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# Language, culture and the conceptualization of character in selected Yorùbá proverbs

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the cultural import of proverbs in contemporary Yorùbá society in Nigeria. Proverbs are short, witty, popular expressions that contain morals, truth, socio-cultural precepts and heritage of a particular group of people. Every ethnic group the world over has its set of proverbs formulated and collected over several generations. Proverbs give insights into wise living and stimulate good decisions thereby satisfying the concept of moralities in African realities. One common thread that runs through world religions and cultures is the universal affirmation of the cultivation and practice of “good character”. This concept, popularly known in the Yorùbá milieu as “omoluabi” is believed to be responsible for fundamental contributions of morality to the overall human flourishing and wholeness of Yorùbá societies and people. Proverbs constitute a veritable component of ‘ways of speaking’ among the constituents of Yorùbá speech communities across age groups, as well as social and occupational categories of speakers. Using fourteen purposively selected proverbs that deal with the Yorùbá concept of “Omoluabi” (good character), this paper employs a socio-cultural linguistic approach to show how the rhetorical force of the proverbs can help reveal the ills in our society and reclaim some of the virtues of “Omoluabi”. Findings show that Yorùbá, like many other African languages, is richly endowed with proverbs emphasizing virtues such as patience, respect for elders and constituted authority, selflessness, contentment and dignity in labour, all of which can bring about cultural re-orientation if imbibed by citizens.

**Keywords:** culture; good character; re-orientation; Yorùbá proverbs

## **Introduction**

Nothing defines a culture as distinctly as its language, and the element of language that best sums up a society's values and beliefs is its proverbs. Mbiti (1981:7) suggests that “in proverbs, there is a rich deposit of the wisdom of many generations”. Similarly, Usman (2018) views a proverb as a piece of folk wisdom expressed with terseness and charm and characterized by the economic use of words, sharpness of focus and a touch of literary/poetic beauty. They convey nuances of culture and through their transmission from one generation to another, ensure the continued relevance of such nuances (Ademilokun, 2014). Among the Yorùbá, proverbs ‘constitute a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs’ Akporobaro & Emovon (1994:169). Proverbs are believed to be inherited from the ancestors and used to communicate a dogmatic wisdom. They constitute one of the privileged deposits of popular wisdom and philosophy. They are the library of general African Culture (Tchimboto, 2017:7). A proverb is a simple and concrete saying popularly known and repeated. It expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity, and are often metaphorical. While previous studies (Ojoade, 2004; Adeleke, 2009; Daramola, 2013; Ademilokun, 2014; Ehineni, 2016; Falaju, 2020) have focused mostly on the significance, categorization, discourse and structural analysis of Yorubá proverbs in terms of syntax, semantics and semiotics, this paper examines the cultural aspects of Yorubá proverbs.

### **The importance of proverbs in African cultures**

Every ethnic group in Africa and the world over has its set of proverbs, maxims and popular sayings formulated and collected over several generations. Proverbs reflect the community's world view by projecting its beliefs, moral, attitudes and inner life. They are found in every language community and constitute a very important category in African folklore. African proverbs offer wisdom and poetry in just one sentence. Even though proverbs are universal and everyone can relate to them, they are also uniquely African and provides insight into African cultures. African proverbs can convey wisdom, truth, a discovery of ideas, as well as life lessons.

The Yorubá are mostly found in the South Western region of Nigeria even though, over the years, they have migrated to other parts of the world – Togo, Benin Republic, Côte D’Ivoire and some parts of Brazil, among other

places. Proverbs are the poetry and the moral science of the Yorùbá nation (Ajibola, 1979). Yorùbá proverbs are not only just a significant part of the daily life of the Yorùbá people, they constitute a rich integral part of the linguistic repertoire of the speech community (Ehineni, 2016). The importance of proverbs in Yorùbá context is underscored in the Yorùbá proverb that says "Owe l'esin oro, bi oro ba sonu, owe ni a fi nwa a" (A proverb is a horse which can carry you swiftly to the discovery of ideas sought). During deliberations among elders in council and at home settling disputes, a relevant proverb throws light on the subject and drives home the points. In the Yorùbá society, no one can be considered educated or qualified to take part in communal discussions unless he is able to quote the proverbs suitable for each situation. (Delano, 1976). According to Sheba (2006), Proverbs are a condensed form of the wisdom of the people accumulated over the ages through a careful observation of everyday experiences involving human beings, animals, nature, natural phenomena and social events.

