

Vulgarity in Yorùbá Proverbs: Its Implications and Sociological Effect

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Abstract²

The Yorùbá are people who hold their culture in high esteem . When it comes to conversation , there are words that they regard as taboos which they will not just say openly or utter in a way that may be regarded as offensive. For such words , the Yorùbá have a kind of euphemism they normally use instead of the words regarded as taboos. This type of communication informs the Yorùbá to say that Gbogboṣòkò là ñ ṣá lóòrùn “It is not all cloths that are spread in the sun”. And that Gbogboohuntójú bá rí kò lẹnú ñ sọ; “It is not all that the eyes see that the mouth talks about” . However, some Yorùbá proverbs have no regard for euphemism . Such proverbs, which are limited in number in the language, are normally given in their sexually explicit forms. The focus of this paper is on such proverbs. We shall present these types of proverbs for analysis and thereafter, we will discuss their implications to the Yorùbá norms, culture and tradition.

Keywords: Proverbs, Taboos, Euphemism, Offensive, Culture.

1. Introduction

The Yorùbá are regarded as cultured people who take their norms , practices and traditions very serious . In Yorùbá setting, words are not just uttered . Words are weighed very well before they are uttered . Yorùbá regard some words as taboos. Such words are not said in their lucid forms; therefore, for such words, there are euphemisms instead. Words that relate to human sexual organs, human sex activities and the like are not just discussed freely. If a person is seen to be mentioning those secret areas of human organs, such a person will be regarded as uncultured and untaught and as lacking in manners . Though, taboo words in Yorùbá go beyond those that relate to human sexuality (see Oyetade 1994), our focus in this paper will be on the ones that relate to human sexuality.

In Yorùbá culture and in some other cultures of the world , vulgarity is prohibited. There is always a kind of decorum in the speech of people. The culture of a people can dictate what to say and what not to say. It can also dictate the time a particular utterance can be made as opposed to another time. Every one that speaks a language and is a native speaker knows this as a rule. Therefore, there is a dichotomy between linguistic competence and communication competence. On this, Gumperz (1972:205) says:

Whereas, linguistic competence covers the speaker’s ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, communicative competence describes his ability to select from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behaviour in specific encounters.

Therefore, if an individual is not from a particular ethnic group, the fact that he can speak the language of that ethnic group fluently does not mean he could be able to know how and when to and not to say particular words. On this issue of taboo, Wardhaugh (2006:238) says that

... language is used to avoid saying certain things as well as to express them. Certain things are not said, not because they cannot be, but because ‘people don’t talk about those things’; or, if those things are talked

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² **To cite this article:** Timothy Adeyemi Akanbi (2015). Vulgarity in Yorùbá Proverbs: Its Implications and Sociological Effect. *Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2(3), 173-181.

about, they are talked about in very roundabout ways. In the first case we have instances of linguistic taboo; in the second we have the employment of euphemisms so as to avoid mentioning certain matters directly.”

It is therefore right to say that the existence of taboo words or ideas stimulates the creation of euphemisms. Euphemism is a word or phrase which replaces a taboo word or which is used in an attempt to avoid either fearful or unpleasant happenings (cf. Akanbi 2008). What exactly is taboo? Wardhaugh (2006:240) describes it as “a way in which a society expresses its disapproval of certain kinds of behaviour believed to be harmful to its members either for supernatural reasons or because such behaviour violates a moral code.” In other words, language is used to avoid saying certain things as well as to express them. Certain things are not said, not because they cannot be, but because people do not talk about them. We have instances of linguistic taboo and the employment of euphemisms. Fakuade et.al. (2012:2) describe linguistic taboos as

Words or expressions to be avoided because using them directly in public is seen as violation of certain moral codes. Put in other words, linguistic taboos have their usage controlled by certain circumstances or reasons such as religion, culture or norms. In an attempt not to violate ...culture, linguistic taboos are expressed in the forms of euphemism: proverbs, idioms, metaphors, paraphrases, etc.

