

Understanding and Using Proverbs of Abuse in Yoruba Polygynous (Ile Olorogun) Settings

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Abstract

This paper discusses the use of abusive Yoruba proverbs in polygynous settings in Western Nigeria, with a focus on how such expressions reflect and shape interpersonal relationships. Using a socio-pragmatic and semiotic theoretical framework, this research explores how proverbs function as complex sign systems that encode power relations and cultural meanings. Data were collected through participant observation in polygynous households, semi-structured interviews with co-wives and family members, crowdsourcing via Facebook validated by a seven-member expert panel, and literature review of documented Yoruba proverb collections. The findings show that proverbs of abuse serve as tools for indirect communication, enabling speakers to negotiate power dynamics, protect personal boundaries, and maintain social harmony. The study reveals that these proverbs function across multiple categories including normalizing jealousy, asserting dominance, attacking character, maintaining strategic neutrality, issuing warnings, and managing hidden tensions. This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring how Yoruba oral traditions use disguised communication in the form of either subtle or overt abuse to convey ideas, mediate conflict, maintain social order, and reinforce cultural norms during crises.

I. INTRODUCTION

The study examines proverbs of insult or abuse among rival parties in Yoruba, Southwestern Nigerian indigenous people's settings, particularly among co-wives in polygynous household. Proverbs are cultural wisdom of ancient origin derived from a language or culture often using metaphors or creative imagery. They serve various functions, such as

advising, warning, and subtly undermining others. In ile olorogun (polygynous household) settings, proverbs of abuse are used to assert power or express dissent without direct confrontation, thus, adhering to cultural norms that value subtlety and respect in communication (Hakima, 2024).

This study explores Yoruba proverbs in polygynous households, focusing on their dual

roles as instruments of conflict resolution and veiled/overt abuse. While Olanrewaju & Titilayo (2020) see proverbs as crucial to Yoruba socio-cultural identity, Ikegwonu et al. (2024) examined how language use often conveys positive connotations for men while negative connotations are assumed for women. Despite proverbs' significance in Yoruba culture, the dynamics of their use among co-wives in ile olorogun settings remain underexplored.

The objectives of the study include the following: to explore the role of proverbs in the communication dynamics of Yoruba polygynous households; analyse the use of proverbs of abuse as tools for asserting dominance or navigating conflict and examine how these proverbs of abuse contribute to or mitigate tension among co-wives and family members.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Proverbs are culturally rooted expressions of wisdom that remain relevant across generations, serving as mnemonic devices that aid in recalling thoughts, preserving experiences, and transmitting wisdom (Ong, 2002; Raji-Oyelade & Oyeleye, 2020). They contain a people's linguistic, philosophical, psychological, and cosmological outlook, passing information from generation to generation with context-dependent meanings (D'Andrade, 1981; Lawal, 1992; Odebunmi, 2008). While proverbs may vary in form across cultures, they often express similar ideas through different imagery. For instance, the English "One swallow doesn't make a summer" and the Yoruba "Igi kan ki'i da'gbo se" differ in expression but convey similar meanings (Daramola, 2013).

In Yoruba culture specifically, proverbs serve as vital repositories of wisdom, guiding social interactions and encapsulating society's values, norms, and worldview. They function as conversational art, tools for dispute resolution, moral instruction, reinforcement of social hierarchies, and occasionally as vehicles for abuse (Ademowo & Balogun, 2014; Olanrewaju & Titilayo, 2020; Olubode-Sawe, 2009). Culture, language, and proverbs are deeply interconnected, with proverbs representing the culmination of a people's existence and experience (Kim, 2020; Wallnock, 1969).

In Yoruba polygynous households, proverbs play a particularly significant role as indirect communicative strategies to assert dominance, mitigate tensions, or veil criticisms and abuse. While Olanrewaju & Titilayo (2020) identify proverbs as crucial to Yoruba socio-cultural identity, Ikegwonu et al. (2024) examine how language use conveys gendered connotations. It is noted that the specific dynamics of proverb use among co-wives in polygynous settings remain underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by identifying proverbs of abuse specific to polygynous contexts and analyzing the scenarios that necessitate their usage in Yoruba polygynous settings. Through this focus, the study explores how proverbs function both as instruments of conflict and as tools for navigating complex relational dynamics in these household structures.

