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THE AFRICAN PROTOPROVERBIAL IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Taiwo Oloruntimehin-Oju
Dept of English
University of Ilorin
Ilorin, Nigeria

ttaiwoju@yahoo.com

Abstract

The proverb is a rhetorical universal and as such shares features across linguistic, ethnic and culture boundaries, thus making typological distinctions along ethnic or regional lines a daunting task. Further complicating this scenario within the African context is the relentless hybridization and subversion of the African proverb consequent on colonial contact and sundry postcolonial interventions. This twin trajectory, the conceptual universalism of the proverb and the relentless absorption of proverbs from diverse sources into contemporary global and hybrid contexts, has often raised the question whether it is possible to pinpoint the 'African' proverb or the Africanness of a proverb with any sense of authority. This paper examines sundry characterizations of the African proverb, with Yorùbá proverbs as exemplar, and proposes a number of linguistic and literary parameters by which what we have described as the African protoproverbial may be distinguished from both western and certain contemporary African varieties. The question how relevant is the African proverb to development in a contemporary multipolar world is also germane to this presentation.

Keywords: Yorùbá proto-proverbial, Africanity, paroemic competence, postcoloniality
language and culture, addressivity, contrastive paremiology

Introduction

The discourse on African cultural expressions had projected itself in the colonial and immediate postcolonial periods as a discourse of difference, and simultaneously as an adversative or opposite discourse. The discourse pitched Western colonial abnegation of African cultural values against postcolonial affirmation of a valued cultural identity. The search for distinctive matrices of African expression was therefore seen as responding to a well-established cultural imperative, that is, the reclamation of the African (cultural) self in a world that frequently threatened the assimilation, and hence annihilation, of oppressed identities. This imperative has been variously phrased in African postcolonial studies, most notably as: an exercise in “race-retrieval” (Soyinka 1976, p. 126); a Negritude-inspired search for “the complete ensemble of values of African culture,” with implication for “the dignity of persons of African descent” (Mphahlele, 1962, p. 98); the need to “assert and preserve distinctly African ways of being and distinct living [by cultivating] distinctly African ways of speaking” (Owomoyela, 1992, p. 93), and again as the need for Africans to assert, through concrete initiative and agency, “a subject place within the context of African history” (Asante, 2007, p. 16), etc. Proverbs, more than any other rhetorical form, have keyed into these trajectories as the most distinctive signifier of African cultural expression and as a proud cultural heritage for Africans.

The theorisation of African cultural holdings such as proverbs has however been complicated over the past decades not only by sundry western denials of the possibility of regional or ethnic specificity in regard to rhetorical forms, but also by the contestant claims among Africans themselves about the definitions and theoretical location of African cultural

products.¹ The discourse has progressively crystallised into a binary opposition between what is considered a lingering and perhaps decadent nativist romanticism, and a metropolitan consciousness that denudes traditional cultural tropes of all claims to originality, homogeneity or fixity. In other words, the quarrel over the valuation of cultural tropes moved from a “twixt the west and the rest” narrative to a fraternal disputation amongst Africans themselves over what should be the correct attitude of the new African, to African cultural products. The particulars of this “nativist infighting” (Ádéèkó, 1998, p. 23) have become part of the metadiscourse on African cultural products in general and of proverbs in particular.²

In this paper, I am concerned to highlight some characterisations of the African proverb by western and African scholars and suggest how these might contribute to a clear appreciation of some of the ways in which African paroemia might differ fundamentally from other, especially western, varieties. I explicate the proverb in terms of its phenomenology, and especially within the framework of what the Yorùbá call *ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* (“the deep word”), and its metaphysical and material concretion in Yorùbá metadiscourse. I erect the proverb on an epistemological tripod, comprising *ogbón*, *òtító* and *àṣẹ* (respectively “wisdom,” “truth” and “elocutionary/spirit force”). These and the associated addressivity and ideationality additionally help to mark out African paroemia from others.

¹ Fredrick Jameson’s (1986) retort that “none of these cultures can be conceived as anthropologically independent or autonomous” (p. 68), has been well cited in the literature, as has Hountodji’s denial of “cultural unanimism” (1983, p. 165).

² The term “nativist” itself is considered perjurious by some scholars. For example, Owomoyela (2005) would take exception to Ádéèkó’s (1998) usage of the term as a manifestation of what he considered to be “the increasing desire among African scholars, in response to an intellectual current in the West, to distance themselves from such concepts as race, nationalism, and other means of suggesting, if not asserting, differences among humankind” (p. 26). This criticism has occurred despite Ádéèkó’s declared objective to “[place] nativism in poststructuralist thinking in a way that does not subordinate one to the other” (p. 29).

Characterisations of african proverbs: dense imagery and definitional intricacies

The African proverb is intuitively felt to be different from western forms. Early Western observers had generally characterized the African proverb in terms of an exuberant expression of feelings and dense imagery, what Finnegan (1970, p. 390) called “a feeling ... for imagery,” or in terms of a vivid verbiage that tends to “give point and add color to every conversation” (Messenger, 1959, p. 64). An earlier statement on such exuberance and popularity of the African proverb was made by Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who, around 1850, compiled the text, *A Vocabulary of the Yorùbá language*, and published it, with introductory remarks by the Reverend Owen Omeric Vidal. Though a Black man, a returned slave turned missionary, Crowther (1850) cited the authority of western fellow missionaries (including Rev. Henry Venn, Bishop Lowth and Bishop Jebb) for a number of important observations, and also pinpointed the Yorùbá proverb as the exemplary African paroemic form:

... In the Yorùbá, however, there is an extraordinary exuberance of these sententious sayings, not confined to any particular caste undertaking to be the guide of the rest; but everywhere in the mouths of all, imparting a character to common conversation, and marking out a people of more than ordinary shrewdness, intelligence, and discernment.

The western descriptions match sundry self-assessments by the Africans themselves. An often cited example is that of the Akan of Ghana who, in a research conducted by the scholar Lawrence Boadi, reportedly scoffed at representative English proverbs as lacking the depth of imagery and vividness that Africans associate with proverbs: “The more concrete and unusual the imagery, the higher the proverb rates” among Africans (Boadi 1981, p. 185). Another African scholar, Owomoyela (2005), citing Rowland Abiodun, also refers to the Yorùbá “(and African generally)” preference for “full figures over bust” (p. 13).

