Introduction

The Postproverbial Agency: Texts, Media and Mediation in African Cultures

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Human communication in all kinds of settings and contexts occur primarily as written, oral, verbal, electronic and non-verbal. Both oral and written traditions, although polar concepts within the field of communication, serve the functions of storing, preserving, evolving and transmitting information, ideas, theorems, phenomena, images, calculations and other imaginations. Both traditions have had equal developments and whilst their interface remain complex, they continue to impact on each other in many and different ways. The philosophical deliberations on the impact and significance of the oral versus the written mode of communication continue to remain controversial especially with the association of the written tradition to literacy and civilisation, and the oral tradition to primitive, non-literate societies. While such deliberations tend to suggest that there are far-reaching differences between these modes of communication and hence in the modes of thought in societies which utilize them, they are often so intertwined to the extent that Walter Ong claims that “reading a text oralizes it” (2002: 171).

Earlier in his book, Ong calls our attention to perhaps the utmost problematic of orality—its ephemeralness. Here now, then gone. He asks the question thus: [h]ow could you ever call back to mind what you had so laboriously worked out? (34) He reflects in the *Presence of the Word* on the philosophical categories of space and time, committing texts to space, and oral/spoken words to time. Citing Augustine, Ong makes the claim that it is not possible for us to have all of a word or utterance present itself to us at once. “When I pronounce “reflect,” by the time I get to the “-flect” the “re-” is gone, and necessarily and irretrievably gone” (40). Scott Momaday (1984) concurs that: “[i]t is the principle of oral tradition that words and the things that are made of words are

tentative. A song, or a prayer, or a story, is always but one generation removed from extinction" (37). He furthers his argument now on the contrary that "... the listener must always be keenly and constantly aware that what he or she has heard has been properly and responsibly understood for it is in the transmission over many generations of the essence of human experience that makes the oral tradition so powerful" (37). Human memory, its frailty and efficiency, becomes at once both a strength and a weakness for orality.

Let us recast Ong's question again in his own voice: [if] "an oral culture has no texts, how does it get together organized material for recall?" He provides a yet suitable answer:

In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, ... in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form.

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African cultures, often regarded largely as oral cultures, have preserved through many generations the wisdom, wits, philosophy, worldview and identities of its people through proverbs. African cultures have also been expressed and preserved in other aspects of its folklore—music, epic poetry, dance, tales as well as its religion, culinary art, arts and crafts, and apparels. Culture, however, as a dynamic process overwhelms the basic instinct for stability and fixity. This tendency towards change, especially in the light of the colonial experience, industrialization and modernisation of the continent, has been greatly welcomed but of course not without a cost. The old gives way to the new. The dispensation of the wisdom of the elders in traditional cultures gave way to the dispensation of Western educated youths. As Toyin Falola puts it, "ideas and beliefs have been reshaped, and material culture has seen significant changes in the use of imported items" (2003: 2).

The modern world has witnessed, and has been defined by, a progressive technological intrusion into the conduct of everyday life, of which the most recent and arguably the most significant manifestations have been our media technologies (Silverstone, 2002: 761). These technologies, Silverstone advances, are predominantly in the field of broadcast technologies and have become increasingly central to the ways in which individuals manage their everyday

lives. With media technologies as a major feature of the new civilisation, a cultural and communication hybridization became a necessity.

While the above might characterise the modern world of media technology¹ in the view of Silverstone, it indeed ought to characterise a postmodern world in media technology.² This is because a vast difference exists between what is termed 'old media' and 'new media.' Old media or traditional mass media, as Croteau and Hoynes (2014) choose to call it, belongs to the period before the onset of the internet comprising mainly of print, radio, and television/cinema. Media of this sort, Croteau and Hoynes posit, consists of one-to-many communication with anonymous receivers through one-way communication channels with a clear distinction between producers and receivers (287).

