

## **CULTURAL EXPLORATION AS ALTER/NATIVE<sup>1</sup> ROUTE TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: INSIGHTS FROM YORUBA VERBAL ARTS**

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**Abstract.** This paper interrogates Yoruba verbal arts and situates culture as a catalyst for development. It is suggested that the intricate resources of oral art, exemplified by Yoruba textual references, are viable ingredients for socio-cultural empowerment. To fully comprehend the dynamics of a society in constant change due to external and internal realities, one must reconsider culture in order to reposition the society. The multidimensional and multidisciplinary significance of Yoruba verbal art demonstrate that culture has a vital role to play in any meaningful socio-political advancement in the Nigerian body polity. The ideas conveyed in proverbial expressions, representing key cultural realities of the Yoruba people, offer insights and ideas for development and social good. The paper submits that a deeper exploration of the intricate resources of verbal art is a viable route to development.

**Keywords and phrases:** Culture, Yoruba, Folklore, Development, Verbal arts

### **INTRODUCTION**

Culture and development are tightly interlinked. Arts in the broad sense provide a bedrock for education of the human mind, social skills, cohesion and long-term economic entrepreneurship. Bringing cultural policies into the center of social policies is a major challenge.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, our consideration of culture is that which people is within the worldview of the Yoruba. The Yoruba are a major tribal and language group in the South-Western part of Nigeria. They are bonded by strong values of folklore which embodies their tradition, religion, arts, worldview and epistemology. A key strength of Yoruba culture is that it is orally transmitted across generations, and various genres of art forms exist among the people. Apart from the aesthetic

functions of these forms, they also serve as a storehouse of knowledge, and are the unwritten constitution of the Yoruba society. Culture among the Yoruba encompasses the commonwealth and the values through which the affairs of the society are piloted. Our concern in this paper is to explicate aspects of Yoruba culture as manifested in verbal arts, towards establishing the thesis that culture is a worthwhile ally in the quest for development. The significance of this study to present day Nigeria is that the Yoruba are a major tribal group in the Nigerian federation; hence, important learning can be drawn from the Yoruba experience for the good of the nation as a whole.

In the African creative imagination, culture embodies religion, language, literature, artistic expressions, and the philosophy of the people. Culture is therefore a generic word that encapsulates what a people represent. Specifically, the Nigerian cultural milieu is a semblance of the linguistic heterogeneity of the post-amalgamation sensibility. In other words, culture has a multifaceted significance. Prior to the 1914 amalgamation that saw the birth of the geographical entity called Nigeria, there were many distinct ethnic nationalities that existed as autonomous self governing units. Common among these ethnic nationalities was their distinct cultural idiosyncrasies. In other words, the estimated over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups co-existed irrespective of their linguistic or religious differences. The basis of this existence and interaction was culture and the inherent values of mutual respect and the sustenance of common humanity.

Art occupies a large space within the context of culture, regardless of whether or not the culture is oral-driven. Art therefore uniquely serves to help express the culture's constituents. As noted by Hussein (2005, 15), "The African oral arts are part and parcel of the continents long standing tradition of oral culture...oral tradition facilitates the transmission of knowledge and conventions from generations to generation".

Thus, for Hussein (2005, 15), art is the vehicle of culture. Art is therefore a critical asset within culture, implying that art is central to cultural understanding. Among the Yoruba, cultural artistic forms range from the visual through the literary to the performing arts. In fact, religion is also another avenue of cultural display as the Yoruba religious pantheon celebrates deities regularly, making festivals an everyday phenomenon. Culture is fully realized, and subsequently mirrored, in artistic representations. The point is that art gives expression to culture. The cultural underpinnings of a tribe or ethnic group are the content of the visual creations.

As illustrations of this point, consider a few examples from Yoruba. The popular *ere-ibeji*<sup>3</sup>, for example, is a representation of both religion and philosophy. As

variously expressed in the works of artists like Labayo Ogundele and Muraina Oyelami,<sup>4</sup> the message is of both artistic and cultural significance. Major themes in traditional Yoruba art like *egungun* (masquerades) *ekun iyawo* (epithalamium) all point to cultural signposts among the linguistic group. Visual arts among the Yoruba also depict hegemony, craft and other events of cultural significance. The implication is that the intrinsic aesthetics of the works of art yield to cultural expressions.

In the literary arts, better appreciated as folklore, culture is similarly mirrored. For example, In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Africa's first Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka (1975), reconstructs a story of ancient Oyo kingdom.<sup>5</sup> This confirms the viability of oral tradition as sources for artistic raw material. Tutuola (1952) also explores Yoruba folklore in *The Palmwine Drinkard*. Thus, Yoruba culture is vibrant and at the centre of creative industry among the Yoruba people.

