

# Nollywood Proverbs as Sociolinguistic Expressions

**Mojisola Shodipe**

*Department of English,  
University of Lagos, Nigeria.  
mjshodipe@yahoo.com*

## **Abstract**

*Proverbs serve as globally recognized expressions of a people's culture and worldview. While the Nollywood industry is acclaimed for propagating Africa's diverse heritage, a crucial component of this cultural display lies in verbal expressions that illuminate traditional moral and ethical norms. This is most evident in the prevalence of proverbs within contemporary productions, ranging from thought-provoking to didactic and hilarious renditions that enhance the narrative's thematic and aesthetic depth. This study explores the sociolinguistic dimensions of traditional proverbs in Yoruba films, focusing on how they are creatively adapted to represent social practices and their cultural implications. Although typically defined as short, pithy expressions that offer moral advice, these proverbs undergo dramatic transformations in modern Yoruba cinema to project their sociolinguistic significance. By integrating these dramatic elements, filmmakers make traditional wisdom more appealing to audiences, fostering a deeper appreciation of ancestral practices. Through a purposive selection of Nollywood proverbs, this research examines the elements that establish these sayings as the ethnography of a society.*

**Key words:** *proverbs, ethnography, sociolinguistics, cultural heritage*

## **Introduction**

It is the masquerade that dances in moderation that dances longest. One does not immerse his legs in water and then complain that the water is cold

- Yoruba Proverbs

Proverbs are globally recognized as unique linguistic features that encapsulate a society's culture and worldviews. Functioning as both an art form and a tool for verbal expression, they reflect the specific rhetorical practices and communal identities of diverse populations (Taylor, 1985; Winick, 2004). Scholars define proverbs as short, traditional utterances that condense cultural truths and recurrent social situations into concentrated, communicable forms (Lau & Winick, 2004; Maret, 1996). Characterized by wit and imagination, they provide amusement and instruction while serving as a collective representation of a people's way of life (Trench, 2003).

While Crystal (1997) observes that proverbs may be restricted to peripheral domains in some Western cultures, they remain central to everyday interaction in Africa. Their prominence in traditional oratory and folklore projects the totality of the African cultural environment, effectively acting as a society's ethnography (Hymes, 1972; Adedimeji, 2009). These pithy distillations of archival wisdom are derived from social occurrences and the natural world, with elders serving as the primary custodians of this knowledge.

In Africa's multi-ethnic landscape, proverbs define the tenor of conversational exchanges and the linguistic character of many communities (Bokor, 2012). They address a vast array of topics—from personal and political matters to abstract concepts like death, power, and poverty. Ultimately, proverbs serve as rhetorical tools to persuade, express deference, or instill respect, enhancing the overall persuasiveness of discourse (Krikmann, 1985). Due to this oratorical significance, they remain integral to traditional ceremonies, verbal arts, chieftaincy practices, and festivals. As Michael J. Bokor (2012) argues:

... Africa's oral literature derives its strength largely from the preponderance of proverbs and these proverbs contribute much towards establishing the linguistic character of the continent.

Proverbs thus constitute an essential sociolinguistic component of cultural narratives which generally relate the experiences of people or their observations about contemporary situations or events, and the morals to be drawn from them (Vansina, 1985). Akporobaro and Emovon (1994) also observe that although proverbs are derived from socio-cultural experiences,

*Nollywood Proverbs ...*

they are universally relevant since humans think alike and share common desires and aspirations in their daily grapple with the life's challenges.

The use of proverbs as an essential ingredient of interpersonal communication is a dominant feature of orality in the African setting as the proverb serves a crucial ethnographic purpose for both the speaker and the audience. Apart from indicating that the speaker has the ability to relate with his African roots; generational differences can be easily bridged when proverbs are applied in the interrogation of contemporary issues. Proverbs are thus described as a record of some sort which links the present with the past and vice versa (Finnegan, 1987).

Scholars have argued that proverbs in the Yoruba cultural milieu are significant components of the ethnography of the society as they communicate the value of oral sources in reconstructing the history of the people (Finnegan 1987; Delano, 1973; Hutcheon, 2000). In charting the route for the proper explication of community norms, Yoruba proverbs can thus be likened to a brief compass which can be used to navigate everyday discourse at the individual and group levels. In this regard, Delano's (1973) definition of Yoruba proverbs as 'self-evident truths' aligns with Falola's (2007) admonition that: "it is useful and valuable for the African histographers, especially the Yoruba, to always explore and exploit available oral traditions such as the proverb to revisit the past and its cultures, as it has become clear that past cultures have shaped present cultures...." (31).

A vivid illustration of this truism can be gleaned in the present-day revivalist role of the Nigerian film industry- Nollywood- in the varied illuminations of the Nigerian cultural heritage as documented in contemporary films. More specifically, the indigenous section of the Nollywood industry has contributed immensely to the stimulation of renewed global interest in the sociolinguistic component of contemporary movies as illustrated in the vast array of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba movie productions.