III. THE NATURE OF YORUBA PROVERBS

Yoruba culture, (including family systems, philosophy, and ethics), is primarily transmitted orally. Yoruba proverbs, rooted in African worldview, serve as cultural education shaped by the people's historical, social, and cultural experiences (Lawal et al., 1997; Wardhaugh, 2006). As most African languages were initially unwritten, cultural norms and values are largely stored and transmitted through proverbs, which have become established laws allowing societal values to be preserved across generations (Olajubu, 2014; Asiyabola, 2007).

Proverbs play a crucial role in individual and communal development within Yoruba oral tradition (Coker & Coker, 2009). The Yoruba use proverbs to convey aesthetic, moral, rhetorical, religious, social, and political values, to instruct younger generations, and to address or insult adversaries (Babalola & Onanuga, 2012). Proverbs of abuse, while not unique to the Yoruba, are a recognized aspect of human communication across cultures (Herzfeld, 1991).

From a semiotic perspective, Yoruba proverbs function as complex sign systems where linguistic forms (signifiers) carry culturally embedded meanings (signifieds) that extend beyond literal interpretations. Following Peirce's

triadic model, these proverbs operate as symbols, requiring cultural competence to decode; as icons, drawing on resemblance between metaphorical vehicles and their targets; and as indices, pointing to specific social relationships and power dynamics within the polygynous household. The semiotic process of meaning-making relies heavily on shared cultural knowledge, thus making proverbs particularly potent within Yoruba speech communities where interlocutors possess the requisite interpretive frameworks.

Pragmatically, Yoruba proverbs align with Crystal's (1995, p. 379) definition of pragmatics: the choices individuals make in using language in social interactions, the constraints they face, and the impact on other participants. Yoruba speakers select proverbs that suit their context, demonstrating the complexity of their use in communication (Kasper, 1997). In polygynous settings, this contextual selection becomes especially significant as co-wives navigate relational tensions through proverbial discourse.

IV. POLYGYNOUS YORUBA SETTINGS

Polygyny, a common marital arrangement in Yoruba society involving a single man with multiple wives, is highly valued in traditional Yoruba culture (Bruce & Yearley, 2006, p. 235; Oyewale, 2016, p. 121). This practice is viewed as a response to sociocultural and practical concerns, including economic stability, securing progeny, and social status reinforcement (Chae & Agadjanian, 2022). In traditional Yoruba family systems, a man's wealth and position are often determined by family size, with larger families considered more productive (Bascom, 1951; Tapsoba, 2022).

Polygyny may arise from various circumstances: the first wife's inability to bear offspring, age, or illness - highlighting the Yoruba emphasis on childbearing (Oni, 1996). The practice is also linked to maintaining kin relationships through traditions like the levirate, an aspect of the Yoruba tradition where a man marries his deceased male relation's widow to ensure the continuance of the family line (Egbeolowo, 2020).

However, polygynous arrangements frequently generate conflicts among co-wives who compete for the husband's attention, resources, and household authority (Bove & Vallengia, 2009; Ware, 1979). In navigating these complex relationships, proverbs, especially those of abuse, serve as critical communicative tools. They allow co-wives to express dominance, resolve conflicts, voice discontent, score personal points, and enforce socio-cultural norms while maintaining the indirect communication valued in Yoruba culture (Golan & Isopi, 2022; Kusinza & Guirkingner, 2024). This study examines how these proverbs function within the unique relational dynamics of the *ile olorogun* (polygynous household).

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs an integrated socio-pragmatic and semiotic approach to analyse Yoruba proverbs of abuse in polygynous settings. The socio-pragmatic dimension examines how proverbs function as speech acts within specific social contexts, focusing on their illocutionary force (what speakers intend to accomplish) and perlocutionary effects (actual impact on hearers) in navigating power dynamics and interpersonal relationships (Thomas, 1983; Fraser, 2010). This framework enables us to understand how speakers deploy proverbs strategically to perform face-threatening acts, assert dominance, or maintain plausible deniability while delivering criticism.