Terms for “proverb” in African languages appear to corroborate this idea of the figural density of the African proverb. African scholars who have sought to characterise the proverb from the standpoint of its meaning or etymology in the African languages have attributed complex morphosemantic significations to the respective terms. For example, Ádéèkó (1998: 46-49) and Owomoyela (2005: 3-4) opine that the complex figurativeness of the Yorùbá proverb is represented in the Yorùbá term for proverb itself, *òwe*, which they interpret ultimately to imply a complex metaphorical comparison. This “meaning” would appear based on the erroneous assumption that the term is semantically motivated; it is therefore arrived at only by means of an allusive and sometimes idiosyncratic imputation by the scholars. However, terms with comparable morphological structures, such as *àfiwé* (to compare), and those with apparently cognate semantic features such as *ìmò* (“knowledge”/“plot”), *ìtumò* (“to interpret”/“to unravel”), *àlò* (“tale”/“puzzle”), as well as explicit metaproverbials such as *òwe l’ẹ̀şin ọ̀rọ̀* (“proverb is the horse of words”) were pressed into service by the scholars in order to squeeze this interpretation out of the term, *òwe* (“proverb”), which is otherwise morphologically unanalysable.³ However, other African terms for “proverb,” such as *bu abē* from Ghana (Akan, Dangme and Ga), and *e’yo obeza* from Uganda (the Lugbara) meaning (“to bend,” “to twist,” “to mix,” etc) - Yankah (1986)

³ The word *òwe* appears more like a symbolic signifier and cannot in my view be reduced to a morpheme based literal signified such as *ó-wé e* (it wraps) or *ó fi wé* (it compares). It is a root morpheme of the VCV noun form and it cannot be further analyzed or segmented into meaning bearing morphemes (any such morphology, if it existed, would appear at least lost to antiquity). The frequently suggested tonal transmutation or morphemic contraction from *ó wé e* (to wrap) to *òwe* appears tenuous. While there is certainly such a phonic/morphemic relationship between a word like *àlò* (riddle) and the verb *lò* (to twist), with both verb elements bearing the high tone, this relationship is not at all analogous to that between *òwe* (low-mid tone) and *ó wé e* (high-high-mid tone). The suggestion that the *o* of *òwe* is agentive (i.e. denotes something/someone - that wraps) appears awkward when we consider the pattern of true agentives which is that the noun normally projects a clear semantic relationship with the base verb (“*dẹ*” to hunt; *ọ̀dẹ* – hunter). Terms with similar morphological non-complex structures such as *owó* (“money”) *òwò* (“trade”) *ọ̀wò* (“broom”) *ọ̀wọ̀* (“hand”) *òwò* (“respect”), *òwú* (“wool”), *ilé* (“house”), *ilẹ̀* (“ground”) appear also to be symbolic signifiers and, like *òwe*, do not appear to be semantically motivated, nor can they be reduced to any denotative signifieds. (However, cf Adetugbo (1974) and Awoyale (1978); both cited in Perkins (2005, p. 5), on the one hand, and Perkins (2005), on the other hand, for related arguments on the morphology of root words in Yorùbá language).

and Dalfovo (1995), cited by Kudadjie (2000, p. 56), also insinuate the metaphoric complexity of African proverbial.

It is clear from the point of view of both western and African scholars that the African is distinguished in paroemic usage and degree of paroemic competence. What has however been problematic is the identification and description of the input elements that might be responsible for the affective force of the African proverb, and an explanation of the disparity in the cultural appreciation of the proverbs, vis-à-vis western ones. Such a lacuna between intuitively observed “facts” of a phenomenon and a scientifically explicit or adequate characterization of the phenomenon is not uncommon, more so in Philosophy, Linguistics and allied humanistic disciplines. With regard to proverbs in particular, the distinction between what is proverbial and what is not is sometimes ascribed to what Taylor (1931, p. 3) has described as “an incommunicable quality.”

Comparisons of English and Yorùbá proverbs, for example, or comparisons between western and African paroemia in general, have therefore been characterized by a tension between Universalist and particularistic parameters of the phenomenon. Crowther, referred to above was to additionally deploy Universalist criteria of proverbs (elegance, conciseness) to locate the African proverb comparatively in relation to western forms:

If brevity and elegance be regarded as the two main excellencies of a proverb, the Yorùbá aphorisms may claim an equal rank with those of any other nation in ancient or modern times; for besides the condensation of the discriminating sentiment into a small compass, which is always observable in them, there is, for the most part, also an almost poetical contrivance or construction of the parts, which marks a refinement of taste ...

Many supposedly particularistic definitions of African proverbs by Africans themselves exemplify this tension. The definitions invariably locate proverbs as didactic anthropological constructs, described in ethic-aesthetic terms as specially crafted insinulators of virtues to be

emulated and vices to be shunned. African proverbs, according to this didactic/prescriptive model, function as a “guide to conduct” (Dzobo, 1975, with reference to Ghanaian and Togolese proverbs), acting as “social charters condemning some practices while recommending others” (Olatunji, 1984, p. 175), etc.

Similarly, many of the aesthetic patterns frequently isolated in African proverbs resonate with universal applicability. These include, in Yorùbá proverbs, a profusion of lexical contrasts and lexical patterning (exemplified with the proverb *Ehinkùnlé lotá wà, Ilé laṣeni ñgbé* (“The enemy lives in the back yard. The abode of the person who inflicts injury is the home”), among others (Bamgbose 1966, as cited by Owomoyela 2005: 8). The same example has been used to exemplify lexical and tonal counterpoints identified by Olatunji, referred to above. However, similar parameters have also been advanced to account for western proverbs. For example, Owomoyela himself (2005) also noted the description of English proverbs by Roger Abrahams, as involving “all of the devices we commonly associate with poetry in English.” These include “binary construction and balanced phrasing, rhyme, assonance and alliteration, conciseness, metaphor, and occasional inverted word order and unusual construction” (1972, p. 119). The observation by Brunvand, that English proverbs exhibit most of the stylistic devices of poetry, including “parallelism ... and several other poetic characteristics” was also cited (Owomoyela 2005: 56). More recently, an analysis of 55 definitions of proverbs of non-African origin, yielded an avalanche of similar philosophical, moral and aesthetic terms such as “wisdom,” “truth,” “moral,” “admonition,” “analogy,” “image,” “poetry,” “alliteration,” “witticism,” “culture,” “universal,” “colloquial,” “memorizable,” “graphic,” “symbolic,” “colorful,” “pictorial,” “pithy,” etc occurred with great frequency. (<http://www.bestreferat.ru/referat-211535.html>)

As if to underscore the continuing predicament involved in any particularistic attribution to African proverbs, the summative definitions by African scholars frequently revert to universal frames of reference. Hence, Ádèèkó (1998, p. 49) would describe Yorùbá rhetoric summatively as “a function of text and intertext” and the Yorùbá proverb as “simultaneously fragmentary, historical, and timeless ... simultaneously figurative and literal ... true and untrue, realistic and non-realistic, local idiomatically and universal in their assumptions.” Owomoyela (2005) also sums up the Yorùbá notion of òwe (“proverb”) in a definition that does not necessarily distinguish the Yorùbá proverb from universal paroemia:

Reduced to its essence, therefore, òwe is a speech form that likens, or compares, one thing or situation to another, highlighting the essential similarities that the two share. In Yorùbá usage it is always at least one complete sentence. ... the language is rich in phrases, descriptions and idiom. (p. 3)

In an article titled “From Proto to Pseudo-proverbial in Yorùbá Culture” Òlórúntọ́ba-Oju (1997, p.106) had also defined the Yorùbá proverbial in universalistic and fairly assumptive terms:

What we have called the protoproverbial subsumes not only proverbs but [also] sundry paroemia, including the adage, idiom, aphorism, pithy sayings, all of which are [deeply rooted] in their originating culture. Obviously enshrined in the protoproverbial are the age-old wisdom, mores and observances of the community, but the protoproverbial is also a marker of the aesthetic consciousness of the community.

