

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Animal Totems in Some Selected Yorùbá Proverbs

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Abstract

This study examines animal totems in selected Yorùbá proverbs and their instructive information because none of the existing studies on Yorùbá proverbs have addressed this. The analysis of this research is premised on the Ethnography of Communication. Data in this research were sourced from native speakers of Yorùbá and Yorùbá proverb texts. It is argued that Yorùbá maintains the notion that animals and human beings share certain characteristics, and the animal features can be a yardstick to measure human behaviour. Findings in this study show that proverbs relating to animals are used to educate, inform, admonish, ridicule, encourage, advise, warn, and satirize the polity.

Keywords: *Yorùbá, proverb, animal totem, culture, language*

1 Introduction

The proverb is one of the genres of Yorùbá oral literature.¹ It has been described as witty sayings laced with the knowledge of cultural values, history, worldview, and natural environmental terrains of the native speakers of a language. Proverbs are premised on absolute truth that can be verified within the ambit of culture. According to Finnegan (1970: 389), a proverb is a saying in the more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense, and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it. For Ohwovoriole (2008: 189), “proverbs are like a code whose message is available only to those who can decipher it.” This view is corroborated in Whiting (1932: 302) cited in Ohwovoriole (2008: 189), where she describes the proverb as:

an expression which, owing its birth to people, testifies its origin in form and phases. It expresses what is apparently a fundamental, truth that is, a truism – in homely language, often adorned, however, with alliteration and rhyme. It is usually short but need not be; it is usually true but needs to be. Some proverbs have both a literal and a figurative meaning, either of which makes perfect sense, but more often, they have but one of the two. A proverb must be venerable; it must bear the sign of antiquity. Since a clever literary man may counterfeit such signs, it should be attested in different places and times.

The excerpt shows that proverbs are based on absolute truth, and they can have both literal and figurative meanings. Proverbs are not language-specific; they are attested in all cultures and languages of the world. In Africa, all cultures have proverbs and witty sayings that are used for different purposes as occasions dictate. Fasiku (2006: 25) explains that

proverbs encapsulate the worldview of a people and serve as a means of arousing, defining, manifesting, and establishing the expectations, aspirations, and consciousness of a people (...) proverbs serve as a linguistic confirmation of the totality of a people's worldview and the epistemic cognition of this world-view.

The inference drawn from Fasiku (2006) is that proverbs show the psychology of the people based on their worldview, ethics, moral values, and norms of society. Zakariyah (2013) notes, among other things, that proverbs are one of the products of language that are used among African communities to educate, teach morals, teach norms, teach social values, enhance social control and maintain orderliness in society. Ojo (2015: 251) explains that proverbs are reflections and expressions of wisdom, ethics, philosophy, and beliefs of a given society. Proverbs in Yorùbá culture are used to show society's views on every occasion and their reaction to issues generally. This presupposes that the Yorùbá have proverbs for every situation and occasion. In the ancient Yorùbá settings, the knowledge of proverbs is one of the prerequisites of attaining leadership positions because individuals who possess versed knowledge of proverbs are deemed to have a good understanding of the history, norms, and value system of the society. This fact is acknowledged by Fayemi (2009: 63) when he says:

The Yorùbá accord great respect for intelligent and expert use of language, especially the use of proverbs, and as such, the àgbà (elders) is expected to exhibit/demonstrate this capacity. And the capacity for exhibiting this expert use of language is not solely based on old age as there are some youths who are witty in the genre of proverbial communication and intelligent use of language. These people are also seen as elders in their own right.

For Alabi (2009: 515), the ability to mix or intersperse speeches with appropriately chosen and well-connected proverbs and proverbial expressions is considered a sign of native intelligence, cultural learnedness, and erudition. Thus, the Yorùbá societies in the olden days always considered individuals with vast knowledge of proverbs in leadership positions so that the knowledge of the proverbs would be preserved and, as well, transmitted to the younger generation. This accords credence to the Yorùbá informal educational system that was practiced in the ancient period, where education is predicated on a sound understanding of society's cultural values, norms, and ethics. However, in modern society, proverbs are still prevalent among Yorùbá people, and people who know the appropriate use are still accorded some forms of respect. Nwachukwu –Agbada (2002: 6) rightly observes that proverbs are statements of rules of conduct or basic laws of existence arrived at through human experience. She explains further that proverbs amplify one's position in a discourse; confer authority in a viewpoint; educate; instruct and satirize for positive behaviour modification or depreciation; serve as a rhetorical tool in persuasion; raise the image of their users" image imbue what is said with poeticism.

In Yorùbá culture, some proverbs are couched with symbolic animal totems to put across messages to human beings. The animal-related proverbs are drawn largely from the characteristics of the animals that have educative information about human existence. The theme of the proverbs ranges from human character and shortcomings, the value of children, social

norms, good manners, admonition, advice, and caution. In this study, Yorùbá proverbs with animal totems will be analyzed because none of the existing works on Yorùbá have addressed the subject matter, and the lesson drawn from such proverbs will be discussed as they relate to modern-day society.