New media on the other hand through the use of the internet, which enables also other forms of digital contents, supersedes the traditional one-to-many model offering instead the likelihood of a many-to-many communication web (288). Also, the identities and behaviours of the audience is sometimes known to the content producer, for example registration is almost always required to access online communities and when we invent identities or do not furnish websites with our personal information, "we still leave our digital footprint (in the form of our computers' IP addresses)" (289). Furthermore, communication via new media is often potentially interactive, as well as instantaneous instead of being one way. Part of the neo-modern features of new media are feedback on newspaper stories, shoppers' product reviews, viewers comments and votes to "like" or "dislike" videos, or votes to select winners in virtual competitions or games. Instantaneity can also imply the rapid and wide spread of content in the form of images, videos, links posted by users of the various social media platforms, thus blurring the line between content producers and receivers. This interactive power of the new media coupled with "the widespread availability of digital media tools means that people with relatively modest financial resources and basic technological literacy can create their own media content and contribute to or alter content on other media platforms" (Croteau and Hoynes, 289). It is especially in this last sense that the relative advantage of the 'new' over the 'old' empowers the users, giving them capacity and power to be producers of content, 'alterers' of content, and through this act, users exercise their agency so much so that they are able to challenge content and alter meanings.

1 Media technology is used loosely here to mean methods, expertise and equipment that assist human communication in time and space.

2 See Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*, 32–33. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002.

It is a process that blurs the line between the producer (custodian) and the consumers; it is a process that grants agential power to alter—to alter that which was once held sacrosanct, unquestionable, immutable, such as proverbs—that this special edition of *Matatu* engages with. The postproverbial agency.

The postproverbial agency turns conventional thought over its head. It is the tangible voicing of the deconstructive energies of the neo-competent speaker of the African language. The postproverbial is “situated in the subfield of transgressive paremiology, that is the collation, study and interpretation of alternate proverbs which are radical and parallel compositions instead of conventionally accepted and given proverbs in traditional societies” (Raji-Oyelade, 2012: 27). Since traditional societies have given way to modern ones, Wolfgang Mieder notes fittingly that, “[c]hanging times and situations require forms of expression that traditional proverbs can no longer supply” (1993: 58). The postproverbials answer to this modern age needs as an innovative, ingenious and often-times humorous statement of actuality.

Akin to the description and discourse of anti-proverbs (W. Mieder & A. Tóthné Litovkina, 1999),³ postproverbiality is purposively named and situated within a string of ‘posts.’ As such, postproverbials are postcolonial, poststructural, postmodern, linguistic reinventions. They are postcolonial in the African/Third world context since their use and popularity became noticeable *post* colonial. They are poststructural because they stand at variance with the norm and are responses to a pre-existing structure—proverbs, whose secure sense of meaning they disrupt. The postproverbial is postmodern because it seeks to create ‘a new from the old’ through the use of playful parody and pastiche, which, as an imitation of another’s style, prompts us that the text is not “original” but constructed. It is in this sense that Raji-Oyelade refers to postproverbials as playful blasphemies.⁴ To reiterate this point, ‘playful parody’ is a postmodern style or feature; thus postproverbials as a postmodern method are playful parodies. They are however blasphemous because as a postcolonial construct, they make trivial certain aspects of the sacred, immutable, unquestionable (oral) tradition of pre-colonial Africa. Postproverbials are thus playful parodies of the once sacrosanct African proverbs. More so, if proverbs represent the traditional heritage of the people’s philosophy, postproverbials are

3 Mieder, W., and Tóthné Litovkina, A. *Twisted Wisdom. Modern Anti-Proverbs*, 1999.

4 The phrase “playful blasphemy” serves as part of the inaugural title of Raji-Oyelade’s essay on the theory of postproverbials (1999); it appears as the head phrase in his 2012 book—*Playful Blasphemies: Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yoruba Culture*.

the immaterial agency of the (post)modernists and radical imaginaries of the (post)colonial African mind.

