

HRISZTALINA HRISZTOVA-GOTTHARDT

Playful Blasphemies. Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yorùbá Culture. By Aderemi Raji-Oyelade. Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2012. Pp. 168. ISBN 978-3-86821-380-5.

Aderemi Raji-Oyelade is a Nigerian poet, scholar, literary organizer, and cultural activist who currently teaches Literature and Creative Writing in the Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. In the beginning of his career, it was his poetry that brought him national and international recognition. Throughout the years he gained a reputation for his scientific work in the field of literature and paremiology and has quickly become one of the most eminent African proverb scholars. He has authored numerous paremiological publications, most of them connected to his mother tongue, Yorùbá.

In 2007, his achievement in the field of paremiology was acknowledged by being appointed a member of the Advisory Board of the International Association of Paremiology. Raji-Oyelade's newest work entitled *Playful Blasphemies. Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yorùbá Culture* was published as a part of the series *Literatures and Arts of Africa*, edited by Susanne Gehrmann, Flora Veit-Wild, and Tobias Wendl. During the period of establishing and developing his radical theory called postproverbials, the author received institutional support from the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, Germany, as well as assistance from the staff of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Humboldt University, Berlin. He had the opportunity of consulting the African studies libraries at Humboldt University, Bayreuth University and the city-owned library, the *Stadtbibliothek*. In this way, Raji-Oyelade gained an excellent overview of the relevant African – and especially Yorùbá – paremiological and paremiographical publications. Throughout all the chapters of his book the author refers to these works, introducing the important aspects of the past and present ones dealing

PROVERBIUM 30 (2013)

with the collecting and studying of Yorùbá proverbs. In addition, he lists all the referenced works at the end of his volume in a very detailed bibliography that can be of a great help for other researchers interested in this topic.

The title of the book already suggests its subject – Raji-Oyelade writes about blasphemies; something that “shows lack of respect for God and religion” (see Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary.) The subtitle explains what it is all about: about postproverbials as archetypes (typical examples) of modernity in Yorùbá culture and language. The cover image shows an “ere” (an image or effigy) with two reflective shadows behind it and stands, according to the author, for the concept of postproverbiality. Raji-Oyelade namely believes that “the radical proverb is a shadow of the original” (see p. 4).

The fact that the Foreword to the book was written by Wolfgang Mieder, the most distinguished proverb scholar of our times, shows the great importance of Raji-Oyelade’s work in terms of modern paremiology. It is important to mention here that Mieder himself coined the term anti-proverb for intentional modifications of proverbs (see Mieder 1983). Nevertheless, he does not disapprove of Raji-Oyelade’s term “postproverbial”, but believes that it appears to fit the specific African changes of existing proverbs more precisely. In the author’s native language, Yorùbá, the phenomenon of deliberately changing proverbs is not only an act of wordplay. It happens also with the intent of negating traditional wisdom and creating new proverbial wisdom that fits new times..

Mieder sees Raji-Oyelade’s credit in showing that proverb modifications are not only a common language phenomenon in Europe and America, but have arrived also to societies which have not been extensively influenced by the Western culture, in other words to Africa. He also emphasizes the author’s eager interest in the dynamic and innovative aspects of proverbs, rather than in their static and traditional features. Moreover, by observing and studying the process of emerging and the spreading of postproverbials, Raji-Oyelade completes one of the most important tasks of modern paremiology.

In the Preface to his volume, Raji-Oyelade explains what made him become interested in postproverbials. He expresses his

great relief and gratitude to the copious work of former scholars because African traditional proverbs have already been archived, documented and 'can no longer be lost of physical death or cultural amnesia'. However, he is extremely aware of the ascendancy of an ultramodern alternative of the traditional proverb in Yorùbá culture and has witnessed how in informal situations more and more speakers of Yorùbá have become inventive with the original wise-sayings, thereby producing interesting deviant re-productions of the conventional proverbs, namely postproverbials. He believes that these innovative proverb alienations deserve a detailed analysis and that is the main reason this volume was born. With his book, Raji-Oyelade aims to reach not only specialists of proverb studies; he hopes that it will be useful also for the general reader who wants to know what the idea of post-proverbiality is all about.

