

# Proverbs and Conflict Management in Africa: A Study of Selected Yoruba Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions

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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of proverbs and their use in conflict management and in enhancing peaceful human co-existence. This is achieved through a content analysis of twenty-four(24) randomly selected Yoruba proverbs, and proverbial expressions, with particular reference to the themes of warning, cooperation, and diversity. The paper argues that proverbs are useful in conflict management, and conflict resolution, and in making people have a peace-loving frame of mind. The paper concludes that proverbs and proverbial expressions are, indeed, vital in relationship management. It avers that anybody with a good understanding of proverbs and their implications for peaceful coexistence would appreciate conflicts as an intricate part of existence and harmonious living; and such person(s) would therefore avoid actions and inactions that would promote violence.

**Keywords:** Proverbs, Yoruba, Africa, Peace, Conflict Management

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## **Africa, Conflict, and Language**

Presently, the social condition in Africa is fast becoming a Hobbesian state of nature where life is brutish, nasty and short. The reason for this is not farfetched from value erosion, wanton poverty to lack of visionary leadership which is fast reducing the human condition to that of predatory animals that nature has conditioned to feed and live on one another for survival, leading to an unprecedented loss of lives and properties in Africa. This situation, if not urgently arrested, portends dangerous omen to generations yet unborn.

The prevalence of political violence, insurgencies of diverse magnitudes and terrorism in contemporary Africa require urgent and renewed efforts in arresting the gory situation. In fact, there is urgent need to look inward for methods of conflict management to support the commonplace western imported paradigm. The need to 'look inward' becomes vital as the search for lasting peace continues (Ogunmodede 2001). It is within this understanding that scholars have blamed the contemporary African problems, not just on eroded traditional African values and value system but also, on the lack of mastery of language that has resulted in gross misunderstanding, particularly the dearth of practical wisdom embedded in proverbs to address issues in conflict (Adeyemi 2014; Ademowo 2012; Makamani 2012). The crux of this work lies in taking a new look at indigenous/traditional means of conflict management which are found in proverbial practical wisdom.

To buttress the foregoing, it is important to reiterate the fact that Africans, like every other human species, often face a common problem of reconciling difference(s) which would often lead into violence, violent conflict, and in some extreme cases war. The parties involved often abandon conflict resolutions process, blaming each other. Also worthy of note is like other humans in other climes, Africans love to live in peace and as this is only through this way that society can grow and everyone finds fulfillment. The question, however, is: how can we live harmoniously without occasional disagreement and upset? Can we rise above negative attitudes and hurt feelings? Can we settle our differences amicably without rancour? These questions have been perused and answered in the pre-colonial African period with profit. There is a common understanding that it is impossible to do without conflicts; conflicts are not considered as the problem, rather the inability of the parties to understand how to resolve them as intricate parts of

life is the bane of peace in pre-colonial, and in contemporary Africa. The beliefs that are rife in pre-colonial Africa are that one listens to the parties in conflict. To be qualified to be a member of the 'peace committee' or the 'cabinet' (as the case may be), one is expected to be grounded in the norms and cultural dictates of the land. Hence, he (or she, when a woman is part of the group unless in matriarchal societies like Ghana) could apply some practical principles that would help friendships not only survive but also grow even stronger afterward and also assist in turning worst enemies to best friends.

Those practical principles capable of enhancing the values and peace-loving frame of mind and in honing conflict management skills can be found in the proverbial sayings and expressions that are widely quoted in relevant situations not only to appease but to warn warring parties and make them overcome deep-seated hatred, enmity and anger (Adeyemi 2014; Makamani 2012; Ademowo 2014). How could proverbs and proverbial expressions be of help in these situations? In their attempt to reading meanings to social control, manage conflicts and attain enduring peace, scholars on Africa have resolved to take a cursory look at the phenomenon of our language pattern with a view to see if certain elements of it could be exploited to achieve such laudable feat (Fasiku 2006; Ogunsiji 2001). In this regard, Ademowo (2014: 4) opined that proverbs enable us to cultivate values and frame of mind that promote peace and heal emotional wounds. These values are found in qualities such as discernment, kindness, love and patience.

It is with this understanding that philosophers of language and ethno-linguist laid emphasis on the explorative and utilitarian use of language in achieving good interpersonal relationship resulting in social order, social control and development (Taylor 2003; Ogunsiji 2001). The thrust of their argument for language use is that language is the key to the heart of a people. This means that to appreciate a people, one must have to go through its language because it is that vehicle through which peoples' identity are viewed/appreciated, and also in boosting the self-confidence, motivation and innovation that drive not just development but also social control (Fasiku 2006; Ademowo 2012). Hence, languages according to Wallnork (1969: 12) have the following roles:

- i. For phatic communication. i.e as a social regulator
- ii. As an instrument of action
- iii. To convey order and information

- iv. To influence people
- v. To enable self-expression, and
- vi. To embody and enable thought.