The performing arts are also an avenue for cultural exploitation. Plays and dramatic performances are deeply rooted in culture. They afford the audience a first-hand, interactive experience with culture, as the source of thematic choices in the performing arts is essentially cultural. Thus, in the oral arts as in the visual arts, culture drives artistic creativity. Culture is therefore clearly conveyed through the artistic resources available to it. The appreciation of culture is therefore directly connected to the depth and insights of the arts.

## YORUBA VERBAL ARTS

Verbal arts, in the context of this paper, include the written and the spoken word. In Yoruba culture, oral tradition propels social direction. As home to society's values, norms and customs, verbal arts in the Yoruba historiography is the data bank for epistemology and philosophy. Furthermore, artistic endeavours in the African sensibility are intrinsically functional in nature. This is in agreement with Orimoogunje's submission that "the members of the Yoruba society are active users of verbal arts. They include the knowledgeable elders, both male and female in their capacity as fathers, mothers, heads of the families, heads of the communities, priests etc."<sup>6</sup> In effect, a developmental paradigm that takes cultural realities into consideration is not out of place because, "a people who free themselves from cultural domination will not be free unless ...they return to the upward path of their own culture..."<sup>7</sup> and "expressions of culture can be politically defined and national liberation may cede primacy to contemporary cultural studies".<sup>8</sup> This paper explores *Owe* (Proverb), an aspect of Yoruba verbal arts to illustrate the fact that culture is a viable path to development. It is intended that through the illumination this study provides, resurgence in culture would be deemed necessary. First, an understanding of proverbs:

...proverbs is the form which has proved itself to be of great continuing relevance to modern man. It has been and it remains a most powerful transmission of culture<sup>9</sup>.

This implies that proverbs are socio-cultural agents where elements of culture are continually explored. Additionally, the Yoruba hold proverbs in great esteem, and believe it is a genre exclusively meant for elders.<sup>10</sup>

This unique position of proverbs within Yoruba culture makes studying them worthwhile. This explains why scholars have shown considerable interest in proverbs studies generally and Yoruba studies, specifically.<sup>11</sup> The implication of this is that the central role of proverbs as a strong carrier of culture has consistently been a subject of the critical enterprise.

This paper situates proverbial expressions of the Yoruba within the context of development to advance the thesis that a thorough appreciation of cultural images featured in Yoruba proverbs is a step towards individual and communal development. Specifically, this paper explores the political and quasi-judicial significance of Yoruba proverbs, and their implications for individual well-being within the society. Culture as total representation of social values thus emphasizes the fact that the true path to development lies in an abiding faith in the tenets of culture over generations.

## **TOWARDS SANITY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

Yoruba societies are organised using hegemony. Hegemony structures may be limited to individual towns or may be a function of large kingdoms such as the Old Oyo Kingdom. Whichever form the structure takes, a Monarch sits atop, superintending the affairs. Culture provides for a traditional system of checks and balances to reign in the excesses of monarchs. For example, the Alaafin<sup>12</sup> in Council (*Oyomesi*<sup>13</sup>) was the nemesis of any erring Alaafin. The fact that the Yoruba, as indicated in their culture, worship and adore their kings does not mean that the citizens be taken for granted.

As the Yoruba would say, legacy is important for any king:

*Oba to je*  
*Ti igbo di ile*  
*Oruko won*  
*Kii parun*  
*Oba to tun je*  
*Ti ile di igbe*  
*Oruko ti e naa ko ni parun (2)*

A king whose reign  
 Heralded development  
 Will remain unforgotten  
 Just as a king whose reign  
 Was characterized by underdevelopment  
 Will also not be forgotten

The implication of the above is two-fold: first the society will never forget both good and bad reigns; second, there is a strong possibility that the lineage of a bad ruler may never be allowed to rule again. The Yoruba therefore encourages good character<sup>14</sup> as essential for conduct in the public sphere. It is generally held that *eefin niwa* (3) (character is like smoke); hence, leaders strive to protect their character, even if only for posterity.

Next is endemic corruption. This cankerworm consistently stands in the way of development in Nigeria, as in many post-independence African states, so much that:

The global development index categorizes Africa as lagging behind every other continent in development and economic growth. Quite a number of states in the continent have in recent development reports been classified as failed and/or fragile states.<sup>15</sup>

The above grim reality needs no verification or contest. It is visible for all to see. Africa is the continent where rulers will naturally overstay their welcome, in spite of the 'handwriting on the wall'.<sup>16</sup> The implication of this sit-tight syndrome has seen African nations struggling to breathe as the quality of life ebbs each passing day. In Nigerian society, basic infrastructure has become a luxury while successive governments are confronted by this hydra-headed monster. All this, the Yoruba would allude to *ifi ete sile, maa pa lapalapa* (4) (curing ringworm and ignoring leprosy).