The Yoruba people are moralistic. Many of the Yorùbá ideas on religion, morality and courtesy are woven into proverbs. It is therefore expected that many Yorùbá proverbs will be laden with thoughts on good living and high moral standards. A unique attribute of Yorùbá proverbs is that some proverbs are historical in origin, and bring to remembrance the events (Such as wars, battles, famine, pestilences, social experiences, etc.) that led to their establishment (Fasiku, 2006). For example the proverb, *Bi o ba laya O se ka, bi o ba gbo kun Gaa o o sotito* literally translated as, 'if you have the mind to be wicked, if you hear about Gaa's death you will be truthful'. This proverb suggests that there was once a major character named *Gaa*. *Gaa* was a Prime Minister in the old Oyo Empire (1759-1775 A.D.). Yorùbá history has it that he was cruel, oppressive and responsible for the dethronement and execution of four successive *Alaafins* (Kings). *Gaa* died a slow and painful death as the king instructed that he should be chopped alive till he died. The derivation of this proverb from history is aimed at deterring evil and immoral acts. Some Yorùbá proverbs are derived from folktales:

*Àlò ni ti Abun, àhò ni ti àna rẹ̀*

'Going is for the tortoise and returning is for his in-law.'

'If the righteous has gone too far, he will receive criticism.'

According to the Yorùbá folktale from which the proverb above was derived, once upon a time, the Tortoise tried to break into his in-law's farm and when caught, he was tied to a tree along the road leading to the fields by his in-laws. At first, all the farmers who heard what the Tortoise had done condemned

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him for his deed and supported his in-law's decision to tie him to a tree. However when the tortoise was still strapped to the tree by the time the farmers were returning from their farms in the evening they laid the blame on the in-law and questioned what he had done to warrant such a severe punishment. Since then, the saying "going is for the tortoise and returning is for his in-law" has gained a proverbial status.

There are also some Yoruba proverbs that originate from the Ifa Corpus. An example is:

*A fi fipá lówó kì í kádún, a fi wàràwàrà lówó kì í pòsù.*

‘A person who acquires wealth via force does not survive a year, a person who acquires wealth hastily will not live beyond a month,’ which means that ‘He who acquires wealth forcefully hastily will not live long.’

***Ogúndá mejì***

I                    I

I                    I

I                    I

II                    II

*A fi fipá lówó kì í kádún*

A person who acquires wealth forcefully does not survive a year

*A fi wàrà wàrà lówó tíí ṣ'ológún wọn ì í dọ̀la*

A person who acquires wealth hastily will not live beyond a day.

*Bọ́ pẹ́ tíí n ó lówó;*

In a while, I'll become wealthy.

*Wón n bẹ́ lábà tí n je ẹ̀sun iṣu.*

They are consuming roasted yam in the village.

*Ojò'èsan ò lẹ́ títí*

That the day of reckoning is drawing near

*Kò jẹ́ ọ̀rọ̀ ó duni*

makes things bearable.

*Adifá fún Adigunlà, tí ó digun sèsèè*

For a hunter who will be pursued, divines

*Kèè pẹ́ o, kè jìnà*

In a jiffy

*È ná wo' fá awókè bí ti í ẹ̀*

See how the priest's holy words are manifesting.

## **Functions of Proverbs**

Proverbs remain a most powerful and effective instrument for the transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people from one generation to another. The reason for this efficacy of a proverb is that, it is an aphorism, a wise saying based upon people's experience, and it is a reflection of the social values and sensibility of the people.

A collection of the proverbs of a community/nation/society represents the ethnography of the people, capable of providing a penetrating picture of the people's way of life, their philosophy, their criticism of life, moral truths and social values. Through proverbs, the tradition, culture and norms of a group of people can be preserved. Not only are proverbs used to make effective points, they are also used to embellish speeches and add colour to everyday conversations (Akanbi, 2015). Proverbs are essential to life and language. Without proverbs, language would be like a skeleton without flesh; body devoid of soul (Ashipu, 2013:11).