The foregoing lends credence to the obvious: that no human society can exist to experience peace without the effective/explorative use of and development of its metaphoric concepts/language that will encourage and teach about peace as we have in proverbs. In looking at the utilitarian value and explorative use of metaphoric/ indigenous language in conflict management and development related matters, Ogunsiyi (2001) and Ademowo (2012) opined that no other language can take place of one's mother/indigenous tongue, and that there is danger in over-blowing the importance of lingua franca at the expense of the indigenous languages. Furthermore, drawing on the role of language (indigenous) to nation building, we agreed with the position that culture and language are like Siamese twins: the death of one portends fatalistic danger for the other. In fact, culture, albeit language, is that prismatic paradigm for conflict resolution/management with the exclusive manner with which the indigenous languages are being played down for the exclusivist employment of foreign languages, culture and value system. It is therefore appropriate to move on to suggest that there is a need for radical revival of the indigenous languages and its strong metaphorical use which would include proverbs, idiom incantations, and panegyrics, among others.

### **The Yorubas, Proverbs and Conflict Management**

The Yorubas are the generality of 'Yoruba' speaking people of south-western Nigeria and their kiths and kins elsewhere in the world with culture that is subsistence, agrarian, communal in the pre-colonial Africa to the capitalist, individualistic and free enterprise of the colonial and post-colonial Africa (Alaba 2004: 2). The communalistic way of life makes conflict management an easy one because of the hierarchical arrangement of society in the traditional society. Whether interpersonal or inter group, the belief is that all conflicts can be resolved through the family system which can be compound, extended or unclear.

There are three categories of leaders who could comfortably adjudicate and settle conflicts among the Yorubas. The *Baale* otherwise known as *Oloriebi* is the head of the family, mostly extended and compound families. The *Baale*, on the other land, is the head of the clan, which

comprises of many extended and compound families that have blood on social link, one with another. The *Oba* (the king) is the head of the town and adjudicates on matters relating to the affairs of the town and sometimes matters involving the clans, with the support of the chiefs. At each of these conflict setting levels, the head (be it *Baale/Oloriebi*, *Baale* or *Oba*) cannot do it alone. The Yorubas system is patriarchal hence, these persons (Baale, Baale and Oba) are male adults. The women became visible as members of the ‘cabinet’ or ‘Conflict Resolution Party’ when ONE (in most cases) of them is requested to represent the women or when they are party to a conflict.

No one can be considered educated or qualified to take part in communal discussion unless he is able to quote the proverbs relevant to each situation. He or she must be a good listener, among other qualities. Age is also a factor, because to the Yorubas knowledge and experience are embedded in age hierarchy in African society, which are vital for social control (Delano 1979: ix; Fadipe 1970: 309). So, when in conflict, an elderly person is expected to be capable of bringing about the much needed peace, as embed in the proverb: *agba kii wa loja, ki ori omo tuntun o wo* (the elderly must endeavor to never allow issues to go beyond control). Within this context, the individual is so amenable to social control in the form of public opinion in a town than he is much less so in a large town than in a small one (Fadipe 1970: 309). Thus, Fadipe in *The Sociology of the Yoruba* reveals that:

it is a norm that two fighting must be separated for the sake of peace and humanity. And after the combatants have been separated and efforts have been made to pacify them, either of them who remains aggressive and uncompromising will find himself/herself in a very awkward situation. And it is the stubbornness and spiteful temper of the social non-conformist which are specifically disapproved of even if other facts of the case are in his favour (Fadipe 1970: 340).

Thus, like every other traditional societies, the traditional Yoruba communities have conscious desire to maintain solidarity of the group, and an unconscious acceptance of whatever is customary, indigenous and the norm. It is thus a truism that an average Yoruba man or woman throws his/her weight into the enforcement of traditional codes expressed and encoded in

proverbial wisdom and anybody that flout the social norm faces the social correction and sanction (Ademowo 2013; Fadipe 1970). What then are proverbs, and what is their place in conflict management in traditional African society?

Proverbs are the simple truths of life that contain the moral values of a society (Taylor 2003: 13). Aside the aesthetic and figurative value judgment pervasive in proverbs; it also presents a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. Its beauty and some delight is that what it says is readily perceived and accepted as an incontrovertible truth. The truth presented in the proverbs is not logical, a priori, or intuitive truth: it is often an empirical fact based upon and derived from the people's experience of life, human relationship, and interaction with the world of nature (Yisa 1997: 120).