The semiotic framework draws on Peirce's triadic model to examine how proverbs operate as complex sign systems where linguistic forms (signifiers) carry culturally embedded meanings (signifieds) beyond their literal interpretations (Peirce, 1931-1958; Eco, 1976). Proverbs function as symbols requiring cultural competence to decode, as icons drawing on resemblance between metaphorical vehicles and their targets, and as indices pointing to specific social relationships and power dynamics. Following Barthes (1972), we analyse how these proverbs naturalize social hierarchies by mapping them onto perceived natural orders.

The integration of these approaches provides a comprehensive framework for understanding both what proverbs do (their

pragmatic functions) and how they mean (their semiotic operations) within the polygynous household context.

VI. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach with an anthropological design to investigate the use of proverbs of abuse in Yoruba polygynous ile olorogun settings, focusing on how proverbs function in family dynamics during times of tension, conflict, or competition between co-wives or with extended family members. As native Yoruba speakers immersed in Yoruba cultural contexts, the research team possesses insider knowledge of these proverbs as part of shared cultural competence, which facilitated both data collection and cultural interpretation while requiring reflexive awareness of potential biases.

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, crowdsourcing, and literature review. The researchers conducted participant observation with polygynous families in Ondo and Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria, over approximately three months, observing daily family interactions and paying special attention to conflict situations when proverbs of abuse were likely to emerge. Field notes captured context, delivery, tone, and reactions to these proverbs. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants: five senior wives, five junior wives, and five extended family members selected based on active involvement in polygynous household dynamics and familiarity with Yoruba proverbs. Interviews focused on participants' awareness of specific abusive proverbs, their cultural meanings, and their impact on domestic relationships. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis.

A crowdsourcing technique via Facebook obtained additional proverbs from a broader audience of 17 participants (7 females and 10 males of varying ages). A seven-member expert panel assessed the relevance and authenticity of the crowdsourced proverbs, ensuring alignment with Yoruba cultural standards and appropriateness for polygynous contexts. Literature review of works by Owomoyela (2005),

Osoba (2014), Daramola (2013), and Hussain-Abubakar (2016) provided a framework for understanding proverbs and verified those gathered during the fieldwork.

The 28 collected proverbs were organized into a table with four columns: serial number, Yoruba proverb, literal meaning, and contextual meaning. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns in how proverbs functioned in conflict situations and influenced interpersonal relationships. The analytical framework combined pragmatic analysis - examining speech acts and contextual appropriateness - with semiotic analysis decoding metaphorical and metonymic structures. Each proverb was analysed for its literal signification, metaphorical mappings, and pragmatic force within specific interactional contexts reported by participants.

This research adhered to established ethical principles for cultural and linguistic research. The proverbs examined constitute public Yoruba cultural heritage, documented in existing literature (Owomoyela, 2005; Daramola, 2013; Osoba, 2014) and representing common knowledge among Yoruba speakers. For participant observation and interviews, all participants provided informed verbal consent and were assured of confidentiality through anonymisation. Facebook contributors were notified of research usage. The study involved no vulnerable populations and posed minimal risk beyond everyday social interactions.

VII. PRAGMATIC AND SEMIOTIC COMPETENCE AND YORUBA PROVERBS

Pragmatic competence involves using language effectively in context, recognising implicit meanings, cultural standards, and social appropriateness (Thomas, 1983). In Yoruba culture, proverbs are crucial communicative tools, especially in polygynous environments where they encapsulate societal standards, moral principles, and wisdom (Ademowo & Balogun, 2014; Olajuyin, 2019). According to Gumperz (1972), knowing the correct grammar alone is insufficient; the ability to use language "to carry out speech functions within certain contexts" is essential. Understanding how to deploy proverbs appropriately constitutes a key

dimension of pragmatic competence in Yoruba communication (Fraser, 2010).

