

Alago Proverbs as Vehicle of Values and Virtues

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Abstract

Scholars working on proverbs from major ethnic stocks in Nigeria have observed that this unique verbal art functions in many ways as a validator of a people's culture, a tool for rhetoric, education and socialisation, and as a measure of a person's cognitive ability. In all these, little or nothing has been done on the value of proverbs from minority cultures with a view to determining the bearing of echoes for possible reorientation for the individual and building of a positive collective consciousness in a postcolonial polity as Nigeria's. This paper therefore focuses on one of Nigeria's minority peoples and cultures: the Alago and their proverb lore. It examines the relevance of proverbs from the functionalist perspective as the embodiment of a people's beliefs, values, taboos and expectations, even as these bear echoes necessary for social stability. Drawing from the Alago society, this paper observes that proverbs, entrenched in traditional thoughts, have the potentials for serving as significant mines for enlarging on positive individual virtues and the polity's values.

Keywords: *proverb, virtues, collective consciousness, values*

Introduction

Nigeria's rural communities have always had valuable resources to offer to the nation. One of such communities is the Alago of Nasarawa state, Nigeria, and one of such resources is its art of speech, the proverbial verbal art. Verbal art simply includes all forms of art created by language whether spoken or written. Since "the art in verbal art is essentially crafted with language [...] as a label it can be applied to any instance wherein art is brought into being by a particular way of languaging" (Hassan 16). Verbal art, of which the proverb is a part, gives wings to individual and cultural expressions. It is used for transferring and preserving tradition and values, for conflict

resolution and maintaining social order. In Lauhakanga's words, they serve as personal rhetorical strategies of survival when "used to check the speaker's emotional and cognitive balance or to find a cognitive solution in conflict resolution" (5).

The Alago of north-central Nigeria indigenous to Nasarawa State, "originated from the Jukun of modern Wukari division, north of the middle Benue plain, a considerable distance from their present homeland" (Meek 42). However, Temple in his own account maintains that the Alago people migrated from the Middle East with the Jukun, Gomai, Igala, and Idoma and they formed the famous Kwararafa Empire (qtd in Agbo 10). The Alago are found in eight out of the thirteen local government areas of Nasarawa State.

The Alago language belongs to the Niger-Congo family – the *kwa* group. The language has dialectical variations, the two recognized by the Alago Language Development Committee are the Eastern and Western variations (*ALDC Handbook 29*). This paper adopts the Eastern variation in this study of its proverbs.

Proverbs

Proverbs “are short pithy statements of widely accepted truth about everyday life” (Abram & Harpham 11). According to Meider, a proverb is “a phrase, saying, sentence of the folk [people] which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in metaphorical, fixed and memorable form, which is handed down from generation to generation” (“Popular Views” 119). Alago proverbs – *Asusesosa* (Alago word for proverb and proverbial sayings) – are an embodiment of the Alago values, taboos, expectations, regrets, socio-economic and religious beliefs expressed in brief, concise and formulaic language, which makes it easy to remember as effective rhetoric tools. They are the people’s observation of life, experiences, cultural values, acceptable norms, etiquettes, wisdom and even solutions to everyday challenges in concise and figurative form usually transmitted orally from one generation to the next.

Alago proverbs and proverbial sayings are informative, educative, corrective and useful signs of cultural values and thoughts. One of the aesthetics of Alago proverbs is that they are simple and practical; but embody complex truths. To understand Alago proverb, the individual must have basic knowledge of the language, its nuances and the ability to read beyond the surface. It is also important to note that Alago proverbs are dynamic and can be interpreted differently depending on the context and participants. That is to say that, once a proverb is spoken, it is capable of

generating different meanings and interpretations. It is in the light of the above, that thdraws attention to the Alago proverb and its echoes of virtues for the individual which are relevant in building positive national values necessary for corporate cohesion.

The erosion of the Nigerian indigenous core values has led to the distortion of our ‘primordial’ thought pattern and the depletion of the same in our ‘collective consciousness’. This project therefore examines Alago proverbs with the hope of teasing out possible utilitarian deployment in the broader socio-cultural discourse, as verbal elements for reorientation and renegotiation of individual and collective consciousness..