The perfect response of Yoruba culture to the spectra of neglect and bad governance can take the form of caveat:

*'eni to ba seun ti eni kan o se ri, oju re a ri ohun ti enikan o ri ri* (5)

whoever perpetrates a strange thing, should prepare for a strange consequence

The response could also be philosophical, entrenched in the principle of retributive justice or religious fatalism:

*Eni to tafa soke,  
To yido bori  
Bi Oba aye ko ri i  
Torun n wo o (6)*

Whoever fires a spear into the sky,  
And shields with a mortar  
If the earthly king does not see the person  
The Heavenly king certainly does

*Se e le, oun ni abo wa ba  
Eni su sona,  
A ba esinsin nigba abo (7)*

Whatever is done  
Becomes ones footprints  
Whoever defecates on a path  
Would meet fliers on the return journey

Another cultural response could tilt towards moral suasion:

*Bintin laye (8)*

Life is nothing

*Oruko rere  
San ju  
Wura tabi fadaka (9)*

A good name  
Is better  
Than Gold or silver

*Ki ni a n je ti ki i tan  
Afi ola oluwa (10)*

What can be eaten forever?  
But God's glory

The above clearly creates a moral burden on the leadership, once the cultural principles are identified with. In addition, the ephemeral nature of life and the transient nature of power are also key cultural epistemological drivers which ultimately instill sanity in the public sphere:

*Eni to leni*  
*Ko lo oni daradara*  
*Ko seni to mo*  
*Eni ti o ni ola* (11)

Whoever owns today  
 Should utilize it well  
 No one knows  
 Who will own tomorrow

*Igba kan o lo ile aye gbo*  
*Oba mewa,*  
*Igba mewa* (12)

No period lasts forever  
 Ten kings  
 Ten periods

Yoruba culture creates an idyllic ethos which can effectively enshrine democratic culture. Governance is taken as a collective responsibility which must be guarded jealously.

In other words, participatory democracy is an essential step towards good governance and social development:

*Agbajo owo*  
*La fi I n soya*  
*Ajeji owo kan*  
*Ko gberu dori* (14)

To beat a chest  
 The whole hand is required  
 A part of the hand  
 Cannot lift up a heavy load

*Ikan pawopo*  
*Won mo ile*  
*Eerun pawopo*  
*Won mo agiyan* (15)

Termites in unity  
 Built a fortress  
 Ants unite  
 To build anthill

Thus, Yoruba cultural expression understands the task of nation building as a collective one. Affirmative action, then, is sometimes necessary, since according to the Yoruba:

*Kekere lati n pa eekan iroko*  
*To ba dagba tan*  
*Ebo lo maa gba* (16)

The root of the *Iroko* tree  
 Is better tamed early  
 Lest it becomes object of worship when old

The indigenous thought disseminated in the above is that an issue has the potential of becoming intractable, if it is not addressed early.

To fully grapple with the above ideas and expressions, a little cultural insight is necessary. The Yoruba have a worldview of deification. As such, even natural phenomenon like hills, rivers, animals, etc., are accorded some religious homage. This explains why the lion, the elephant, the tortoise, the deer and others are accorded special praise names.<sup>17</sup> Probing the religious or spiritual is not within the purview of this paper; rather the concern is the metaphorical extension of the *Iroko* parable resonating in contemporary African political leadership. The various African 'messiahs of pain' (Ibitokun 1995) dotting the political landscape are represented as monsters that ought to have been tamed before growing into demonic enigmas. The point above is that with an adequate cultural consciousness, our society can be liberated from the grip of harmful rule. The form the liberation would take is another point to note, especially in the context of cultural suppression and defeatism. However, Nnolim (2007, 2) declares:

Politics enters literature at those times when the fate or destiny of people or classes are locked in the death-throes of survival, when continuity in a peoples way of life is threatened; when alien forces by way of military forces or colonial invasion endanger a people's future or make that future uncertain and in our body politic, when the vultures of corruption descend to devour a people's cherished ethical, religious values.<sup>18</sup>

From this critical and literary viewpoint, verbal arts can make a significant and potent contribution to the task of liberation, especially given the communal advantage they have over literary arts. The fact is, a people's art is a direct representation of their cultural understanding of the issues and events around them. Furthermore, verbal resources serve satirical ends. Hence, an artist is the harbingers of hope and by extension, 'righter'<sup>19</sup> of social wrongs. This can be instantiated in the saying among the Yoruba that:

*Ko si oun ti oju ko ri ri*  
*Ati ri Oba to deru ri*  
*Ati ri eru to di Oba* (17)

There is nothing new never witnessed  
 Kings have become slaves  
 Slaves have been kings

*Bo rika o seka*  
*Bo ba ranti iku Gaa*  
*Ko se ooto* (18)

If you like, be wicked  
 But if you remember *Gaa's* death<sup>20</sup>  
 Be just

Embedded in culture therefore is a potent voice that supports good governance and heralds socio-economic development. As these selected proverbs suggest, culture is a viable foundation for sustainable development. The mores contained in cultural expressions and tenets are steps towards a reorientation of values. Since the crisis of underdevelopment is a product of humanistic failure, redress should arise from the essential social foundation.