Semiotically, competent use of proverbs in the ile olorogun contexts requires participants to navigate multiple layers of signification simultaneously. Following Eco (1976), proverbs function through “semiotic codes” – systems of conventions linking expressions to their culturally appropriate meanings. These codes are particularly complex in polygynous settings where the same proverbial expression may carry different connotations depending on who deploys it, against whom, and under what circumstances. The ability to decode these

shifting meanings constitutes crucial communicative competence in Yoruba society.

Effective usage of Yoruba proverbs in the ile olorogun contexts necessitates in-depth comprehension of shared cultural knowledge and implied meanings. Individuals with pragmatic and semiotic competence can negotiate the layered meanings of proverbs, ensuring appropriate deployment to maintain social cohesiveness or strategically disrupt it. Thus, proverbs serve not merely as linguistic artifacts but as practical instruments for maintaining balance and order, or expressing discontent in polygynous homes.

VIII. PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

S/N	Yorùbá Proverb	Literal Translation	Meaning
1.	<i>Obirin ti'o jowu, obe o'ledun</i>	A woman who is not jealous cannot prepare a good soup or meal.	To be jealous is not a crime but expected of a woman.
2.	<i>Obinrin ti o tii lórogún ò ti màrùn tí ñsèun</i>	Being a single wife in your husband's house, spares you the agony of knowing your flaws or shortcomings.	You don't know your flaws or shortcoming until there is a competitor or competition.
3.	<i>Adiẹ funfun kò mọ ara rẹ lágba.</i>	The white hen does not realise it is old.	Respect yourself.
4.	<i>Bí orogún iyá ení bá ju iyá ení lọ, iyá là ñpè é</i>	If one's mother's co-wife is older than one's mother, one calls her mother.	One shows the same respect to all elders as one would show to one's mother (Owomoyela, 2005, p. 330)
5.	<i>Fì mi du won awon to ni' e!</i>	Compare me to your parents	The insult you hurled at me belongs to your parents.
6.	<i>Abi i iko, ako i gba</i>	It's obvious, your parents didn't train you. Or maybe you were trained by them, you refused to imbibe their training.	You lack home training.
7.	<i>Òjòwú ò leran láyà</i>	Excessive jealousy is not good for the well-being of a person.	Too much of anything is bad.
8.	<i>Owú pani ju kùmmo</i>	Jealousy kills more surely than a cudgel.	Jealousy is a dangerous thing (Owomoyela, 2005).
9.	<i>À ñpe gbénàgbénà ẹyẹ àkókó ñ yojú</i>	We summoned a sculptor, the woodpecker shows up	Never think too highly of yourself.
10.	<i>Bí ajá bá ñ sínwín, á m'ojú 'iná.</i>	A rabid dog knows fire	We're not mates. Despite the situation, honour should be given to who is due to.

