

Book Review

Aderemi RAJI-OYELADE, *PLAYFUL BLASPHEMIES: POSTPROVERBIALS AS ARCHETYPES OF MODERNITY IN YORUBÁ CULTURE*, Trier, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2012, 168pp, €22, 50, paperback.

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Proverbs are critical in the understanding of African cultures and wisdoms. Mostly employed by elderly people, proverbs are valued in orature as they help to construct and comprehend society. One rarely reads through literary texts by African authors without encountering more than a dozen proverbs. Such expressions permeate the works of Wole Soyinka, Bole Butake, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ola Rotimi, Ama Ata Aidoo, to name just a few. To underline the traditional, perhaps aesthetic, relevance of proverbs in specifically Igbo conversations Chinua Achebe ascertains in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) that “proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (7). This metaphorical labelling of proverbs as symbols of livelihood, i.e. oil, validates the relevance of Aderemi Raji-Oyelade’s study which indeed studies African proverbs, but focuses on Yoruba speakers’ (re)formulation of certain well-known proverbs.

Raji-Oyelade’s informative book, *Playful Blasphemies: Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yorubá Culture*, examines the impact of foreign languages and cultures on classical Yoruba proverbs as they are employed in daily conversations, Yoruba theatre, music, and home videos. The main objective of his research is to deconstruct current inventions of, and transgressions in, Yoruba proverbs especially in an era when the Yoruba language has come into contact with foreign and other local languages in Nigeria. This perspective allows Raji-Oyelade to analyse the process of inventiveness and subversiveness in Yoruba proverbs. The book is divided into five chapters, a conclusion, appendices and an index. The appendices, consisting of questionnaires, conventional Yoruba proverbs and their postproverbial variants, a list of music recordings by Abass Akande Obesere and a list of Yoruba films, alone indicate the versatility of the domain of proverbs and the quality of the research pursued on them in this study.

In the opening pages of Chapter One, “Introduction”, the author raises the need for a theoretical investigation of the changes in traditional proverbs introduced by speakers of African languages. He specifies that these changes have resulted in radicalised proverb types which he calls ‘postproverbials’. Postproverbials, he explains, are ‘subversive’ variations of conventional proverbs, which might as well perform a different function which is far removed from the original role of the traditional or conventional proverbs. In this chapter, the author further discusses specific examples of radical transformation of ‘original’ Yoruba proverbs by younger Yoruba speakers in non-formal settings. Although the examples that he lists may communicate the same meaning proffered in the

conventional proverbs, Raji-Oyelade seems to suggest that proverb transgression among the Yoruba could be an unavoidably contemporary reality since ‘proverbs with “deeper meanings” is an endangered speech act at the present time’ (31). Raji-Oyelade distinguishes between paremiography and paremiology. The former entails the collection of proverbs from within local and regional boundaries and beyond while the latter dwells on proverb analysis in culture and cultural products that result in texts that are ‘investigative, interpretive ... comparative, drawing the interdisciplinary tools of the social sciences and literary theory to bear on the criticisms of the proverb form’ (26). Although the author admits that paremiography and paremiology are both aimed at capturing the wisdom behind non-literate creativity, theoretical reception and structural analysis of specific proverbs, seemingly, present a challenge for research in paremiology. Perhaps the subject of challenge lies in the ambiguity of specific Yoruba proverbs which are not only an embodiment of the cultural heritage/wisdoms/spirituality and art of its people, but also a subject exposed to contemporary transformation and subversion.

This apparently explains why Raji-Oyelade focuses on the structure of proverbs in Chapter 2. First, he points out that previous research had concentrated exceedingly on the ethical role of African proverbs thereby resulting in the paucity of research on transformations in the style and structure of African proverbs. Second, in most research efforts on the form of African proverbs, accent is put more on the ‘rigidity’ of this folk element rather than on its fluid, flexible, and diverse potentiality. Although some scholars have illustrated the transformative potentials of proverbs especially in performance, they do not closely examine the nature of such transformations. The chapter then examines proverbs which have emerged as a result of the speaker’s contact with other social and cultural systems that are different from ‘strict’ traditional Yoruba cultures. The author’s interest is on new proverbs that can be structurally and semantically traced back to wise sayings that are traditional, yet ‘explode conventional meaning and deconstruct the logic of traditional sayings’ (46). Again, these postproverbials, are referred to by the author as blasphemous and playful, and can be connected to the notion of the ‘anti-proverb’ (47). An example of a proverb transformation that carries a blasphemised-playful undertone is: ‘Where there’s a pill there is a way’ transgressed from the English proverb ‘Where there’s a will there is a way’ (47). In a bid to examine the structure of proverbs, Raji-Oyelade uses the head-tail dichotomy proposed by G.B Milner, and hypothesises that each proverb contains a positive and a negative category ‘thereby producing a network of opposing, similar, contradictory, and congruent permutations’ (50).