This paper focuses on the unique filmic portrayals of the Yoruba linguistic ethnography through the dramatic presentations of proverbs or wise sayings, a trend which has deeply enhanced the filmic interrogation of the socio-cultural nuances of the Yoruba people. This paper examines the sociolinguistic dimension in the exploration of the socio-cultural impact of proverbs in selected Nollywood movies. The sociolinguistic approach is aimed at providing significant insights into the understanding of selected

Nollywood proverbs within the ambit of Yoruba cosmology, history and cultural ideology.

### **Yoruba Proverbs, Language and Culture in Nollywood**

Many African societies are extremely rich in proverbs (Finnegan, 1970; Egblewogbe, 1980; Akporobaro and Emovon, 1994; Bokor, 2003), among them the Zulu of South Africa, the Azande of Central Africa, the Igbos of South East Nigeria and the Yoruba of South West Nigeria where this study is domiciled. The Yoruba socio-cultural environment is strongly rooted in oral tradition and thus provides a fertile ground for the examination of the sociolinguistic import of proverbs. The richness of the Yoruba worldview, history and cosmology has consistently found vivid portrayal in the Yoruba film industry. From the pioneering travelling theatres of the 1960s, the celluloid films of the seventies and the evolution of present-day Nollywood from television and cinema to home video and now satellite television, the Yoruba culture has a long tradition of colourful representation in the filmic projections of Nollywood. A dominant component of Nollywood's cultural illumination is the exploration of the Yoruba ways of speaking which exhibit the profundity of proverbs in the interrogation of the socio-cultural nuances of the people.

Movies are a powerful form of media through which socio-cultural conceptualisations are created and reinforced (Sharifian, 2011, 2017; Kolker, 2006). Film as a media form thus functions as a major channel of cultural communication, while the film practitioners easily fit the description of moulders and projectors of social image. Since movies rely on language to convey messages, language becomes instrumental to the exploration of society and culture. Proverbs constitute a dominant component of this cultural exposition and they provide an immense variety of ethnographic information in their rhetorical (persuasive), epistemological (history, folklore, myth, legend, etc.), didactic and philosophical characteristics.

### **Conceptual Considerations**

Contemporary studies of language have always embraced the interdisciplinary perspective. Sarangi (2001) observes that scholars from a range of disciplines (Bakhtin, Benveniste, Derrida, Lacan, Levi-Strauss, Nietzsche, Volosinov, Vygotsky, Wittgenstein) have fore-grounded a view of language in the

*Nollywood Proverbs ...*

development of their distinct approaches to the study of human thought in relation to social and cultural factors. For instance, both Levi-Strauss (1963) (from an anthropological viewpoint, e.g., kinship structure) and Lacan (1968) (the psychoanalytic perspective) (on the language of dreams) share the view that the “deep structures of human consciousness” can only be grasped by focusing on the linguistic realizations. Sarangi (*ibid*) thus argues that language stands at the intersection between social sciences (language as social activity-to include interaction) and natural science (language as a scientific system and therefore a separate entity out there).

Historically however, much of mainstream linguistic theory has flourished without a view of language as action; that is, without a consideration of the mediating role of language in the shaping of individual – society relations. Chomsky’s theorization of language has received much criticism (Hymes, 1964) as a result of its characteristic neglect of social praxis. Within linguistics, language has been objectified as a system (Saussure, Jacobson, Chomsky). Saussure (1916; 1966) is credited with much of the definitive principles on the structure of language, particularly in his famous proposition on sets of binary opposites or dualities in the study of language (e.g. individual and society; *langue* and *parole*; concrete and abstract; identity and opposition). The thrust of Saussure’s views generally lie in how meaning is realizable through, and also constructed by, language structure. This relationship between language structure and situated meaning can easily be mapped on to the relationship between social structure and social action as proposed by later scholars like Habermas (1987), Foucault and Bourdieu (1991).

***Habermas***

Habermas is primarily concerned with the theorizing of the language – action relationship, and the extent to which communication (as symbolic interaction) is central to the evolution of society. Habermas’ initial fixation was with the theory of knowledge in the tradition of the *Frankfurt School*, but the publication of *The Theory of Communicative Action in two volumes* (1987) marks his turn to the linguistic perspective. Habermas built on the work of Weber’s (1947, (1922) model of action which emphasizes the notion of ‘acting individual’ and ‘explanatory understanding’ in order to account for economic rationality and rule-oriented rationality (to include social action as

rule following in both constitutive and regulative terms). By social action, Weber means action which takes account of the behavior of other individuals in the same social environment in which they co-exist. The Habermasian framework idealizes the dimension of rationality and intentionality as forms of human action. He sees language as communication (to include distorted communication) and strategic rationality as parasitic on communicative rationality. For him, communicative action as distinct from strategic and instrumental action is paramount to the ‘life-world’ and its reproduction.