Whenever there is doubt about an accepted pattern of behaviour, doubt about a stipulated line of action, or traditional norms are threatened, there are always proverbs and indeed tales or myths to affirm, illuminate and buttress the wisdom of the traditional code of conduct. Proverbs help to strengthen tradition and contribute to the life and continuity of a given society, as well as the individual who lives in it. Proverbs are carriers of culture, they convey the

nuances of culture and by their transmission from one generation to another, they ensure the continued relevance of such nuances (Ademilokun, 2014). A proverb is a tool to teach people to practice ethical value and sociable behaviours. Proverbs constitute one of the privileged deposit of popular wisdom and philosophy. They are the library of general African culture (Tchimboto, 2017:7). Proverbs can be used to ‘...recall particular events in the life of the community which created them and in which they are used’. These events include wars, battles, famines or pestilences and other social experiences that are characteristic of such a community (Delano, 1973:77). The next section reviews some studies on proverbs, followed by a brief discussion of the theoretical framework for the paper. I then explain the data collection procedure before presenting and analysing them. Thereafter I present the concluding remarks.

## **Literature Review**

A number of scholars have made fruitful efforts to demonstrate the value and the importance of proverbs among the Yorubá and other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Delano’s (1973) paper makes a passing reference to the significance of Yorubá proverbs as one of the sources of Yorubá history. Udoidem’s (1984) paper examines the epistemological significance of proverbs among the Ibíbiós in Nigeria. Using an eclectic approach, Ojoadé (2004) classifies Yorubá proverbs under religious, moral and psychological, environmental and climatic proverbs, oriental and occidental borrowing of proverbs. Adeleke’s (2009) study illustrates the value of proverbs to Yorubá historiography, using the concept of globalisation as a launch pad.

Using Eco’s concept of ‘Semiotics of Metaphor’, Daramola (2013) attempts an exploratory categorization of aspects of the semiotic systems of English and Yorubá. Ademilokun’s (2014) paper focuses on Yorubá proverbs and the anti-corruption crusade in Nigeria. Dickson & Mbosowo’s (2014) paper examines the semantic import of African proverbs about women and their status as depicted by selected proverbs and wise sayings from several ethnic groups across the continent. Ehineni’s (2016) study, a discourse and structural analysis of Yorubá proverbs collected from oral interviews and native Yorubá texts, shows that proverbs are a culturally and linguistically rich significant part of the Yorubá speech community. Falóju’s (2020) paper focuses on the worldview, the socio-cultural and the anthropological linguistic import of children and childbirth in Russian and Yorubá proverbs. Using the worldview theory, the paper brings to light the peculiarities, similarities and differences in the representation of children and childbirth in the two cultures. It however argues that the cultural phenomenon observable in the

representation of children and childbirth in these two cultures is somewhat universal.

Yorubá proverbs are one of the tools for communicating, negotiating and practising moralities. They constitute the foundation on which moral positions can be taken and established. Using some purposively selected proverbs that deal with the Yorubá concept of “Omoluabi” this paper employs a cultural linguistic approach to scrutinize selected proverbs in order to unveil the underlying cultural patterns in the proverbs.

## **Methodology**

Proverbs used for analysis in this study were drawn from written texts and journals. In addition, different informants volunteered some proverbs, while the researcher also took advantage of being a native speaker and user of Yorubá language.

## **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical anchor for this study is Cultural Linguistics. Cultural Linguistics is a field of research which explores the interrelationship between language, culture and conceptualizations (Sharifian, 2011, 2017a, 2017b) by integrating cognitive linguistics with three anthropological traditions namely ethnography of speaking, ethnosemantics and Boasian Linguistics (Palmer, 1996:10-26). This multidisciplinary field of study explores conceptualizations encoded through linguistic elements (one of such culturally defined linguistic elements is the proverb) and is able to reveal the values and beliefs hidden in a people’s language. Cultural Linguistics provides insights into the nature of, and the relationship amongst, cultural cognition, cultural conceptualizations, and language. Cultural cognition is the cognition that results from the interactions among the members of a speech community. As a “collective memory bank” of the cultural cognition of a speech community, language is presumed to store and communicate cultural cognition. In other words, language is a tool for the transmission of cultural conceptualizations. The analytical framework of Cultural Linguistics provides a number of analytical tools (cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors which is the most relevant tool for the current study), referred to as ‘cultural conceptualizations,’ and explores how they are encoded in certain features of human languages and language varieties. Cultural metaphors are cross-domain conceptualizations grounded in cultural traditions such as folk medicine, worldview, or a spiritual belief system (see Sharifian et al, 2008). For example, temperature terms, in particular the terms *garm* ‘warm’ and *sard* ‘cold’, are used as cultural metaphors in Persian to