He examines four typologies of postproverbials or post modernist proverbs which according to the head-tail categorisation invent radicalised contemporary meanings that might not reflect the original Yoruba proverb and its meaning. In the first type, simple, complex and parallel transformations are clearly evident in postproverbials while in the second type, key words and/or phrases are either replaced or reinvented. While the third category discusses postproverbial created

with a humorous background, the fourth in fact maintains the structure of traditional proverbs and modifies it with what he calls “proverbemes”. He concludes the chapter by not only referring to proverbs and postproverbials as speech acts, but also emphasising the major character of postproverbials which is aberrant and contains itinerant texts.

Different types of postproverbials are investigated in Chapter 3 entitled ‘Eponymous Postproverbials: Authorizing the Deviant Tongue’. The chapter focuses on what the author calls the ‘eponymous’ variant of the Yoruba postproverbial as employed in *Réré Rún* a Yoruba play by Oladejio Okediji. Raji-Oyelade defines this type as “a shifty negation of the conventional or standard or popular proverb...it is [also] a disregard, sometimes an absolute disdain, for the sense and tense of the conventional utterance” (74). These proverbs, he states, are either re-invented or invented after particular characters that have artistic backgrounds. Apparently, the author is arguing that if postproverbials are already a deviant formulation of conventional Yoruba proverbs, eponymous postproverbials present an over-radicalised postproverbial text—‘eponymous other’—which when uttered immediately conjures a particular artistic personality in the minds of the interlocutors. He illustrates eponymous postproverbials by analysing ten examples from *Réré Rún*. It is worthy to mention that most of the proverbs relate not only to the psychological state of the characters, but also to the socio-political themes raised in the play.

Still in the domain of contemporary art, Raji-Oyelade discusses postproverbials in a Yoruba popular music in Chapter 4. Focusing on ‘fúji’ music genre, he analyses the lyrics of Abass Akande Obesere, king of ‘Àsàkàsà’. He argues that postproverbials in the lyrics of ‘fúji’ do more than just alter the structure of traditional Yoruba proverbs. In essence they privilege ‘the activity of excision, of grafting, of superimposition and of supplementarity’ (90). Therefore, postproverbials pose as blasphemy when conventional proverbs are banalised to capture not only the imagination of the artist, but also cosmopolitan realities. Code-mixing—a feature of cosmopolitan context—and the adoption of funk, he argues, contribute to the creation of postproverbials in cultural productions such as the ‘fúji’ popular music. These innovated and invented forms which might either be popular or received with skepticism begin to put to question the original function of conventional Yoruba proverbs in particular and perhaps African proverbs as a whole.

In a similar vein as in Chapter 4, Chapter 5, ‘Framing Non-sense: Postproverbial Bytes in Yorùbá Video Films’, traces the origin of the Yoruba home video with a critical eye on ‘citified Yoruba video film’ made in the Yoruba language. Focusing on productions between 1999 and 2006, the author identifies these films as a fertile ground for postproverbials created either as conscious inventions or as erroneous renditions of the original traditional Yoruba proverbs. This categorisation stands in opposition to the content and context of films with strict traditional Yoruba settings which he calls ‘village-square movies’. In addressing a common misjudgment that radicalised proverbs are employed as a

comic tool in the home videos, he reiterates that all characters use postproverbials for comic and non-comic ends. However, such modernist forms are generally common in the language of comic characters not only for the purposes of entertainment and marketing, but also as a strategy to mirror modern Africa as a platform of cultural flexibility. The author analyses proverbs from movie sequences and in the process differentiates between ‘incremental’ and ‘fragmental’ (113) postproverbial usages. He posits that additions to proverbs and extended metaphors are also present in the Yoruba films’ postproverbials. Emphasising that postproverbiality is not a spatio-temporal phenomenon, he notes in his conclusion that it is a common phenomenon in many cultures, and it will certainly be a continuous process—especially with digital media—because humans today seem to be endowed with a ‘manipulative imagination’ (123).

The strength of this book lies in the different areas of intervention on African proverbs. Raji-Oyelade distinguishes between the aesthetic-rhetorical and the cumulative-archival studies of African proverbs (34) in a bid to emphasise on inadequate research that focuses on the alterations and distinctions that affect the structure of African proverbs, particularly in ‘their textual aftermaths or outgrowths’ (36). His review of literature which includes many aspects of research on African proverbs in general and Yoruba proverbs in particular informs on the historical evolution of research in the field of paremiography and paremiology.

The originality of this research is doubtless as the author proves that radicalised or postmodernist proverb-formulation is a recurrent feature not only among Yoruba youths, but that it also permeates the urban space. What is of further interest is the fact that these formulations take even queer forms as demonstrated in quadripartite proverbemes forms of eponymous postproverbials. Such hybrid forms are not only linguistic inventions that either resist or echo conventional proverbs, but they are also playful linguistic reinventions, given the social, political and cultural circumstances to which the speakers are exposed. The author pursues his research question to the end. With its accessible writing style and the diverse areas in which postproverbials occur, this book is resource not only for paremiologists, but also a useful research material for researchers in the fields of linguistics, literature, performance studies, popular culture, and cultural studies. It is hoped that Raji-Oyelade’s research will not only open vistas for further research on postproverbials as they occur in other African languages, but will also encourage more criticisms of literary and cultural products in African languages.

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