Moreover, scholars are agreed that traditional proverbs are the prismatic verbal expression of the essence of folk culture (Shimkin and Sanjuan 1953; Taylor 1981; Oladeji 1988; Yusuf 1997, Nicolaisen 1994: 197). This perception of proverbs is related to Seitel's (1981: 124) definition of proverbs as "short, traditional statements used to further some social end" (Egbemogbe 1980; Meider 1989). Adeyemi (2005: 60) also noted that proverbs remain a very powerful and effective instrument for the transmission of culture, philosophy, social morality and values and the sensibility of the people. In essence, the values of proverbs do not lie only in what they reveal of the thoughts of the people, they are also models of compressed or forceful language that make people behave according to norms and mores of the land. Other than their powerful verbal expression, proverbs have proved to be of great relevance/benefit to modern man (Ademowo 2014; Oladeji 1998; Makamani 2012). This is due to the fact that users with gifts of creativity who are familiar with its techniques may create new ones to avoid hackneyed expression. This point of view explains, perhaps, Chomskyan view that all normal native speakers are capable of generating novel sentences that they have never generated before.

The above reference to proverb is contextualized in metaphor, although the reference is more literary than linguistic, the import of the interactional nature of proverbs, its universal and experiential relevance is notable. Thus, Yoruba proverbs are thus seen as:

products of people's socio-cultural, historical, philosophical and geographical experience. Proverbs are used by the Yoruba people

not only as “owe l’essin oro, oro l’essin owe, bi oro ba nu, owe [ni a fi wa’, meaning ‘a proverb is a horse which can carry you swiftly to the discovery of ideas sought: this ‘horse’ is being constantly pressed into the service of elders during deliberations in council and at home settling disputes as a relevant proverbs throws light on the subject and drives points home: that proverb is not only the vehicle of the expression of truth, religion, morality, but also dominant occupation, and other practices which reflect their day-today living (Adeyemi 2005: 61).

## **Research Method**

Twenty four (24) Yoruba proverbs were randomly selected from: the day to day used/anonymous proverbs and proverbial expressions among the Yorubas from anonymous authors as well as the written collections of proverbs from Adebayo (1979) *Owe in Yoruba Fun Ile-Eko Giga*; Delano (1976) *Owe L’essin Oro: Yoruba Proverbs, their Meaning and Usage*; and Adeyemi (2005) *Empowering African Languages: Rethinking the Strategies*.

The selected proverbs were subjected to content analysis. Content analysis is “the use of replicable and valid method for making specific inferences from texts to other states or properties of its source” (Krippendorff, 1969: 103). Content analysis, as used in this study, involves succinct interpretation and explanations of the proverbs using their contextual meaning in order to draw reasonable implications for the proverbs in the context of conflict management among the Yorubas. The proverbs were interpreted and related to their contextual meanings with a view to explain how their everyday use can promote or be used as a foil to achieve the desired peace in Africa. The selected proverbs are then interpreted and grouped under themes that reflected their use in conflict management. This is done to ensure that our selected sample represented the world view of the Yorubas with regards to conflict management.

## **Finding: The Proverbial Propositions and their Implications for Conflict Management**

### **A. Warning and Conflict Management**

I. *Ibere ogun laa mo, eni kan kii mo ipari e* (Delano 1976: 81).

**Meaning:** It is the beginning of war that we know; nobody can tell how it would end

Let sleeping dogs lie (Adeyemi 2005: 64).

### ***Implication***

The best way to handle conflicts and inter personal issues is to avoid them. Often time the elders employ this proverb to warn warring parties to desist from war and to bury their hatchet for the sake of peace; and that war inadvertently yields unanticipated devastating consequences.

2. *Okun kii ho ruru ka waa ruru* (Anonymous).

**Meaning:** We must not sail a turbulent ocean turbulently.

### ***Implication***

This proverb is used to pacify conflicting parties to be patient with regards to issues and problem when they arise. It is used to advise people that patience is a virtue capable of helping in amicably settling a perceived and real conflict.

3. *Maja ma sa laa mo akikanju, eyi to moo ja ti o omoo sa, iruu won nii bogun lo* (Adebayo 1979: 59).

**Meaning:** He, who fights and run away at the point of death, lives to fight some other day.

### ***Implication***

The import of this proverb is to discourage people from destructive fight. It is to pacify to people that warring should not get to the extent of on being getting killed/utterly destructive.

4. *Kekere laa ti n peekan iroko, otri ti o ba dagba tan ebon ii gba* (Adeyemi 2005: 66).