11.	<i>Amúnibúni eran Ìbíyè, Ìbíyè fójú òtún, eran rẹ́ fọ́ t'òsì.</i>	A-creature-that-makes-one-insult-another person, like Ìbíyè's goat; Ìbíyè is blind in the right eye, and her goat is blind in the left	Catch-22 (If the parent and the child share the same trait, one risks provoking the parent by remarking on the trait in the child.) (Owomoyela, 2005, p. 313)
12.	<i>Òjò ni wá, àwa ò bá ẹnìkan ẹ́ ọ́tá. Ẹ̀ni ẹ̀jí rí, l'ẹ̀jí ńpa.</i>	Like the rain, we hold no grudges against anyone as the rain falls on whosoever is in the open	We have no enemies as we are friends to all.
13.	<i>Pàsán tafi na iyálé, onbẹ́ lóri àjà fún iyàwó</i>	The cane used to flog the first wife is on the ceiling for the younger wife.	What goes around, comes around (Life's turn-by-turn).
14.	<i>T'ẹ̀lẹ̀gàn ló sòro</i>	The one who shames others has the biggest misfortune	You hurt yourself the most when you hurt others.
15.	<i>Àdàbà ńpògèdè, ó rò pé ẹ̀yẹ̀lé ò gbo; ẹ̀yẹ̀lé gbo, títiiri ló tiiri.</i>	The dove recites incantations, thinking that the pigeon cannot understand; the pigeon understands, it only pretends to be asleep.	Never mistake a person's easy-going demeanour for cowardice or folly. (Owomoyela, 2005).
16.	<i>Iwofa lenu ibi to bá wù elenu lo lẹ́ gbégbá</i>	The mouth is a servant of the owner and wherever the owner likes he uses it the way he wants	I choose not to be involved whatever what you say
17.	<i>Ìpàko ò gbo sùti, ìpèhìndà ò mọ́ yege yíye.</i>	The occiput does not recognize contempt; a turned back does not see a disdainful gesture.	The best response to insults is to disregard them (Owomoyela, 2005).
18.	<i>Àti jùwá l'ẹ̀bá lọ, à'itó l'ẹ̀bá bọ́, wọ̀n darí dé, wọ̀n òjẹ́ ńkan.</i>	You went to look for how to surpass us but achieve nothing in the end	Pulling others down to rise eventually leads to downfall
19.	<i>Şàkì ńşe bí orá, egungun ńşe bí eran.</i>	The tripe presents itself as fat; the bone presents itself as meat (Owomoyela, 2005).	Do not over rate yourself.
20.	<i>Ẹ̀lede ńpàfo ó rò pé òún ńsoge.</i>	The pig wallows in the mud but thinks it is being a dandy.	People who lack good judgment are never aware of their own misbehaviour (Owomoyela, 2005).
21.	<i>À ńjùwon" ò ẹ́éé wí lejo; ijà ilara ò tán boro</i>	"We are driven by envy of them" is a bad case to make; a quarrel spawned by jealousy is not easy to settle.	Quarrels whose causes cannot be openly admitted will not readily end (Owomoyela, 2005).
22.	<i>Eni a fi pamó, tí n wúkó</i>	The one who is hidden from others' view but coughs	Efforts are made (deliberately) to protect you so you won't be noticed or be involved in a matter (saved from ugly or embarrassing situations) but you're doing everything possible to thwart that effort.

23.	<i>Kuru kèrè ...o di ile alawo, kuru..kèrè..o di ile onisegun, ogun o ran wa o..è ma wu lè sa're ka.</i>	You do your hide and seek to the diviner's house and the same to the healer's house, but your charms are powerless to affect us, stop running helter skelter.	Going to any length to hurt others eventually does not hurt such despite the efforts.
24.	<i>Bí egúngún ñlá bá ní òhun ò rí gontò, gontò na á ní òhun o rí egúngún ñlá.</i>	If a big masquerade claims it doesn't see the smaller masquerade, the small masquerade will also claim it doesn't see the big masquerade.	Respect is reciprocal.
25.	<i>Èrú kan ní òmúni bú igba èrú.</i>	A single slave causes one to insult two hundred other slaves	Birds of a feather flock together. (The misbehaviour of one member of a group brings dishonour to all members of the group.) (Owomoyela, 2005).
26.	<i>Irikuri bèbè Àbèbí, Àbèbí ñdánà, bèbè è ñṣu sára.</i>	Abebi's waist beads make one to see all sorts of undesirables. Abebi is cooking, the beads are singing lullaby.	One's purpose/desire/situation, etc. predisposes one to some undesirable treatment from others
27.	<i>Ìyàn ní òmúni jẹ èso igi-kígi.</i>	It is famine that brings one to eating the fruits of all sorts of trees.	Hard times force one to unbecoming behaviour (Owomoyela, 2005).
28.	<i>Èyélé fí esín re pamo, ó ñṣe esín adìe.</i>	The pigeon hides its own shame and goes ridiculing the hen.	A person full of flaws insists on finding fault with others. (Owomoyela, 2005, p. 258)

IX. DISCUSSION

This section examines proverbs presented above according to their functional categories, analyzing both the semiotic structures enabling meaning-making and the pragmatic strategies accomplishing social actions. From analysis of the data, different scenarios emerge as sources of proverbs of abuse in the Yoruba ile olorogun settings, including normalizing jealousy, asserting dominance, attacking character, strategic neutrality, warnings and exposing hypocrisy, reciprocity, and managing tensions.

