamed "Ox". He twisted the standard Greek proverb "The ass hears the lyre", replacing the animal to produce the personalized insult, "The Ox hears the lyre" (Fortenbaugh 2005:386, fn. 665). In this clever way, he compared the singer to an ass by twisting the proverb. The playful transformation of proverbs has "always been part of human history from antiquity" (Olaniyan and Ajayi p. 186). The frequency and popularity of postproverbials will vary across times and places. Raji-Oyelade and these authors believe that postproverbials are a very frequent type of speech in Nigeria today, for reasons they specify.

There are many wonderful books by African scholars containing African proverb collections. Those studies, paremiography, are of vital importance for the advanced study of proverbs. The book being reviewed here is a collection of studies on postproverbials, modified proverbs. The book is the work of Nigerian scholars moving beyond paremiography to paremiology. As such, this book is a welcome addition to the study of proverbs.

This collection of 13 chapters advances the scholarly enterprise of studying the forms and uses of postproverbials. Some of the chapters are built around the analyses of collections of traditional proverbs paired with postproverbials that the authors have designated as related.

Many of the authors point out that there are several trends in Nigerian society that all contribute to the increase in the number and popularity of postproverbials, including the loosening of traditional cultures, the loss of traditional languages, changing attitudes towards gender, a love for humor, the growth of new media, and urban orientation.

Some authors studied new proverbs that were not built on traditional proverbs, though Raji-Oyelade has made it clear that he holds that a postproverbial "must displace or build on an extant structure" (Raji-Oyelade 2012:49).

In several of the articles, the connection between a traditional proverb and the postproverbial that the author paired with it is not clear. As an outsider, I do not have an insider's understanding of which postproverbials are logically linked to which traditional proverbs. The following examples illustrate this. The first pair of proverbs is clearly linked, with the second one being a postproverbial based on the first:

(2) "When a child stumbles, s/he bursts into tears; when the elder falls, s/he gets up."
"When a child stumbles, s/he sets his/her eyes on the destination; when an elder falls, s/he takes a backward glance." (p. 140, 141)

However, the logical connection between the following pair of proverbs is not clear to me:

(2) "It has been a long time since the Hausa [a major tribe in Nigeria] has been using bows."
The partings in the buttocks did not start today." (p. 242, 243)

I remind myself that that it is difficult to explain proverbs to outsiders, so it is also difficult to explain the similarities between two proverbs.

The following chapters will provide a brief summary of each chapter of the book. In *Òwe Ìgbàlódé: Interrogation of Post-Proverbial Interpretations in Contemporary Scholarship* Toyin Falola examines the knowledge of traditional proverbs that lies behind the creation of postproverbials. He mourns the loss of knowledge of traditional languages and cultures, which leads to the loss of traditional proverbs. He fears that this could lead to "the risk of swimming in a whirlpool of post-proverbials, strong enough to make one forget their original forms" (p. 23). He fears the future will bring an "almost scare incidence of mastery in African proverbs… There has to be a continuous usage of the original proverbs in order to bring it to the bare notice of users… post-proverbials can only arise where there is a proverb to distort, hence, the proverb must be in use" (p. 25).

As people know fewer and fewer traditional proverbs, they will not be able to form postproverbials based on specific proverbs. The loss of proverb knowledge is a process, not an event. Less common proverbs will be lost first. Also, he points out that anecdotal proverbs, proverbs that require knowledge of a piece of folklore, will also be lost early (p. 30).

He does not oppose the creation and use of postproverbials over traditional proverbs. Rather, he wants to have his cake and eat it, too. His stance is both boldly idealistic and realistic. He calls for steps to protect and promote knowledge of traditional proverbs, including in schools. But also, "We encourage the creation of post-proverbials as they are used as part of the plasticity of cultures, adapting to new generations… In preserving the past, encouraging recent creativity, we manifest a cultural collective in motion—always moving, endless, products of adaptations without boundaries" (p. 35, 36).

In *Proverbs, Postproverbials and the African Mythological Imaginary* Adeshina Afolayan brings his ideas as a philosophy professor to the study of postproverbials, citing Derrida, Wittgenstein, Malinowski, as well as African philosophers Adeshina Afolayan, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Olayinka Oyeleye. I found it refreshing to read, "I will not make any attempt at defining what a proverb is" (p. 44). He pointed out that "It is the *function* [emphasis added] of proverbs as culture markers that paremoiologists, paremiographers, and philosophers cannot afford to take for granted" (p. 44). This is an important perspective for proverb scholars, whether we study traditional proverb forms or postproverbials. I will quote him to my students. He later goes on to discuss the definition of English "proverb" in contrast to Yoruba *òwe* (p. 48, 49). I will quote him to my students, again, that the concept of "proverb" varies from language to language. He also notes that the concept of "postproverbial" will differ from group to group.

