

African Research Review

An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 3 (2), January, 2009

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

Some Ondo Philosophical Proverbs for Practical Living (*Pp. 109-118*)

C. Arinola Akinmade - Department of English, University of Jos, Nigeria.

Abstract

Although proverbs play significant and varied roles among people of different cultures, their function as bearers of philosophical insights is particularly unique and amazing. Within the context of Ondo culture, proverbs reflect the people's attempt not only at abstract thinking but also their depth of wisdom and the astuteness of their thoughts. In an attempt to explore and document how Ondo philosophical proverbs rouse the unseeing eye and alert the unheeding ear to the marvels of everyday realities, this paper conceptualizes philosophy and African philosophy, bringing to the fore how in Ondo society man abstracts on events, make generalizations, understands the behaviour of their gods, reflects the ethics of society and philosophizes concerning life and death, using proverbs as a primary strategy. In each of the examples cited, an attempt is made to couch the proverb in its original form. This is followed by its translation, theme, function and finally its application to daily living.

Introduction

Proverbs perform several functions among which bearing philosophical insights. This is a unique function on which the corpus of the proverbs of non-literate people all over the world portrays their moral and political philosophy, their *Weltanschauung* and their *volkspsychologie*. According to Loeb, proverbs were man's first significant attempt at abstract thinking and

these specific proverbs show the terseness of the wisdom of the autochthons as well as the shrewdness of their thoughts. Scholars such as Rattray (1914) have been so captivated by African philosophy that he wondered that:

A savage or primitive people could possibly have possessed the rude philosophers, theologians, moralists, naturalists and even philologists, which many of the proverbs prove them to have among them (11-12). Elmslie (1917) acknowledged the significance of proverbial philosophy in the following observation that ‘the proverb does for human life something that science does for the world of nature: it rouses the unseeing eye and the unheeding ear to the marvel of what seems ordinary’ (18).

One then wonders what philosophy means. Here we shall define philosophy in general terms and then go to describe African philosophy, discuss the link between the African philosophy and proverbs and also show how Ondo philosophical proverbs can be used for practical living.

Concept of Philosophy

Oxford advanced Learners Dictionary defines philosophy as “the search for knowledge and the understanding of the nature and meaning of the universe and of human life”. According to the Chambers dictionary, philosophy is “the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, investigation or contemplation of the nature of being, knowledge of the causes and laws of all things; the principles underlying any sphere of knowledge; reasoning”.

Having defined philosophy in the general term, let us now look at African philosophy.

What is African Philosophy?

By philosophy, we mean the attempt by the African man, nay Ondo man in particular: to describe and understand the world in which he lives, the behavior of his gods, the facts of life, and death, the ethics of his society, the way to success and happiness, the vagaries of human nature and the laws by which he must live (Thompson, 1965:23).

Quite a number of collectors have acknowledged that proverbs function predominantly as bearers of philosophical insight. According to Oesterley and Robinson (1930), the aim of all science and philosophy is the unification of experience, the reduction of all phenomena to a single rule, the discovery of a single fact or principle with which all the varied manifestations of the

universe can be brought into accord. Its earliest effort at expression is normally in the epigram or proverb, a short saying in which a number of different facts are brought together, a generalization, which shall include the result of a number of different observations. The wise man is he who has observed life and the interrelations of man and man, of man and nature, or of man and God, that he is able to group them, or many of them, under a single general law. Such a law may be either descriptive of experience in the material world, when it will be an elementary form of natural science, or it may be normative of conduct when it will be a moral precept, or it may go deeper into the nature of reality when it will be classed as metaphysical (334).

In a similar vein, Robinson observes that proverb is:

The first tentative efforts of the human mind in the direction of a philosophy, and they are to be found everywhere. Regarded as the essence of human wisdom by generation after generation, they were quoted in market and field, in the city and in the open pasture. Learned men delighted in making collections of them, and it is interesting to note how often we find similar proverbs among people so far distant from one another as to preclude the idea of direct borrowing (165).

Similarly, Paul Radin also shares the view that proverbs are very good examples of philosophical statements. Ruth Finnegan dwells on the functions of proverbs among Africans. She particularly notes that proverbs:

Represent a people's philosophy. In proverbs, the whole range of human experience can be commented on and analyzed, generalizations and principles expressed in graphic and concise form and the wider implications of specific situations brought to mind (416).

Ondo Philosophical Proverbs

That proverbs exist in Ondo is not an overstatement. This existence of proverbs among Ondo folks clearly shows that Ondo people, like other peoples in Africa and indeed the world, have been observing nature, the rules and laws of human behaviour. They have been abstracting on a good number

of events, happenings, situations and have in the process made generalizations about them. They have been able to understand and describe the world in which they live, observed the behaviour of their gods, philosophize about the facts of life and death, and also portray the ethics of their society.