### ***Foucault***

Foucault’s interest is in the language-thought (or language –cognition) relationship. In *The Order of Things* (1966, 1970) Foucault discusses the problematic relationship between words and things. Echoing the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Foucault goes on to claim that language constitutes our categories of thought (as in the categorization of different kinds of pain), and therefore to question language can amount to questioning thought itself. This position is what he later designates as ‘episteme’ or the ‘archeological’ level of discourse. Foucault draws attention to how social rules permit certain statements to be made, and to be identified as true or false. As he sees it, statements are not produced by speakers; in fact, statements determine the role that a speaker must assume in making use of that statement.

### ***Bourdieu (1991)***

Although Bourdieu endorses the Austin/Searle model of performative action, he stresses that his interest is not just in understanding utterances but in the social conditions of production (and implicitly, reception) of utterances. In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), Bourdieu develops a model of praxis where language is conceptualized, not as an object of analysis or ‘logos’ as in the structural linguistic tradition, but as an instrument of power and of action. According to Bourdieu, linguistic utterances seem to have value in a specific market, hence linguistic exchange can be conceptualized in parallel with economic exchange systems (Weber 1947 (1922)).

For Bourdieu, utterances (and for that matter, words, languages, discourses) do not have intrinsic status of their own; they derive power from the legitimization and authority with which they are backed. He sees every linguistic exchange as having the potentiality of an act of power: linguistic

*Nollywood Proverbs ...*

relations, by definition, are always relations of power. According to Bourdieu, ‘authority comes to language from the outside’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992); an indication that Bourdieu’s economic model transcends the realm of communication in accounting for socio-cultural effects of linguistic action. Bourdieu also makes a connection between social structure and social action. In his terms, social structure and social action can be mapped on to ‘field’ and ‘habitus.’ Habitus has a linguistic manifestation, and its meaning potential is tied up to a given field of practice. His view of social agents as products of history allows him to overcome the shortcomings of the “detemporalised conception of action that informs both structural and rational choice views of action.” In other words, action is constituted in practice, rather than just being a product of history. According to Bourdieu “structures produce habitus, which determines practices, which reproduce structures.” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:135).

The examination of proverbs as used in Nollywood (Yoruba) films is premised on the interdisciplinary perspective, involving the sociolinguistic/ethnographic dimension and the social theoretical perspectives which lend credence to the sociolinguistic exploration of the topic. These conceptual perspectives combine to provide a holistic view of the filmic projections of the Yoruba cultural ethos through the myriad of proverbs in selected Yoruba movies.

### **Language, Culture and Thought**

The interconnections between language, culture and thought is quite crucial to the explication of proverbs in Nollywood movies. The Yoruba movies themselves can be regarded as vivid expressions of the cultural dynamics in both traditional and contemporary settings normally portrayed in these movies. The medium through which these dynamics are enacted is of course, language. The question which readily comes mind then is: To what extent does the language we speak determine the way we think about the world? (John Saeed, 2000: 42). Saeed echoes Sapir’s (1946) view that the particular language we speak conditions our conceptualizations of the world (ibid), language is thus a guide to “social reality.” According to Sapir, human beings do not live in the objective world nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.

No two languages are sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The world in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same with different labels attached. We see and hear and otherwise very largely experience as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation, from this standpoint as the symbolic guide to culture.

(Sapir 1946:162)

Robert Kolker (2006) opines that culture can be understood as the text of our lives, the ultimate coherent pattern of beliefs, acts responses and artifacts that we produce and comprehend every day. These beliefs, act and artifacts have meaning. Goodenough (1964: 36) offers a comprehensive insight into the nature and significance of culture in contemporary society:

... a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end product of learning... By definition, we should note that culture is not material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances. To one who knows their culture, these things and events are also signs signifying the cultural forms or models of which they are material representation.

An American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, describes human behaviour as symbolic action and thus the question of its ontological status is overshadowed by that of its social import (1993:10) Geertz therefore sees culture not merely as complexes of concrete behaviour patterns – customs, usage, traditions, habit clusters – but as a set of control mechanisms including

*Nollywood Proverbs ...*

norms, recipes, rules, instructions for the governing of behaviour. (Geertz 1993: 44) In stressing the vital role of culture in human life, Geertz refers precisely to that mosaic of different cultures in human society, hence the emphasis on cultural diversity, and the recognition of ethnography as a major tool of assessing meaning in different cultures. This ethnographic dimension is referred to as *thick description* (Geertz 1993: 9 – 10). According to Sakellarious, the notion of thick description primarily underscores the extremely dense structures of social events. In the case of ethnographers and translators, the notion of thick description can serve as a useful “object of comparison” for conceptualizing the interpretive task involved in intercultural communication. Sakellarious thus observes:

Thick description, as a “process of sorting out structures of signification”, denotes the attempt of the individual to understand other people’s acts and discourses that are rooted in a web of various forms of life.... it is a task always performed from within a specific, socio-cultural determined horizon ... (200: 4).