Adaobi Muo in *Recasting Traditional Adages in the Light of Christianity: An Examination of Selected Igbo Postproverbial Expressions* examines ten postproverbials on themes of Christianity. Only one of the traditional proverbs underlying these ten postproverbials is about religion on the surface, a proverb about traditional religion and divination. None of the ten postproverbials are entirely positive, reassuring or urging Christians forward in their practice. There is one that gently admonishes Christians to do better, "When a Reverend Father is eating, he should remember the Reverend Brother" (p. 71), built on "When one is eating, he/she should not forget his/her siblings." She points out that these postproverbials draw from two cultural streams, one the traditional Igbo and the other Christianity. This "dramatises the substantial input of major drivers of cultural change… [in Nigeria's] pluri-cultural postcolonial population" (p. 74).

Chiamaka Ngozi Oyeka and Chigozie Bright Nnabuihe studied 39 Igbo postproverbials in their work *Recasting Traditional Adages in the Light of Christianity: An Examination of Selected Igbo Postproverbial Expressions*. It is no surprise that the younger generation uses more postproverbials than the older generation, which uses more traditional proverbs, but it is useful that they have documented this (p. 89). Outsiders often need explanations of traditional proverbs and the same is true for postproverbials.

For example, the following postproverbial is unclear to outsiders: "A person whose father was killed by a mad fellow, when he sights a mechanic takes to his heels" (p. 109). The helpful explanation is that mechanics clothes are dirty so that people may mistake them for madmen (p. 95, 96). This article, like several others in the collection, uses the term "postproverbial" to cover new proverbs, even if they are not based on traditional proverbs (p. 116).

When Damola Adeyefa in *Towards a Methodology for Translating African Postproverbials Òwe Ìgbàlódé: Interrogation of Post-Proverbial Interpretations in Contemporary Scholarship* begins to present his methodology for translating postproverbials, he introduces and applies four structural categories of postproverbials, as proposed by Raji-Oyelade (p. 136). He demonstrates his ideas by translating a number of postproverbials. His approach is appropriately focused on understanding and translating individual proverbs in isolation, a different approach to that used in translating proverbs in literature. He wisely points out that "Researchers translating African postproverbial expressions into foreign languages should consider a literal approach in form of transliteration, which is faithful to the source postproverbials", though cultural explanations are often needed by outsiders (p. 149). The author does not cite any references about how to translate proverbs.

Chinyere T. Ojiakor in *Igbo Postproverbials: The Dynamic Act of the Cultural Deviant* gathered 30 Igbo traditional proverbs and matched them with postproverbials. Some of the pairs are clearly structurally related, such as "Count your teeth with your tongue" and "Count your teeth with your tongue does not mean you are losing any" (p. 165). Other pairs were related by the meaning she (the cultural insider) understood, not structure: "Particles removed from the teeth after food does not fill the stomach" and "He whose monthly salary is not enough, the overtime he puts in will not be enough too" (p. 168). She explained that she was applying postcolonial theory and that the postproverbials she listed "contain subjects and objects which came with the white man or with other cultures outside Igbo land" (p. 163). As an outsider, I studied the 30 proverb pairs, and could identify outside influences in only five of the pairs. She found it easier to gather postproverbials from music and media, gathering 20 twenty from such sources, and only ten in interviews. She concluded, as have others, that postproverbials

are used much more "by the younger generation than by the older generation" (p. 172).

Adeola Seleem Olaniyan and Adeola Mercy Ajayi begin their article *A Comic Wisdom: Taking a Philosophical Interrogation of Baba Suwe's Postproverbials* by arguing for the existence of African philosophy, one not built on a Western framework. They wrote about the use of proverbs and the current usage of proverbs in music. Not only do some musicians use postproverbials, in some cases they also "revive and promote the ancient" styles of music, using proverbs (p. 181). They point out that postproverbials can become so popular that they displace the original proverb in the minds of people (p. 186, 187). Helpfully, they provide a page about the late Yoruba-speaking comic actor Baba Suwe. He was appreciated for his use of proverbs, especially postproverbials. In one famous film, he is asked by students to listen to the beginning of a proverb and then complete the proverb. In one example, he is given the opening "A king's palace that is set ablaze…" and responds with the humorously practical "…puts the villagers into debt" (p. 192). The authors examine less than 10 traditional proverbs and their postproverbial offspring, but they do so in ways that a cultural outsider, like myself, can understand and appreciate (some of) the richness of Baba Suwe's humor.