categorise not only edible things (fish is “cold”, but walnuts are “warm), such as food and fruit, but human nature as well. Thus, individuals may also be characterized as having a hot or a cold “nature”. These categorisations have provided Persian speakers with a kind of folk medicine approach to people’s health problems. Thus, people diagnose each other’s rather mild illnesses as due to a kind of temperament imbalance, such as having had too much “cold” or “hot” food, and the opposite type is often recommended as a kind of remedy. For example, someone may feel lethargic and that can be attributed to the result of eating beef, which is categorised as a “cold” food. The person may then be advised to have some “warm” food to rebalance his/her digestive system. This advice is consistent with Iranian Traditional Medicine (ITM) and the theory of the four humours, in which temperature concepts play a pivotal role. In the following section the data for the study are presented and analysed using a socio-cultural linguistic approach.

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

Proverb: *Iwa ni orisa; bi a ba ti hu u si ni ifi gbe 'ni*

Translation: Good character is a deity; it favours one as it is exhibited.

Interpretation: If you have good character, you will benefit from it. As you sow, so will you reap.

Cultural metaphor: In traditional African religion, deities are supreme beings that elders regularly pour libations and offer prayers to, giving thanks to them and seeking their blessing. They are also highly venerated and considered guardians of the moral order. To equate good character with a deity, therefore, is to say good character is something to be desired, hallowed and sought after, the same way we seek God.

Proverb: *Apa Lara, Igbonwo ni iyekan; bi a o ri eni fehinti bi ole li a nri; bi a ko ri eni gbojule, a tera mo ise eni.*

Translation: A man's arms are his relatives, his elbows are his brothers and sisters; if we find no one to lean on, we are like a Lazy man; if we find no one to rely on, we apply ourselves to our work.

Interpretation: people should apply themselves to their work instead of hoping for help from others. (The proverb extols hardwork)

Cultural metaphor: In the traditional African setting, relatives/family are the people one maintains close ties with, exchanging visits, phone calls, letters and email, holiday or birthday gifts and turning to one another for assistance in times of need. Family members are the ones who provide socialization, affection and emotional support. Their functions also include economic, protective, educational, religious and recreational ones. By saying ‘a man's arms are his relatives’, one is more or less saying that the same way one



depends and counts on one's relatives for all manner of support, one should consider one's hands as dependable and reliable tools of labour that will never fail one.

Proverb: *Ibi gbogbo ni iro adaba l'orun.*

Translation: The dove finds everywhere comfortable (the dove is noted as a bird of peace). Symbol of peace

Interpretation: A peaceful man is likely to find peace where ever he goes; it is the state of his own mind and thoughts which determines the situation in which he is likely to find himself. (a piece of advice on the need to be a peace-loving individual)

Cultural Metaphor: The dove represents love and peace. A person referred to as a dove is usually peaceable, loving and kind with a good understanding of life and problems that others may be having; he or she is also very devoted to his or her goals and loved ones. He/she would go to any length to ensure that others achieve their goals. Such a person is sacrificial and altruistic by nature.

Proverb: *Aguntan ti o ba ba aja rin yi o je imi.*

Translation: The sheep that moves in the company of dogs will eat excrement (dogs, although very useful in Yorubaland, are considered to be low animals because of their habit of eating human waste. In the olden days, many nursing mothers kept dogs as pets. The dogs served the purpose of eating the excrement of infants.

Interpretation: This is a warning to avoid bad company.

“Evil communication corrupts good manners”

Cultural metaphor: In Yorubá culture, the sheep is known for its gentility or at times, its sheer stupidity or sluggish intellect, while the dog is known for being an uncritical follower (strays easily); also for sexual incontinence / promiscuity and lack of table manners.