Culture in this paper will be viewed in a broad sense, as in anthropological studies. According to Sugeng Hariyanto, “culture is not only understood as the advanced intellectual development of mankind as reflected in the arts, but it refers to all socially conditioned aspects of human life” (Snell-Hornby, 1988; Hymes, 1964).

Language is an expression of culture and individuality of its speakers. It influences the way the speakers perceive the world. At the societal level, language serves many functions, which include unifying its speakers and reinforcing their identities as members of a speech community, (Saville-Troike, 1987), creating social categories and maintaining communal boundaries, and entrenching aspects of the community’s norms and practices in the consciousness of its speakers.

While many of the social functions of language are universal, the peculiar ways in which communication operates to project these functions naturally vary from one society to another. In other words, language functions are culture-specific. For instance, greetings in many African societies are

more elaborate than in European cultures, and in many cases, they are a reflection of the social structure or the values and belief systems of the African societies.

At the individual level, the functions of language are directly related to the speaker's purpose and needs (Hymes, 1961; 1972). These range from the expressive (emotional), directive (requests/ demands), poetic (aesthetic), phatic (empathy/solidarity) to the referential (true or false propositional content) and the meta-linguistic (Saville-Troike, 1987: 14). At both individual and group levels, it is evident that the functions of language provide the major tools for characterizing and organizing communicative processes in a speech community. Such processes are generally recognized as 'ways of speaking' in the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1964), a perspective which takes language primarily as a socially-constituted cultural form.

The focus of the ethnography of communication is the interrogation of the kind of knowledge which a language speaker needs to function effectively and appropriately in the speech community. Such knowledge, which includes the social and cultural skills required to use it, is known as *communicative competence* (Hymes, 1964).

### **The Ethnography of Speaking**

Dell Hymes' *ethnography of speaking* deals with actual speech events rather than as an ideal speech situation and truth/validity claims. Hymes' model is far from being limited. He takes into account various 'components of communicative events' which include role-relation. Both Hymes (1964) and Habermas (1987) regard communicative competence to be more than an extension of linguistic competence to social actions, but they differ at the level of abstraction and theorizing.

Ethnography of communication relies on qualitative information. The focus is on the speech community, and on the way communication is patterned within that unit. A speech community is defined variously as shared language use (Lyons, 1970); frequency of interaction by a group of people (Bloomfield 1933, Gumperz 1962); shared rules of speaking and interpretation of speech performance (Hymes, 1972); shared attitudes and values regarding language forms and use (Labov, 1972), shared socio-cultural understandings and presuppositions with regard to speech (Sherzer 1975).

### *Nollywood Proverbs ...*

The central focus of the ethnography of communication, according to Saville-Troike (1985) is best illustrated by the question: what does a speaker need to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community, and how does the speaker learn the procedure for acquiring such knowledge? The process of such understanding is what is known as *communicative competence*. This stipulates that the speaker needs not only the rules for communication (both linguistic and sociolinguistic) and shared rules for interaction, but also the knowledge of the culture which is the basis of communicative events and interactional processes (ibid, 3).

Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language code, but also what to say to whom and how to say it appropriately in any given situation (Saville-Troike, 1989:21). It deals with the social and cultural knowledge speakers are presumed to have to enable them to use and interpret linguistic forms. *Communicative competence* refers to knowledge and skills for contextually appropriate use and interpretation of language in a community, it refers to the communicative knowledge shared by the group, although these (like all aspects of culture) reside invariably in its individual members. Language most obviously serves a role in social control by providing a medium for telling people directly what to do.

### **Methodology**

The proverbs being examined in this paper were purposively selected from Nollywood (Yoruba) movies produced between 2010 and 2015. Ten movies were selected for this purpose on terms of the nature of the proverbs and how effectively the proverbs were seen to project sociolinguistic features. Three of the movies were accessed through video DVD disks while the others were accessed through media monitoring of the satellite station which airs Yoruba movies on a daily basis. The movies include “Fifehanmi”, “Eburu Ni”, “Igba Iwa”, “Arodan”, “Akuko”, and “Agbada Esan.”

### **Cultural Consideration in Translation**

The Nollywood proverbs under examination in this paper are presented in Yoruba. This underlies the imperative of providing adequate culture-based translations of these wise sayings for a clear understanding of the meaning and application of the proverbs to the filmic contexts in which they appear. Therefore, the methodological direction of this paper will take due cognizance

of the cultural imputations in the proverbs. Over the years, scholars have attempted various definitions of the art of translation but few of those definitions take cognizance of the cultural dimension. For instance, Brislin defines translation as:

The general term referring to the transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language (source) to another (target), whether the languages are in written or oral form; whether the languages have established orthographies or do not have such standardization ... (1976: 1)

Similarly, Pinhhuck (1977: 38) proposes that "translation is a process of finding a TL equivalent for an SL utterance". In the same vein, Newmark's (1981) definition does not state anything about culture:

Translation is a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language.  
(1981: 7).

Savory (1968) equally maintains that translation is made possible by an equivalent of thought that lies behind its different verbal expressions. Catford (1965: 20) states that translation is the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language. In this definition, Catford gives prominence to 'equivalent textual material', even though the specific type of equivalence is not stated. Culture is not taken into account.