The point of these examples is to acknowledge the difficulty of providing a description of African proverbs in terms of regional or ethnic specificities. Implicit in sundry characterizations of the African proverb is also an assumption of some universalism of the paroemic form, which allows the characterisations to sit comfortably among western definitions of the proverb from Aristotle to Mieder. In other words, classic western definitions of proverbs similarly capture the trope of edification and delight, remarking the proverb for its philosophical moral content and its succinct, aesthetically striking form. Mieder’s often cited (1985, p. 119) definition of the proverb

as: “a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation;” Camden’s earlier observation that one of the main functions of proverbs is the transmission of “good caveats” (cited in Whiting, 1932, p. 293), and the American Heritage College Dictionary’s description of proverbs as “a succinct formulation of a fundamental principle, general truth, or rule of conduct” (cited by Owomoyela, 2005, p. 37) all exemplify this classic western definition.

The absence of further distinguishing parameters within definitions of the African proverb unwittingly compromises any insistence on its specificity, peculiarity or Africanness. Definitions of the African proverb in terms of mere metaphorical comparisons (e.g. as “a speech form that likens, or compares, one thing or situation to another, highlighting the essential similarities that the two share,” to recall Owomoyela’s definition above) tend to reduce the African proverb to a conventional Aristotelian model, thereby inadvertently robbing it of a deeper, structural appreciation of its phenomenology.

A number of rhetorical, anthropological, linguistic and pragmatic accounts of proverbs have also been pointed out in relation to African proverbs. In Ádéèkó’s (1998) treatise on “nativism” and idealism in African proverbs (Ch. 2), the rhetorical model, which we have described above as Aristotelian, is exemplified in the work of Camden (1614) and Howell (1660) and it sees proverbs as an accumulation of tropes that embody the wisdoms and mores of the community in succinct verbiage. This again summarises the classic universal definition of proverbs noted in the foregoing for its inability to account for the disparity in the appreciation by different communities of what constitutes imagery or its affective potential. The anthropological model is exemplified by the works of William Angler, Bishop Vidal and Edward Loeb. This sees

proverbs as socio-ethnic codes, as well as (especially in Loeb) a possible indicator of the intellectual growth of communities. The model is also troubled by its inability to account for the Archerian “incommunicable quality” that constitutes utterances into proverbs. The attempt by descriptive linguists such as G.B. Milner to account for this quality led to models that structure proverbs into grammatical structures such as “head” and “tail” (e.g. “Penny wise/pound foolish”) and, further, into “positive head, positive tail,” “negative head, positive tail,” etc. Similarly, proverbs have been structured, notably by Alan Dundes, into “topic-comment” and “equational”/“oppositional” categories, while the pragmatic linguistic model attempts to account for the proverb as a vehicle for social communication or, in Ádéèkó’s words, as “the most self-aware vehicle of semiotic intentions” (p. 35). These attempts have also been deservedly critiqued in Ádéèkó’s treatise for failing to account fully for the nature of proverbs.

The Aristotelian “substitution” model of metaphor referred to above (i.e. metaphor as simply a linguistic means of transferring meaning from one object to another) has also been subjected to sustained criticism for its inability to account for the complexity of proverbs as appreciated in different communities and in varied contexts. In its place, the subversive projections of western philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Ricoeur and Derrida have been proposed as exemplars of the phenomenological model of metaphors, as independent cognitive routes to the appreciation and codification of experience (See Theodorou, n.d.). In the final analysis, an eclectic combination of anthropological, structuralist, semiotic and linguistic perspectives would appear to better enable one to plumb the depth of African proverbs and to define them within the framework of Africanity, than a perspective of proverbs as a mere agent of comparison or a mere “mapping” of one concept on to another.⁴

⁴ One is of course cognizant of the suspicion, and sometimes disdain, that any employment of western models in the explication African forms often attracts to itself especially within the context of “nativist” critiques. The reference to

The Phenomenological and the Structural

The phenomenology of proverbs suggests that, like metaphors, they are not just linguistic manifestations of some random penchant for comparison; nor do they merely reference their immediate textual surroundings or mirror only immediately apprehended contexts. Rather, proverbs, as compmetaphors, function as paradigms for apprehending truth as “forgotten aspects of being” (Heidegger, 1982, cited by Theodorou, n.d. section 2b ¶ 4). Zhabus’s (1991) analogy of the palimpsest captures the symbolic reality of the primordial, as reflected in sometimes hazy textual traces and patches on surviving tablets. Derrida would propose a different kind of analogy, that of the coin image that had been deliberately defaced or erased, by universalists, who would then proclaim the absence of any peculiarity or original value: “These pieces have nothing either English, German, or French about them; we have freed them from all limits of time and space ...” (Derrida, 1982, p. 210, Theodorou n.d. Section 4, ¶ 3). In both analogies (Zhabus’s and Derrida’s), the extant object does give the sense of primordial usage, sometimes leaving cognizable traces of previous encounters, and sometimes leaving not so cognizable traces, thereby compelling a speculative foray into the unknown.

Hence, a mere explication of the analogical fit between the source or ground of a metaphor, and a given metaphorical target (either in the manner of Aristotelian direct correspondence or substitution of objects, or even the Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual mapping of metaphoric features from one object to the other), is a useful exercise in so far as the routine interpretation of proverbs is concerned, but it will not yield the depth of metaphorical significations that are hidden under surface expressions. More to the point here, such analyses of

these western approaches here is not to suggest the inadequacy of African epistemological and ontological models but to draw attention to apparent parallels in the methodology of these approaches and some established African forms. It is instructive that Soyinka would sometimes invoke the Hegelian model (of the “world historical spirit”; “contradiction and annulment of contradiction,” etc) (Soyinka, 1988, p. 21) in explicating aspects of the African world view.

the meaning and contexts of individual proverbs would not yield a structural appreciation of the phenomenology of proverbs or account for the cultural differences in the modes of production and appreciation of proverbs. In short, any structurally efficacious analysis of African proverbs must, in order not appear commonplace or trivial, deploy paradigms that are rooted in the peculiar structure of the experience of the original givers of the proverbs. Such paradigms must help to discriminate between African and non-African, especially western, varieties of the proverb, as the major postcolonial Other.

Wole Soyinka's (1976) explication of the ritual basis of African epistemology, although it does not discuss proverbs, continues to offer critical insights into the formation of root based canons such as proverbs and other African oral forms. I suggest that although some earlier works on African proverbs had referred to Soyinka's reading of the ritual landscape, they have not concretely established a structural relationship or demonstrated how the experience or mode of experiencing of the Yorùbá community shapes the structure of the proverbs, and how even the linguistic structure of many proverbs encode and reflect the experience.⁵

The rationale for a recourse to the ritual model is easily appreciable:

Where society lives in a close interrelation with Nature, regulates its existence by nature phenomena within the observable process of continuity-ebb and tide, waxing and waning of the moon, rain and drought, planting and harvest, the highest moral order is seen as that which guarantees a parallel continuity of the species. We must try to understand this as operating within a framework which can conveniently be termed the metaphysics of the irreducible knowledge of birth and death as the human cycle, the wind as a moving, felling, cleansing, destroying winnowing force, the duality of the knife as blood-letter and creative implement, earth and sun as life sustaining verities, etc, etc. *These are matrices within which mores, personal relationships, even communal economics are formulated and received.* (Soyinka 1976, p. 16; italics added)

⁵ For example, both Oloruntimehin-Oju (1997: 109) and Adéèkó (1998: 14-17) had referred to Soyinka's theory of the ritual space in their explication of the African proverb, but only tangentially, without pursuing the materiality of proverbs in relation to the ritual trajectory.

