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YORUBA PROVERBS IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF MUSIC

Introduction

The importance of music to the lives of the Yoruba people has been like that of air to life. There is almost no Yoruba traditional life that is not accompanied by music. The peoples' day is always accompanied by one form of musical activity or the other. It is a means by which the people express the sense in the world around them and through which they give interpretations to various actions and events. This may be in terms of singing by which the singer sings away daily stress and odds; or body movement to an implicitly conceived tune or rhythm that align with what one is engaged at a particular time. It may also be a response to occurrences surrounding or happening within the context of an endeavor. In these circumstances, proverbial songs form part of songs used as a means of expressing ideas or feeling. Sometimes the songs may be satirical, eulogistical, critical or just for an emphasis.

A proverb is a short wise saying usually well known and handed down orally from one generation to another. It contains the thoughts of elders, words of advice, words of warning and words of wisdom. Like music in everyday life to the Yoruba, proverbs are frequently used in everyday discourse and oratory to embellish, conceal, or hint. Many proverbs are derived from lessons learnt by the elders through the day-to-day relationship between friends, husband and wife, man and woman, old and young, leaders and followers, etc. Many others are derived from the observation of the lives of lower mammals, birds and other living things. Some proverbs are also generated from stories and folktales. From the ongoing, a proverb can be seen as an abridged statement containing truths and facts that can only be interpreted by those who understand it. That is why the Yoruba will say “òwe lesin òrò, òrò lesin òwe, bí òrò bá sonù òwe la fi n wa” (Proverbs are ‘horses’ for searching for the truth, when the truth is missing, proverbs are used to discover it).

This paper attempts to collate some music-oriented Yoruba proverbs for both textual and contextual analysis.

Yoruba proverbs are significant not only in the beauty of their texts and form, their sense of detachment and generalization, and their connections with other genres of artistic expression such as traditional music, jurisprudence, drama, etc., but also in the aptness and perceptiveness with which they are used by individuals as an aspect of artistic expression within a whole social and literary context. Unlike such forms as riddles and stories they are not normally set apart as suitable for relaxation after, say, the end of the day's work, but are closely invoked with speech and action on every sort of occasion (including general conversation) (Finnegan 1976: 394). Therefore to differentiate proverbs from other sayings that are merely idiomatic expression, one needs precise information about their context. This paper hopes to work within this framework.

Among the Yoruba, proverbs are considered to be the wisdom lore of the people. They are considered to be indigenous and originate with the observation of natural phenomena and human relations. Therefore, proverbs are accorded high level importance and value among the people while the elderly are regarded as a repository of proverbs. It is very unusual among the people for the young ones to presume to press a point with their seniors by citing proverbs. Even when such occasion arises it is always with due homage and respect. In such occasion the young after citing the proverb would say "*Kí ó je ti èyin àgbà*" (let it be for the elders) and the elders would respond by saying "*wo a pa òmíràn*" or "*wo a ri òmíràn pa*" (you will have another opportunity) as a sign of acceptance of the homage.

The Yoruba have great respect for old age and regards for the young ones that are endowed in the use of proverbs. Any one who does not know, or who cannot understand the application of proverbs, is regarded as unwise (Olatunji 1984: 170).

Some popularly used Yoruba proverbs that are music oriented are collated for discussion in this paper. Some of them are taken from the works of Adeoye (1978) and Ajibola (1979). Others are cited from day-to-day conversation in which these proverbs are constantly used. The proverbs reflect on the peoples' attitude to and experience in relationship with the traditional music, which permeates almost all aspects of their lives.

They are sometimes expressed by a straight, relatively literal statement; some by similes, some by various types of metaphor, some by hyperbole and paradox.

Yoruba Proverbs and Music

As earlier mentioned it is a thing of honor among the Yoruba to be versed in the saying and understanding of proverbs. One proverb within the context of this paper is commonly used to support the peoples' attitude towards the promotion of the use of proverbs. It runs thus:

- (i) “*Bí òwe bí òwe là n lùlù ògìdìgbó
Ológbón ní jo o
òmíràn ní mò o*”

“The war drum is cryptically beaten like a proverb
It is wise men that dance to it,
It is informed men that know it (Olatunji 1984: 170).