This paper is organized into seven sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two contains the literature review. Section three is the theoretical framework. Section four treats data collection, while section five discusses data presentation and analysis. Section six discusses the sociolinguistic implications of animal totems, while section seven is the conclusion.

2 Related works

Ohwovoriola (2008), in her work, explains animal imagery in Urhobo proverbs using the functionalist theory. She explains that proverbs with animal totems in Urhobo are used to educate, inform and satirize the polity. She claims further that local myths and legends surround the totems of animals such as Iguana, Boa-constrictor, cobra, crocodile, alligator, hyrax, monitor lizard, dog, tiger, tortoise, rabbit, and snails, and there are sacred edicts concerning the treatment of these animals. She states that people from the polities where these totems are revered are not permitted to harm, kill or eat such animals. She concludes by establishing that there are interesting interrelationships between traditional beliefs, proverbs, verbal folklores such as legends and myths in respect to the animals. Ojo (2015) analyses the functional aspects of proverbs in selected Yoruba written literature. She identifies and describes the communicative functions of these proverbs. The article reveals that Yoruba proverbs play important roles in interpersonal relationships as well as community development. Akanbi (2015) discusses Yorùbá proverbs through the lens of vulgar language. At the same time, stressing the fact that the Yorùbá frowns at the use of sexual euphemism, which is seen as taboo, and that the users of such words are seen as uncultured. Therefore, he concludes that such proverbs use sexually explicit words that are not regarded as obscene in the context of their usage. Abiodun (2018) focuses on proverbs that deal with the elders in Yorùbá society. He establishes that the positions of elders are vital in society because they are the custodian of culture. He explains that age, beards, accomplishments, marriage, chieftaincy titles, and childbearing are some of the qualities of elders in Yorùbá. He notes further that elders in Yorùbá, as depicted in proverbs, must possess wisdom, deep thought, patience, perseverance, experience, cheerfulness, and the ability to settle disputes. Faleye (2018) provides an overview of the importance of the dress code, its artistry, and law to underscore the relevance and importance of dress attached to the issue of identity, beautification, and dignity in ancient times through some Yoruba proverbial sayings. Olofinsao (2018) identifies the use of proverbs in the day-to-day administration of Yorùbá community affairs in a formal system of governance. The article discovers that the Yorùbá proverbs are employed as a form of a plain statement of fact or a warning to those in governance either to praise or to guide them. She concludes that Yorùbá proverbs are a repertoire of knowledge used to control the affairs of the communities for peaceful co-existence. Akanbi (2020) examines Yoruba proverbs seeming contradiction and brings to the fore the implications of such contradictions. The paradox of this contradiction affirms that the nature of man calls for different

proverbs that match the behaviour of people. The paper concludes that the seeming inconsistencies observed in Yoruba proverbs portray the nature of inconsistencies and contradiction in man. The paper stressed that proverbs are not contradictory on their own, but they portray unpredictable behaviour found in human nature.

3 Theoretical Framework

This study deploys the Ethnography of Communication (henceforth, EOC) for its discussion. Dell Hymes proposed the theory in 1962, and its major concern is the investigation of language use in its cultural settings. According to Hymes (1962: 22), speech cannot be considered separate from the sociological and cultural factors that help shape linguistic forms and create meaning. As stipulated in Hymes (1962), the theory places a high premium on the interface of language and culture and the different manners in which individuals or groups perceive and experience the world in their domain. It is noted that the primary concern of the theory is the analysis of communication within the wider context of the social and cultural practices and beliefs of the members of a particular culture or speech community. The theory emphasizes the inseparability of culture and language for the total understanding of the meaning of an utterance. Thus, within the framework of the theory, the total understanding of an utterance will be predicated on the following: Settings (of speech event), Participants (people involved in the interaction), Ends (outcome and goal of conversation), Act sequence (actual form and content of what is said), Key (tone and meaning), Instrument (choice of the channel), Norms (of interaction and behaviours), and Genre (type of interaction).

We submit in this study that proverbs are laced with social values, cultural beliefs, world view, and the interlocutors' background knowledge; thus, the understanding requires a firm grasp of EOC. This is so because language cannot be divorced from the social and cultural context of its use, and the participants in the speech community also serve as a formidable force because they create interpretation and meaning for the codes in their communication event.

4 Data Collection

The data for this research were collected from ten informants who are natives of Òşogbo, Ìkirè, Ìbàdàn, Òyó, and Ògbómóşò. The ages of the informants range from 65- 80 years. The choice of the elderly people is borne of the fact that most of them are not exposed to Western education, and they use Yorùbá mainly for their purpose of communication. Interviews were conducted for our informants in the five towns mentioned above (Òşogbo, Ìkirè, Ìbàdàn, Òyó, and Ogbòmóşò) and their responses were recorded in digital recorder for the purpose of transcription. Apart from the native speakers, Yorùbá texts on proverbs were also consulted to authenticate the interpretations and comments of the elderly people collected during our fieldwork.