These are also the matrices within which African proverbs, as figural representations of an African ontology, are formulated and must be explored. They are also the matrices within which to continually locate the African proverb even in a contemporary, multipolar world.

Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ọ̀rọ̀: The African proverb as “the deep word”

I propose that the African proverb can be appraised within the framework of what the Yorùbá call *ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀*. Literally “deep word,” *ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* refers to expressions that plumb the depth of wisdom, knowledge and truth, while also manifesting the logico-aesthetic orientation of the numinous realm with which the African world continues to keep a close co-habitation. *Ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* therefore implies elocutionary profundity with a matching elocutionary/metaphysical force.⁶

I propose that, while the origin of the Yorùbá term for proverb, *òwe*, has been and would always remain controversial,⁷ its conceptual link to the term, *ọ̀rọ̀* (“word”), and others such as *ọgbón* (“wisdom”), *òótọ̀/òtítọ̀/òdodo* (“truth”) and *àṣẹ* (“metaphysical force/authority”) is hardly contestable, and within this link will also be found the structural connections of the proverb with the ritual landscape. A number of Yorùbá metaproverbials (in this case, proverbs about proverbs) concretise this link within the structure of communal appreciation of the concept of proverbs, as shown in the table below.

⁶ This certainly echoes Austin (1962)’s speech act theories of illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. However, where Austin’s theory is grounded on sheer materiality, the Yorùbá concept is grounded in metaphysics.

⁷ The problem with some earlier conjectures about the origin of the Yorùbá term for proverb, *òwe*, has been noted above. The term could easily have derived originally from exclamatory responses to the emergence of a profound verbiage in the course of oratorical presentations. At a general level, spontaneous exclamatory responses (to pain, pleasure and sundry phenomena) have been established as one of the sources of human language. More importantly however, the rendition of proverbs and sundry paroemia in Yorùbá settings to date typically provokes such responses as: “*Ò we e e!*” (“A proverb!”); “*ò ó pà mû!*” (“May you [live to] tell another!”); “*Ọ̀rọ̀ lo sọ, o ò puró!*” (“You have spoken the true word; it’s no lie!”), etc. The listeners are presumably struck by the sheer profundity of the paroemia and the awesome craftsmanship that compresses centuries of communal cognition into one amazing concise aesthetic statement; hence their hailing response transforms into a designation for the phenomenon.

SOME METAPROVERBIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ÒWE (“PROVERB”) AS ANALOGUES/COLLOCATES OF ÒRÒ (“WORD”), OGBÓN (“WISDOM”), OOTO (“TRUTH”) AND ÀŞẸ (“AUTHORITY”/“SPIRIT FORCE”)

Analognes/Collocates of òwe	Metaproverbial	Interpretation
Òrò/Òwe (“proverb”-“word” interchangeableness)	<p><i>a. Olòwe lèrò n bá wi</i></p> <p><i>b. Olòrò lòwe n bá wi</i></p> <p><i>a. Bí òwe bá jò òwe ẹni, tí a kò bá lè dá si, ẹrù ija lo n ba onítóhun</i></p> <p><i>b. Bí òrò bá jò òrò ẹni tí a kò bá lè dá si, ẹrù ija ló n ba onítóhún</i></p> <p>Òwe lẹsin òrò; òrò lẹsin òwe</p> <p>Olòrò lo lo l’òwe Olówe lo lèrò</p> <p>Amòrò/Amòrán m’òwe ló n la idi òrò</p>	<p>(“the object/target/butt of a proverb (òwe) is the object/target/butt of the word (òrò”)</p> <p>(“If a proverb/word appears like one’s proverb/word and s/he feigns ignorance, then the person is being a coward”)</p> <p>(“Proverb is the horse [pathfinder] of word; word is the horse [pathfinder] of proverb”)</p>
Òwe/ogbón (“proverb” – “wisdom”)	<i>Bi òwe bí òwe la á lu ilu àgídìgbo; ológbón ní n jó o, òmòrán ní i mò ọn</i>	(“Like proverbs do we beat the àgídìgbo drum; only the wise can sway to its rhythm; only the knowledgeable can fathom its depth”)
Òrò/Òótọ́/Òtítọ́/Òdodo (“word” - “truth”)	<i>Òrò lo sọ, o ò purọ!</i>	(“You have spoken [the true] word; you have not lied”).
Òwe/Òrò/Áşẹ (“proverb”/ “word” - “spirit force”/“authority”)	<p><i>a. Olówe láláşẹ òrò</i></p> <p><i>b. Amòrò/Amòrán m’òwe ló n la idi òrò</i></p> <p><i>c. Òrò àgbà bí ò şẹ l’òwúró, á şẹ lálẹ</i></p>	<p>The “owner” of proverb has the authority on issues.</p> <p>Who is knowledgeable and is conversant with proverbs is who clarifies resolves the issues.</p> <p>The elder’s word must perforce come to pass, in the ‘evening’ if not in the ‘morning.’</p>

The metaproverbials that link the terms òwe and ọ̀rọ̀ and also suggest their interchangeability include those shown in the first row above, while the other rows also establish *ọ̀gbón* (“wisdom”), *òótọ̀* (“truth”) and *àṣẹ* (“authority”/“spirit force”) as cognates and collocates of ọ̀rọ̀ (“word”), and òwe (‘proverb’). The last row above, with the metaproverbial, *Olówe laláṣẹ ọ̀rọ̀*, ‘the “owner” of proverb (òwe) is the king of discourse (ọ̀rọ̀), suggests that Africans place much premium on paroemic competence, which in turn confers discursive authority on the competent discussant.⁸

Yorùbá formulation about ọ̀rọ̀ (“word”) is a manifestation of the reification impulse that governs the people’s understanding of the production, nature and content of usages such as proverbs. Ọ̀rọ̀ is represented in mythology as a gnomic being, whose precise origin varies with different mythical tales and different tellers. The Yorùbá expression, *Ó n rìn l’óru bi Ọ̀rọ̀* (“one who walks the night like Ọ̀rọ̀”) suggests a tangible, albeit mythical form. The gnomic being, Ọ̀rọ̀, takes residence in every human and enables, or disables, speech and degree of articulacy at any given point in time. In the lyrical rendition of Hubert Ogunde, the late icon of Nigerian stage and celluloid arts described by Soyinka as “the grand old man of Nigerian theatre,” it is the being, Ọ̀rọ̀, that, living in the human being, brings forth the sounds of speech: *Ọ̀rọ̀ gbénú ọmọ èniyàn fọhùn*. The dark arena of the oesophagus presumably provides an analogical and passably comfortable habitat for the miniature replica of this mythical being of the night. The morpho-phonemics of ọ̀rọ̀ locates it as a glottal, and it typically comes out in pronunciation as a guttural, which is the form of expression associated with Ọ̀rọ̀, the gnomic being.⁹

⁸ The translation of this proverb provided by Owomoyela seems quite interesting (“A person who knows proverbs has the last word in a dispute.” (“There is no authority like proverbial authority.”) p. 134; however, the original proverb does not particularize about the settling of disputes; the person who parades superlative paroemic competence is crowned as the “king” of all discourses in the African setting.