Proverb: *Alaso ala ki ilo iso elepo.*

Translation: One who is clad in fine white clothes (apparel) does not go to the stall of a palm-oil seller.

Interpretation: If you have a good name it is unwise to move in bad company. (If you have a good character (alaso ala) you won't hang out with people of questionable or dubious character (elepo)

Cultural metaphor: In African, including Yorubá culture, white ('ala' or 'funfun') symbolizes purity, innocence and all that is good. The Hausas, for example, believe that white is a symbol of positive and desirable things. In Yorubá colour classification, 'funfun' represents a category of colours which includes white (other colours in this category are turquoise, blue, silver, chrome and other icy colours) that connotes peaceful feeling. White is seen as a replica of purity. Therefore, white attire is worn by people who are not expected to participate in or do evil. The gods and goddesses that are described and

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represented with *'funfun'* colours are practically accepted as the 'good ones'. In contrast, pupa (which is the colour of palm-oil *'epo'*) refers to a category of colours that encompasses colours such as orange, dark yellow, gold, etc., which relate to hot, fiery characteristics. The colour of fire (as well as palm oil) is red which connotes danger and fearful individuals or creatures. *'Pupa'* (red) has the psychological dimension of a dangerous personality who possesses a trait of wickedness and lacks mercy; someone who is passionate about evil, gets angry very easily and whose second nature is evil. The associated deities are the ones involved in carrying out evil. Buildings that are not meant for the general public (e.g. shrines) are painted red. Examples of such buildings in Yorubaland are the buildings of Orisapopo in Ogbomosho, Obatala in Ila, Oya in Jebba and Irele in Ikirun (see Oluwole, Ahmad & Ossen, 2013).

Proverb: *'Fila ko dun bi ki a mo o de; ki a ri owo ra eleya ko to ki oye 'ni'*

Also: *'Gele odun bi ka mo we, ka mo we ko to ki oye ni'*.

Interpretation: Having a cap is not so pleasant or as important as knowing how to wear it. Having money to buy eleya cloth is not as important as the fit of the apparel on the wearer (There are different ways of wearing a cap in Yorubaland; Eleya is an expensive native fabric).

Interpretation: To reach a position of honour and regard is less important than to know how to maintain the dignity such a position requires. Looking like a dignitary is less important than having dignity that befits the office. Do not just look the part, have the character. This is the English equivalent of "Appearances are deceptive".

Cultural metaphor: In Yoruba culture, it is expected that respectable, responsible and wealthy men and women would dress in expensive attires complete with caps (for men) and headpieces (for the women). But we all know that it is not the clothes that make a man or woman. This proverb delves into the core of Yoruba value system, reminding one that the real beauty is the inner beauty and not the outer one. Thus, to emphasize the importance attached to good character, the Yoruba people would say: *"bibire ko se fowó rá"* (that is good character/reputation cannot be bought with money). Another proverb with a similar interpretation is:

Proverb: *'Iwa rere l'eso eniyan.'*

Interpretation: This means that 'good character is the perfect adornment. A good name is better than riches.

Cultural metaphor: Outward dressing/adornment is not what makes you a person. What makes you beautiful as a person is your character. Good character, therefore, is like wearing gemstones: a self-adornment that stands you out.

Proverb: *'Ìdòbálè kè ì sèwà, tinú n' ẹ̀ nínú.'*

Interpretation: Prostration is not synonymous with virtue, one's intention is in the mind.

Cultural metaphor: The proverb preaches caution in terms of interpersonal relationships. Among the Yorubá, prostrating (or kneeling) is a sign of respect, a gesture which elders do not joke with. The proverb, however, takes that into account to caution people that prostrating to show respect does not erase the person's ulterior motives. Simply put, that a person shows traditional ethics by prostrating to an authority is not a sign of full support or loyalty, and should not be wholly taken as such.

Proverb: *Ìjàkùmò kẹ́ í rinde òsán, eni a bíire kẹ́ í rínru'.*

Interpretation: The jackal is barely seen during the day, one of noble birth shouldn't be seen at midnight.

Cultural metaphor: Traditionally, the Yorubá believe that the night is a respecter of no one. Hence, the saying, *òkùnkùn ò mẹnì òmò'* - 'once it's dark, your reputation is unnoticed'. It is also believed spiritually that one may encounter malevolent spirits when it is dark. Hence, it is advisable to do whatever one has to do during the day, and remain indoors at night.