In these definitions, Sugeng Hariyanto, notes that three points stand out clearly: (1) there is a change of expression from one language to the other, and (2) the meaning and message are rendered in the TL, and (3) the translator has an obligation to seek for the closest equivalent in the TL. But a cultural dimension is implied in Nida and Taber's (1969) explanation of the process of translation:

Translating consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language

*Nollywood Proverbs ...*

message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.

Sugeng Hariyanto further argues that the concept of closest natural equivalent is rooted in Nida's concept of dynamic equivalent. His celebrated example is taken from the Bible, that is the translation of "Lamb of God" into the Eskimo language. Here "lamb" symbolizes innocence, especially in the context of sacrifice. As a matter of fact, Eskimo culture does not know "lamb". Thus, the word does not symbolize anything. Instead of "Lamb of God", he prefers "Seal of God" to transfer the message. Here he considers cultural aspects

Clifford Geertz, an American anthropologist, describes the cultural dimension to translation as "webs of significance" in line with Max Weber's conception of man as an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun. Geertz therefore contends:

I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning (1993:5).

Snell-Hornby (1988: 39) explains that this exclusion of cultural aspect from the discussion of translation theory is premised on the view of the traditional approach in linguistics which draws a distinction between language and "extra-linguistic reality" (culture, situation, etc.). The contemporary approach, however sees language as an integral part of culture, as proposed by Hymes (1964) and Halliday and Hasan (1985).

With regard to translation, the manifestation of culture can be gleaned in two ways: First, the concept or reference of the vocabulary items is somehow specific for the given culture. Second, the concept or reference is actually general but expressed in a way specific to the source language culture. In practice, however, it is suggested that a translator should take into account the purpose of the translation in translating the culturally-bound words or expressions (Sugeng Hariyanto, web).

### **Sociolinguistic Features of Proverbs in Selected Nollywood (Yoruba) Films**

This section examines the myriad of Nollywood proverbs which represent significant depictions of the sociolinguistic norms of the Yoruba society. Against the background of the pivotal role of the filmic medium in the vivid portrayals of Nigeria's cultural heritage, the analysis of the proverbs seeks to unearth the varied dimensions of socio-cultural messages which these proverbs project. More importantly, the exploration of the ethnographic details of these messages is aimed at providing an adequate explanation of not only the various functions of proverbs, but also the ways in which they point the new generation to the understanding of the socio-cultural essence of Yoruba ways of speaking. The Nollywood proverbs to be examined are categorized in terms of the aspects of Yoruba culture and tradition which they depict.

#### ***Narrative Proverbs***

Narrative proverbs are autonomous stories that appear in different genres of African oral tradition. They function as images, metaphors, and symbols and advance the meanings of the narratives in which they occur. Narrative proverbs in Nollywood films extend across broad ideological and generic divides. They are embedded inside larger, more inclusive narratives within the film such as flashbacks, chants, eulogies, and other forms of oratory. In this regard, it may be argued that narrative proverbs are an essential feature of Yoruba poetics, a feature which is derived from the interplay of oral and literary traditions.

When a story is used as a proverb, it draws upon group habits of speech and narration as a means of giving shape to experience, drawing upon what could be called the populist impulse in art and life. According to Obiechina (1992), the embedding of stories in the form of proverbs is based upon two main principles of the African oral tradition- authority and association. An idea is given validity by being placed side by side with another idea that bears the stamp of communal approval (authority) and by virtue of its being linked to the storehouse of collective wisdom (association). The narrative proverb lends credence to an action, feeling, gestures in filmic

*Nollywood Proverbs ...*

context and generally supplies illustrative or authoritative support to an idea, a point of view, or social process being depicted in the movie.

The mutual exchangeability of proverb and story is possible because both are the common ingredients of Yoruba oral tradition which represent unique ways of speaking in a cultural setting. The use of the narrative proverb to validate individual positions or arguments by placing them within the framework of stories has been adopted by the Nollywood producers in their attempt to infuse creative impulses from Yoruba oral tradition with the aesthetics of film culture.

Nollywood movies thus employ the narrative proverb in the artistic depictions of varying strands of character and their response to everyday challenges as in the following examples:

Proverb	Translation	Meaning
<b>Quest for Appreciation:</b> Ká k'éyin s'qwó òtún, ká kékéyin s'qwó osì, ká wá fi èhìn rìn dé ìlú Iséyìn, éni tì kò ní yin'ni kò ní yin'ni!	<i>If you put eggs in one hand, and palm kernels in the other, and embark on a long trek to Iseyin town, you are not likely to be acknowledged by those who lack appreciation!</i>	People are difficult to please!
<b>Valour/Arrogance:</b> Ai tó'dòó tó sí, ni òkéré di'jú, kònkokò di'jú; bí a bá tó'dòó tò, sí, ìhòòhò gbangba ni 'kálukú yóò dúró!	<i>It is sheer cowardice that makes the squirrel join the toad to strip naked just to urinate in the river. Otherwise, each of them should be bold enough to swim naked in the river!</i>	One should not be afraid to speak their mind or take certain action regardless of other people's opinion.