⁹ It is interesting that the English term, gnomic, also connects proverbial sayings. However, the metaphysical paradigm does not appear to have been sustained in English folk consciousness.

Although the reification of “word” is not unknown in other belief systems (cf the biblical “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... And the word became flesh and liveth with us”), African mythical accounts appear to be a lot more complex. More crucially within the present context, the reification here presents proverbs as a complex manifestation of gnomic articulation in traditional African appreciation. The account recorded by Rowland Abiodun locates the being, *Òrò*, as a gnomic embodiment of three other mythical beings, *Ọgbón* (wisdom); *Ìmò* (knowledge) and *Òye* (Understanding) who were coughed out by Olódùmarè (the Supreme Being in Yorùbá cosmology), in the process producing the single guttural that translates to *òrò*. *Òrò* thereafter needed vehicular support as it made its way into the world, and *òwe*, proverb, came in to fulfil this need. The popular saying *Òwe lẹsin òrò; bi òrò bá sọ̀nù, òwe la fì n wá a* (literally, “Proverb is the horse of Word, if Word is lost, proverb is used to find it”) is a metaproverbial articulation of this perception. Implicit in this is the assumption that paroemic competence is both a short-cut to and an index of wisdom, a key to successful navigation in a world that ceaselessly threatens annihilation. Often in traditional African discourse situations, to find the (right) word requires finding the (right) proverb, and vice-versa. In traditional African conception, proverb is the pathfinder of discourse.

The link of *òwe* (proverb) with *ọgbón* (wisdom), the second leg of the matrix, is most popularly expressed in the proverb with which D.O. Fagunwa prefaced his classic novel, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* – *Bi òwe bí òwe la á lu ilu àgídìgbo; olọgbón ní n jó o, ọmọ̀ràn ní i mọ̀ọ̀n* (“Like proverbs do we beat the *àgídìgbo* drum; only the wise can sway to its rhythm; only the sagacious can fathom its depth”). It is in this connection that the *Òrò* and its exemplary agent and conveyance, *òwe*, are inscribed in communal consciousness as belonging to the turf of elders or the ancestors. Just as the guttural is the phonic medium of *Òrò*, so it is that of the *egúngún*,

emissaries of the world of ancestors who periodically “descend” to date in the form of masquerades to felicitate with inhabitants of the world of the living. The lyrics of the famed Nigerian juju maestro, Sunny Ade, deploys traditional onomatopoeia of heaviness to express the location of *ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* (word) within the turf of elders (*agba*): *Ọ̀rọ̀ gbengbe, kanka, ribiti latenu agba la o gbo; Ọ̀rọ̀ kanka, kanka ribiti latenu agba la o gbo* (“Profound utterances, heavy words, will only be heard from the elders”). The *ọ̀rọ̀* of the *agba* is also held as prophetic (*Ọ̀rọ̀ agba, bi o se lowuro a se lale*: “The words of the elders will come to pass, if not in the morning, then in the evening”). Any utterance of African proverbs is traditionally affixed, with the attribution formula: “So the elders say” (Dzobo, 1975), which in addition to indexing communal proprietorship also “functions as apologia for venturing into the rhetorical turf of the ancestors” (Ọlórúntọ́ba-Oju 1997, p. 107).

Such reverence for elocutionary profundity (as represented in proverbs and similar manifestations of *ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀*) is thus profusely represented in Yorùbá metadiscourse. The intensity of this representation is matched only by the parallel expression of contempt for elocutionary banality or for jejune usage of the sort projected in contemporary pseudo-proverbials.¹⁰ *Ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* is contrasted to *ọ̀rọ̀ àlùfànsà* or *ọ̀rọ̀ sákálá* (jejune, facetious or “worthless” elocution); the latter is castigated in caustic metaproverbials as the ‘proverb’ or counsel of *asiwèrè* or *omùgò* (the foolish, the moron, etc): *Ète omùgò a dàbi ọgbón lójú u rẹ̀* (“The foolish one’s counsel/schemes strangely appear like wisdom to them); *Ogún n bókòó, ọ̀we asiwèrè* (“(Is it) twenty or a score?” [is] A moron’s proverb/puzzle”).

¹⁰ The sometimes elevation of the pseudo-proverbial to the level of noteworthy discourses has generated some controversy in the literature. Compare, for example, Raji-Oyelade’s (1997) proposition on the c he called “post-proverbial,” which Ọlórúntọ́ba-Oju (1997) (in the same volume) rather referred to as “pseudo-proverbial.” Owomoyela (2005, p. 19), was later to describe Oyelade’s term as “grandiose,” without however pursuing the implied argument any further.

Truth, the third leg of the matrix is indexed in sayings such as *Òrò lo sọ, o ò puró!* (“You have spoken [the true] word; you have not lied”). This Yorùbá saying would seem analogous to the Latinate *rem acu tetigisti* – “you have touched the point with a needle” or “you have hit the nail on the head.” However, the Yorùbá has a more drastic equivalent of this western saying, which is: *o so oju abe niko* (“you have hit the edge of the knife with the knuckle”), which symbolises the sometimes bloody brutality of “truth” in Yorùbá perception. In *Òrò lo so o o puro* we rather have the rendition of *òrò* as a specialised synonym of truth. The main lexes for truth in Yorùbá language (*ododo* and *òtító/ooto*) collocate with *òrò* to form the default or unmarked Yorùbá adjective-noun nominal group structure (MH - modifier-head). A synonym is *okodoro* (“naked”/“plain”); hence *okodoro òrò* (“naked/plain word” or “naked/plain truth”).

By some curious linguistic manoeuvre (or happenstance), Yorùbá lexes bearing negative moral values (such as *iró* or *èké*, the lexes for “lie”/“untruth”, or *búrúkú*, *ibàjé*, *rúnrùn*, lexes for badness, filth, etc), never collocate with *òrò* in the default or normal (MH) mode. Hence, “truth” or “true word” is *ododo òrò* or *òótó òrò* [truth word], but “lie” is hardly *iró òrò* or *èké òrò* (“lie word”). *Iró* and *èké* (“lie”/“untruth”) only occur normally in qualifier (HQ) position relative to *òrò*, e.g. *òrò iró* or *òrò èké* (“word lie”). It is not clear why, as it were, the Yorùbá never allow negative terms before the term, *Òrò!*

Fourthly, the term, *àṣẹ* (literally “cause to be”), connotes the force or authority, attributes that are also associated with *òwe* and *òrò*. I have noted elsewhere (Ọlóruntọba-Oju, 1997, p. 107) that *òrò* is invested with cosmic significance in Yorùbá consciousness, and that nowhere is this more evident than in the tradition of incantations and cultic elocutions in which the word is expected to strike a mortal blow by the sheer force of its enunciation.¹¹ A Yorùbá myth has it

¹¹ The Yorùbá typically avoid directing *òrò búrúkú* (“bad word”) at themselves; they consider such to be ominous and would urgently disown or contextualize such “bad words” (e.g. “my time is up”) if accidentally uttered. Sayings

that all beings derive from an original godhead, symbol of goodness and purity, shattered into many fragments through the action of a rebellious creation, referred to as Atunda in Soyinka (1976, p. 17), and as Esu in Wenger (1983, p. 89). This results in the investment of every conceivable concept, thought, idea, object, etc with a metaphysical force presumably deriving from the original godhead.¹² Much of African cultic poetry or incantations derive from this principle.