In this paper therefore, our aim is to document some Ondo philosophical proverbs in the original, translate them discuss their themes and functions and explain their applications. However, before we go into details of this paper, we shall discuss briefly the socio-cultural setting of the Ondo folks. Ondo is one of the sub-groups in Yoruba land. Ondo town is located in the eastern part of the Yoruba speaking region of the south-western Nigeria. It is located in the damp tropic, within the tropical rain forest and the southeasterly wind which blows through the region throughout the better part of the year. Ondo people are great farmers. They cultivate food crops such as yams, cassava, maize, cocoyam, rice and beans. The most important cash crop is cocoa, which covers a massive portion of the land. Other cash crops are rubber, coffee, kolanuts and palm produce. These collectively constitute the people's means of economic support. Ondo people are also very hospitable and interact with other people through trade and many other social activities. Nevertheless, the people have self-pride and this is reflected in their ethnic slurs. Having given this socio-cultural context, we can now proceed to discuss some of the philosophical proverbs. All the proverbs used in this paper are taken from Akinmade (2005).

The first proverb we shall discuss draws insight from the socio-cultural setting of the Ondo people. The proverb is rooted in an analogy based on the behaviours or peculiar characteristics of the flowing stream; this is because human beings, more often than not, are always on the move through transfers, journeys, migrations and other forms of human movement. The proverb says:

Omi l'eniyan, e ma iba ti a san pade; de ba a san pade n'oke, a san pade n'odo.

Human beings are water (rivers) we do not know where we can flow into each other. if we don't flow into each other down stream, we may flow into each other upstream.

Could any rule of law be greater than this? The proverb advises human beings generally to mind the way they relate to each other because one can never tell when and where we would need each other's help. The proverb stresses the need for justice, equity and fair play in human relationships. If for example someone is hostile to a visitor in her state, the children of such people may meet in a completely different environment and the bitter experience will linger on. Just as rivers flow into each other, so also human beings can meet in any part of the world. It is therefore always good to relate to each other cordially. To Ondo folk, cordial relationship is very important. When one has any cause to interact with anybody, one should ensure that the elements of fairness, justice and a sense of responsibility are introduced into the relationship. The proverb also advises that one should keep out prejudices and treat everybody that comes his way with respect and integrity. In the above proverb too, we cannot but notice the metaphorical use of water. There is a strong comparison between water and human beings. The proverb likens the movement of human beings to the flowing of river. This profound and witty saying underscores the need to associate without prejudicess and to eshew hostility in human relationships. We should therefore not discriminate against each other; rather, we should capitalize on our similarities to cultivate cordial relationship rather than focusing on our differences which often breed antagonism.

The next proverb poits to the need for shared responsibility for the common good of society. It says:

Onen yo fi d'aiye san e e s'oun nukan a je.

He who wishes well for the world will not reap the benefits alone.

Apropos of this proverb, the illustration that readily comes to mind is that of the Nigeria Labour Congress' struggle against fuel increase. The Labour Congress executives took it upon themselves to negotiate with the Federal Government for the affordable stabilization of fuel price. For certain, it is not only the Nigeria Labour Congress leaders that will benefit from it but the entire Nigerian populace particularly, the poor. However, they took up the fight for the benefit of every one. The proverb poses a challenge to all and sundry to fight for the common good of all and avoid the 'me-first' syndrome, which hinders spiritual transformation. Like Selwyn Hughes (2006), Ondo folks believe that:

Life will tend to leave you 'in knots' if you are self-centred. But if you think of others more highly than you think of yourself then you will not end up 'in knots' but will become a useful and constructive person (30).

The proverb also urges one to generosity and using one's talent for the common good. All these put together show how we should create and sustain an ideal society. In deed, Ondo culture encourages this positive social trait as can be seen their philosophical proverbs.

The following proverb is used to draw attention to divine providence.

Bi 'lekun kan ti omuen si

If one door does not close, another does not open.

For an illustration, the story of a civil servant leaps to mind. The civil servant has been serving his ministry as the head of a unit for some years. After some time, the Nigerian factor of indigenisation brought him down as the head but as God would have it, he finds a better, less tedious employment elsewhere. This shows that the door of the previous employment closed but God opened a better one.

E si uun yo fi da ma t'ola a fi uku.

Nothing prevents one from seeing tomorrow except death.

One really wonders if this needs any further explanation! It is only death that is capable of preventing one from achieving his goal in life. Next is this proverb that states the fact of life:

Aiye kooto

The world hates truth.

It is those who tell the truth that are hated most because as another saying rightly puts it, 'truth is bitter' and for this reason, human beings in general find it difficult to accept the truth, particularly when they realize that it might affect them negatively.

T'ika t'oiye e si ye gbe ni nen.

Both wickedness and goodness will certainly be rewarded.

In other words there is always a price for being good and also for being wicked. This is a warning to those who may have the tendency of being wicked to desist from it else the reward awaits them.

The next proverb is used to caution people over unnecessary emphasis on issues, to the extent of making the settlement of a dispute difficult. It can be applied when one of the parties concerned keeps repeating the same thing over and over again.

E e toi fi da pe n'oiho uun da mu igi polopolo p'opolo.

One cannot say in order not to prolong an issue, use crooked stick to kill a toad.