Proverb: *'Bí enu bá tí n gba dodo, kò ní gba ododo'.*

Interpretation: When the mouth is well fed, it becomes docile.

Cultural metaphor: The proverb cautions against incessant acceptance of gifts, especially by people saddled with responsibilities to maintain law and order. It draws example from the fact that when one has his/her hands in a cookie jar, he/she finds it difficult to criticize others that have decided to do same. *'Dodo'* is symbolises anything tempting or pleasurable. It does not necessarily translate to 'fried plantain'.

Proverb: *Ìjẹkúje ní kẹ́ í jẹ́ kẹ́, enu àgbà ó tólẹ'.*

Interpretation: An elder who eats without caution loses respect.

Cultural metaphor: Elders are authorities in Yorubaland. It is expected of the youth to listen whenever an elder admonishes or advices. However, the proverb is a warning to the elders that the position is not automatic, or synonymous with age. It belongs to elders who have been able to caution themselves on how they relate with the younger generation in all aspects.

Proverb: *'Orúkọ rere sà n jù wúra àti fadáká ló'.*

Interpretation: A good name is better than gold and silver

Cultural metaphor: The proverb reiterates the tradition of knowing the source of a person's wealth before partaking or spending with such a person. Among the Yorubá of old, if a person's source of wealth is not well defined or known, the community will distance themselves from such a person. This is because the society believes that for an individual to have acquired such wealth suddenly, they must have thrown caution to the wind, not minding whatever

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the consequences will be. They have chosen wealth over humanity, and others will not allow this to happen to them. Silver and gold represents wealth and other good things that may lead to greed.

Proverb: ‘*Ówó tán lówó oníwà, ó dàsónú.*’

Interpretation: In the absence of money, a good person becomes despondent.

Cultural metaphor: This proverb reiterates the position of the Yorubá on the importance of money. This Proverb preaches against the act of greed and how important it is to maintain a good reputation, and not lose it over money. This proverb however insists that money is key to existence, and in the absence of money, especially from one who once had enough, such a person’s attitude may be affected. Simply put, lack of money is frustrating.

Proverb: ‘*Ọba tó je tí ilú dẹ̀rò, orúkọ rẹ̀ kò ní paré, èyí tí ó je tí ilú tó, orúkọ rẹ̀ kò ní paré.*’

Interpretation: History will not forget the king whose reign was peaceful, and one whose reign was full of turmoil.

The proverb implies that in whatever we do, we should always remember that our acts will someday become history. More importantly, things that will be said about us after our demise, will be far more than what actually happened. For example, if a king is seen as wicked by his subjects during his reign his subjects might not be able to say what and how they feel about him, but long after he is gone, his acts will be narrated and made to look worse than how they really were. The proverb preaches the importance of living a decent life in order to leave good legacies. More importantly, it must be remembered always that nothing lasts forever. Every action will someday become history but history will last forever. The proverb highlights the fact that one is immortalized in the memories of others through ones actions and inaction long after one has left the scene.

## Conclusion

The Yorubá culture is a repository of traditions, norms, values and social thoughts which structure social relations and actions according to indigenous value systems regardless of modernity induced by the over 100 years of colonisation (Laitin 1986; Okunoye 2010). A significant aspect of Yorubá popular culture propagated through proverbs and songs as well as everyday routine interactions accentuates the value of good character. This paper has explored the inherent principles of ‘*omoluabi*’, as reflected in selected Yorubá proverbs. The main thrust of the paper is that a cultural re-orientation of Nigerians towards the ideals of the Yoruba philosophy of *omoluabi* (good

character) would bring about positive effects in remoulding the Nigerian society towards a moral path. It is important for the society to go back to the basics by integrating programmes that will teach young Nigerian citizens at the primary and secondary school levels aspects of the Yorubá notion of good character. Proverbs that emphasize virtues such as patience, respect for elders and constituted authority, selflessness, contentment, dignity in labour and hard work as reflected in many of the Yorubá proverbs should be incorporated into the primary and secondary schools' Civic Studies curriculum. If the youth, in turn, imbibe the lessons behind these proverbs, it is very likely that many of them will grow up with the right attitude.

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