Suffice it to add here that the Yorùbá term for incantation, *ofò*, shares root with *ifò*, a synonym of *òrò* (“word”) and, more crucially, that most *ofò* (incantation) also attest as *òwe* (“proverb”). As proverbs, *òrò* or *ifò* (“word”/“utterance”/“saying”) bears the force of universal truth, with a potential for metaphoric application, while as incantations they bear a metaphysical force for the fulfilment of desired ends. Examples include: *Fonfon ni t’ifon*; *àsùnmáparada ni ti’gi àjà* (“Deep slumber is the nature of *ifon*; sleeping without moving is the lot of the roof rafter”); *Bí iwín bí iwín ní ñse ọlỌya*; *bíi were bíi wèrè ní ñse elÈṣù*; *àjótápá àjópoyi ní ti oníSàngó* (“Like gnostic beings goes the behaviour of the worshipper of *Ọya*; like lunacy goes the behaviour of the worshipper of *Èṣù*; with swirling and twirling goes the dance of the worshipper of Sango”).¹³

From the foregoing, one would suggest that *òwe* (“proverb”) in traditional African conception refers to expressions that manifest the deep word, *ìjìnlẹ̀ ọrò*; it is a compendium of age-old wisdom, truth and elocutionary profundity¹⁴ invested with the force of metaphysics or of

such as *òrò búrukú o ní ti enu tẹ̀mì jade*, or: *enu mi kọ̀ nì wọ̀n ó ti gbọ̀ ọ* (“it is not from my mouth that this will be heard”) are frequently used by the Yorùbá.

¹² In a translation by Oyin Ogunba (1978, p. 12), “it is the spirit in fire that gives it the power to burn the bush. It is the spirit in the sun that gives it the power to achieve the noon heat.”

¹³ These proverbs occur as part of incantations in Duro Ladipo’s *Oba Koso* and Femi Osofisan’s *Once Upon Four Robbers* respectively – in one the objective is to force the opponent into slumbers and in the other to force the opponents into a dancing swirl.

¹⁴ The potential tension between the term, profundity, and the apparent literalness of many proverbs is a trajectory that is worth pursuing in scholarly disputation. I take the stance however that most of the so called “literal”

spirituality. In short, *òwe*, “proverb,” is a statement that “brings out wisdom” in a memorable phrasing, encapsulating the traditional observations, mores and observances of the African people, passed on from older generations and typically comprising concise sayings that are structurally linked to the metaphysical world view of the African people.

Proverb, Metaphysics and the African Universe

As the pathfinder of discourse, proverbs reveal the African world’s intense commune with the metaphysical in the ordering of its affairs and the pursuit of its perception of existence and its moral imperative. An astonishing number of African proverbs index the metaphysical through lexical references and allied philosophical propositions. Terms such as: *Ọlórún/Olódùmarè* (the Supreme Being or “God”), *egúngún* (“masquerade” representatives of the ancestor world); *òrìsà* (spirits, inhabitants of the numinous world), *òrun* (“heaven”),¹⁵ etc occur in African proverbs with profusion. The relationship between the three worlds of African metaphysical reckoning (the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn) and their inhabitants is also indexed in numerous proverbs.

The concept of *ayé* (“world”; “universe”) coalesces with that of *ìgbà* (“time”) to convey a sense of the endless and cyclical (*Ayé ò pin síbikan* – “the world has no boundaries”; *Ìgbà kan n lo, ìgbà kan n bo* – “Time goes and comes”). Perhaps it is no coincidence that the basic lexes for “time” in Yorùbá are *ìgbà* and *àkókò*, both of which denote periodicity rather than temporal specificity. Interestingly too, there are no Yorùbá salutation terms for “goodbye,” as the terms

proverbial expressions when subjected to a deep analysis reveal a surprising treasure of profundity, both in terms of what I would call the inherent weight of philosophy and the hidden stylistic and rhetorical properties of the expressions. The assumption of literality may also be sometimes due to interference in perception occasioned by linguistic and rhetorical differences between languages.

¹⁵ *Òrun*, in Yorùbá conception is not the same as the Christian “heaven” but the home of the ancestors. However, see Manfredi’s (2011) summary of the anthropological and linguistic debate (from Talbot 1928, Verger 1958, Banjo 1991, Awoyale 2008, around the semantic transmutation of *òrun* to a skyward space under the influence of the Christian religion.

for departures actually denote returning! The term *O dàbò*, usually said when one is leaving, is a contraction of *Ó di l'abò*. Either way, *àbò* means “[the] return”; hence, cyclically, “till I return.” (The salutation that denotes “welcome” is *Ẹ ku àbò* or *Ẹ Kaàbò* (“Well return”/Good return)). The other term for departures in Yorùbá is *Ó d'ìgbà* which is used for a longer period of separation and is the preferred salutation for the dead. It is a contraction of *Ó di ìgbà (omiran)*. *Ìgbà* means “time”/“period,” while *omíràn* or *omù* means “another” or “next,” hence, “till another/next time/period.” The term *Ó d'ìgbà* is therefore cyclical and inscribes an expectation of return and reunion with the dead.

Relevant proverbs also indicate a hierarchy between the worlds. For example, proverbs such as *Àti mọ̀nà edá n be lówọ̀ Olódùmarè* (“The pathway to human sustenance is in the hands of God”) and *Àti sun edá o n be lówọ̀ Olódùmarè* (“The fate of the created [human] is in the hands of God”), etc place *Olódùmarè* or *Ọlórún* in a primal position superior to all other beings. The proverb below is interesting because it deploys a parallel and climactic construction to give the sense of a rising hierarchy:

Bí a bá bẹ̀ egúngún egúngún a gbọ̀; bí a bá bẹ̀ ọ̀rìsà, ọ̀rìsà a gbà; bí a bá bẹ̀ Ọlórún ọ̀ba a dárí jì nì

(“If we implore *egúngún*, *egúngún* would hear; if we supplicate *ọ̀rìsà* (spirit beings), *ọ̀rìsà* would yield; if we importune the Supreme Being, the Supreme Being forgives one.”)