5 Data Presentation and Analysis

5.1 The Animal Totems in the Selected Yorùbá Proverbs

The names of the animals mentioned below that are referred to in the selected Yorùbá proverbs have different characteristics that are related to human life.

Monkey	“Òbọ”	Lizard	“Aláńgbá”	Grass-cutter	“Òyà”
Goat	“Ìdèrègbè”	Frog	“Àkèré”	Leopard	“Akátá”
Vulture	“Igún”	Snake	“Ejò”	Cat	“Ológbò/ológìnní”
Pigeon	“Eyélé”	Elephant	“Erin”	Chameleon	“Ògà/alágemọ”
Chicken	“Adiye”	Tiger	“Èkún”	Toad	“Òpòlọ”
Dog	“Ajá”	Lion	“Kìniún”	Earthworm	“Ekòlọ”
Rat	“Òkété”	Dove	“Àdàbà”	Hawk	“Àṣá”
Bush fowl	“Àparò”	Falcon	“Àwòdi”	Rabbit	“Ehoró”

Many folklore and myths are associated with these animals, and each of them shares certain unique features that are instructive to human beings in their day-to-day activities.

5.2 Data Analysis

(i) *Àkùkọ tí yòd kọ lágba àṣá ò nù be ní òròmọ.* “The cock that will crow will not fall prey to the hawk at tender age.”

It is a known fact that a hawk is a significant challenge for a chick’s survival at the early stage of its life. However, against all odds, some chicks still outwit the challenge. Note that “cock”, “crow,” and “hawk” are three symbolic elements in the proverb. The “hawk” symbolizes death or extinction, while the “cock” is synonymous with a young man or woman with full potential. The “crow” means a duty they will perform later in their life. For instance, cock crows wake people up in the morning, afternoon, and evening to tell time. The cock has a masculine connotation, but it symbolizes energy and zeal, which means that one who will become a warrior or prominent person will survive the oddity of untimely extinction to fulfil his destiny. In human parlance, the proverb is used to affirm the decree of providence on one’s life that whoever is destined for greatness will not be nipped in the bud by adversaries or death. This proverb is rendered to encourage younger people to be focused, that no matter the tribulations confronting them at the moment, their destiny will prevail. The fact of this proverb is applicable to our day-to-day activities; our growth and development generally as challenges and obstacles may stand as a cog in the wheel of our successes or nip our aspirations in the bud, but destiny in Yorùbá mythology is a strong will that will prevail over the challenges to pave the way for our desired achievements.

(ii) *Ìyànjú gbígba ojoojúmó ni òbò fi í mọ igi í gùn.* “Series of daily trials make the monkey attain perfect climbing skills.”

It is common knowledge that monkeys show skill in climbing trees and playing with the branches and trunk, much to people’s admiration. This feat is not attained overnight but through learning and constant practice. It is a known fact that monkeys are used to running on trees. Yorùbá believes that when running activities meet monkeys on the ground, they become weak. The monkey starts learning to climb from the cradle. The monkey always straps the cub on her chest after birth jumping from one tree to another in search of food and water for itself and the cub. Through this process, the cub gets its first orientation. Second, when the cub is a bit mature, the mother will start the initiation of using his hands-on trees to prepare the cub for the future. During this period, a series of mistakes will be made before the monkey attains the level of perfection that will allow it to fend for itself. The proverb is used to emphasize that, through consistency and persistence; perfection will be the end result. It is also used to inform the younger ones or starters that perfection is not attained in an instant; a series of mistakes must have been made, and the ability to resist odds will usher in the desired perfection. The feat attained by the monkey as a sign of success is through constant practice and the ability to learn from different mistakes. Yorùbá elders, having noted that the attributes of consistency, perseverance, and doggedness of the monkey are germane to human success, normally encourage younger people to borrow clues from this special attribute of the monkey in their business, education, and vocation. Note that three words are symbolic in the proverb. “Òbò” “the monkey” here means a starter/ aspiring individual, “ojoojúmó” that literarily means daily symbolizes consistency and perseverance, while igi “tree” is synonymous with success.

(iii) *Bù fún mi n bù fún ọ làkèré n ké lódò.* “Life is symbiotic croak the frogs in the river.”

This proverb is derived possibly from the melodic sounds of the frog, which seem to be like a conversation between them. One will make the sound ọ-ọ-ọ while others will respond similarly. The noise made by the frogs is similar to give and take. This proverb is rendered to tell people that life is a symbiotic relationship. That is if you accord respect or assistance to people, the same will be given back to you. On the other hand, if you insist on not giving necessary help or assistance to people, the same act will be reciprocated to you. It must be noted that proverbs are context-sensitive. This same proverb may be rendered as a form of agreement between two people who are willing to assist each other to show that certain benefits are required from the other person to show appreciation once particular assistance is rendered.