<p><b>Repeated Misconduct:</b> Eni ọmọ ọba jìn s'ófin.; ọla ọmọ jìn s'ófin; tí ojú kò bá tí ọfin, ó yé kí ojú ti ọmọ ọba.</p> <p><b>Similar:</b> Eni alaàgemọ kù s'árò, ọla alaágemọ kú s'árò; bí ojú kò bá tí arò, ẹ́ ojú kò gbodò, ti alágemọ n i?</p>	<p><i>Today the royal child falls into a pit; tomorrow the royal child falls into a pit; if the pit is not ashamed of trapping the royal child, royalty itself should steer clear of the pit!</i></p>	<p>People in the eye of the public should always strive to remain above board.</p>
--	---	--

### ***Dramatic Proverbs***

Dramatic proverbs are the hallmarks of Nollywood story-telling. Apart from accentuating the dramatic impact of the story by painting vivid pictures and images in the eyes of the viewer, this category of Nollywood proverbs have the added quality of portraying aspects of Yoruba social practices and ways of life. Despite their characteristic dramatic features, they have the potential to instill life lessons, and provide wise counsel through a range of satiric, ironic and sarcastic features.

Proverbs	Translation	Meaning
<p><b>On Commitment or Interest:</b> Ijó tó bá káni lára ni à n fi ìkúùkù jó.</p>	<p><i>You always know when someone is dancing with passion and excitement when their two hands turn into fists!</i></p>	<p>Action speaks louder than words!</p>

*Nollywood Proverbs ...*

<b>Action versus Procedure:</b> Ká róṣo módií, ká ródií máṣo; kí ìdí ó má ti gbófo ni.	<i>It does not matter whether you tie the wrapper to the waist or the waist to the wrapper; the idea is not to go naked.</i>	The end justifies the means.
<b>Unexpected Opportunity:</b> Málùù tó yóké, ìdùnnú nílá ni fún alápatà.	<i>The hunch- backed cow only provides added profit advantage to the butcher.</i>	When somebody's misadventure / mistake translates to unexpected gain for another.
<b>Knowing when to quit or move on:</b> Bí èèyàn bá fi orí ti ìtìkutì, orí náà yóò fó yán-án-yán ni!	<i>If you keep hitting your head against the wall, it will soon break!</i>	There is a limit to endurance/perseverance of an unpleasant experience; lest the one who endures soon becomes history.

*Proverbs of Power and Power Relations*

Perhaps one of the most poignant uses of proverbs in Nollywood is the way they are deployed in the portrayal of extraordinary characters or charismatic persona whose antics and idiosyncrasies naturally sustain the dramatic tenor of the movie. Yoruba mythology is replete with stories of iconic leaders who changed the course of history. Such characters are known to use specially-coined proverbs for varied purposes which include social control, intimidation, or for ironic and sarcastic purposes. Whatever the purpose, the over-riding motivation is constant: to exert power over others in the dynamics of communal leadership Nollywood producers explore this mythic heritage in the depiction of both character, action and consequences, as exemplified in the following:

Proverbs	Translation	Meaning
In the film, <i>Igba Iwa</i> , when a despotic king is confronted with the inevitable finitude to his tyrannical reign, stubbornly declares with arrogant indifference:  Èní ni ọla àna; ọtunla sì ni ọla ọla!	<i>Today is the tomorrow of yesterday; two days hence is the tomorrow of tomorrow!</i>	Today I will do something so memorable that the story will be told for years to come as an act of a warrior-king.
<b>2. Undeserved Glory:</b> A kò ní gbé orí olórí karí kí ọrùn kó má wọ’ni.	<i>Anyone who goes around with another person's head on his shoulders should be prepared to endure severe neck pain!</i>	Power corrupts.... Anyone who fraudulently attains a position of glory must surely be overwhelmed and misuse the position.
<b>3. Unacknowledged limitation:</b> Akàlàmàgbò tó ní pariwo pé òun fẹ́ jọba, ó ni ọwó Olúdùmarè nínú ni.	<i>The vulture that goes about campaigning for a kingship position must surely have the backing of the Almighty!</i>	It is an act of arrogance to aim toward an unattainable or undeserved position.