Apart from the fact that this proverb extols the art of proverb usage in conversations it may also be used to alert the audience within a conversation to be calculative in order to get the import of the conversation. The Ogìdìgbó is a traditional war drum. It is used to send messages to warriors at the battlefield. Those who understand its sound and respond accordingly excel in battle. It is implied therefore, that those who are versed in proverbs are usually wise and good orators.

Other proverbs that are music oriented include:

- (ii) “*Ai fi èsò ké ìbòsí ni kò jé kó seé jó*”

An unorganized sound (shout noise)
Is usually not danceable.

This proverb is used to curb disorderliness or rowdiness. It is commonly used to settle rifts between two or more people and to invoke orderliness in a particular disordered situation. “Ibosi” is an unpleasant sound/shout that is caused by or may cause uproar. The Yoruba believe that if it is well organized “Ibosi” can be danced to.

This belief corroborates the definition of music as the arrangement of sounds in pleasant pattern and tunes. Or better still the definition of music as the organization of raw materials of

sound into formal and structural patterns that are meaningful and generally acceptable to that society in which the organization takes place. An organized “*Ibosi*” sound becomes musical and danceable, as an unpleasant situation becomes pleasant when orderliness is invoked. A shout is as good as a dance music if made in a suitable manner, as certain statements and situations would have received attention if made in proper and organized ways.

(iii) “*A n kii a n saa O ni o ko mo eni ku*”

Somebody’s character is being narrated
And his epithet sung, yet you don’t
Recognize who the deceased was;

The proverb is used to attract or direct the focus of an audience to a particular character or a scene that is needed to be notified. It is used to give direction or to retract lost focus during a conversation.

Oriki is a Yoruba praise poetry, which is also commonly used in songs. It is the most popular of the peoples’ poetic genres. It features in the performance of all Yoruba chanters as they address members of their audience. The position of oriki as a ‘master discourse’ can be seen immediately in the ubiquitous and manifold realizations of this genre in daily life (Barber: 1991: 10).

Esá on the other hand is the praise poetry (vocal music) used by the Yoruba masquerade worshippers. The two genres are used according to Olatunji (1984: 73) to define their subject, usually by maximizing those attributes which the Yoruba society considers to be good qualities and playing down, as much as possible, the not very flattering ones. It is believed among the Yoruba that the descriptions given in both or either of the two genres should be sufficient for somebody to know the person or character being spoken about.

(iv) “*Akorin – ìní – elégbè, bi eni ti njo àsánkan ilù ni o ri*”

A singer without people to chorus in response
Is like somebody who dances to a single drum.

Yoruba do not dance to a single drum. There is no single drum, which is believed to be able to provide a complete focus for the dancer. In actual fact, during performance one drum

means nothing without the others. The concept of concert is imminent in Yoruba drumming. Like the concept of *ebí* (family), no drum is totally independent in performance. Though Yoruba drums are in groups, members of each group are interrelated when it comes to performance. This makes it difficult for the dancer to dance because the balance and the beauty of the concert performance, which guide and inform the footsteps of the dancers, are lost. The proverb is used to encourage teamwork, promote the concepts of leadership and followership, division of labor, spirit of belonging, and unity in diversity. The proverb is usually used when there is the need to facilitate co-operation or mutual agreement either between an individual and a group of people or between two groups of people.

(v) “*Kiribótó ni ijo Egbá*
Eni ti ko ba nípon láyà
Kó má mà jo” (Adeoye 1978: 127)

“Kiriboto” is the music Egba people love to dance to whoever is not “muscularly chested” should not dance to it.

Kiriboto is one of the popular traditional forms of music of the Egba. It is the music of the bourgeoisie. In the olden days a bourgeois could engage the Kiriboto for nine days in just one occasion. Those who are financially less privileged settle for music types that are less expensive. This implies “cut your coat according to your cloth” or “be equipped before you get a quip”. The proverb is used to guide those who seek leadership or high positions at all cost. These are responsible positions and are not only meant for those who have the wherewithal but also those who are ready to pay the price of being a leader. It is mostly used during contest for honourable positions.