(iv) *Èsò pèlẹ lejò n gun àgbọn.* “It is through patience that snake mounts the coconut tree.”

The coconut trees are very smooth, and this makes it to be slippery. Thus, a snake that will climb the tree must be patient and extra-careful. In human parlance, the coconut tree symbolizes the soil terrain, the world we live in. It is a common belief among the Yorùbá that life is slippery and that one needs to be careful. In modern-day society, people are eager to make headway in life very early through any possible means available. The older people normally render the proverb to tell the younger ones that patience and perseverance are crucial to success. The elderly, having

observed that snakes need more patience and precision in climbing a tree, felt humans should imbibe the same in climbing their ladder of success. The inference drawn from the proverbs is that when one is not patient in climbing the ladder of any race in life, it is not unlikely that the person will fall without getting to his destination. This proverb is rendered to teach patience and discourage over-ambition.

(v) *Erin kì í fọn kí ọmọ rẹ fọn.* “Elephants and her offspring can’t be trumpeting simultaneously.”

Elephants daily, walk-in teams with their calves; the parents walk in the front while the calves stay in the middle. It is only the parents that trumpet on the journey. This silence on the part of calves indicates submissiveness, humility, and courtesy. In a real-life situation, father and son cannot be operating simultaneously to avoid unnecessary rivalry and unhealthy competition. This proverb is rendered to discourage disorderliness in society. Since the adage is context-sensitive, it can also be used to discourage the dominance of particular kin over the rest of the people. It can also be used to emphasize that father and son cannot be in the limelight simultaneously. Yorùbá elders normally use this proverb to caution someone (probably an heir to the throne) who wants to be making a decision when the father is still alive and capable of desisting from such an act. This is not to say that father and son cannot be in the position of authority at the same time, but their domains must be different.

(vi) *Ajá tí yòò sọ̀nù kò ní í gbọ̀ fẹ̀rẹ̀ ọ̀lọ̀dẹ̀.* “The dog that will go astray will not listen to the whistle of the hunter.”

Dogs accompany the hunters on a hunting spree, who probably might be their owners. They help the hunters in sighting and catching animals. Frequently, they are always ahead of the hunters in the bush. As a result, the hunters use the whistle to summon them that they are ready to go home or draw their attention to come close to the hunters’ camp. However, the dog that will go astray or get lost in the bush would have dwelt in the bush such that it cannot hear the whistle of the hunters. It must be noted that three words are symbolic in this proverb. They are *ajá* “dog”, *fẹ̀rẹ̀* “whistle” *ọ̀lọ̀dẹ̀* “hunter.” The “dog” here means a person, whistle in the context connotes admonition and the hunter could be advisers or elders. This proverb is given to those who are not willing to listen to corrections from others. When the elderly suspect that a community member is engaging in an illicit affair that can ruin them, they usually call the attention of such a person, his relatives, or friends to admonish them to desist from such an act. After a series of warnings, if they insist, the proverb will be given to show that they are toying the path of danger which will lead to destruction in the end.

(vii) *Àgùntan tó bá bá ajá rìn yòò jẹ̀ ìgbẹ̀.* “Sheep that fraternizes with dogs will eat defecation.”

The sheep are known for eating grasses, while local dogs eat feces/excreta in the bush or anywhere. The sheep in this proverb symbolizes mild character, while the dog means wayward character. The excreta here means negative influence, which others may get involved in through peer group pressure. This proverb admonishes the hearer against a lousy company or peer group

pressure and its antecedent influence. It simply shows that one needs to be extra careful as bad company corrupts good manners. This proverb is pertinent in our present society, where adults engage in illicit affairs because of peer group pressure. On this note, the majority have deviated from their upbringing. The proverb is used to caution a child brought up in a decent home not to join a lousy gang to avoid bad influence, which may likely jeopardize their lives.

(viii) *Bí ajá bá forí kó imí á mọ ọ̀nà ilé olówó rẹ.* “When dogs encounter misfortune, it turns back to the owner’s domain.”

Excreta are associated with local dogs because it is their best food. They go to the bush in search of it. Due to the impatience of the dog, the excreta may fall on its head or stain its body. Local dogs cannot wash their bodies. They have to take the stain to the master for necessary action. Having observed this character of the dog, the Yorùbá believes that whenever dogs encounter strange things in their journey, they will run back to the owner’s abode. The same applies to humans; whenever they experience difficulties, they recourse to their home where their family members can assist them.

Moreover, people tend to remember the serenity and sweetness of their home when faced with challenges with nobody to assist them in a foreign land. Apart from this, whenever a person encounters tribulation, their first succour is the family or loved ones. This proverb is used to counsel people on the importance of their home.

(ix) *Kàkà kí kìnìún ó ẹ̀ akápò ẹ̀kùn oníkálukú yòò ẹ̀ ọ̀dẹ̀ tí ẹ̀ lóṣòṣò.* “For a lion to collaborate with a tiger on the same hunting spree, each will do its hunting separately.”

