

Aderemi Raji-Oyelade

Playful Blasphemies

Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity  
in Yorùbá Culture

Susanne Gehrman, Flora Veit-Wild, Tobias Wendl (Hg.)

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of Modernity in Yorùbá Culture**

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A note on the cover image – “Ere Ibeji on fan blades”

In Yoruba society, the “ere” means image, effigy, figurine and mask, and the “ibeji” is twin-child, referent of either or both of a duality of being, carved in celebration or memory of a set of twins. There are two reflective shadows behind the “ere” itself. The montage is apt for the concept of post-proverbiality, because the radical proverb is a shadow of the original, and the double shadow points at the plurality of the radical text. The fan blades represent the modernist base, as well as the potential of the whirl, the shifting, and revolving force of the new proverb.

*The installation of “ere ibeji on fan blades” is made from the original collection of Author’s mother, dating back to 1960.*

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Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier

Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier

Tel.: (0651) 41503

Fax: (0651) 41504

Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>

E-Mail: [wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)

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For Adéṣolá, and the girls – Qláyoṃbò, Olúwadàbirá and Qláṣùbòmí  
And in prayerful memory of my parents.





## Acknowledgements

In writing this book, I have cause to thank a decade of peoples and institutions. As indicated in the next prefatory pages, I have benefitted from years of interactions with other scholars and students who had either shown uncommon interest, or who had been nudged, by my own inundation, to develop interest in the radical theory called *postproverbials*. From many, I have received support in terms of assurances as well as compassionate doubts about the idea of the cultural phenomenon expressed here. After half-a-dozen lectures on the subject, in both local and international conferences, after confirmation of theory and after commendations and enthusiastic inquiries here and there, I thought it was necessary to heed the challenge of writing the book.

I would like to thank Funso Fatokun, colleague and helpmeet during my teaching stint at St. Andrew's College of Education (Oyo), for useful hints and materials; my teachers at the University of Ibadan – Dan S. Izevbaye, Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan and Harry Garuba – for critical suggestions after the seminar presentation of 1995; and Kamari Clarke, for offering to carry the manuscript of the first essay to the Ohio office of *Research in African Literatures*.

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I received the institutional support of the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, Germany (January 2006 - August 2007) which afforded me the real-time opportunity of consulting the African studies libraries at Humboldt University and Bayreuth University, as well as the rare collections in the precincts of the state-owned library, the Stadtbibliothek. During this period, I received remarkable assistance from Eckhardt Breitingner (in Bayreuth) and from the staff of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Humboldt, especially Flora Veit-Wild (my main and official host in Berlin), Susanne Gehrmann, Christine Matzke, and the timeous presence of Marcela Knapp, who was then the research assistant to Veit-Wild. It is therefore not by sheer chance that the first edition of this book is published in Germany, through the persistence and collaboration of Veit-Wild and Gehrmann who hold the honour of sourcing the publishers for the book.

My invitation to the first international colloquium on proverbs which held in Tavira (Algarve), Portugal, in November of 2007 was auspicious and indeed strategic. Apart from providing the occasion of introducing the theory of postproverbials to an international audience drawn from Europe, Asia, Africa, South America and the United States, Tavira was also the point of my meeting with two major scholars of the proverb tradition, Wolfgang Mieder and Anna T. Litovkina, among others. I owe a debt of gratitude to Mieder, for friendship and confidence; to Litovkina, for recommending me as a lead speaker to that historic colloquium which was co-ordinated by Rui Soares and Outi Lauhakangas; to Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt, for engaging discussions; and to Melita Aleksa Varga, for advice and technical support, and for helping in the initial formatting of the entire work. For this and subsequent invitations, many thanks to the IAP, the International Association of Paremiology, to Ana Paula Guimaraes and Instituto de Estudos de Literatura Tradicional (IELT).

Through the years, I have benefitted from many insightful queries at conferences or seminars in Portugal (Lisbon, Tavira), Spain (Barcelona), Germany (Berlin, Bayreuth, Freiburg and Aachen), Switzerland (Basel), South Africa (Pretoria) and the US (Lawrence, Kansas and Edwardsville, Illinois). I have great and sincere appreciation of all the contributors in these places, too numerous to recount or remember.

Above all, I thank the authorities of the University of Ibadan, at different times, for approving my periods of absence and for granting a sabbatical year during which I took up the AvH scholarship as a Georg Forster Fellow in Berlin, Germany. More significantly, my work has enjoyed real understanding and collegial scrutiny and referencing by a number of Nigerian scholars including the late Femi Fatoba, Francis Egbokhare, Sola Olorunyomi, Toyin Jegede and Nelson Fashina, among others. Special thanks to my graduate students – Eytayo Folorunso who helped with final fieldwork, and Adetutu Afonja who helped with proofreading and other suggestions.

I must admit that I found the writing of this book very pleasant and excitingly prolonged that it almost became a disturbing tedium of daily conversation. The competence of engaging in the radical extensions of Yorùbá proverbial lore goes back to the knowledge of a welter of the conventional wise-sayings in my language through continual tutelage first under my maternal grandparents, and later my parents, uncles, brothers and sisters in the Ojoekun clan of Ibadan. Indeed, several other elders, friends and acquaintances are part of the history of the knowledge. One of those elders from whom I have drawn great inspiration is Akinwumi Isola-Orojide, the distinguished Professor of Yoruba language and literature, himself a renowned author of several plays and novels in both English and Yoruba.