Notice the onomatopoeic use of the above proverb. The *opolo* is an ugly creature, so also *polopolo* portrays ugliness.

The following proverb is similar to the above in meaning and application:

E le fi toi fi a fe i b'oma da b'obien se po maju.

One cannot say because one wants to have children and sleep on a woman throughout the night.

The next proverb finds application in a situation whereby an inexperienced individual becomes arrogant and feels he knows better than everybody else. Hence, he over-emphasizes or exaggerates what he does. This proverb can be hauled at him to mock and ridicule him at the same time.

Oise ma bi gha an r'iyangun.

The mutter does not know that there will be yam for it to pound.

The next one:

Koko s'ogi d'eniyan.

Cocoa turns (elevates) a wood to the status of a human being.

This proverb needs no explanation as it speaks for itself. It is used to castigate people who were poor but because fortune has fallen on them as a result of their becoming a cocoa farmer and have become rich, they become arrogant and ungovernable.

The next proverb is a warning for one to tread cautiously:

E ti k'ose kan s'omi, akee pohohoiho.

One has not put one leg in water, the toad starts croaking.

The proverb is a call for one to allow wisdom to rule one's life.

Inon agbalagba e ti b'egungunen i.

It is in the stomach of an elder that one finds rubbish or dirt.

The above proverb finds application in a situation whereby an elder gets angry because of the unacceptable behaviour of a younger one. It is used to pacify and advise the elderly one to endure.

Onen o b'efon n'abata do y'obe , o da ro fi omi ghon mon ku si'be i?

He who meets *efon* in a swamp and draws his knife, does he think that the animal drank water till it died?

This proverb is used to rebuke someone who may want to take advantage of other people's sweat or want to take others for granted by trying to reap where they do not sow. It is a rhetorical proverb, which emphasizes the importance of the proverb.

The next one:

Asun e n'odi, e lo y'onen a a fe udi ghan?

One deficates without cleaning the anus, how many people will one show one's anus?

This proverb encourages maintaining one's secrecy. It is used to advise people not to wash their dirty linen in public. The following proverb:

E en b'aya O'onmila sun ninon'li, Oo'nmila gbi ken n'oita, iin epo yi ewen 'o i, iin oju l'okunon en wen deen o' si.

Somebody is having an affair with *Orunmila*'s wife in the house, *Orunmila* is sighing heavily at a crossroads. And when asked why he is so worried, he replies that the oil they are pouring is going into the eye of a sick man.

In the above proverb, *Orunmila* is not worried simply because somebody is having an affair with his wife, but he is concerned about the repercussion of the action on him, his wife and indeed the entire family. Another saying buttresses his concern: 'When the eye is in trouble, the nose too is in trouble'.

The problem of the action being perpetrated in the house has great impact on him that he has to go the crossroad to express his sorrow and concern. This proverb is used to sound strong warning to people to look beyond the immediate and to have some foresight.

Aghon yi a ri n'ale oun e m'una pan udi e i.

It is the tortoise one finds around that one puts fire under its bottom.

The above proverb talks about accessibility. It is a statement of fact, which comments on an individual who may be prone to taking an undue advantage of the proximity of another person. The proverb is used to advise people not to take an undue advantage of one another.

The next proverb speaks about a problem that defies solution, an enigmatic problem.

O so si ko du ka , o wo si ko du se e.

It fruits where it cannot be plucked and when plucked, falls where it cannot be picked up.

This proverb is used to warn an individual or a nation to tread cautiously and apply wisdom to whatever action one wishes to take in a problematic situation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to discuss the various views on philosophical proverbs and has been able to establish that Africans, nay Ondo people are great philosophers. The philosophical proverbs used in this paper are a beautiful reflection of the Ondo people's careful observation of the natural world, their personal experiences, and their relationship between their gods as well as their fellow human beings. We have also been able to prove that quite a number of Ondo proverbs serve as bearers of philosophical insights and that the corpus of non-literate peoples all over the world particularly Ondo people, constitute the foundation of their moral and political philosophy, their weltanschauung as well as their volkspychologie.

References

- Akinmade, C. Arinola. Ondo-Yoruba Proverbs: A Literary Study of Theme, Functions and Poetic Devices, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Jos, 2005.
- Elmslie W. A. L, Studies in Life from Jewish Proverbs. London: James Clarke and Co. 1917.
- Essien, P.P. The Annang Proverbs. PhD Thesis, St. Louis University, 1978.
- Finnegan, Ruth. Oral Literature in Africa, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.
- Kirk-Green, Hausa Dabo Ba Ne 1966.
- Oesterley, W.O.E. and Robinson T. H, Hebrew Religion New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930.
- Radin, Paul. Primitive Man as Philosopher New York: n.p 1927
- Rattray, R. S. Hausa Folklore Customs and Proverbs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2 Vol, 1913.
- Robinson Theodore, The Poetry of the Old Testament. London: Duckworth, 1947.
- Thompson, J. M. "The Form and Function of Proverbs in Ancient Israel". PhD Thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1965.