The profusion of *ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* with such structural linkage with the metaphysical world view of the African people tends to mark out African paroemia and distinguish it from others. Collectively, African proverbs resonate with a sense of cyclicity, continuity, communality and

complementarity, four seas that they navigate to bring home the collective wisdom of the people concerning the issues of being. These paradigms can be illustrated with a few basic proverbs:

Cyclicity/Continuity

- i. *Ayé là n še ká tó s'òrun* (“First we traverse the earth, then we traverse heaven)
- ii. *Iná ku ó feéru boju; ògèdè kú o f' omọ rẹ rópò* (“Fire dies, covers its face with ashes; banana dies, replaces itself with its offshoot”)
- iii. *Ìgbà kan n lọ, igbà kan nbọ; ìgbà kan o lo ilé ayé gbó* (“A period goes, a period comes, no one period ever exhausts existence”)

Communality/Collectivity

- i. *Igba ẹkẹ ni i fọwọ tilé; igba alámu ni i fọwọ ti ògiri* (“Two hundred poles prop up the house; two hundred lizards support the wall with their palms”)
- ii. *Àgbájọ ọwọ la fi n sọ àyà* (“With hands collected together [clenched fist] do we beat the chest [in confidence]”)
- iii. *Ẹyẹ kí i fi apá kan fò; àjẹjẹ ọwọ kan kò gbẹrù dórí* (“A bird cannot fly with one wing; one hand cannot lift a heavy load to the head”)

Complementarity/Harmony

- i. *Bí ò sí èniyàn, imalẹ ò sí* (“Without humans there will be no god (or spirit)”)
- ii. *Tibi tire la dá ilé ayé* (*With good as with evil was the world created*)
- iii. *Ọwọ ọmọdé ò tó pepẹ; t'àgbàlagbà ò wọ kèrèngbè* (“The hand of the child cannot reach the rafters, that of the grown up cannot enter the gourd”)

It is important to note that these proverbs occur at a high level of structuration, and that they have several sub-layers. For example, the communality/collectivity paradigm also translates in African culture to an abhorrence of individualism, and generates proverbs such as:

- *Wèrè èniyàn ní pé irú òun ò sí: irúu wọn ju ẹgbààgbèje lo* (Only a fool boasts that there is none like him; there are hundreds and thousands like them")
- *Pípé la n pé gbon, a kii pé gò* ("We bunch together to generate wisdom, not idiocy")

Similarly, the complementarity/harmony paradigm generally straddles the theme of excess and generates proverbs at every level or domain of society, e.g.:

Class (e.g. proverbs between *oṣi/òrò* (wealth/poverty); *ogbón/agò* (wisdom/folly), etc.

Olówó ẹni kii rorò ká má ṣu ká má tò ("One's master/boss cannot be so tyrannical as to prevent one from defecating or urinating")

Ẹnikan kii gbón tán ("No one is all wise");

Ti ogbón bá pọ̀jù ó má n pa ọlọgbón ("Too much wisdom ends up killing [confounding] the wise")

Gender (proverbs about liaisons or relationships between *ọkùnrin* and *obìnrin* male and female):

Ìfẹ̀ àfẹ́jú lo n mú ewúré hu irun àgbón ("Excessive behavior [much doting] is what makes the she-goat grow a beard")

Bí ọkùnrin rí ejò, kí obìnrin paá, kí ejò sá ti má lọ ní ("If a man sees a snake and a woman kills it; the important thing is for the snake to be killed").

Age (*àgbà/omọdẹ* "the young/the old")

Àgbàlagbà kii fi ara rẹ ẹ lán gbálán gbá ("An elder should not court disrespect")

Owó ọmọdé o tó pepẹ, t'àgbàlagbà o wọ kèrègbè ọlọgbón/omugò (“The hand of the child cannot reach the rafters; that of the grown up cannot enter a gourd”)

Ọmọdé gbón àgbà gbón la fí dá Ilé Ifẹ (“The child is wise and the elder is wise” is the creation formula for Ilé-Ifẹ¹⁶)

Scores of other related paradigms demonstrate the structural link of African proverbs to the metaphysical world view of Africans. These include the profusion of elements of reification and personification, among others. The limitation of time and space will not permit a further elaboration here. It is however pertinent to briefly relate aspects of the language and form of African proverbs to the framework of *ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* and to the cognate metaphysical structure highlighted in the foregoing.

Formal Predilections

As noted in the foregoing, African paroemia has generally been described in terms of its dense imagery. Comparatively, western, especially the English proverbs had been regarded especially in Africa as apparently lacking such “aesthetic attribute of figurativeness” or such “striking imagery” (Raji 1997: 95) and Ádéèkó (1998: 31) respectively, following Boadi’s research finding also referred to in the foregoing. Many specific formal and aesthetic parameters that enable an analytic differentiation of African and western proverbs have also been discussed in the literature. They include parameters such as length and syntactic structure. For example, the “universal” definition of proverbs as a “short, pithy saying” or as constituting a “complete

¹⁶ Ilé-Ifẹ is considered the spiritual origin of the Yorùbá.

sentence” does collide with African appreciation of paroemic forms, as observed more recently by Owomoyela (2005).¹⁷

Forms appreciated as proverbs in Yorùbá also include short poems, songs, chants and tales, cultic poetry, incantations and the like. Linguistic patterns such as lexical contrasts and sundry parallel structures, as well as rhetorically appreciated processes such as pun and word play have also been observed. These examples show that the African proverb is not structurally constrained. The sheer range and variety of these forms also signal the intense intersemioticity of the proverb in African settings, as an embedded construct involving inputs from different semiotic systems and requiring considerable analytical dexterity.

A related appraisal has been that certain forms that are attested in Western paroemia are not of the same nature and structure as similar forms in African settings. Prominent here is the example of Western Wellerisms, which have parallels in African paroemia, but whose realisations in the different paroemic environments are not identical. Yet another consideration concerns the comparative interplay of “sense and salt” in western and African proverbs. While the binary nature of proverbs as a philosophical/didactic and aesthetic complex is universally appreciated, the argument has however arisen whether the functional supersedes the aesthetic in African paroemia, or vice-versa. This is an old debate in African literature and aesthetics in general.¹⁸

Suffice it to recall here that *ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀*, the paradigm employed in this essay towards the analysis of African paroemia, is a complex combination of wisdom, truth and elocutionary

¹⁷ Using a fairly long Yorùbá proverb as illustration, Owomoyela (2005: 6) observed that “the definitions of the English proverb that it is pithy, concise, succinct, brief, terse, and so on, is not always true of the Yorùbá òwẹ, which is sometimes quite long-winded.”

¹⁸ (Cf Izevbaye (1979: 28): “Many English-speaking African writers accept the notion that African art is functional and that, therefore, the concept of art for art's sake should not be allowed to take root in African critical thought,” and, among others (Irele 1988: 152).

profundity with elocutionary/spiritual force. Most African proverbial constructions not only index a philosophical call but also exhibit a self-conscious artistry. Proverbs such as *Adaba ni baba; eni a ba laba ni baba* (“The dove is father; who we meet at the farmstead is father” – notice the ab-ba play) also demonstrate that the philosophical and aesthetic purport of African proverbs may not always be immediately accessible to western sensibilities. Paroemic competence thus derives from a combination of linguistic and cultural immersions within the African environment.

Some of the linguistic patterns attested in African proverbs invite structural associations with the cognate worldview and the African perspective of *ìjìnlẹ̀ ọ̀rọ̀*. It is useful to recall here that the functions (or metafunctions) of language identified and codified by linguists from Roman Jakobson to Michael Halliday are based precisely, albeit from different perspectives, on the relationship of language to the structure of experience, the mode of experiencing. The structure of proverbs, as quintessential cultural texts, conveys the predominant mode by which a community experiences the world (the ideational function of language), by which it codifies the experience (the textual function), and its interactions in the process of communicating experience (interpersonal function).