### Onomatopoeic Proverbs

Nollywood proverbs have great entertainment value. Many instances abound in Nollywood films where certain proverbs present verbal features which exhibit the richness of Yoruba word power by turning words (or their components) around for phonic effect. They take various forms such as pun, alliteration, or homophony and they often characterized by a graphic portrayal of culturally motivated attitudes and communal practices. A significant

*Nollywood Proverbs ...*

feature of such sound-based proverbs is the play on Yoruba tone marks for meaning distinction between similar sounding words, as observed in the following examples:

- i). Eni tó bá ni eléde l’ó ni ède; eni tó bá sì ni èdè l’óni eléde.  
(*He who owns the pig owns the homestead, and he who owns the homestead owns the pig*).  
Meaning: A no-contest situation.
- ii). Eni tó bá ju garawa, ó di dandan kó gbó gan-an-ran-ran.  
(*He who throws an iron bucket must surely hear a clanking noise*).  
Meaning: You reap what you sow.
- iii). Isinà ni siná jé fún Shinà tó n şe siná pèlúu Sínátù.  
(‘*It is a sign of foolishness for (a man called) Shina to engage in adultery with (a woman called) Sinatu*’)  
Meaning: It is an act of sheer foolishness for any man to engage in adultery with another man’s wife. (Normally used to indicate incongruities or anomalies in social life).
- iv) T’imú yé imú tí imú fi n fòn.  
(‘*The nose knows what it is doing each time it blows its own trumpet*’)  
Meaning: ‘I know what I am doing’
- v) A ní ajá n lósòó, a tún kó owó lo ra òbo; ni lósòó, lósòó, bá n pò, si!  
(‘*We complain that the dog is fond of stooping, then we go ahead and purchase a monkey; what will we get but more stooping around?!*’)  
Meaning: An incorrigible person, or a frustrating situation.
- vi) O ti jé Dòdò, kò lè rí òdodo sò!  
(‘*He/she has eaten ‘Dodo’ (a plantain delicacy); so it will be hard to speak against the provider of the palatable meal*’) ‘Dodo’ here is metaphor for gratification.  
Meaning: He/she who has been bribed cannot speak the truth)

***Proverbs about Contemporary Challenges***

One of the defining emblems of Nigerian films is the constant focus on varying facets of the human condition. Thus, Nollywood productions imitate life generously through filmic depictions which engage the emotions and human psyche of the audience. Proverbs have the potential to illuminate various aspects of the culture that inform the understanding of life challenges

and the cultural resources for addressing them. The Nollywood (Yoruba) movie productions thus explore the vastness of the traditional worldview of the indigenous culture in the presentation of man in the quest for self-fulfilment and the grapple with contemporary realities. Proverbs are thus deployed in the varied expressions of such challenges.

i) *Giving Hope:*

Ko si bi sanma se le funfun to, ti dudu die ko ni si nibe.

*No matter the whiteness of the sky, there must be patches of darkness.*

*Meaning:* Every problem has a solution.

ii) *On the importance of mutual love and solidarity:*

Bi na'ni na'ni ba n na'ni; ti naayan naayan ba n naayan, ti eni ti o to nii gba ko ba da si, yoo da bi eni pe oun lo ran won ni!

*(One who stands by and watches the oppression of his fellow being is deemed to be complicit in the oppressive act).*

*Meaning:* Nobody appreciates a kinsman who ignores the sufferings of his people.

iii) *On valour and its reward:*

Mòjà mòsá ni ologun fii t'ijo, akoni to b'ogun lo ko ni oriyin.

*(The wise warrior knows when to pull back, the warrior that dies in battle will never receive a hero's reward)*

*Meaning:* He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day.

iv) *Managing Adversity:*

Ojò n pa iyò, inú orí n dùn; àmò kí orí náà má şàfara, nítorí òòrùn si maa ràn, orí si mää yó.

*(The rain falls on the salt, the shea butter rejoices; but the shea butter's joy is short-lived, for the rain will soon give way to sunshine, and it will be the turn of the shea butter to melt!)*

*Meaning:* One should not rejoice at the down-fall of others; no condition is permanent.

### ***Didactic Proverbs***

Nollywood proverbs carry a great deal of sociolinguistic information about the language user as well as the culture from which the he/she originates. In both modern and ‘traditional’ productions, Nollywood projects the deep historical nuances and societal antecedents of the Yoruba. It is for this reason that proverbs are described as the ethnography of a people. Many of the proverbs that depict Nollywood characters provide graphic insights into Yoruba ways of maintaining cordiality and social responsibility. The film medium thus explores the core aspects of Yoruba communal norms by depicting communities that cherish their wise sayings as a moral guide in interpersonal and inter-communal relations.

#### i) *Forthrightness*:

*Bi a á ti se là á wí, a kì í yan àna èni lódi.*

*Meaning:* One must always be forthright; it is not the tradition to pick a quarrel with one’s in-laws.

#### ii) *Good Character*:

*Bi a ñe tó ni kì í jé kí a bínú, bí a ó ñe mọ ni kì í jé ki a mọ ìwà á hù.*

*Meaning:* One’s status is enough motivation to refrain from anger; only the nonentity will willingly misbehave.