Lion and tiger are potent animals, feeding on flesh (carnivores). The two animals cannot be seen together in hunting games because they may have a tough fight. Apart from this, cheating may ensue because the lion has more strength than the tiger. Thus, they will be more productive to hunt separately to realize their goal. This proverb is given to encourage self-reliance to avoid unnecessary cheating. It also captures instances where there was a rivalry between two groups, and one of the parties is unwilling to succumb to the dictates of the other party. As a result, they decided to go on their separate ways to avoid quarrels or misunderstandings.

(x) *Gbogbo ilérí aláńgbá ọ̀ ju ọ̀dọ̀bàlẹ̀ lo.* “All the bravados of the lizard does not transcend prostration.”

The lizard is known for crawling on the ground and moving on the wall on its stomach. All struggles or braggart cannot exceed its laying posture because it cannot stand up like other animals to resist attacks. This proverb is used to ridicule a bravado or proud person who insists they have nothing to do with other people or who feels their help does not matter. This proverb is used to ridicule a proud person to show that they have nothing to show for their pride.

(xi) *Ewuré kò ní ọ̀un ọ̀ ẹ̀ ọ̀mọ̀ iyá àgùntàn, àgùntàn ló ní Iya ọ̀un ọ̀ bí dúdú.* “The goat does not separate itself from the sheep, it is the sheep that laments that her mother did not give birth to blacks.”

It is known that goats and sheep are different breeds of mammals, and they share other characteristics in terms of their colours, outlook, and behaviour. These colours (black and white of the animals) are symbolic and synonymous with negative and positive impacts. The black of the goat could mean bad character, poverty, or lack of education. The white of the sheep symbolizes affluence, wealth, and achievements. Note that there are no white goats and black sheep. This proverb shows that interaction between two people from different classes is challenging and most likely impossible. However, it can also be used when the relationship of two parties becomes sour due to the activities of one of the parties that have pushed the other to the wall. It aptly captures the scenario where a party, group, or individual in a relationship has endured the illicit activities of the other party for an extended period and tried every means to sustain the relationship without any hope in sight. This proverb is given to vindicate the party who has reasonably endured the odious acts of the other to show that he wants friendship, but the other insists on enmity.

(xii) Eḡe tó bá fi ara rẹ́ wé igún èyìn ààrò ni yòò sùn. “Any bird that compares itself with the vulture will find itself in the pot of soup.”

In Yorùbá tradition, the vulture is a sacred bird that must not be eaten or killed unless it dies naturally. It is an abomination for anybody to kill a vulture in Yoruba land. As a result of the cultural restriction placed on the killings of vultures, they can be found anywhere on the street devouring dead animals, but if any other birds did the same, they would end up in the pot of soup as a meal of the hunter. This proverb is used in instances where one compares their lifestyle, success, and growth with somebody else that has the money or has strong backing. In this situation, the proverb will be used to admonish, warn and caution such a person so that they will desist from such acts they won't find themselves in deep problems. This proverb captures the present situation in our society where social media is in vogue and celebrities have flooded it with various shows to show off their wealth and lifestyle. As a result, many youths want to copy their character and lifestyle. This proverb succinctly summarizes that making an unnecessary comparison is dangerous and deadly, and wanting to behave like somebody else may lead one into the dungeon. The saying means that imitation is risky.

(xiii) Àgò ló kó eḡelẹ́ pọ́ mọ́ adiyẹ́. “It is the roost that brought pigeon and chicken together.”

Naturally, pigeons and chickens cannot stay together in a cage; the pigeon will get hurt. Yorùbá had observed the situation critically and concluded that the only thing that can make them stay together is a tight situation where the chicken cannot exhibit its character. This proverb is used when a bad situation brought two people who were not supposed to be in the same position together, primarily people of different classes. In this situation, if the younger person or person of low status is overstepping their boundary, the proverb will be rendered to rebuke and remind them that the situation compels their attitude.

(xiv) *Àgò lo máa dé adiyẹ gbẹ̀yìn.* “It is the cage that will house the chicken at the end.”

The cage is the abode of the chicken. No matter how it roams about, it will come back to it. The cage as used in this proverb has different connotations based on the context of its use. It may symbolize death in a broad sense, the wrath of the law, or succumbing to pressure. This proverb is told to caution miscreants or criminals who thought they could escape the consequences of their crimes; it is a matter of time, and the law will catch up with them. In another sense, it can be rendered to a lady that proves hard to get at the beginning of a relationship by putting up all sorts of troubles to discourage the suitors from wooing her that she will eventually end up with the man she despised. In another context, this proverb may be used to warn men about the inevitable end, death. No matter how long we spend on earth, human beings will fall into the cage of death despite shying away from it.

(xv) *Ajá kì í rorò kó ọ́júlẹ̀ mẹ́jí.* “A dog cannot be fierce to guard two houses at the same time.”