Functions of Proverbs

On proverbs as medium of communication, Ojo Arewa and Alan Dundes in “Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore”, a work focusing on Yoruba proverbs, argue that proverbs serve as impersonal vehicles for personal communication. They contend that, the person who uses proverbs to direct or advise whether an individual or a group is simply an instrument, a voice through which the proverb speaks to the audience. They explain that the impersonal power of the proverb is more conspicuous in the African judicial process where participants argue and present their positions and counter positions using proverbs as precedents and as example to support or oppose the present action or position. Oyekan Owomoyela does not lose sight of the proverb as communicative channel when he observes that traditional African societies, whether monarchically organized like the Yoruba, Bini, Ashanti, Alago etc. or republican as in the nature of the Igbo, who are strongly class- and age-conscious, have always seen the proverb as more than just tools for communication. He draws attention

to proverbs as means and tools of exploring the African philosophy.

On the relationship between proverb and psychology, Wolfgang Mieder, in one of his articles posits that for folklorists and cultural historians, proverbs serve as pointers to national history. These scholars study proverbs from different historical periods to glean from their distinctive and dominant attitude and values prevalent in each period. In psychology and psychiatry, proverbs have been studied and used by social psychologists to help people deal with various behavioural problems, including alcoholism and drug addiction. Above all, he maintains that proverbs have been resorted to as pedagogical tools for teaching moral values and social skills, the subtleties and nuances of the people.

Sunday E Sule, Sunday T.Ojonugwa and Joseph Akanya in their paper, “Igala proverbs as correctional tools” maintain that Igala proverbs adorn speeches; teach, correct and position the young for a better future. For them, Igala proverbs are “expressed to correct ugly situation and replace it with generally acceptable norms and belief” (188).

Some African proverb scholars hold the view that proverbs can be valuable medium for the study of the past (Vansina 1965, Alagoa 1968, Nwachukwu-Agbada 1990). These scholars used proverbs from their milieu to establish their contributions as authentic indicators of aspects of their history. In the same vein, others have studied proverbial images to examine the place and role of the woman in traditional African society (Odoyoye 1979, Nwachukwu-Agbada 1989, Amali 2000). Studies have also been carried out on the linguistic and semantic aspects of the proverb (Jason 1971, Boadi 1972, Cram 1983) and as medium for socialization and cultural education (Essien 1981, Boateng 1985, Chukwukere 1988). All these studies on Nigerian proverbs have generally focused on

major ethnic domains in Nigeria and Ghana. So far, little or nothing has been done on the value of proverbs from minority cultures with a view to determining how it could possibly serve as a medium for reorienting individual virtues and as a tool for building a positive collective consciousness. This paper draws attention to the evidence in a minority cultural group as the Alago of proverbs bearing core African values, norms, traditions and other institution,. This paper argues that proverbs are not only effective as pedagogical tools, they are a potent tool for reorientation and renegotiation of individual and national moral values.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is functionalism. Functionalism as a theory focuses on the roles performed by social structures within the society. It grew out of the works of English philosopher, biologist and sociological functionalist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who popularized the relationship between society and the human body. He argues that just as different organs of the body work together to keep the body functioning, the various parts of the society work together to keep the society functioning (Spencer 1898)

Functionalists argues that different parts of the society are inter-related just like the human body, so a change in one part of the society will lead to changes in other parts too. Functionalists sees the society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote stability. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) building on Spencer’s ideas maintains that society is held in place by “collective consciousness” – a set of communal norms, tradition and attitude which serves as a unifying force within the society. He adds that social solidarity is based upon homogeneity of value and behaviour, strong social constraint and loyalty to tradition (*Collins Dictionary of*

Sociology 40). For Durkheim, every part of the social structure must work for the stability of the whole; when one part of the system is dysfunctional, it affects all other part and creates social problems. Durkheim goes on to state that punishment for deviance will affirm established cultural values and norms. (*Introduction to Sociology* 93). This approach is suitable for this paper as it provides the premise for its argument that “the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society form a determinate system with a life on its own”, what is referred to as collective value in this paper. (qtd in Pope, *The Division of Labour* 365). It also goes to show that the proverbial contents of the Alago, a part of the Nigerian nation, could be of potential benefits to the individuals and the Nigerian polity as a whole. For this essay, Spencer and Durkheim’s perspective on functionalism is apt for its emphasis on the role the component members/ structures within the society play towards maintaining social stability. This approach therefore gives framework for considering proverb and Alago proverbs in particular as a social aspect of the society capable of functioning, if harvested for national socialization, to inculcate virtues in individuals and creating a set of shared national norms and values.. This could be achieved, as the society imbibing these proverbial thoughts could produce sets of acceptable values and norms. Thoughts encapsulated in proverbs and other oral literary forms are therefore productive verbal art. As Abraham noted, there are always proverbs to express dissatisfaction or uphold any acceptable pattern of thoughts within any given society (143). It is in this function that the proverb, an aspect of the social institution, could be used to instill virtues among the citizen which will in turn contribute to collective, social stability of the body politic, the whole entity.