#### iii) *Achieving Success*:

*Adię ti yóò dàgbà, àṣá kò níí gbe lómódé.*

*(The hen that will grow to maturity will not be snatched away by a hawk in childhood).*

*Meaning:* One who is destined to succeed will not yield to adversarial distractions.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the various aspects of the sociolinguistic significance of selected Yoruba proverbs as depicted in Nollywood (Yoruba) movie productions. The purposive selection of the proverbs which are examined here may be restrictive of the whole range of Nollywood proverbs in terms of their contribution to the filmic experience. However, while the full range of the versatility of Yoruba proverbs which are frequently adapted for dramatic

effect in Nollywood films cannot be exhausted in a single study, this study has however shown, with considerable evidence, that Yoruba proverbs are significant rhetorical tools in Nigerian indigenous movies for the projection of the unique traditional norms and values of the Nigerian people. Furthermore, the role of proverbs in indigenous Nigerian films can be described as ‘picturesque’, not just in their vividness, but more crucially in the varied manifestations of language as ‘cultural action’, a filmic feature that deeply accentuates the sociolinguistic impact and relevance of the African proverb in Nollywood experience.

Against the background of the huge motivation for the promotion of Nollywood language culture in contemporary film studies (Obiegbu, 2016; Onyenankya, 2017; Ugochukwu, 2011; Elegbe and Fadipe, 2017), the dynamic use of proverbs in the depiction of social action certainly increases the cultural and aesthetic value of indigenous movie productions. More inspiring is the way Nollywood proverbs combine the visual and verbal elements of film in the illumination of traditional knowledge by enhancing the cognitive value of Nigerian indigenous norms through its unique appeal to vast audiences worldwide. It is equally worth noting that the thematic and aesthetic innovations which are components of the application of proverbs (among other culture features) in Nollywood films have significant impact on the promotion of indigenous Nigerian language and culture. To this end, studies such as this have the potential of providing windows of engaging scholarship on emerging trends in African cultural revival and sustenance across the ages.

## References

Austin, J. L. (1962). How to do things with words. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bhuvaneswar, C. (2003). Culture as communication: The construction of indexical meaning in proverbs. *Proverbium*, 20, 1–14.

Bokor, M. J. K. (2012, January). African proverbs in African literature: A critical resource base. Retrieved from <https://liu.edu/brooklyn>.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). Language and symbolic power (J. B. Thompson, Ed.; G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). An introduction to reflexive sociology. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Brislin, R. W. (1976). Translation: Applications and research. New York, NY: Gardner Press Inc.

Catford, J. C. (1965). A linguistic theory of translation. London, UK: Oxford University Press.

Delano, I. O. (1973). Proverbs, songs and poems. In S. Biobaku (Ed.), *Sources of Yoruba history* (pp. 76–86). Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.

Delano, I. O. (1983). *Owe l’esin oro: Yoruba proverbs*. Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press Ltd.

Egblewogbe, E. Y. (1980). The structure and functions of proverbs in African societies. *Social Education*, 516–518.

Elegbe, O., & Fadipe, I. A. (2017). Promoting cultural and social values in Yoruba Nollywood movies. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net>

Falola, T. (2007). Nationalising Africa, culturalising the West, and reforming the humanities in Africa. In S. Akinrinade, D. Fashina, D. Ogungbile, & J. Famakinwa (Eds.), *Rethinking humanities in Africa* (pp. 25–44). Ile-Ife, Nigeria: Faculty of Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University.

Finnegan, R. (1970). Oral literature in Africa. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers.

Finnegan, R. (1978). Oral literature in Africa. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.

Foucault, M. (1972). The archaeology of knowledge. London, UK: Tavistock.

Habermas, J. (1987). The theory of communicative action (Vols. 1-2) (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Hariyanto, S. (1996). Of poetry translation. *ELE Journal*, 2(1), 91–104.

Hariyanto, S. (n.d.). The implication of culture on translation theory and practice. Retrieved from <http://www.translationdirectory.com>

Hutcheon, L. (2000). A theory of parody. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Hymes, D. (1964). Introduction: Toward ethnographies of communication. *American Anthropologist*, 66(6), 12–25.

Hymes, D. (Ed.). (1964). Language in culture and society: A reader in linguistics and anthropology. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Kolker, R. (2006). Film form and culture (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.

Labov, W. (1972). Sociolinguistic patterns. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Obiechina, E. (2007). Narrative proverbs in the African novel. Retrieved from <https://www.semanticscholar.org>

Obiegbu, I. (2016). Language and culture: Nigerian perspective. *African Research Review*, 10(4), 69–82.

Onyenankeya, O. M., Onyenankeya, K. U., & Osunkunle, O. (2017). The persuasive influence of Nollywood films in cultural transmission: Negotiating Nigerian culture in a South African environment. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 46(4), 297–313.

*Nollywood Proverbs ...*

Sarangi, S. (2001). A comparative perspective on social theoretical accounts of the language-action interrelationship. In N. Coupland, S. Sarangi, & C. N. Candlin (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and social theory* (pp. 31–60). London, UK: Longman.

Saville-Troike, M. (1989). *The ethnography of communication: An introduction*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Ugochukwu, F. (2011). *Nollywood in diaspora: A cultural tool*. Paris, France: VNRS-LLACAN.