Oyetade (1994) classifies taboo expressions into four different types (i) propriety related taboos – these types of taboos reflect the desire to conform to the acceptable moral standard or decorum (ii) taboos for averting ominous consequences - the taboos in this category centre on the belief that there is power in the spoken words and that a person can bring misfortune or good fortune upon himself/herself depending on what he or she says; (iii) veneration taboos – these are taboos meant to express honour to a specific class of people and (iv) fear centred taboos – these types of taboos show the belief in the existence of supernatural forces that are believed to have control over human beings. The first set of taboos i.e. propriety related taboos is the concern of this paper. We are going to discuss this paper under four sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two is the literature review. We shall present our data and the analysis in section three. In section four we shall discuss the implicational and sociological effect of sexually explicit proverbs. Section five will be the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Proverb is a kind of wise saying that is common in the culture of every community. It is also a cultural heritage that is not found wanting in the Yorùbá setting . The Yorùbá people relish in saying proverbs and they say it a lot . Hardly can a Yorùbá man or a woman utter three sentences without spicing it with a proverb. They regard proverb as problem solver . Hence, the Yorùbá say that *Òwẹ̀ṣinòrò, òrò ṣẹ̀sinòwẹ, bọ̀rò bá sọ̀nù, òwẹ la fi n wa*. This is to say that “proverbs are the vehicle of thought; when truth is elusive; it is proverbs we employ to seek for it.” Every individual in Yorùbá community has the freedom to say proverbs wherever he/she may find him/herself. An adult as well as a young person can give proverb when talking if and when the needs arise. However, a young person does not have absolute freedom to say a proverb in the presence of an elderly person. It is a taboo. If such a person has to say a proverb at such a setting at all, he must pay homage to that elderly person. His paying homage, which is to be given verbally will either come first before he says the proverb or last, after he has said the proverb. Such verbal homage include the following: *Tótó ó ẹ̀se bí òwẹ*; loosely means “I pay homage to the elders” or *kí òwẹj é tiyìnàgbà*; i.e. “may proverbs continue to be in the custody of you the elders” or *oràw ọ̀nàgbà bọ̀ wónsọ̀pé* i.e. “the elders sigh and say...” Any of these statements can be said before or after the saying of the proverb by the young person (cf. Abiodun 2000)

Scholars have written variously on Yorùbá proverbs . Each scholar has also given different definitions and description to proverbs. For instance, Adékéyè (2001:31) sees proverbs as philosophical sayings of a group of people handed over from one generation to the other. Here proverbs are related to philosophy; and since the philosophers see philosophy as the love of wisdom, proverbs then can be regarded as wise sayings. Akporobaro (2008) defines proverbs as “a short popular saying usually in the form of a moral advice or truth

expressed in a concise form. It is a means by which ideas could be vividly expressed and illustrated. Yusuf (1998) opines that “proverb is a short repeated witty statement of experience which is used to further a social end.” While among other definitions, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2008) defines proverb as a short well-known statement that is generally true.

In writing on Yorùbá proverbs, Vidal (1852) discusses Yorùbá proverbs in relation to the parallelism found in them. Ajibola (1947), Ogunbowale (1970), Jeḗniwa and Babatunde (2013) attempt a compilation of Yorùbá proverbs in their various books; they explain the meaning and the use of each proverb in their compendium. Olatunji (1984) examines and discusses the cultural and sociological background of various Yorùbá proverbs. He (Olatunji) also examines the aesthetics and stylistics of Yorùbá proverbs. He goes further to explain that Yorùbá proverbs are used as an instrument of correction, instruction, rebuke, commendation and condemnation among other usages. Delano (1987, 1996) discusses Yorùbá proverbs along the line of historical information of Yorùbá origin. Sheba (2000) on her own weaves Yorùbá proverbs to the concept of feminism by attempting a compilation of proverbs of Yorùbá that centre on women. Of much relevance to this paper is Ojoade’s (1983) article where he discusses the obscene nature of some Yorùbá proverbs. He says that such proverbs are selectively used in relation to situations and circumstances. He goes further to say that if such proverbs are said outside the situation for which they could be said, the speaker will be looked upon as uncultured person and will be regarded as a violator of Yoruba ethics, norms and tradition. Our discussion in this paper will go along the line of that of Òjóadè (ibid.). However, we shall go further to show the implications of these types of proverbs to the sociological interaction of the Yorùbá people.

3. Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Our concern in this section is to present the data and explain them. The data are simply the Yorùbá proverbs that are seen as containing taboo or obscene words. Why do Yorùbá allow such to be said considering the premium Yorùbá place on decorum and their avoidance of vulgar language? We shall proffer why this is so in the course of this section. The question is why do Yorùbá use sexual proverbs? Ojoade (1983:203) gives the answer by saying that “Yorùbá and other Africans do not see sexual proverbs as obscene just because they use sexual symbols. A Yorùbá using these proverbs is simply looking for the most appropriate vehicle to convey his message, his point, and his ideas in a forceful way; he is merely aiming at directness, frankness, and starkness. In a word, he just likes to call a spade a spade, and they are really not dirty words.” For instance, in the proverb,

➤ Ikú ọkọtíí múniríóbitíbiti ẹ̀pọ̀n

The death of husband that makes the wife endure big testicles

Is one that is said when one is face to face with a degrading situation where one has no option or alternative. Whereas, if circumstances or situations are as they should be, no one will come and ridicule the person who is being degraded. This vulgar proverb is used to drive home the point that there are times when one has no other alternative than to endure the situation in which he/she finds him/herself. Saying it in another form may not give the information intended in a forceful manner.

In some instances, as noticed by Fakoya (2007), vulgar proverbs are said to emphasize the need for caution. Therefore, adults sometimes resort to imagery that can fully display to the hearer the import of the advice being provided. For instance, a father or mother hoping to make the best impact on a wasteful son or daughter in the name of being generous may prefer to use a proverb like the one in (2).

➤ A kì í lóyúnsínú ká fòbò tọ̀rẹ̀

One cannot be pregnant and dash away her vagina.

This is saying that if a particular instrument that has no replacement or alternative is dashed out, the giver who also will need that material sooner than later, will be seen as a foolish person. Because of the dire

implication such a generosity can have, the speaker may not want to use an alternative proverb (if there is any) since such will not bring home his point in a serious manner.

It is not only when a note of caution can be sounded that vulgar proverbs are used. Even when two people are arguing about their prowess or superiority, vulgar proverb can be utilised. For instance, the proverb in (3) is said to tell people who are locked in horns that an open ground will be made for them to try their superiority

➤ **Okó ñléri, òbò ñléri, ipàdédorí ẹni**

The penis is boasting, the vagina is boasting, the meeting point is on the bed.

The semantics of the above sexually explicit proverb is to show that when the two organs meet in a sex-spree, one will bow for the other. It is to say that when two boasters meet in a contest, one will surely defeat the other.

In some cases, sexually explicit proverbs are given to advise and encourage a person who is becoming discouraged. This proverb is to encourage such a person to exercise patience; that there is nothing that has a beginning that will not have an end. In such a circumstance, a vulgar proverb like the one below is normally employed.

➤ **Bólókóńlábá ńdónigbígbinláágbin**

When a man with big penis is having sex with one, we only groan and do not complain.

Since proverbs like this are given to pacify the one who is in an adverse circumstance, no one will take offence on the sexually explicit words used in the proverb.

At times, Yorùbá people being a concerned tribe may want to show concern to others who do not have a focus, those who do not set a goal of achievement. In other words, there are people who cannot chart a course of action on their own. All they do is a kind of just following other people in what they do . And when the benefit of what these other people do comes to be reaped, such ‘follow-follow’ people have no way of tasting the fruit of such labour . For such, Yorùbá have a proverb which also bothers on using a vulgar language to drive home their point . The proverb in (5) is an example of what Yorùbá will say to such a person.