Hauwa Mohammed Sani argues in *Stylo-Semantic Analyses of Humorous Political Postproverbials in Hausa Speech Communities in Northern Nigeria* that her "definition [of postproverbials] can include modern creations, known as neoproverbs, rooted in postmodernity" (p. 204). She clearly states that the 24 postproverbials in her chapter do not have to be derived from "traditional proverbs, either in structurally or semantically, but as newly created and radicalized proverbs that reflect the socio-political situations of a given society" (p. 204). Though few would call them "postproverbials", the proverbs she selected are similar to postproverbials in that they violate traditional expectations and touch on issues of the immediate time. Her 23 proverbs are all related to current politics in Nigeria, such as "'Only God can salvage this country,' an All People Congress party member said when he went to buy food" (p. 216). These new proverbs are formed in patterns similar to traditional proverbs, such as

alliteration, parallelism (p. 224). One of these new proverbs has complete vowel assonance, "*Banza a banza talaka a APC* 'What a non-entity, a poor man in APC [All People Congress]'" (p. 215). At least seven of the new proverbs are wellerism proverbs, formed with a quotation and an identified speaker, a common form in Nigerian proverbs. Noting the immediate relevance of these proverbs, she describes them as representing a "temporal dialect", language used only during a limited period of time. Most are not likely to be remembered or used in the future, e.g. "The level of your support for the APC/AC merger is the level of your suffering" (p. 215). This concept of short-term relevance for some proverbs is a fascinating concept for proverb researchers. It goes against the idea that proverbs must be part of traditional language use. It gives a useful tool for studying short-lived proverbs, such as "Dot-com, dot-bomb", a proverb that arose and was used during an American financial crisis during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Doyle, Mieder, Shapiro 20212:60). It is now almost exclusively used to refer to events of that era. It was a proverb of a temporal dialect.

The chapter *Identity Constructions, Social Correction and Representational Dynamics of Reconstructing Igbo Proverbs Among Digital Natives: A Socio-Pragmemic Analysis* by Uche Oboko and Timothy Ekeledirichukwu Onyejelem is rich in data, with "forty proverbs and their postproverbial forms" which the authors translated and explained. They explained not only the meaning of the postproverbials, but sometimes also the societal changes and values associated with them. In their abstract, they mention Mey's (2001) "pragmatic act theory" with its five pragmatic acts. They categorized their proverbs into these five categories. In this way, they applied their stated theoretical approach more explicitly than the other authors. The article repeatedly mentions "digital natives" as the creators of the postproverbials, but they did not present data that being a digital native or that using digital media was directly related to producing or using postproverbials.

Kikelomo Olusola Adeniyi and Olatunde Adeyemi Ojerinde in *Nigerian Pidgin Postproverbials: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Social Realities in Selected NP Postproverbials* wrote about proverbs in Nigerian Pidgin (NP), a language that contains many

elements of both English and Nigerian languages. Those who speak it are transgressing the grammars of at least two languages, so "NP itself is a disruptive phenomenon" (p. 267). This makes Nigerian Pidgin a logical language for the formation and use of postproverbials or transgressive proverbs. The authors analyzed 20 proverbs that they had collected from a Nigerian Facebook page. Only one of these 20 proverbs was explained as being related to an existing proverb (p. 282), so 19 of them are not technically postproverbials by Raji-Oyelade's definition. The explanations of proverb #15 points out how the proverb cleverly plays with the fact that "chop" means slightly different things in English and in NP (p. 281).

Olayombo Raji-Oyelade in her work *Textile is the Horse of Beauty and Identity: Reading Yoruba Fashion Proverbs and Postproverbials* pointed out that the title of her chapter is a "postproverbial within itself, as it is a way of troping on the original [Yoruba] meta proverb … 'proverb is the horse of words, if the word is missing, proverb is meant to hunt for it'. Thus, the idea of textile being 'the horse of beauty and identity' suggests that clothing and the concept of dressing are the vehicles of the aesthetics of beauty and the formation of identities" (p. 292). Awareness of traditional proverbs and transgressive creativity produces postproverbials, and also these clever titles. Olayombo Raji-Oyelade collected 10 Yoruba postproverbials from both digital sources and a published collection. She compared the traditional proverbs and their corresponding postproverbials to show that just as young people assert new, disruptive identities by their fashion choices, they also create and use postproverbials about fashion to state new values. It is interesting to me that even in creating new identities, they still use the traditional medium of proverbs, albeit in transgressive ways. She discussed differences between the 10 traditional proverbs and corresponding postproverbial forms. Some of her explanations of the traditional proverb and postproverbials, comparing both the literal and metaphorical levels, are a challenge for readers. I was positively struck by one postproverbial and its translation and explanation:

(3) Traditional: "A child may have numerous clothes as an elder, but he cannot have as much wardrobe of rags like the elder."

> Postproverbial: "A child may have numerous clothes as an elder, in these days he/she will have more rags than the elder."