**Meaning:** An evil habit is easily subdued in the beginning but when it becomes incurable it gains strength.

### ***Implication***

This proverb is also used to pacify warring parties to nip an aggression in the bud before it gets out of hand.

5. *Aimokan aimokan ni ekute se npe ologbo ni ija* (Adeyemi 2005: 65).

**Meaning:** It is out of naivety that rat calls cat to a wrestling competing

### ***Implication***

These proverbs are usually used to shun or warn people from engaging in war. It tells that war is bad and destructive. That it knows no bound when it begins, and nobody can actually lays claim to whether or not he/she would survive it



6. *Alagbara ma mero baba ole* (Anonymous)

**Meaning:** An indiscreet man of valour is a worthless idler

**Implication**

This proverb aims at preaching that thoughtfulness is superior to sheer use of strength which could incite conflict and bullying. It lays emphasis on the need to employ wisdom and dialogues and not physical strength in resolving issues. It as well tries to discourage violence in conflict resolution process.

7. *Oro pele yo obi lapo* (see Delano 1976: 68, Adeyemi 2005: 64)

**Meaning:** A good word takes kola nut from the pocket

Soft words win hard hearts

A soft answer turns away wrath (Adeyemi 2005: 64)

**Implication**

What this implies is that words are capable of making or marring a relationship. That if good words are spoken, it is capable of restoring a supposed tension and conflicts. The import of this is that words hold the key to amicable conflict resolution. It is also a warning to the parties to be mindful of their utterances during conflicts.

8. *Aa kii ti kootu de dore* (Anonymous)

**Meaning:** You don't come back from court to become friend; it is better to be loved than feared

**Implication**

The implication of this is that we should not overstretch issues when it actually can be resolved without having to involve third parties

9. *Idobale kii se iwa* (Anonymous).

**Meaning:** Prostrating (genuflecting) is not tantamount to having good behavior.

Call the bear 'Uncle' until you are safely across the bridge

**Implication**

The point here is that, prostrating is an act of respect in among the Yorubas, but this proverb points to the truth that it is possible to imbibe the acts of prostrating and still not have imbibe the

good traits of having to behave according to the societal prescription when matters arises. It underscores the value that the Yoruba attach to morality and humility, even in the face of harassment, in the context of attempts to maintaining peaceful co-existence.

## **B. Cooperation, Diversity and Conflict Management**

10. *Agbe maja kan osi, a ja matan ni o da* (Adebayo 1979: 56).

11. *Eyin ati ahon nan nan ma n ja* (Adeyemi 2005: 65).

**Meaning:** It is not possible to live together and not have disagreement; not finding solutions to the constant conflict is what is condemnable.

### **Implication**

The obvious implication of these proverbs are that every relationship comes with some degree of fracture, but such often time conflict should not deter the continuity of the relationship. Thus, we should at all time find means of settling conflicts.

12. *Mafara kanmi kii lo soja lo ra nkan* (Anonymous).

**Meaning:** He who does not want to relate and be touched must resist going to market-place.

### **Implication**

These proverbs hold that life is more or less a marketplace, where existence means the possibility of inevitable conflict one with another he/she because it is important that people relate. But he who must not relate with people must not come to the market place of existence where relationship and conflict co-exist. What this points at is the fact that in every relationship there is bound to be differences which should only be managed if harmony is to be achieved.

13. *Ohun to wu o o wumi, l'omo iya meji se n jeun lotooto* (Adeyemi 2005, Delano: 1976).

**Meaning:** All men do not admire and love the same objects, hence the reason for children of the same mother to eat with different plates.

### **Implication**

This is used to underscore the place of diversity/ and unwished away differences in human interactions and daily living no matter how closely related we may be. It also shows that nobody has the monopoly of opinion on matters of preference

14. *Okeere l'omo iya dun* (Adeyemi 2005 66).

**Meaning:** Respect is greater at a distance (Adeyemi 2005: 66).

**Implication**

This is used to underscore the truism that undue closeness brings with it a level of rancor which could bring friction in relationship. One is therefore expected to appreciate this rancor and manage it appropriately.

15. *Akii dajo enikan ki a sore nu* (Adeyemi 2005: 66).

16. *A gbo ejo enikan da, agba osika ni* (Anonymous).

**Meaning:** Don't pronounce sentence till you have heard the story of both parties.

**Implication**

This is used to call a mediator in a dispute to order, that he/she must be fair; he/she must at all times give room to fair hearing which is a requisite for justice and peaceful coexistence.

17. *Oko kii je ti baba t'omo koma ni aala* (Delano 1976).