➤ **Òjyà bì ẹpònkòsí, okó wọlẹsínú òbò, ẹpòndúrósíta**

There is no greater sufferer than the testicle, the penis enters the vagina, the testicle stays outside.

What the Yorùbá meant with this proverb is that as long as a person who should use his own initiative in other to enjoy, continues to neglect his talent, he will suffer deprivation of some good things.

There are times when two alternatives may not have a fundamental difference in the underlying form . The only difference that can be pointed out may just be the aesthetics of one above the other . For instance, the Yorùbá people cherish and place a very high premium on having male children rather than females . In other to douse the tension that the husband and wife having only female children can have, Yorùbá can give a proverb like the one below.

➤ **Ojú là ń dọ, òbòwèrè òyàtọ**

It is the beauty that attracts; the vagina of a mad woman is not different (from that of a beautiful woman).

Proverbs like the (6) above is to tell a person who is unduly placing value on a particular thing rather than the other that both the one he cherishes and the one he relegated have no intrinsic difference. It means then that there are things that people regards more than the other when in fact the two have the same vale and advantage.

In some situations, some may behave as ingrates. They are people that always repay good with evil forgetting that they may still seek help from the person to whom they show ingratitude. In such a situation, Yorùbá can give a sexually explicit proverb as in (7) in order to condemn such attitude.

➤ **Eni tó dóbò lẹ̀ẹ̀kan tó kùú lẹ̀şẹ̀, okó rẹ̀ yóò tún le.**

The man that has sex once and punches the woman's vagina will have another erection.

The proverb in (7) is to show the ingrate that he might be in the condition that pushed him to receive succour from the one that gave him succour once again. If he therefore shows a kind of ingratitude, nobody will be ready to help him at the time he has a need.

There is no situation that may present itself that the Yorùbá will not have a proverb to say in regard to such a situation. For instance if there are certain things that are affecting people and no matter what the situation is that some people are not being affected, Yorùbá will have a proverb to say. In this case, in order to drive home their point, Yorùbá can result to a proverb like (8) below.

➤ **Àrùnkì í pò láraobìnrínkí obìnrinsòpá, paríparíkí obìnrinnì idòtítóbi.**

No matter the myriads of diseases a woman is bedeviled with she cannot have big scrotum, the worst for a woman is to have a large clitoris.

This kind of proverb is to show that in spite of whatever a man/woman may possess, there is something he/she cannot have.

A proverb like the following is showing that there is no work a man does that women too cannot do. It is also a manifestation that both men and women are in partnership thereby complementing each other.

➤ **Tokótòbò ló ñ şişẹ̀ okoIdó.**

Both the penis and the vagina are doing the sexual intercourse.

Apart from the fact that women also can perform like men, there should also be a kind of cooperation between men and a woman if something tangible can be achieved. The proverb also shows a kind of figure of speech where metaphor is used. In the proverb, *okó* 'penis' stands for the men and *òbò* 'vagina' stands for the women. It shows that the work of sexing can only be accomplished when a man and a woman do it together. The word *idó* 'to have sex' which is a noun is derived from the verb *dó* 'to copulate'.

In some cases, what terrifies one may be a child's play for the other person. Depending on the position one is occupying, certain things may not matter to him/her any longer. When it appears that somebody is being threatened with a kind of situation which is not strange to him as a result of the experiences such a person has, Yorùbá can result to the proverb in (10) below.

➤ **A kù fókó ñlá dẹ̀rù barúgbó**

One does not terrify an old woman with huge penis.

The assumption is an old woman must have met with various men with different sizes of penis in her life time. Therefore, there is no kind of situation that can be used as far as man/woman sexual relationship is concerned that will terrify her. The proverb is also very appropriate in a situation where a person has weathered different storms of hardship. Such a person will not be afraid of any other situation no matter how harsh such may be.

The Yorùbá people like their secret to be kept secret. They do not like their private affairs divulged in the open. But in a situation where somebody does not know how to keep the mouth shut, the proverb in (11) is normally invoked.