Data Presentation and Analysis

One may ask, what is the relationship between the proverb, virtues, national values and development? For the purpose of this paper Alago *Asusesosa* is described as an embodiment of the people’s values, worldviews, taboos, socio-cultural religious beliefs rendered in a brief and aesthetic form and transmitted orally. Virtue can be described as adherence to a particular standard of what is right or to be morally sound. Values are “principles or standards of behaviour, a person’s judgement of what is [right and] important in life” (*Oxford Dictionary of Languages*). It is a shared ideal about how something is valued, its desirability, goodness or otherwise. T.W Hipple’s definition of values suits this study aptly, for him, “values are conscious or unconscious motivators, and justifiers of the actions and judgements” [of a person or a people] (“Guiding Force” 1). Some of these values and virtues rapidly eluding us as individuals and as a nation include: fairness, friendliness, equity, justice, fairness, moral uprightness, mutual respect, industry, patriotism, good neighbourliness, etc.

The relationship between these terms is that the proverb; which is the reservoir of these core values serves as vehicle to transmit, engrave and create a positive conscience, a collective consciousness which will in turn motivate or justify actions of a person or people positively. Values are formed by the sum total of previous experiences, and the experiences become part of a person’s or people’s psyche and personality. Proverbs as mentioned earlier are concise rendition of a peoples’ previous experiences, expectations and even regrets. If a people are versed in these positive values, it will no doubt reflect in their daily activities. In other words, our core individual values influence not only our thought pattern, but our words and finally what we do (action). The shared social perception which the majority of the citizens

hold will to a large extent determine the well-being of the people.

A tabular format is adopted for presentation of data for this paper.

Table 1: Selected Patriotism Proverbs

Alago Proverbs (AP)	English Translation	Contextual Situation	Moral Implication/ Interpretation
Owoni api manu ya adole nu nu a ngmo, a y age ekwu dudu la. (AP 1)	The hydrocele that kills his master must follow him to the grave	To dissuade a person from taking a decision that will have a boomerang effect.	Whatever you sow, you will reap.
Obobo k'ene ho lonye she koni ota kpikyini ni. (AP 3)	One's mother's soup tastes better even with locust beans	Spoken to a person who exposes the weaknesses of his home or nation. Used to discourage disloyalty.	One's family or national honour must be protected at all times.
Ase ya gwinu k'ebe ko gutagye nu ela k'inyo(A P 4)	One repairs the roof which he sleeps under	It is used to encourage solidarity and discourage passivity, call to action instead of complaining about what is wrong with one's family, kinsmen or nation.	One must nurture what one has, not to abandon it. Taking responsibility.

Proverb 1 above, can be used to inculcate self-love, tolerance and the need to be kind to others. AP 1 shows that for every action, there

are consequences. AP 1 & 4 were spoken to a young man of about seventeen years by his late father's brother, urging him to be content with his lot in life. His uncle had come after learning that the young man harassed his mother for not having enough money to send him to a privately owned School of Health. He used AP 1 "the hydrocele that kills its master will follow him to the grave" to remind him of the likely consequences of his action: the death of his mother and benefactor, which will eventually compound his troubles. He used AP 4, "one repairs the roof which he sleeps under" to encourage him to support his mother in all ramifications since she is his roof.

AP 2 "the tongue of the deity is greater than the father of the deity" and AP 3 "One's mother's soup tastes better even with only locust beans" can be used to support the position stated above. The values of loyalty and contentment expressed in AP 2 and 3 will encourage young ones and even adults to honour and support their own no matter the circumstance, thereby promoting familial bond and stability.

Table 2: Selected Good Neighbourliness and Peaceful Co-existence Proverbs.