My wife – Adesolape – has been the homefront muse, the wonderful keeper of my various books, journals and rough notes, believing with me that papers are the sacro-

sanct spaces for trapping and passing knowledge. To her and our children – Olayombo, Oluwadabira and Olasubomi – this is to say thank you immensely, for keeping up with my days and nights away from home and play. Yes, I know, the writing of this book almost became a family of its own!



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## Foreword

More than fifteen years ago I had the honor to be invited to a truly significant Interdisciplinary Symposium on the African Proverb that took place from October 2 to 7, 1995, at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in Pretoria. In order to show my sincere appreciation, I had put together a publication on *African Proverb Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography* (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 1994) that was distributed free of charge to all the participants of the conference, their respective universities, and about five hundred libraries worldwide. The proceedings of this unforgettable paremiological event in South Africa were subsequently edited by Willem Saayman as *Embracing the Baobab Tree: The African Proverb in the 21st Century* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 1997), and it can be stated that all of this marked a welcome increase in interest by the international community of paremiologists in the rich treasure trove of African proverbs. Of course, many superb collections of African proverbs from different languages and cultures already existed, but there has now also been a definite attempt to collect those proverbs from small African languages that have hitherto not been recorded. This effort has been spear-headed by Joseph Healey under the auspices of the African Proverbs Project that grew out of this symposium. There has subsequently also been a noticeable increase in interpretive studies regarding the multifaceted aspects of African proverbs, as can be seen from the impressive entries in my two-volume *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009) and my annual bibliographies in *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*.

My young Nigerian friend Aderemi Raji-Oyelade was not yet part of that memorable meeting in 1995 at Pretoria, but not long thereafter he appeared on the paremiological scene and has quickly made a distinguished name for himself as one of the eminent African proverb scholars. I remember well how impressed I was when I came across his early paper on “Postproverbials in Yoruba Culture: A Playful Blasphemy,” *Research in African Literatures*, 30 (1999), 74-82, that showed that the phenomenon of so-called anti-proverbs is also well established in Africa. While I coined the term anti-proverb for such intentional modifications of proverbs, I feel quite comfortable in Raji-Oyelade’s term “postproverbial” that appears to fit the specific African changes of existing proverbs more precisely. When Raji-Oyelade sent me his follow-up paper on “Posting the African Proverb: A Grammar of Yoruba Postproverbials, or Logophagia, Logorrhoea and the Grammar of Yoruba Postproverbials”, the reviewers and I were glad to publish it in *Proverbium*, 21 (2004), 299-314. Paremiologists throughout the world became familiar with this new concept, and African scholars by now have begun to look at languages beyond Raji-Oyelade’s native Yoruba for this fascinating phenomenon of deliberately changing proverbs not only as an act of wordplay but also with

the intent of creating new proverbial wisdom that fits new times and changed social mores in Africa. Then, in 2007, I had the welcome opportunity to meet Aderemi Raji-Oyelade in person at a gathering of the International Association of Paremiology in Tavira, Portugal. His lecture on “Classifying the Unclassified: The Challenge of Post-proverbiality in International Proverb Scholarship” was a major success for this young scholar. His eloquent remarks were followed by a lively discussion, and his cutting-edge paper has now been published in the *Proceedings of the First Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs, 5th to 12th November 2007, at Tavira, Portugal*, eds. by Rui J.B. Soares and Outi Lauhakangas (Tavira: Tipografia Tavirense, 2008, 146-155). I have fond memories of this event, and I treasure the several lengthy conversations the two of us had in Tavira. There is nothing more rewarding for an older scholar than to meet up with eager and energetic younger colleagues who will doubtlessly carry on the paremiological torch in the future.

Aderemi Raji-Oyelade has not rested on his well-deserved laurels. Instead, he has deliberately and enthusiastically continued his study of postproverbials. I knew that he was hard at work on this innovative project, and I was eagerly awaiting the conclusion of his labors. Little did I know that my young friend would invite me to write this foreword for his magisterial study on *Playful Blasphemies: Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yorùbá Culture*. Even though I experienced some difficulties printing out the impressive manuscript, I succeeded doing so just in time for my long trip from Vermont to California where I was attending an American meeting of folklorists recently. It took over twelve hours to get there, but never mind! I had this wonderful manuscript with me, having told my dear wife that I could hardly wait to settle down on the plane to get to work on it. I had to change planes in Chicago and Denver, and twice I had someone sitting next to me who inquired what I was reading with such intense interest. The conversations that I had with these two non-expert fellow travelers were unbelievably pleasant because they showed such keen interest in postproverbials. In fact, when I told them that I once had tried to describe them as anti-proverbs in the world of European and American proverbs, they said that they quite like the sound of postproverbial for the African scene. In any case, when I arrived at Los Angeles, I was a happy paremiologist, ready to present my lecture on modern proverbial mini-poems by Anglo-American poets.

By now we have a number of large collections of anti-proverbs, to wit Wolfgang Mieder, *Verdrehte Weisheiten: Antisprichwörter aus Literatur und Medien* (Wiesbaden: Quelle & Meyer, 1998); Erika Gossler, *Besser Arm dran als Bein ab. Anti-Sprichwörter und ihresgleichen* (Wien: Edition Praesens, 2005); Harry Walter and Valerii M. Mokienko, *Antisposlovitsy russkogo naroda* (Sankt-Peterburg: Neva, 2005); Anna T. Litovkina and Wolfgang Mieder, *Old Proverbs Never Die, They Just Diversify: A Collection of Anti-Proverbs* (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, and