9.1 Normalizing Jealousy and Asserting Dominance

Several proverbs function to normalize emotional responses like jealousy arising inevitably in polygynous settings. Obirin ti'o jowu, obe o'ledun (P1: A woman who is not jealous cannot prepare good soup) and Obinrin ti

o tii lórogún ò ti màrùn tí ñṣèun. (P2: Being a single wife spares you the agony of knowing your flaws) exemplify this. Semiotically, jealousy signifies emotional investment in marriage, which then signifies domestic competence and wifely dedication. Cooking, itself a symbolic performance of wifely role, becomes indexically linked to jealousy, naturalizing rivalry by embedding it within positive connotations of domestic excellence. Pragmatically, these proverbs function as both assertive and directive speech acts, making claims about the world while implicitly prescribing that women should experience jealousy, transforming potentially face-threatening behavior into evidence of virtue.

When rivalry escalates - whether from inability to procreate, competition for the husband's attention, or generational tensions - proverbs asserting dominance emerge. A younger wife might deploy Adìe funfun kò mọ ara rẹ lágba

(P3: The white hen does not realise its age) to suggest an aging senior wife inappropriately competes with the younger one(s). While Yoruba culture values age-based hierarchy, this proverb performs face-threatening criticism through indirection, providing plausible deniability. The hen symbolizes domestic, feminine, and maternal qualities; whiteness indexes age. The hen's oblivious behavior maps onto human failure regarding appropriate age-based conduct.

Similarly, in beauty or finesse competitions, proverbs like *À npe gbénàgbénà eyẹ àkókó n' yojú* (P9: We summoned a sculptor; the woodpecker shows up) and *Şàki nşe bí orá, egungun nşe bí ẹran* (P19: The tripe presents itself as fat; the bone presents itself as meat) create paradigmatic oppositions positioning the addressed person as inferior.

Another proverb: *Bí ajá bá n' sínwín, á m'ojú 'iná* (P10: A rabid dog knows fire) asserts hierarchical distinctions, reminding rivals that despite any conflict, proper respect and recognition of status differences must be maintained. These perform severe face-threats by directly challenging positive face through withdrawal of recognition or insistence on hierarchical acknowledgment.

However, cautionary proverbs moderate excessive jealousy: *Ọjowú ò leran l'áyà* (P7: Excessive jealousy is not good for wellbeing) and *Owú pani ju kùmmo* (P8: Jealousy kills more surely than a cudgel) shift semiotic framing from proper feeling to dangerous excess. The metaphorical comparison to a cudgel transforms jealousy from internal emotion into external threat, making visible its destructive capacity. These are typically deployed by elders possessing authority to moderate behavior.

9.2 Attacking Character, Family Origin, and Exposing Hypocrisy

Some proverbs extend criticism beyond immediate behavior to attack fundamental character and family origin. *Amúnibúni ẹran İbiyẹ, İbiyẹ fọjú ọtún, ẹran rẹ fọ t'òsì* (P11: A-creature-that-makes-one-insult-another person, like İbiyẹ's goat; İbiyẹ is blind in the right eye, and her goat is blind in the left) and *Fi mi du won awon to ni' e!* (P5: The insult you hurled belongs to your parents) operate through metonymy, where individual behavior functions as an index

of family character and parental competence. Similarly, *Abi i iko, ako i gba* (P6: It's obvious, your parents didn't train you/Though you were trained by them, you refused to imbibe their training) directly attacks parental competence and the target's receptiveness to proper upbringing. These perform multiple simultaneous speech acts: expressing offense, making claims about the target's family, and redirecting insult. The face-threat is maximized by extension to family, as respect for parents constitutes core Yoruba values and attacking someone's parents is among the most severe insults possible in Yoruba culture.