The postproverbial presents also as a form of mediation, a mediation with the potential of being an ‘assault on meaning.’⁵ First, in the simplest form of the term mediation, consider the image of a bridge. The postproverbial agency serves as a bridge linking the old to the new without necessarily ditching the old. It mediates the new and the old serving as a link, a means that makes two ends meet. Second, mediation requires an understanding of how meanings emerge. As Silverstone notes, it:

involves the movement of meaning from one text to another, from one discourse to another, from one event to another. It involves the constant transformation of meanings, both large scale and small, significant and insignificant, as media texts and texts about media circulate in writing, in speech and audiovisual forms, and as we, individually and collectively, directly and indirectly, contribute to their production.

1999: 13

Mediated meanings are distributed through texts and boundless intertextualities, using parody and pastiche, in constant replay, and in the interminable discourses, in which we as producers and consumers act and interact, urgently seeking to make sense of the world (13). Since the postproverbial as a postmodern construct blurs the line that separates high art/high culture from low art/pop culture, it privileges the mixity, a *metissage*, of both cultures. Silverstone asserts further: “We are all mediators, and the meanings we create are themselves nomadic” (18). Through their movement from place to place, our meanings become powerful, they cross boundaries, once our postproverbials (meanings) are created, once our parodies and pastiches are created and disseminated, boundaries will continue to be crossed and every crossing becomes also a transformation.⁶

Postproverbiality is a method and a methodology. As earlier mentioned, the postproverbial is poststructural and postmodernist in its theoretical approach. Fostered upon the methodology of deconstruction (deconstruction being a commonality between the poststructural and postmodernist schools of

5 Reference here is to the provocative title of Akihiro Kitada’s paper, ‘An Assault on “Meaning”: On Nakai Masakazu’s Concept of “Mediation”’ Trans. Alex Zahlten, In *Media Theory in Japan*. 2017.

6 This is a paraphrasing of Roger Silverstone (18).

thought), postproverbiality has itself become a systematic enquiry, a theoretical lens through which analyses occur. This is made evident not only within the field of paremiology where it has been mostly employed, but within literary studies (Ezenwamadu and Ojiakor, Dunmade, in this edition), communication and language studies (Ayodele, in this edition) within the broad field of (African) gender and feminist studies (Yitah, H. 2009, Balogun, A. 2010, Oyeleye, O. 2020), and many more. The deployment of postproverbial discourse in feminist studies is especially significant for its deconstruction and reconstructive capacity because it provides the dynamics for reconfiguring the agential power of women who have suffered many decades of cultural subjection. To distinguish this form of the postproverbial from the appropriation of postproverbials in other fields lends it the appellation, feminist postproverbials.

Feminist postproverbiality is a critical and reformative attempt to alter the traditional perception of woman as traditionally observed and passed down through the medium of language found in proverbs. The feminist postproverbial discourse, as a feminist perspective to the existing idea of postproverbials, is intended to be insightful linguistic reconstructions aimed at positing woman in an egalitarian standing within a new rhetorical tradition. By adopting the indigenous framework propounded by Raji-Oyelade, it aspires to be a radical response to the feminist decolonization project by being an indigenous solution to an indigenous (African) problem. Let us consider briefly two examples of feminist reconstructed proverbial utterances as rendered in the essay, *Language Game and the Inequality of Gender*;⁷

Ìtākùn ní ñsẹ ikú pa òkéré; obìnrin ní ñsẹ ikú pa òkùnrin. Vines are the death of squirrels; women are the death of men. (As dangerous as vines are to the squirrels, so dangerous are women to men.)⁸

In the analysis on this proverb, Oyeleye maintains that spousal death through murder by the other partner due to rage, envy or mental disorder can occur both ways and should not be attributed to one gender alone. Men, she holds, are as dangerous to women as women can be dangerous to men. Hence, there is the feminist postproverbial version of same proverb:

7 See Oyeleye, Olayinka. "The Language Game and the Inequality of Gender: Interrogating Feminist Postproverbials." In *Identities, Histories and Values in Postcolonial Nigeria*. Ed. Adeshina Afolayan. London: Rowman and Littlefield. In print.