## CONCLUSION

This paper tries to foreground the fact that, with adequate attention given to culture, society would be salvaged from the rubrics of human brutality and corruption. This is the noble role culture must take in national integration and sustainable development. With textual evidence drawn from the artistic resources of the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria, culture has been identified as being at the heart of development. For developmental aspirations to firmly take root, there is a need to establish an emotional connection with the people through culture. The resources explored in this discourse include proverbial expressions and witty sayings as well as notable artistic images which portray indigenous values of the people.

However, the paper does not advocate a blind appropriation of culture. Rather, we have demonstrated that Yoruba verbal expressions exemplify noble ideas that are still relevant to contemporary clamours for development. The thesis, therefore, is that culture offers intrinsic positive values that could be harnessed to shape the fortunes of societies.

## NOTES

1. The pun on 'Alter' and 'Native' emphasise the ideas both represent for this discourse.
2. Losito, C. *Culture and Development: A New Paradigm* (London: CAN/API, 2000).
3. This means twins' statue.
4. These are notable artists from the famous Osogbo School in Yorubaland.
5. In pre-colonial Yoruba history, Oyo kingdom was regarded as the political capital of the Yoruba people.
6. Orimogunje, C. O. The social context of verbal arts in the Yoruba Healthcare practices. *Folklore*, 24(March 2003): 90–98.
7. Amical Cabral quoted in Soyinka, W. *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994).
8. Zwerling, P. The political agenda for theatricalizing religion in *Shango de Ima* and *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns*. *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, 3, no. 2 (2004): 303–316. Available from [http://www.rjournal.org/vol\\_2/no\\_2/zwerling.html](http://www.rjournal.org/vol_2/no_2/zwerling.html).
9. Akporobaro, F. B. O. *Intoduction to African Oral Literature* (Lagos: Lighthouse, 2001).
10. This is captured in a saying that, '*Omode lo lorin, agba lo ni itan, omode lo ni aalo, agba lo lowe*' (Songs are for children, elders own history, proverbs belong to elders, folktales are children's).
11. This is captured in a saying that, '*Omode lo lorin, agba lo ni itan, omode lo ni aalo, agba lo lowe*' (Songs are for children, elders own history, proverbs belong to elders, folktales are children's).
12. 'African Proverbs Conference' hosted by the English Department of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in September 2006, was a well attended conference featuring scholars from different disciplines. Available from <http://www.proverbsconference.org> for details.
13. Literally meaning 'Owner of palace'. This is the traditional title of the ruling monarch of Oyo the oldest political kingdom among the Yoruba.
14. This means 'OYO has the right answer'. They are a quasi religious as well as legislative organ.
15. The concepts of *Iwalewa* (character is beauty) and *Iwapele* (Gentle character) are strong in Yoruba culture. See Abiodun Rowland. Identity and the Artistic Process in Yoruba Aesthetic Concept. *Journal of Culture and Ideas*, 1, no. 1 (1983): 13–30.
16. Michael Anyiam-Osigme, quoted by Offor, F. The quest for development in Africa and the dilemma of competing cultural paradigms. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 9, no. 3 (2007): 86–96.
17. The botched 3rd Term Debate in Nigeria and the recent 1-man election in Zimbabwe are examples.
18. The lion is praised as '*Olola-iju, ajegun-geran* (Lord of the wilderness, the devourer of bones and meat); elephant is *ajanaku* (mighty being); tortoise is *ijapa-tiroko, oko yannibo* (crafty tortoise, the husband of *yannibo*); deer is called *etu obeje, alawo lolo* (the athletic deer, with beautiful colors), etc. For an extensive insight into this, see George Olusola Ajibade, "Animals in the Traditional Yoruba Worldview". *Folklore*, 30, no. 10 (2006): 156–172.

19. See Charles Nnolim. *The Writers Responsibility and Literature in National Development* Public Lecture Series 3 (School of Post Graduate Studies, University of Port Harcourt, 2007).
20. See Niyi Osundare. *The Writer as Righter* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1995).
21. *Gaa* was a prominent feature of Ancient Oyo history. He was the *enfant terrible* of his time. He was brutal and wicked. He however died a tragic death, paralysed. Adebayo Faleti's *Basorun Gaa* is an account of the life and times of this character.

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