**Meaning:** A farm does not belong to a father and son and not have demarcation still.

**Implication**

These point to the reality of the limitations of rights and privileges that everyone enjoys; it points that there are limitations to which we can get along with one another without quarrelling.

18. *Ai kowo po ejo nii je emo ejo niya* (Adebayo 1979:61).

**Meaning:** The refusal of snakes to work together is what makes them to suffer.

No person has the final answer but everyone has something to contribute.

**Implication**

This is used to advocate that people should at all times be together in peace and not fight and be disintegrated. It underscores the need to for collectiveness as a requirement for peace and development.

19. *Ota eni kii pa odu oya* (Anonymous).

**Meaning:** One's enemy could not be ascribed with killing fat game.

**Implication**

This proverb is used to depict that fact that no matter how brilliant one's effort is at achieving a feat, it can never be welcome by an enemy.

20. *Mowa fun oniwa nii je ore jore* (Delano 1976: 4).

**Meaning:** To know people according to their beliefs and character is the means to enhance friendship. Only the person who is willing to give up his or her monopoly on the truth can ever profit from the truths that others hold.

**Implication**

These underscore the position that people should understand differences as the bedrock of sustained relationship. And that it is better to experience conflict and manage it than not to have any misunderstanding in relationship.

21. *Ai fagba fenikan ni o je aye o roju* (Adeyemi 2005: 66).

22. *Omo ti koni Iberu nii baje* (Adebayo 1979: 58).

**Meaning:** Lack of respect for the elders is the root of crisis in the world.

**Implication**

The import of this proverb is that there should be the reciprocity of respect between followers and leaders and between the elderly and young ones. In the precolonial African setting, the elders are given uncanny respect for their wisdom at using appropriate proverbs while settling dispute. In fact, they are at the helm of affairs for their experience and wisdom in handling governance related matters.

23. *Omode gbon agba gbon lafi da Ile-ife* (Adebayo 1979: 57).

24. *Owo omode o to pepe, t'agbalagba owo kengbe* (Adebayo 1979: 58).

**Meaning:** No person has the final answer but everyone has something to contribute.

**Implication**

This is said to underscore the belief in the communalistic and kinship spirit which is at the heart of dispute resolution for the Yorubas.

**Culture, Proverbs/Language and Conflict**

The foregoing underscores the fact that the Yorubas have a wide range of proverbs that can support conflict management process. Coessentially these proverbs promote such values as human cooperation, diversity and warning; this in support of our position that should the proverbial implications be studied, particular in indigenous languages, showing their logical structure and implications for conflict management, it would greatly enhance conflict management (Ademowo 2012; Ademowo 2014; Oladipo 1992: 20; Oladipo 2009:105). Examining the interconnectedness of culture, language and development (Wilhem 1963; Ademowo 2011; Ademowo 2012), we cannot but reiterate the essential role of the use proverbs in conflict management that, culture, which language is an integral part, functions as a catalyst for conflict management and development in these distinct ways. In other words, it is used:

- a. as a means of creating order
- b. as an instrument of the achievement of social integration
- c. to make events in human experience intelligible and significant and as regulator of change

(Ademowo 2012: 15).

It is Africa's inability to come to terms with these intricate linguistic-cultural elements that has made it impossible for authentic African contribution to effective conflict management. There is an urgent need for a rejuvenation of the linguistic-cultural elements that would enhance peaceful coexistence. This would inadvertently underscore the argument that Africans have linguistic-moral and rational capacity worthy of making its world humane and worthy of living. Hence we agree with the position that knowledge comes with virtue, and man would behave in a peace loving ways, and conflict appreciation manner, if they have the knowledge of what harmonious living entails, most especially through the use of the proverbs and the proverbial expressions (Oladipo 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing Yoruba proverbs and their implications reiterate that proverbs not only sensitize people to conform to desired mores but also teach a method of expressing life which is aesthetically, nay pragmatically, flavoured. If more researches, documentation and expressive uses are carried out on proverbs, a good level of peace management skills would be developed across Africa. We agree with Adeyemi (2008:30) that, proverbs enabled people to conform to desired rules, mores and traditions as well as teach method of expression of the realities of life

with aesthetic flavor, and that language and not weapon (a metaphoric strand like we have in proverbs) is central to effective communication and dialogue which is veritable instrument of mediation and conflict management anywhere in the world. Conclusively, we agree with Olubunmi (2010: 16) that the use of proverbs exhumes the values of good conduct, respect for elders and the young, warning and advice, cordiality and cooperation which are vital for peaceful co-existence. It is therefore imperative that Africans look inward, and explore how these proverbs will be inculcated into daily usages and imported into peace education curriculum across levels.

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