➤ **A tú nilásìriobìnrìntólókóqòuntóbijutàlè lẹ.**

It is the woman who will divorce a secret that will say her husband's penis is bigger than that of her concubine.

How will people know that her husband's penis is very bigger if she knows how to keep a secret as secret? The proverb is also meant to teach gossipers how to keep secret what should not be divulged.

For those who are deceivers, there is a sexually explicit proverb for them. It is usually believed that no one deceiver can deceive a person two times. If he succeeds in doing so, it is not that he is so wise but it is due to the foolishness of the deceived. And because Yorùbá see it as not possible for one to be deceived twice, hence the proverb presented in (12).

➤ **Èḡkanlatannidó n tannií mọ**

Deceiving a woman in having sex with her can only be done once.

In a proverb like the one in (13) below, the person saying the proverb is making it known to whoever cares to know that when you have particular thing at your disposal, you do not behave as if you can be doing such an activity without being fed up.

➤ **Mélò la ó dò nínú òbò tá ní kílẹ́ má mọ**

For how long can one sex a woman that he will be praying that the day should not break.

Such proverbs are given in order to show the futility of adhering too much on a particular thing. It will come to a time that it will become repulsive to the person.

There are some vulgar proverbs in Yorùbá where penis nor vagina, man nor woman is mentioned, yet such proverbs can still be regarded as sexually explicit ones. In the proverb stated in (14) below, it is the sexual activity that is shown vividly in the proverb. Somebody who is not of the Yorùbá ethnic group will be wondering why such a proverb is regarded as a vulgar one because *lẹ́dí* 'sexual advance' which is a vulgar word there can only be interpreted by a native speaker.

➤ **Bí èyànbá ń lẹ́dí mọ ọmọiyarẹ, ó yẹkí ọbàkansá fúnun.**

If a man makes sexual advances to his blood sister, his female cousins should avoid him.

In this type of proverb, the activity of having sex in practical terms, which Yorùbá regard as taboo is what is seen in the proverb stated in (14). It means that it is not only when the sexual organs of the body is mentioned before such utterance can be regarded as vulgar, speaking and mentioning the activity of having sex is also regarded as taboo.

4. The Implication and Sociological Effect of Sexually Explicit Proverbs on Yorùbá Culture

As we have pointed out, discussing and mentioning sex organs and sexually related words are taboos not only in the Yorùbá culture but in every culture of the world. Words that are regarded as taboos or vulgarity are highly restricted within the society. Dare (2005) commenting on this issue says that

Not only is sex a subject severely restricted in public discourse, lexical choices in direct reference to sex and sexual organs are allowed to feature only in periphrastic and euphemistic terms. In Yoruba language, the penis is referred to as *ǹnkanomokunrin* (the thing of a man or the thing of manhood). It is also humorously referred to as *ẹkẹtitan* (the third thigh). Vagina is described as *ọjúara* (the body's opening/the point of entry into the body). Similarly, sexual intercourse is presented in euphemistic descriptions: *ó básùn* (he slept/lay with her), *óbá lóp ọ* (he interacted with her/he related with her), and *wónniàjosepò* (they had mutual dealings/relationship). Similar periphrases are found in the Judeo-Christian literature: "And Adam knew his wife" (Genesis 4:1) where "knew" is a euphemism for having sexual intercourse.

The question then is why do the Yorùbá discountenance this cultural practice in certain proverbs, and what is the implication of doing so?