Further in the Preface, Raji-Oyelade explains that his book is actually a result of close to two decades of research and revision work. There were two procedures involved in gathering the language data (postproverbials) for this study. The first one included the administration of a questionnaire to groups of Yorùbá speakers categorized by age, location, and level of literacy. In this questionnaire the informants were asked to complete traditional Yorùbá proverbs as best as they could, and also to provide any other alternative form of the 'original' proverb, as known by them (see Appendix I, pp. 125-130). In addition to that, the author collected postproverbials in contemporary Yorùbá music, video films, and literary texts. The second procedure of data collection involved gathering of alternative proverb statements made in real-life, everyday speech, and dialogue situations. Raji-Oyelade collected the corpus for his study at different locations and occasions of southwestern Nigeria, ranging from social gatherings and marketplaces to public transports and radio/television programs.

In Chapter 1 the author introduces to the reader the subject of paremiology and paremiography and summarizes the most significant trends in these two research areas worldwide. Raji-Oyelade also gives a very detailed overview of Yorùbá paremiography – something to be considered one of the main merits of this work. He emphasizes that unlike American and European scholarship, the major studies on African proverbs have sus-

tained the idea of the sacrosanct structure of the proverb text. Indeed, much of Yorùbá proverb scholarship has concentrated on aspects of the function, the form, and the thematic categories of proverbs, but aspects on the innovativeness of the verbal art are still under-theorized. Even the two pioneering works of Alaba (1986) and Owomolyela (1988) only acknowledge the existence of alternative transformations and variations of traditional Yorùbá proverbs but do not define or analyze the phenomenon rigorously. Raji-Oyelade argues that it is important to recognize that societies and cultures are developing dynamically and that there is also a certain radical shift or transgressive force in the making and use of proverbs in recent times. Therefore, the author aims to theorize the phenomenon of transformations in the body of Yorùbá proverbs as a sociolinguistic event by defining the character and the grammar of postproverbials and examining their manifestation and function in popular media.

In the very beginning of Chapter 2 Raji-Oyelade indicates that until now only little focus has been set on the area of transformative paremiology, that is, the study of shifts in structure and meaning(s) of proverbs. Within the next 30 pages, he attempts to address this neglected issue by giving a poststructuralist description of the radical proverb and by defining the “post-modern” template in the production of the typical postproverbial statement. He presents his own taxonomic categorization of the main structural categories of Yorùbá postproverbials and provides representative illustrations of the utterances. The author appropriates the fundamental aspect of G.B. Milner’s theory of the head-tail dyad of the given proverb (see Milner 1969).

According to Raji-Oyelade, based on their structural formation, there are four major types of Yorùbá postproverbials:

- Category I represents the most popular category of postproverbials in current usage. In this case, the transformation takes place in the completing clause of the conventional utterance;
- Category II covers an exceptional type of postproverbials in which the significant rupture occurs in the signal clause;

- In category III, the transformation takes place either in the signal clause or in the completing clause of the proverb. In this group, the making of the postproverbial text is highly dependent on the use of the pun as the operable constant in the “new” proverb.
- Unlike the other three groups, category IV of postproverbials usually retains the entire sentence structure of the conventional proverb. The transgressive act is achieved in the form of an additional proverbeme (extension, prolongation) to the original text.

Raji-Oyelade illustrates his theoretical framework with numerous examples of Yorùbá postproverbials. He does not simply provide an English translation for all of his examples but also explains the exact type of structural transformation and the shift in the meaning(s) of the texts and gives some additional historical and cultural background information. In this way, he makes it possible for the reader to gain a deeper insight into the nature and “behavior” of postproverbials.

However, despite its innovativeness and really good elaboration, the taxonomic categorization of Raji-Oyelade has its little drawback that has to be mentioned here. In fact, the so-called category III does not group the postproverbials according to the position of transformation (e.g. signal clause, completing clause or extension of the original text), as the other three categories do. It rather introduces the pun (the word play) as a very powerful way for modifying the meaning of traditional Yorùbá proverbs. As the author notices, the pun can occur both in the head and in the tail of a proverb; it is merely enabled by the tonality of the Yorùbá language. In this regard, I would recommend Raji-Oyelade to reorganize his typology of postproverbials by defining more different criteria for categorizing the texts, e.g. place, i.e. position of transformation, type of transformation etc. This might also help him to solve the cases of so-called overlapping postproverbials, where “the recreated sayings incorporate the characteristic elements of two or more categories for their own composition” (see p. 61).