8 This proverb is cited in Oyekan Owomoyela's *Yoruba Proverbs*, 2005: 306.

Ìtàkùn ní ñṣe ikú pa òkéré; oun tó wuníje ní ñ pani. Vines are the death of squirrels; a person's desire can cause their death. Or: As dangerous as vines are to the squirrels, so dangerous can a person's desire be, if untamed.⁹

A second example;

Filà lobinrin, wọn kì í bá oḍẹ wọ ití. Women are caps; they never accompany the hunter into the dense forest. (Women do not stick around when their men suffer reverses.)¹⁰

Oyeleye mentions that the meaning of this can be deduced from the hunter's regimen. According to Owomoyela; "A hunter's cap is likely to be knocked off his head by hanging branches when he enters a thick forest" (2005: 305), as such a woman like a hunter's cap would not stay with him in the thick (jungle of life).

Its feminist reconstruction;

Filà lobinrin, wọn buyi kún orí nì: Women are caps, they add value to the head.

Oyeleye uses the head figuratively to represent "a person in charge, the leader," also, "rather than ascribe a debasing role to woman she is reconstructed to be the one that adds value, worth, adornment to the head and a certain sense of protection too."¹¹

Feminist Postproverbials, although a concept in its developing stages, is presently being explored by its progenitor as a significant commencement point for an African feminist philosophy of language.

1 Deploying Postproverbial Theory and Practices in This Special Edition

The essays in this special edition of *Matatu* are interventions and descriptions of the act of double writing—écriture double—which happens on the verbal art of proverb making. A total of fifty-nine papers were presented at the first

9 This reconstruction can be found in Oyeleye's "The Language Game and the Inequality of Gender: Interrogating Feminist Postproverbials."

10 Owomoyela. *Yoruba Proverbs*, 305.

11 Reconstruction can be found as noted earlier.

International Conference on Postproverbials which held in Ibadan, Nigeria in June, 2019. Twenty-five essays were eventually submitted and reviewed for publication; of the lot, fifteen were accepted for this special issue. These essays focus on the study of proverb transformations in Arabic, Fulbe, Igbo, Shona, Swahili and Yoruba languages. A common theme that runs through most of the papers is that the postproverbial is potentially a new text of an old writing, a re-translation of another received transcription.

In the opening essay, "The Postmodern Pulse of Postproverbials in African Cultural Space," Charles Tolulope Akinsete lays a theoretical groundwork on which most of the other articles reflect or rest. Clarifying and engaging with certain conceptual misunderstanding of the postproverbial, Akinsete defends its agency through an examination of its postmodern pulse noted as "significant to the aesthetics and values of postproverbiality, which today is conceived as a corresponding measurement of literary advancement in contemporary African space." The essay articulates the presence of postmodernist thoughts in postcolonial African literary space as well as the theoretical significance of postmodernism as an undeniable strength of postproverbiality.

Nureni Oyewole Fadare examines the postproverbial and postmodernist tenets found in the 'new media' texts of Ify Asia Chiemeziem. In his essay titled "Postproverbial and Postmodern Aesthetics in Ify Asia Chiemeziem's New Media Proverbs," Fadare selects a score and three utterances which are either reconstructions of existing proverbs or entirely new sayings formulated by Chiemeziem. Most of the selected proverbs are heavily imbued with sexual imageries which trivializes the once held sacredness of the African human genitals. Although Chiemeziem's goal might be to draw traffic to their Facebook wall as most content providers on the social media seek to do, they however ground our earlier discussion on new media which unlike the traditional media gives agency to its users to be producers and 'alterers' of content. Fadare's paper however holds an interesting angle for the postproverbials. While Akinsete clarifies that postproverbials are new proverbs coined from old sayings, Fadare's essay appears to suggest that the creation of new sayings is in fact an aspect of postproverbiality. According to him, "postproverbials give room for innovation and creativity, which engenders the formation of new proverbs."