It should be understood that there are contexts where sexually explicit proverbs are used when it will not be regarded as taboo or vulgarity. Anything outside such contexts, the person using such proverb will be looked at as uncultured. In some instances, certain words that should not be said in a particular context or

environment may be expressed without any inhibition in some other context or environments without inhibition. Abiodun (1998) writing on the game of *Ayò* opines that words that ordinarily are regarded as insults are freely used during the game of *Ayò*. Outside the context of *Ayò* game nobody uses it without incurring the wrath of the society. Therefore, vulgar proverbs have a context of use. Ojoade (1983:1) while discussing the issue of sexual proverbs in Yorùbá has this to say

...traditional Yorùbá and other Africans do not see sexual proverbs as obscene just because they use sexual symbols. A Yorùbá using these proverbs is simply looking for the most appropriate vehicle to convey his message, his point, (and) his ideas in a forceful way; he is merely aiming at directness, frankness and starkness. In a word, he just likes to call a spade a spade, and they are not really dirty words.

He (Ojoade *ibid.*) thereafter sounds a note of warning that sexual proverbs, like any other proverb, must never be used out of context or at an inappropriate time. No one goes about just citing sexual proverbs (or any other obscene folklore) just for the sake of quoting them. But when one does so at the right moment, that is the time one is given automatic licence, which provides psychological release from the restraints placed on the individual by society.

In some Yorùbá festivals, especially Okebadan Festival, there is always freedom to mention sex and sexual activities without any inhibition. Commenting on this, Dare (*ibid*) says that

One particularly interesting exception to the rule of conformity to the social norm is the occasion provided by the annual Oke'badan Festival. Oke'badan, (literally the festival of Ibadan Hill), is an annual festival observed by the worshippers of the deity of the hill in Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State of Nigeria. This freedom is probably predicated on the society's recognition of man's need for catharsis following a whole year of bottled up emotion. The passion and vivacity that usually attend the outbursts during the Oke'badan festival attest to the obsession with which sexual matters are held by men and women of all agegroups.

Freud, in some of his writings, has said that sex occupies a core area of the human psychology. His statement which was controversial then, and now in Nigeria, may be difficult to ignore. Sociologically, there are some instances, when discussing sex and sexually related activity is not regarded as taboos or vulgarity. However, the licence given contextually notwithstanding, there are occasions when these proverbs are indeed considered off-colour, they are therefore considered offensive when quoted out of context or inappropriately, especially when the one quoting them tends to make light of a serious matter or seeks a thrill by doing the ordinarily forbidden thing (cfOjoade 1983). It goes to say that a word is obscene not because the thing named is obscene, but because the speaker or hearer regards it, owing to the interference of a taboo, with a sneaking, shamefaced, psychopathic attitude.

5. Summary

In this paper, we have discussed the Yorùbá proverbs in the lens of vulgar language. Having presented our data and followed by analyses, we conclude that even though, such proverbs use sexually explicit words; they are not regarded as obscene in the context in which they are supposed to be used. We premise our argument on the fact that even in *Ayó* game, words that ordinarily will be regarded as offensive and insulting, are used without inhibition. However, we opine that if such taboo words are used outside the context in which they are to be used, then such user will be seen and regarded as an uncultured person and/or an individual that has no manners.

The question that remains to be asked and answered is that can't there be other ways of saying those proverbs by avoiding the use of vulgar words? The answer is yes, only that they will not express the real meaning the speaker intends to convey (see Fakoyà 2007). However, sexually explicit proverbs should be used discretionally so as not to offend the psych of the listeners. The point is that such proverbs cannot be expunged in the Yorùbá day-to-day interaction. Fakoya (2007:22) notes that

... such proverbs are an integral part of the Yorùbá culture; nevertheless, since they may be found offensive at times, it is unwise to deploy them excessively. One way of avoiding this dilemma is for the speaker to find pragmatic correlates to express his thought or to ground his contribution during talk. However, it would be wide off the mark for anyone to expect that such proverbs would be expunged from the language. Like other figures of speech, sexually grounded proverbs do not constitute stumbling blocks for the successful execution of Yorùbá communicative interaction and even for the sake of their discourse value, they may be used and be received with the objectivity attending less offensive proverbs.

Therefore, using sexually explicit Yoruba proverbs in the context in which they should be used should not be regarded as violating the restriction on taboo words but it should be seen as driving home a point of argument in a way that the hearer will grasp the import of what is said in an understandable manner.

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