Chapter 3 draws attention to another variant of radicalized Yorùbá proverbs, marked by the author as “eponymous postpro-

verbials”. These creations are qualified not so much by their structural formation but by the possibility of identifying their origins or source reference. This category of re-invented sayings includes the range of “axiomatic” statements ascribed to particular personae, including fictional characters, usually contemporary poets, orators, politicians etc. In other words, the most crucial difference of eponymous postproverbials is that its creation is always connected to an individual in society.

In Yorùbá-language literature, the peculiarity of the eponymous postproverbial is contained in the exemplary creations of the radical fictional character called “Lawuwo” in Oladejo Okediji’s play *Rere Run*. According to Raji-Oyelade, the play contains an approximate number of one hundred and twenty conventional proverbs in dialogue, besides the sequence of postproverbial utterances. In the frame of Chapter 3, the author analyzes ten eponymous postproverbials. In his critique, he not only comments on the structural changes undergone by the traditional sayings but also makes an attempt to explain the primary metaphors and the semantic intention behind those rather unusual utterances.

In Chapter 4 Raji-Oyelade examines and describes the deployment of postproverbials in a contemporary Yorùbá musical form known as *fuji*. The author believes that it is in *fuji*, other than in any other popular art form, that the traditional Yorùbá proverb records the greatest and the most amazing transmutations. For this reason, he examines the phenomenon of “nonsense lyrics”, also called *asakasa* lyrics. In traditional use, *asakasa* is a term which connotes a negative moral attitude and therefore implies some kind of degeneration, retrogression, or disruption within the cultural system. In recent usage, *asakasa* becomes the pronominal reference to a particularly racy, hip-hop style of *fuji* music, named by Abass Obesere Akande, one of the new generation of Yorùbá popular musicians. Raji-Oyelade takes a closer look at some of Obesere’s records and compact discs and comes to the conclusion that the musician is competent and versed in traditional Yorùbá proverbs; therefore his use and invention of postproverbials is not inadvertent but deliberate.

Chapter 5 discusses the inflections of conventional proverbs as postproverbials in Yorùbá video films. The author’s first gen-

eral observation is that postproverbials are significant dialogic “in-texts” present in Yorùbá-language movies, especially in productions of the 1990s onward. In this chapter, he attempts to describe the nature of the transformative rupture that has come upon the identity of conventional proverbs and their radical deployment in Yorùbá video films. For this purpose, Raji Oyelade examines examples from different productions dated between 1999 and 2006. He comes to the conclusion that the typical proverbial utterance is almost always predictably deployed as comic relief material. Apart from that, the proverbial line operates as a sign of the challenge of a long-held belief systems, as well as a reflection of contemporary social concepts and realities of a new generation of Yorùbá language users and speakers.

In the concluding chapter of his book, Raji-Oyelade asserts that the postproverbial text is the evidence of the culture’s dynamism. Among other factors, the making of postproverbials has been due to:

- the vanishing of the real village or community square tradition;
- the decline in the deployment of the standard resources of Yorùbá language among educated elites;
- the indifferent or triumphalist sense of overcoming Yorùbá with the use of the English language by the youth;
- the intervention and corruption of Yorùbá conversations with words and phrases borrowed from other languages;
- the suspension or de-emphasis of the teaching of the forms of Yorùbá proverbs in schools.

In this regard, postproverbials can be seen as peculiar verbal signs of modernity, in particular of African cultural modernity. Their permanent appearance in popular mass media is the evidence of a unique and inevitable development. For this reason, Raji-Oyelade believes that the study of postproverbiality is to become an essential part of modern linguistics, literature, and cultural research. His book is intended not only to arouse the interest of paremiologists in the radical African proverb text and its typology, but also to bring the idea of postproverbiality closer to the general reader. In my opinion, the author has fully suc-

ceeded in his intention. His inventive theoretical analysis of innovative proverb modifications is definitely worth reading and further examining.

Bibliography

- Alaba, O. (1986): *Agbeyewo Owe Iwoyi*. Láàńgbàsà: Jónà Isé Akadá ní Èdè Yorùbá 3: 51-66.
- Mieder, W. (1983): *Antisprichwörter*. Wiesbaden: Verlag für deutsche Sprache.
- Milner, G.B. (1969): Oudripartite Structures. *Proverbium* 14: 379-383.
- Owomoyela, O. (1988): *A Ki i: Yoruba Proscriptive and Prescriptive Proverbs*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America.
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (2000). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt
Olga utca 1.X.32
7632 Pécs
Hungary
E-mail: xpucu@freemail.hu