As an example, the intense communality of the African world-view highlighted in the foregoing is matched by the pervasive dialogism of African proverbs – the fact that it is almost always structured like a meeting of persons, and as explicit or implicit conversations between them, in contrast to the impersonal mode of most western proverbs. A distinctive linguistic measure of this Bakhtinian addressivity, to give just one example, is the profusion of communal lexes (such as *èniyàn/àwọn èniyàn/ ọ̀tòkùlù/ayé/áráyé/ọ̀mọ aráyé* (“person”/“people”/ “people of the world”)), and also communal deixis, especially the collective pronouns *a, àwa* (“we”/“us”);

wọn/awọn; (“they”/“them”) *ẹ* (“you” plural), etc at the head of proverbial clauses. The profusion of such indexical deictics indicates the African perception of paroemic wisdom as a communal product. In the examples below, the deictics are represented as indicators of communal “actor” or “senser” processes, communal citation and communal imperative.¹⁹

Communal Actor/Senser Process <i>a/àwa</i> – “we”	Communal Citation <i>Wọn [ní]</i> – “they [say]”	Communal Imperative Jussive Exclusive (with vocative emphasis) / Jussive Inclusive <i>Ẹ [jẹ́ kí] á</i> – “you (pl) let us”)
<i>A kii rí arémája; a kii sìi rí ajámárẹ̀</i> (“We do not find persons so bonded as never to wrangle, or wranglers never once to bond”).	<i>Wọn ní ká jẹ̀ èkuru kó tán, ẹ̀ tún n gbọ̀n ọ̀wọ̀ rẹ̀ sí àwọ</i> (“They say let us finish the bean morsel off the plate [let the matter end], but we keep shaking the crumbs from the fingers on to the plate”)	<i>Ẹ̀ jẹ́ kí á fí òmùgò sílẹ̀ kí o ma bá agò rẹ̀ nìsọ̀</i> (“Let us leave the foolish to proceed with his/her folly”)
<i>A kii ké “yàgò” fún ẹ̀lẹ̀şin àná</i> (“We do not cry “give way” to yesterday’s horseman”)	<i>Wọn ní ọ̀rọ̀ yì ọ̀rọ̀ rẹ̀ nì, o ní ò n lọ oko; ò báà lọ odò, tí o bá de, o o ní bá ọ̀rọ̀ nílẹ̀?</i> (“They say this is a matter for you, but you say you’re off to the farm; even if you went off the stream, would the matter not still be waiting here for you?”)	<i>Ẹ̀ jẹ́ kí á pe wèrè lórúkọ́ tó sunwọ̀n, kí á lè rọ̀nà lọ</i> (“Let us call a lunatic a well sounding name so that he may allow us go by.”)
<i>Abámo a o şéé, a şé tán o d’áápon; gbogbo ọ̀tọ̀kùlú dári jọ, wọn ò rí ọ̀gùn àbámọ̀ se</i> (“Had we but known, we might not so have done; now done it has become an albatross; all the wise people in the world could not find a cure for ‘had I known’”)	<i>Wọn ní amúkùún ẹ̀rù rẹ̀ wọ; ó ní “isàlẹ̀ ló ti wọ wá”</i> (“They say “cripple, your baggage is bent”; s/he says “it got bent from below”)	<i>Ẹ̀ jẹ́ kí á mí, ẹ̀ je kí á simi; èniyàn i bá şe bíi Ọ̀lọ̀run kò nìí jẹ́ kí á mí.</i> (“Let us breathe freely let us have some rest; if humans were to be God, they would not allow humans to breathe to at all”)

Again, scores of related paroemic phenomena such as paroemic seriation, and the so called paraproverbial (Ọ̀lọ̀runtọ̀ba-Oju 1997) can be described in terms of their linguistic properties, their

¹⁹ The terms “actor” and “senser” were used by Halliday to distinguish material and mental processes within the framework of ideationality. The term “jussive” (exclusive and inclusive) is also Hallidayan and it indicates the exclusion or inclusion of participants from the frame of reference in jussive (imperative) statements. In this case the (imagined and real) participants are both excluded and included.

structural link with the metaphysical world view of the cognate cultures, and sundry peculiarities that distinguish them from western paroemia.²⁰

Conclusion

Paradigms for relating African and western paroemia continue to be both contrastive and contestatory. African proverbs are distinguished from western proverbs, not only by their phenomenology and demonstrable structural links with the metaphysical world view of the cognate African communities, but also by their remarkable rhetorical density and peculiar linguistic/aesthetic forms. These differences occur without prejudice to the established universalism of proverbs, thus suggesting the need for a comprehensive contrastive African-European paremiology and joint comprehensive research and compilations by African and European scholars. The task could be daunting. African paroemia not only boasts an immense corpus but also an iterative, regenerative capability, with scores of new sayings entering the already bursting corpus *du jour*. The corpus defies classificatory absolutes or analytical conclusiveness. There is also a definitive differential in the paroemic competence of Africans compared with westerners, and this has long been presented in African postcolonial literature as a symbolic level of African-Western conflict.²¹

Decades down the line, the multipolar world continues to generate contrastive attitudes towards proverbs. Contemporary western dismissive attitude is exemplified by the oft-heard

²⁰ An earlier paper titled "Tracking the African Protoproverbial" (Ọlórúntọ́bá-Ojú, 2012) elaborated on some of these linguistic elements.

²¹For example, in a climactic moment in one of Wole Soyinka's acclaimed plays, *Death and the King's Horseman*, the white District Overseer Mr Pilkings expresses a deep frustration at his subjects' penchant to deploy paroemic forms even in moments of tragedy. "What's she saying now?" he asks another African for clues; "Christ! Must your people forever speak in riddles? (1975, p. 71). On the other hand, Odewale in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* takes the paroemic competence of Africans for granted: "Are you not a Yorùbá man? Must proverbs be explained to you after they are said?"

trivializing question (“Who cares about proverbs anyway,” more so in a highly industrialised world?), and it manifests more crucially in the diminished usage of proverbs in western popular culture. This contrasts vividly with the situation in Africa where the ancient sayings, especially proverbs (described by Crowther in 1852 as “the national poetry of the Yorùbá”), continue to flourish in contemporary African folk and literary culture. Proverbs and sundry African paroemia also constitute an international currency in the hands of African writers and African humanities scholars who deploy them with great facility and often with great aesthetic and other benefits. Again in contrast to the situation in the West, African proverbs are currently experiencing a renaissance of sorts. This is particularly evident in contemporary Afropop music with international reach, through which medium the ancient treasures get conveyed to appreciative African youths “stranded” in various global Diasporas.

However, the multipolar world also generates the reciprocal absorption of African and Western proverbs into the paroemic corpus of the contestant cultures. Sometimes, this comes with the appropriate proprietary acknowledgment. For example, Johnny Walker, the international spirit manufacturer (no pun intended) lately propagated its brand with the proverb, “the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step,” which was acknowledged in the advert as an African proverb. Sometimes, however, many proverbs also get absorbed into a gnostic no man’s land and would require considerable research efforts to track or relate to their original sources. The modality and rate of absorption of proverbs on different sides of the world cultural divide is also a matter for further, multipolar, researches.

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