Alago Proverbs (AP)	English Translation	Contextual Situation	Moral Implication/ Interpretation
Abwo ore kwu otu; abwo oshe kwu otu. (AP 5)	Both the right hand and the left hand are attached to the chest.	It is used when suing for peace amongst kinsmen or neighbours.	We are all the same, if not one family, one nation and one humanity. Togetherness.
Ame kpo otu wo ayine. (AP 6)	The breast and the chest are kinsmen.	In fact, it is used to settle disagreement between two seeming different people.	Teaches love and mutual respect in spite of our differences.
Ahanu kpo	The teeth and the	Used to encourage	Disagreements are inevitable,

igbenu b'okunu dudu aba. fiyiwa. (AP 7)	tongue do quarrel but have not seized to co-habit in the mouth.	people to let bygones be bygone. To move on without grudges.	we must learn to overcome them.
Ofu kpo ishi wo ayine la. (AP 8)	The penis and vagina are kinsmen/ partners.	It is used to discourage favouritism or discrimination of any kind.	Importance of working as one, complimentarily as a .people or nation.

The proverbs in this table are useful for teaching the values of friendliness, acceptance, peaceful co-existence, mutual respect, peaceful resolution of conflicts and to discourage favoritism. The context for the proverbs in this table was a peace/reconciliation meeting at Keana L.G.A. at the height of an inter-tribal crisis between the Alago and the Fulani in Keana. The crisis started with a misunderstanding between some Alago and Fulani boys that led to the demise of the grandchild of the Alago chief in the context. The Fulani leader in Keana- the Adoo, is a man whose grandparents and parents were born and bred in Keana. During the peace meeting with the Alago elder whose grandchild lost his life and who incidentally was his friend, the Adoo started his speech with “one who is purging never gets tired of visiting the toilet – *Oshipu a mwo eya lo* in lieu of their (The Adoo and some Fulani elders) constant visit to Mr. Ogaji’s house. He (The Adoo) used AP 5 “both the right hand and the left hand are attached to the chest and AP 6 “the breast and the chest are kinsmen” to remind the man of their history as friends and ‘kinsmen’ though one has a mound- his status as an indigene and the other flat- a settler but in the end both embraced as kinsmen. AP 7 “The teeth and the tongue do quarrel but have not seized to co-habit in the mouth”, emphasizes the need for

peaceful resolution, mutual respect and acceptance as seen in the context above. As painful as the loss of his grand- child was, Mr. Ogaji agrees with the Adoo on the need to leave harmoniously as he accepts their apologies and advocates for tolerance in spite of their differences as he concludes with AP 8 “the penis and vagina are kinsmen/ partners”. On the national scale, if mutual respect is inculcated among the ethnic nationalities in the nation, her citizens like the teeth and the tongue will co-exist harmoniously. Furthermore, if leaders encourage their adherents to accept and tolerate one another as demonstrated in the preceding context; it will bring an end to discrimination, favouritism and incessant ethno-religious crisis facing the nation.

Table 3: Selected Proverbs that illustrate Fairness, Equity and Justice

Alago Proverbs (AP)	English Translation	Contextual Situation	Moral Implication/ Interpretation
Ozani y'ikweyi khe eyi ni pini y'ikweyi kho onu. (AP 9)	Whatever is on the buffalo's head is on the antelope's head	Used in a situation where one is suspected of favouritism or given a person undue advantage over another.	Treat everybody fairly and equally without personal or group interest.
Igbano n'iyi inyawo ogu pini inya wo ya. (AP 10)	The bird that calls rain, the rain beats.	When a person is being punished for an offence he committed	Punish the guilty.
Owoni oma akhi iyu, oma	If you blame the rat; you	Used in a situation when one	Need to be thorough, just and firm in

akhi ikini. (AP 11)	blame the locust bean.	is expected to apportion blame to two parties claiming to be right.	judgement. The importance of giving a balanced verdict.
Aba y'emu akye e y'eshi k'iyi la. (AP 12)	You do not break the nose to cure the eyes.	Used in a situation when one is accused of taking a biased position.	Give to everyone his due.

The proverb performance in this table was an unsolicited recording during a traditional judicial session. The participants were the *Orogu k'ole* (head of the family), an elder who served as a witness, two brothers, and their nephew, who were embroiled in a land dispute. The young man accused his uncles of marginalizing him and being biased in the sharing of their family land. When he was asked to speak, he concluded his speech with AP 9 “Whatever is on the buffalo’s head is on the antelope’s head” to support his right to a full portion of his father’s share of the land since it was shared among the sons of his grandfather not the half offered him by his uncles. Using AP 10 “The bird that calls rain, the rain beats”, the *Orogu* holds the uncles responsible for the embarrassment they have suffered from the young man as a result of the decision they made. The *Orogu*, in delivering his verdict, cited AP 11 “if you blame the rat; you blame the locust bean”. He used the proverb to apportion blame to the young man for making their family matter public without denying the boy his right or sparing his uncles. The young man was given his father’s full share as he rules with AP12, “one does not break the nose to cure the eyes”. He refused to sacrifice the young man’s right to satisfy his uncles’ greed.