Some dogs are well-trained to perform the function of a guard. These dogs are often ferocious and ready to attack enemies. However, no matter the training the dogs receive, they cannot watch over two different houses simultaneously. This piece of wisdom is used to prevent interference in other people’s affairs. It is given to tell people to mind their business instead of poking their nose into matters that have no bearing on their life. In marriages, most mothers-in-law are thorns in the flesh of the bride. Some of them go to the extent of dictating to the bride what to do and how to do it in her husband’s house. The Yorùbá elders noticed that situations like this could not be ruled out in real-life situations. Whenever they see such, the proverb will be told to the erring personality so that they can take caution and desist from the act of interfering in the affairs of other people. It must be noted that Yorùbá did intervene when things were about to go wrong. The proverb is used to warn against over-zealousness because wisdom in one domain is idiocy in another.

(xvi) *Ajá ráunràun ní í pa ikún.* “It is the marauding dogs that kill a squirrel.”

Some dogs are so ferocious that their owners no longer use them for hunting, but they do impressive things at times. This proverb is given to educate people, not to under-rate anybody. It is often the case that the person we thought might not have anything to offer may be our saviour. In other words, the proverb emphasizes that people should be treated with care and be given the benefit of the doubt. The adage discourages underrating anyone for whatsoever reason(s).

(xvii) *Bí ajá wọ agbádá iná, tí àmòtẹ̀kùn wọ ẹ̀wù ẹ̀jẹ̀, tó ológìnní sán àkísà mọ́ idí, ẹ̀gbé aṣẹ̀ranjẹ ní wón ẹ.* “If the dog wears a dress of fire, the leopard a dress of blood and cat just a rag tied around its body, they are all animals of the same species which kill and eat animals.”

One can see that the three animals mentioned (dog, leopard, and cat) are carnivores” and each of them has a different capacity for hunting, and their levels of hunting are pretty different. Leopard hunts game in the wild for its consumption. On the other hand, the dog hunts in the wild too for

its owner, while the cat only hunts at home. Despite the difference in their power rating, they belong to the same family. The proverb is used to rebuke people in higher positions who want to deprive their subordinates of what should accrue to them due to their outlook or appearance. In essence, the proverb is used to teach people that appearance and reality are two sides of the coin. Often, appearance can be the opposite of reality; on the other hand, it can be reality itself. Thus, no man should be deprived of his right based on their appearance. The proverb also discourages looking down on others because of position or privilege.

(xviii) Alágemọ tó n ẹ jẹ́jẹ́, ikú n pa á, ánbèlèté ọ̀pọ̀lọ́ tó n jan ara rẹ̀ mọ̀lẹ̀. “Despite the calmness of chameleon death devours it, let alone toad that is hitting itself on the ground.”

The chameleon is known for calmness and gentility, while the toad has a hasty disposition in its ways of movement. The chameleon’s name in the proverb symbolizes calmness, carefulness, humility, and patience, while the frog is synonymous with impatience and hastiness. Yorùbá observed that with all the good attributes of a chameleon, it does not escape death, let alone the toad searching for death unknowingly through its lifestyle. This proverb is used to teach moderation and humility. It is used to discourage show-off and vivid life that may warrant unnecessary suspicion and hostility. The proverb, just like a sermon, is used to tell people who display wealth with pride to think of people who are humble and moderate but are still unfortunate. The proverb is used to say to people to take life easy.

(xix) Bí ekòlọ́ bá jubà ilẹ̀, ilẹ̀ álanu fún un. “If the earthworm acknowledges the superiority of the earth, the earth will open for it.”

The Yorùbá people believe that the earth is older than the earthworm. They also share the view that the earthworm accords due respect to the soil before it can pierce through it. The application of this proverb to the real-life situation is that honour should be to whom honour is due so that, one can have their way. The proverb is often given among elders when a younger person is addressing a gathering of both old and young to show respect. The inference that could be drawn from this proverb is that respect and honour do not end with one’s parents alone, but whoever has an age advantage over us must be respected and honoured.

(xx) Òkété fi ijà sẹ̀yìn ó dé ọ̀jà ó wá káwọ́ lẹ́rì. “The dead bush rat is brought to the market hanging from a stick to which its front feet are tied.”

The Yorùbá believe that the trap of the hunter catches the bush rats because it did not think wise to leave the seed on the web. This proverb is given to both younger and old to teach them how to make reasonable/intelligent decisions to prevent unnecessary regret. Yorùbá are smart people that cherish making decisive decisions that would not lead to regret in the future. Thus, if a person is hasty in deciding, the Yorùbá will use this proverb to sermonize the regret that may ensue if they do not retrace their steps. The adage taught us that it is good to arrest situations to prevent danger in the aftermath.

(xxi) Àdàbà n pe ògèdè ó se bí eḡlẹ̀ kò gbọ̀ eḡlẹ̀ kúkú gbọ̀ títiri ló n tiri. “The dove recites an incantation and believes that the pigeon does not understand; the pigeon understands, but it is hesitating how to act.”