In the traditional form, "'wardrobe of rags' represent the accumulation of experience" (p. 295). Today, some young people choose to wear "crazy jeans", jeans that are torn and patched when they are sold new. Youth wearing crazy jeans will feel superior in fashion. The elders will certainly agree with the postproverbial saying that the youth have more "rags" (they have literal rags, but no accumulation of experience), and will mock them for their fashion choices and their corruption of a traditional proverb. Using proverbs to mock proverbs, I chuckle at the rag-wearing youth, "It is ever thus." And a clever youth may reply, "It has been this way too long."

Peace Sorochi Longdet in *Representation of Gender in Mwaghavul Postproverbials* studied women as portrayed in postproverbials from Mwaghavul, a smaller language community of Nigeria. It is likely that the methodology used in this research skewed the results: "I selected ten pre-published proverbs from the compendium of Mwaghavul proverbs *Bighit Po*" (p. 307). Readers are left with the suspicion that from *Bighit Po,* the author deliberately chose 10 proverbs that portrayed women in certain ways. It is likely that her ten proverbs are not a representative sample of Mwaghavul proverbs about women. The author was wise and alert to choose some proverbs that do not overtly mention "women" or "men". For example, she included a proverb that referred to women and men as "moon" and "sun" and another that spoke of "neck" and head". The author grouped the postproverbials into four categories:

- Subverting Traditional Gender Roles
- From Domination to Complementarity
- Women as objects and commodifying the woman's body
- Portraying women as stubborn and destructive

In the closing, the author observed, "in recent times, the social roles of many Mwaghavul women have changed and continue to change" (p. 315). It would be instructive and fascinating to se-

lect a larger set of proverbs about women and men and interview people about which of these proverbs and postproverbials they use and hear *currently*. As social roles change, how has the use of proverbs changed?

Charles Tolulope Akinsete, in *Postproverbial Irony in Contemporary African Cultural Expression,* studies irony in postproverbials, the two overlapping in the ways they bend expectations and convey truth from unexpected directions. There will certainly be more studies that follow him by studying postproverbials and irony. This is the only chapter to study proverbs from outside of Nigeria and from multiple languages, examining a proverb each from five language communities outside of Nigeria. Raji-Oyelade has noted that the formation of postproverbials is usually not in the first clause of a proverb, but in the following. However, the data in this article show exceptions to this. Perhaps languages with different grammatical patterns and structures form postproverbials in different ways? His chapter concludes with an observation that sums up much of the book by pointing out that postproverbials are "complex but highly advanced cultural expressions in postcolonial African societies" (p. 337).

Some of the authors may have felt pressure to name a theoretical approach for their work. However, within their articles, most did not mention the theory again, nor did they give any evidence that their theory had been relevant in their analysis. Some writers filled many pages explaining the importance of proverbs. Readers of a book about African proverbs already know that their speech communities value and appreciate their proverbs. Adaobi Muo wrote "The phenomenon of postproverbials (or anti-proverbs) is a universal cultural issue" (p. 65). And she is right. As soon as a proverb is formed to say something important, somebody may restate it, maybe for humor, maybe to challenge the message of the proverb, maybe to do both. Adeola Seleem Olaniyan and Adeola Mercy Ajayi agree, writing, "the transformation of proverbs, as against relative fixity of the same, has always been part of human history from antiquity only that it exists in different degrees, mindsets, frequency and popularity" (p. 186). The last part of that is behind the creation of this book, the belief that postproverbials are being created and used more often in Nigeria than in the past. Many of the authors referred

to the "relative fixity" of proverbs, the idea that the traditional forms of proverbs are preserved. They cited Ruth Finnegan for this, but some of them were not aware there is a newer edition of her valuable book *Oral literature in Africa*, now published for free online access in 2012.

In 2019, Raji-Oyelade and Olayinka Oyeley compiled a collection of articles on postproverbials in the journal *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society*. Those articles are not as easily accessible as Finnegan's book, but I have accessed them via ResearchGate.net. In two of the chapters, there is a proverb that counters the widespread high prestige associated with speaking English in Nigeria.

(4) Nigerian Pidgin: "The one with humongous problems does not pray in English." (p. 270, 271)
(5) Igbo: "It is only a person who has never experienced serious challenges in life that still prays in English." (p. 244)

In both of these proverbs, it is asserted that when there are major problems, people do not pray in English, but rather in a traditional language. In a few words, this postproverbial saying deflates the inflated prestige of English found in much of Nigeria. Using English is often seen as more prestigious than using Nigerian languages, so that praying in a language other than English is seen as significant. It is fascinating that a postproverbial saying like this has been transferred from one Nigerian language to another, showing that this idea is relevant across a wider area. This example shows the power and application of postproverbials and new proverbs. The title of the book is *Proverbials at Work*. In the spirit of these chapters, I remind readers that "Postproverbials work".

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