Taking the postproverbial agency into the political terrain, Ahmad Kipacha focuses on the Tanzanian political space in the wake of the 2015 elections. In "Not so Well Campaign Speech in Swahili: Postproverbials as Persuasive Tool," Kipacha reflects on speeches which did not only "promote election manifestos of the candidates" but served "also as communication channels imbued with creative manipulation of words, phrases, sayings and proverbial expressions

to lure voters.” Through the native tongue of Swahili, political parties turned to the use of subverted forms of standard adage as an inevitable tool to wage verbal wars in a bid to disarm opponents’ argumentative style, didactic wisdom and explanatory prowess. Hinging yet on the political, Zvinashe Mamvura and Shumirai Nyota in “The form and communicative impact of Shona postproverbs,” explore the syntax-semantics nexus of Shona postproverbs in contemporary Zimbabwean society. Their essay, like Fadare’s, allude to the innovative and creative capacities of the postproverbial user. The essay establishes that the postproverbs, similar to traditional proverbs, “are pithy and terse philosophical statements that resonate with a people’s collective experience. In most cases, the postproverbs provide a conduit for people to comment on issues regarded as politically ‘taboo’ and sensitive in a society where the state does not tolerate open criticism.”

Adams Olufemi Akewula draws attention to the postproverbial agency within Arabic studies and notes that it is a relatively new trend in the discipline. His essay, “Al-Ghuluwu fi al-amsal al-arabiyy: Of Postproverbs in Modern Arabic Literature and Perceptive Transformations in Afro-Arab Culture,” explores how much common philosophy is shared between postproverbial expressions in Arabic and Yoruba languages. Looking at Yoruba and Arabic languages, Akewula considers the common philosophical underpinnings in their postproverbial expressions. A *métissage* becomes useful here as a pedagogical strategy for negotiating the conflicting or dichotomous language systems employed in a bid to re-create a number of postproverbial texts within the context of Arabic culture. In “Linguistic Representations of Postproverbial Expressions among selected Yoruba speakers: A Socio-Cultural Interpretation”, Ojo Akinleye Ayinuola adopts Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics alongside Tajfel and Turner’s Social Identity Theory as framework to examine ten postproverbial Yoruba expressions. His critical interest is to determine how social identities are constructed through the use of postproverbs among Yoruba youths as well as a consideration of the social realities that conditioned the representations of these new identities in such utterances.

Exploring “Postproverbs: The Changing Phases of Igbo Proverbs”, the trio of Ositadinma Nkeiruka Lemoha, Felicia Ohwovoriole and Augustine Okechukwu Agugua contend that “Igbo postproverbs are products of change in Igbo worldviews, values, ethics, and morals.” This, according to them, is “engendered by the fact of the current era, what the postmodernists refer to as a period of intense social change.” Leveraging on Herbert Blumer’s theory of symbolic interactionism, which considers meaning as emerging from the interaction of group members, they consider twenty-one Igbo proverbs along-

side their postproverbials, establishing Igbo postproverbials to be a reaction to the diffusion of culture occasioned by human interaction. Arguing along similar lines in "Of Proverbs and Postproverbial (Re)Constructions: An Evaluation Of 'Altering Alternatives' in Selected Igbo Proverbs," Chukwudi Christian Egbara examines postproverbial reconstructions in Igbo language, blaming the use of postproverbials on the disconnect between postproverbial users and the custodians of the Igbo proverbs. He attributes the relative popularity of postproverbials to urbanization and its influence on the speakers of the language and users of proverbs. He admonishes Igbo language users to return to their source in order to save Igbo proverbs from "the near-overbearing influence of postproverbials on the autochthonous, symbolic, semantic, and philosophical essence of Igbo traditional proverbs."