(vi) “*Oba pe ilù o kò jó*
Nijowo ni ó ò ri owó pe tire?”

The King calls a dance you did not dance when
 Will you have enough money to call your own?

The proverb implies “Once opportunity is lost it may never be regained”. The king is the royal father and leader of his people. Traditionally, Oba’s feast is for his subjects. It is therefore mor-

ally and customarily wrong for an individual to behave unconcerned to an Oba's feast. Though it is a gesture, it is also a rare opportunity to feast with a king. If anybody therefore denies himself of the opportunity it may not come again either in his own lifetime or in the lifetime of the Oba. This proverb is used to emphasize the notion that opportunity comes but once and that no two opportunities come in the same manner. Therefore one should seize every opportunity that comes one's way and use it well. That is to say that people should "make hay while the sun shines".

(vii) "Won ni won ò fe ni'lu o nda'rin
Bi o ba da orin naa tani yo gbee?"

You are not wanted in a town and you begin
to raise a song. If you raise it who is going
to chorus it?

The proverb implies that "a loved person is an admired person". Among the Yoruba, questionable characters are usually treated with ignominy in the society. When such a person gives any suggestion it is usually turned down or rejected without apology. The proverb is usually employed when somebody is trying to force an opinion on people which they resist and show to detest. It is used to express the notions of the "majority carry the vote" and "nobody is indispensable".

(viii) "*Olè tó gbé Kàkàkí Oba
Nibo ni yòò gbe fon ón?"*

The thief who steals the king's bougle,
Where is he going to blow (play) it.

"Kakaki" (bougle) is a musical instrument, which usually forms part of some Yoruba Oba's paraphernalia. It carries royal dignity. It is not played for any individual other than the Obas. If a thief therefore steals the musical instrument it is not going to be useful for him. This proverb is used to warn people who arrogate authority to themselves unduly, most especially when there is somebody who should have greater authority. It is also a warrant for people to desist from embarking on unprofitable ventures. It implies that "the gold is not useful for the pigs".

(ix) *“Ija lo de ti orin d’owe”*

A quarrel has arisen, that is why the song
appears as an allusion to it.

Quarrel precipitates undue suspicion. A song that ordinarily does not have any conformity with a proverb is taken to be proverbial in the midst of a quarrel between two people or groups of people. Though there are several Yoruba songs that are proverbial, these will not sound venomous in the time of peace. The proverb is used to settle rifts and to absorb people from blame for their actions during a misunderstanding. It implies that every action in the time of rift is seen as negative and suspicious even though the motive may be different.

(x) *“A s̀nkú tán alugbá kò lo sé o fe súpó ni”*

The funeral ceremony has ended
The calabash drummer still stays behind
Does he want to inherit the widow?

This proverb is used to castigate a malice bearer. The alugba is an entertainer who sings dirge at funeral ceremonies. His business at such ceremony ends after the interment. It therefore becomes illegal and uncustomary for him to stay behind after the show. The proverb is an advice against malice bearing after a settlement of an issue. In traditional Yoruba elders settle disputes and the affected parties are expected to sheath their swords after the settlement. If the issue resurfaces thereafter, the affected parties are asked who among them is still harboring the “alugba” because after the “burial” of the dispute its attendant hostilities and malice should disappear.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to give a discourse on some Yoruba proverbs that are music oriented. The primary aim was to analyze these proverbs from their textual and contextual point of view. In the process the paper has been able to assert that proverbs are not only an aspect of artistic expression within a whole social and literary context, but also that there are different situations in which they are cited. The veracity of Finnegan’s (1976: 399) claim that knowledge of situations in which prov-

erbs are cited may be an essential part of understanding their implications is also confirmed.

It is found that each of the proverbs used as a sample in this paper has a peculiar situation as context for its use while the textual analysis of each of them provides an insight into the attitude and experience of the Yoruba to their traditional music which is not only part of their culture but also part of their lives.

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