The pigeon and dove are birds that share the same character; one lives in the bush while the other is domesticated at home. It is common knowledge that the dove will have access to food more than the pigeon but pretend as if it is suffering. Little did it know that the pigeon was aware but tried to ignore the pretence? This proverb is related to people doing something and believing that other people do not know but prefer to jettison it.

(xxii) Àpa àìgbé dé ilé ni kò jẹ́ kí á mọ̀ pé ológbò n se oḡe. “The fact that the cat does not bring its kill back home prevents us knowing that the cat is a hunter.”

Cats hunt games, especially rats, but eat it on the spot without taking it home. This proverb is used to rebuke someone working without anything to show for it. In another context, an adage is told when one struggles to succeed, and his efforts have not yielded the necessary outcome. People will not recognize the actions of a man until he succeeds. A man whose struggle and efforts have not paid off is looked down upon as if he is not making any efforts or working hard, but the man who succeeds is recognized even though he may not be working hard as the unsuccessful man. This proverb emphasizes the ends result as a justification for one’s struggles and hard work.

(xxiii) Akátá n dífá, ikamùdù n dibò, wọn ní kí ló n rùn báwònyí, ara ta ló mọ̀ nínú wọn. “The civet cats are consulting the Ifa oracle, the large black ants are voting among themselves, and one asks the other ‘what is it that is smelling?’ which of them has a clean body.”

Civet cats and black ants have foul odour such that it would not be possible for one to accuse the other. This proverb criticizes people with shady antecedents/characters who blame others for a bad situation. This proverb is used to expose the antics of the politicians who claim they are not corrupt by referring to their predecessor’s shortcomings in office, but their present administration is worse. The proverb aptly captures the current political situation in Nigeria where PDP is blaming APC and APC is pointing to the lapses of PDP for lousy leadership. Still, none of the two parties is clean of mismanagement.

(xxiv) Bí àşà kò bá fẹ́ fín àwòdì níràn, ojú sánmọ̀ tó eḡe é fò láìgún ara wọn. “If the hawk does not want to tease the kite the sky is big enough for any bird to fly without bumping into each other.”

Kite and hawks maintain different spaces in the sky without interference from each other, even though they feed on chicken. This proverb is used to emphasize living and letting others live in society. The Yorùbá notice that the sky is vast enough for different types of birds to dwell without affecting one another. The world has enough space for everyone to live and succeed in human terminology. Thus, no one should prevent or hinder the success of the other. Yorùbá admits that there are competitions in business, politics, trade, contracts, and so on. Still, each of

the competitors must be given an equal opportunity to explore, knowing full well that one of them must win the race.

(xxv) *Ẹnu ehorò kò gba ijánu.* “The hare’s mouth cannot accommodate the bridle.”

The bridle is peculiar to the horse because it is used to direct its movement. It is a known fact that the bridle is larger than the rabbit. As a result, its mouth cannot withstand it. This proverb is told when one cannot meddle in particular issues. In the Yorùbá settings, essential matters are left to the elders or people who have sound knowledge to take care of them. Furthermore, in Yorùbá culture, certain errands are not given to a younger person. For instance, the news of sudden death, drowning in water, and land disputes are always given to the king, chiefs, and prominent people in the society to handle.

(xxvi) *Adiẹ níjẹ àgbàdo, ó ní mu omi, ó ní oun kò ní eyín, idérègbè tí ó ní eyín níjẹ okúta?* “The fowl eats corn and drinks water, yet it complains that it has no teeth; does the goat with teeth heat stone?”

One will notice that a chicken has no teeth. Still, it can devour pebbles, while a goat with all the teeth cannot do so. This proverb is told to someone who enjoyed certain privileges and still complains by comparing themselves to others who have more benefits but did not achieve the same thing. This proverb applies to whoever is using other people’s lifestyles as a yardstick without acknowledging that they stand a better chance than them. It condemns the unnecessary comparison of one’s opportunity with another who has a bigger chance with fewer achievements.

(xxvii) *Àdàbà kò fì ounjẹ sí òfun òrófó, olúkùlùkù ní wá ounjẹ sí ẹnu ara rẹ ni.* “The dove does not put food into the mouth of the green bush pigeon; each bird finds its own food.”

The proverb is told to command one’s job and show its superiority, that no other job is better than one’s occupation because the work is putting food on the owner’s table just like other jobs do for their owners. This proverb is used to teach self-pride and reliance on one’s position and source of income. It is used to inform or educate people to have the confidence and boldness to say whatever legitimate job they are engaged in as long as they do not beg others to feed them.

(xxviii) *Ajá mọ ọmọ tí ẹ fún lómún ó mọ tí òdù ọyà kì mólẹ.* “Dog knows how to breast-feed her offspring but knows how to grip that of the grass-cutters.”