Still on Igbo postproverbials, Uche Oboko and Jennifer Umezina ground their analysis on Jacob Mey's theory of pragmeme in "A Pragmemic Analysis of Igbo Postproverbials: Identity Creation, Negotiation and Signification." They evaluate the pragmatic acts, on which some of these proverbs are reconstructed while yet maintaining the qualities of Igbo culture and at the same time accommodating the identity of the twenty-first century ideology of the Igbo people. Ronke Eunice Okhuosi's essay, "A Pragmatic Act Analysis of English Postproverbials on Twitter," also utilizes Jacob Mey's pragmatic act as theoretical framework. Her work reveals ten praxs and allopraxs which are projected through contextual features of shared situational knowledge, voicing, inference, metaphor, and socio-cultural knowledge. Her essay further reveals that "cultures and occurrences in public affairs affect such cultural indices as proverbs and language use" and this is intensified through the use of new media. Furthering on pragmatic acts, Abana Ifeoma and Eke Obiora, relying on J.L. Austin's speech act theory, conversational implicature and presupposition, unravel "the linguistic idiosyncrasies associated with the connotation of postproverbials as it relates to different contextual usages." In their essay, "Postproverbials in Igbo Language: A Pragmatic Perspective," they consider the development of the postproverbials as a threat to the fixity of Igbo proverbs. They conclude that "postproverbiality is situated in the dynamic space of informal speech of a younger and adventurous generation."

Aderemi Raji-Oyelade and Zaynab Ango in "Five and five does not make ten ...": Perspectives on Ful'be Postproverbials" take us through proverb transformations amongst the Fulani people of the Sahelian region of West Africa, specifically the transformations peculiar to the Fulfulde speakers in Nigeria. Their essay is divided into two parts: the first part serves as a backdrop providing information about the Ful'be people's origin, language and culture; the second part provides samples of proverbs and their accompanying postprover-

bials alongside their analyses. They state the aim of their essay thus: “to establish the existence of transformation in the proverb text among, mostly younger, urban and educated speakers of the Ful’be language, and to propose whether such transformations impact on the worldview of contemporary Ful’be speakers.” Raji-Oyelade and Ango offer us an interesting angle to engage with in their analysis of the historical revision of the proverb “Five and five does not make ten, ...”

Femi Dunmade’s “A Phenomenology of Selected Postproverbial Poetry of Jack Mapanje,” examines the implementation of the umbilical-cordage-of-peculiar-hounds proverb in four selected poems from Mapanje’s *Skipping Without Ropes*. He considers this from a phenomenological perspective to enable the reader, or critic as the case may be, to move with ease, or with a certain presence of mind, between the particular poems “in a resolute hunt for the essence of the proverb.” The essay uncovers Mapanje’s rupturing of the original meaning of the said proverb which denotes a thirst, a desire to see the wonder and beauty of nature as a reason to travel to distant lands. Mapanje however, according to Dunmade, “deploys it to treat flight from barbarous tyranny.” Within the same literary tradition, Nkechi Judith Ezenwamadu and Chinyere Theodora Ojiakor consider J.L. Austin’s Speech Act Theory in examining proverb uses and postproverbial reflections and their implications in Zulu Sofola’s *Old Wines are Tasty* and Emeka Nwabueze’s *A Parliament of Vultures*. Their essay is titled “Proverbs and Postproverbial Stance in Selected Plays of Emeka Nwabueze and Zulu Sofola”.

Taiwo Adesoji Ayodele concludes this special edition with his essay titled, “Determining the Domain of Postproverbials in Human Language Development Theories and Stages.” In this essay, Ayodele attempts an exploration, justification, as well as a determination of the place of the human linguistic capacity in articulating and engaging postproverbials. He does this in relation to Chomsky’s model of grammar alongside some other scholarly positions. The essay upholds Chomsky’s idea of linguistic competence as the most suitable justification for the use and understanding of postproverbials.

In conclusion, the last twenty-five years have witnessed an instrumental explosion in postproverbial theorization, and its applicability has remained boundless since the term *postproverbial* was first used in a staff-student seminar in the Department of Ibadan, Nigeria in 1995. It does seem that the phenomenon has become both feature and agency of (post)modernist performance. It is thus apt and convincing to say that “for every popular traditional proverb in use, there is at least one postproverbial as its prosthesis” (Raji-Oyelade, 2012:126).

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