Proverbs also expose hypocrisy and self-delusion. *Eyélé fi esín re pamo, ó nşe esin adię* (P28: The pigeon hides its own shame and goes ridiculing the hen) exposes the gap between how targets present themselves and how others perceive them. The pigeon and hen function as parallel signs for rival wives, creating ironic distance between self-perception and actual status. Another proverb: *Ẹledé nşàfò ó rò pé òún nşoge* (P20: The pig wallows in the mud but thinks it is being a dandy) employs loaded symbolism contrasting wallowing with grooming practices, creating sharp critique through incongruity between self-perception and observable reality.

Women in unwanted situations, such as levirate marriages, which is part of Yoruba tradition, may use *İyàn ní m̀m̀ni jẹ ẹso igi-kigi* (P27: Famine brings one to eating fruits of all sorts of trees) where famine symbolizes necessity overriding preference, creating semiotic justification for accepting unwanted circumstances while simultaneously explaining, justifying, and complaining.

9.3 Strategic Neutrality and Managing Hidden Tensions

Where conflicts involve third parties, especially in a polygynous setting, proverbs serve as shields allowing speakers to deflect involvement or maintain strategic neutrality. *Àdàbà nşogèdè, ó rò pé eyélé ò gbo; eyélé gbo, títiiri ló tiiri* (P15: The dove recites incantations, thinking the pigeon cannot understand; the pigeon understands, it only pretends to be asleep) creates a split between appearance (sleeping, being unaware) and reality (awake,

comprehension), allowing speakers to occupy positions of knowing neutrality. Òjò ni wá, àwa ò bá ẹnikan ẹ ọtá (P12: Like the rain, we hold no grudges) is another proverb expressing neutrality in conflictual situation(s). It aligns the speaker with rain's non-discriminating action, creating semiotic equivalence with neutrality.

Ìpàko ò gbo ẹ̀tí, ipèhìndà ò mọ̀ yege yíye (P17: The occiput does not recognize contempt; the back does not see disdainful gestures) suggests disregarding insults is the best response. This defensive strategy denies the insulting sign its intended target, creating semiotic void where the message fails to reach its interpretant. Another proverb, Iwofa lenu ibi to bá wù elenu lo ẹ̀ gbégbá (P16: The mouth is a servant of the owner) expresses refusal to be drawn into conflicts regardless of the provocation. On the other hand, Eni a fi pamó, tí n wúkó (P22: The one that is hidden from the glare of others but is coughing) criticizes those who undermine protective efforts, suggesting that while others work to shield someone from embarrassment or involvement in matters, that person actively thwarts such protection through their own indiscretion.

Some conflicts cannot be openly discussed because they are shameful or culturally inappropriate. À nǵùwon" ò ẹ́é wí lejo; ijà ilara ò tán boro (P21: We are driven by envy is a bad case to make; a quarrel spawned by jealousy is not easy to settle) acknowledges that quarrels whose causes cannot be openly admitted will not readily end. When quarrels stem from unequal distribution of conjugal attention, which is shameful to complain about openly, this proverb addresses the situation while maintaining veils of propriety, creating public signs obscuring private referents.

9.4 Warnings, Threats, and Karmic Justice

Some proverbs function as warnings suggesting current behavior will have negative consequences. Pásán tafí na iyálé, onbé lóri àjà fún iyàwó (P13: The cane used to flog the first wife is on the ceiling for the younger wife) delivers clear warning about karmic cycles, operating on temporal semiotic axes where present signs point toward future outcomes. The cane functions as material sign of punishment persisting across time, indexing both past events and future

consequences. The ceiling represents suspended but inevitable justice, creating symbolic architecture of retribution. T'ẹ̀lẹ̀gàn ló ẹ̀soro (P14: The one who shames others has the biggest misfortune) and Àti jùwá l'ẹ̀bá lọ, à'itọ̀ l'ẹ̀bá bọ̀ (P18: You went to look for how to surpass us but achieve nothing in the end) suggest that efforts to pull others down lead to one's own downfall.