Dogs typically protect their offspring by monitoring their steps and keeping vigil to ward-off humans and other animals from attacking them. Still, whenever it goes hunting, it kills the offspring of the grass-cutters. The proverb is given to rebuke the authority when double standards are used for people entitled to the same treatment. The saying also emphasizes that sons and slaves are born through the same process. Thus, equal treatment should be given to both. That is, justice must be served accordingly without fear or favour. This proverb is used to reprimand people who protect their children and maltreat other people’s children.

(xxix) *Àdàbà ò náání à ñ kùn gbé pápá ñ jó ẹyẹ oko ñ fò lọ.* “The dove takes no notice of someone burning the bush; the fire burns and the bird flies off.”

Dove is one of the birds in the savannah forest. It has the character of looking for where there is serenity. As a result, it flies to another place whenever the bush is set on fire, not minding whether its former abode has been destroyed. This proverb is told to caution stakeholders in a community to be wary of outsiders who do not care if the community is destroyed. In Yorùbá community, the elders typically take cognizance of happenstances in their environment. They usually caution their children not to mingle with people who can cause mayhem in their community and run to another place for safety.

(xxx) *Àjáti àwọ̀n tí ñ kọ àparò lógbón.* “The damaged net teaches the bush fowl a lesson.”

Net is one of the traps that are used in catching bush fowl. When the bush fowl is detected, it will struggle to escape from the net. If it runs from the net by luck, it would have gathered experience on how to surmount the net whenever it falls into the same trap. The proverb emphasizes that experience is the best teacher. Experience often teaches someone the steps to take and how to handle them when one falls into a crisis. In education, previous knowledge is very pertinent in facing new challenges, which is why; teachers are often advised to start from the known to the unknown when new topics are introduced. The proverb shows that experience (whether negative or positive) typically prepares one’s mind for the future.

From the data presentation and explanations provided so far, one issue interested this present research. What is the rationale behind the use of animal totems in Yorùbá proverbs? This issue will be discussed in this section.

6 The Sociolinguistic Implication of Animal Totems in Yorùbá Proverbs

The Yorùbá philosophy underscores the fact that animals also exhibit specific characteristics peculiar to human beings. These characters are used in Yorùbá proverbs metaphorically to refer to a human being trailing the animals’ part. This observation among the Yorùbá is in tandem with the behaviourist approach, which stipulates that human and animal behaviour is similar or identical. Yorùbá also believes that each of the animals in the bush has human manifestations. That is why they usually say *Ìṣe èniyàn ni ìse eranko*, “human behaviour is similar to animal behaviour.” Using animal totems in proverbs among the Yorùbá people have two implications:

- (i) It is a means of coding information reserved for the wise.
- (ii) It is also a conventional way to oust outsiders from the conversation.

The relationship between the Yorùbá and animals that led to the derivation of the proverbs is borne out of the agrarian society of the ancient Yorùbá where they relate freely with some of the animals. The keen observation of the animal characters by the old Yorùbá people forms the basis of all the sayings with animal totems. The relationship between ancient Yorùbá and the animals

is clearly shown in their panegyrics. The ancient Yorùbá believe that they are sons and daughters of some animals. The relationship of Yorùbá people with animals is evident in their various panegyrics when they are rendered. For instance, Ìjẹ̀sà people's panegyric clearly shows their affiliation with tiger (*ẹ̀kún*). They are praised in their panegyric as *omọ ọwá, omọ ẹ̀kún*, "the children of ọwá and the children of the tiger." The Aláàfin Ọ̀yó, on the other hand, has a panegyric that relates to elephant (*erin*). Also, among the Yorùbá people, certain tribes are prohibited from eating certain animals because of their affinities with such animals. For instance, the olòjẹ́ families are not allowed to eat parrot, Tedé people are forbidden from eating black cray-fish, while Sẹ̀pẹ̀tẹ̀rí people are prohibited from eating duck. It is a general belief among the Yorùbá people that members of the tribes mentioned above, where these animals are revered, are not to harm, kill, or eat them. These facts enumerated above testify to the cordial relationship that existed between the ancient Yorùbá and the animals in the forest.

7 Conclusion

In this study, we have examined animal totems in selected Yorùbá proverbs and their instructive information based on the ethnography of communication. It is argued that proverbs relating to animals are used to educate, inform, admonish, ridicule, encourage, advise, warn, and satirize the polity. It is also established that Yorùbá people use proverbs with animal totems metaphorically to mirror their philosophy and worldview.

Notes

1. The Yorùbá are a group of people who are supposedly believed to be the descendant of Oduduwa. Yorùbá people are found in six states, namely Lagos, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Ogun, some parts of Kwara, Kogi, and Edo State in Nigeria. The population of Yorùbá speakers is estimated at 50million (2006 census). The language (Yorùbá) is spoken mostly in the Western part of Nigeria. Apart from the states mentioned in Nigeria, Yoruba is also spoken outside the shores of the country in Benin Republic, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad, and Tobago.

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