On the national scale, Nigeria and those in authority can be likened to the *Orogu*;, if all

the ethnic nationalities are treated equally, it will bring an end to the security and political challenges facing the nation. A national situation comes to mind, in 2017, the Indigenous People of Biafra, a non-violent group was proscribed and declared “terrorist and illegal”. The Nigerian army went on “to confirm to the general public that IPOB...is a militant terrorist group” (*Vanguard*). Meanwhile bandits, herdsmen and Boko haram who were killing, kidnapping Nigerians for ransom, rustling cattle and sacking communities were not outlawed. Rather, after mounting pressure the government was ‘forced’ to declare some bandits terrorists. Arrested bandits were given amnesty and sent to schools abroad or rewarded with job opportunities, while hundreds of Biafran youths are unjustly arrested, extra-judicially executed. For the government to maintain social stability, there is need for those in leadership positions, parents, teacher and religious leaders to emulate the *Orogu* in eschewing nepotism, favouritism and all forms of bias and treat every citizen and ethnic groups with fairness, equity, equality and justice.

Table 4: Selected Responsibility Proverbs.

Alago Proverbs (AP)	English Translation	Contextual Situation	Moral Implication/ Interpretation
Ogheghe kpo okposhi pini igbano yak wo anu. (AP 12)	It is the strength of a tree that birds perch (make abode) on it.	When a person complains of negligence or disloyalty.	Do to others as you want to be done by. Show yourself as deserving loyalty and respect.
Eho yi yinu ya pini aba y'okpa ba shola. (AP 13)	The way a farm makes itself that people dress in animal skin	Cited in a situation when a person is caught in his web of	Taking responsibility and the need for openness.

	to cultivate it.	deception.	
Ogwo kw'ola oya n'iyu kiyinu (AP 14)	When the gruel is hot, no fly perches on it.	Cited to encourage responsibility. No person or nation can be faulted for fulfilling obligation	Nobody is disrespected for doing the right thing. Being right gives one an edge.

This context was recorded by a proxy (a member of the group) during a meeting between members of a particular group of intellectuals and the senator representing their zone in the National Assembly. The essence of the meeting as the researcher was told is to remind their senator the reason for his re-election. As expected, both parties stated their positions using proverbs. The leader of the group in his speech among other proverbs used AP 12 “it is the strength of a tree that birds descend (make abode) on it”, to remind the senator that it was based on his track record and his previous performance that they mobilized people to vote for him the second time; if he fails to live up to expectations that he should not count on them to win his third term bid.

In his response, the senator acknowledged their concern and thanked them for their support, however he used AP 13 “The way a farm makes itself that people dress in animal skin to cultivate it” to justify his attitude and perceived low performance. He informed the group that members of his constituency had miss-used his open policy and taken his commitment to their welfare for granted. He went on to enumerate how he had given money for some projects which were not executed at all or poorly executed. However, citing AP 14 “when the gruel is hot, no fly perches on it” he threw back the challenge to

the group. He encouraged them (those committed the welfare of the people) to support him by making themselves available; if this is done selfish individuals will no longer sabotage his commitment to the welfare of the people.

Proverbs in this table show that the led as well as the leaders have roles to play in national development. For a people to develop, they must deliberately take responsibility for those they entrust leadership on and hold them accountable.

Conclusion

From the fore going, it is clear that Alago proverbs like other proverbs from major Nigerian ethnic stocks are capable of institutionalizing core moral and national values such as patriotism, fairness, good neighbourliness, mutual respect, acceptance, tolerance and state responsibility. These Alago proverbs bear potential for instilling individual virtues relevant in building positive values necessary for social stability and corporate cohesion. We have seen that proverbs are not only effective for pedagogical purposes as studies have revealed, they can become potent tools for reorientation and renegotiation of individual and national moral values if harnessed for these functions. The functionalist framework has indeed revealed that from the margins of society can be got the truths for the development of the whole, the nation. .

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