The proverb: Kuru kèrè ...o di ile alawo, kuru..kèrè..o di ile onisegun, ogun o ran wa o (P23: You do your hide and seek to the diviner's and healer's houses, but your charms are powerless) reveals dimensions of polygynous conflict extending into spiritual realms where co-wives may seek supernatural means to harm one another. The proverb dismisses such efforts as futile, creating symbolic shield of invulnerability against spiritual attack while simultaneously exposing the rival's recourse to such methods. These proverbs perform directive speech acts warning of consequences while asserting the speaker's immunity to threats.

9.5 Reciprocity and Challenging Hierarchy

The principle of reciprocity is central to conflict management in the ile orogun setting. Bí egúngún ńlá bá ní òhun ò rí gontò, gontò na á ní òhun o ri egúngún ńlá (P24: If a big masquerade claims it doesn't see the smaller masquerade, the small masquerade will also claim it doesn't see the big masquerade) asserts that respect is reciprocal. This proverb challenges hierarchical encoding structuring most polygynous relationships. The masquerades function as symbols of ritual – it is a spiritual being in the Yoruba worldview – and social importance, and the proverb's genius lies in creating symmetrical relationships between entities that tradition would position hierarchically. This empowers junior wives to push back against senior wives abusing their positions. While Yoruba culture traditionally emphasizes age-based hierarchy, this proverb introduces countervailing principles where hierarchy does not absolve someone of responsibility to treat others with basic dignity.

While the above challenges oppression based on hierarchy, the proverb Bí orogún iyá ẹ̀ni bá ju iyá ẹ̀ni lọ, iyá là ńpè é (P4: If one's mother's co-wife is older than one's mother, one calls her mother) reinforces respect for elders regardless of

rivalry (a core tenet in the Yoruba worldview), demonstrating how proverbs can also enforce traditional hierarchies when deployed by concerned elders seeking to moderate conflict.

9.6 Collective Identity and Indirect Attacks

Some conflicts involve indirect attacks such as criticism directed at rivals' children. *Ẹrú kan ní òmúni bú igba ẹrú* (P25: A single slave causes one to insult two hundred other slaves) addresses collective reputation, suggesting that one member's misbehavior brings dishonor to all members. In polygynous contexts, this applies when one wife's behavior reflects on all wives or when children's misbehavior affects mothers' standing. The numerical contrast between one and two hundred others creates symbolic representation of how individual actions ripple outward to affect collective identity, transforming personal signs into group signifiers. *Irikuri bẹbẹ Àbẹbí, Àbẹbí ndánà, bẹbẹ ẹ ñsù sára* (P26: Abebi's waist beads make one see all sorts of undesirables; Abebi is cooking, the beads are singing lullaby) is another proverb used in polygynous setting to show displeasure of certain unpleasant circumstances or situations that predisposes one to undesirable treatment from others. Pragmatically, these proverbs perform accusatory speech acts while creating collective responsibility for individual behavior.

X. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the multifaceted roles of Yoruba proverbs in polygynous settings, revealing them as sophisticated pragmatic and semiotic devices that reflect lived experiences, values, and power dynamics in Yoruba polygynous families. The functional taxonomy developed, spanning categories from normalizing jealousy to managing hidden tensions, reveals the complexity of indirect communication and demonstrates how speakers must navigate multiple interpretive codes simultaneously. The pragmatic analysis illuminates how proverbs function as strategic speech acts, enabling speakers to perform face-threatening actions, assert dominance, or maintain plausible deniability while delivering criticism. The semiotic analysis shows how metaphorical language drawn from everyday life, nature, and animal behavior becomes loaded with

connotative meanings encoding judgments about human conducts, characters, and social positions.

Proverbs serve functions beyond criticism, including advising, resolving conflict, and averting shame. Family elders deploy them to caution against relationship-damaging actions, emphasizing how verbal expressions can maintain family cohesion. However, the study reveals significant power asymmetries in proverb deployment. While theoretically available to all, certain proverbs carry different weights depending on who speaks them and to whom, reflecting broader social hierarchies.

It is important to emphasize that in the Yoruba family and social settings, proverbs are not gender-specific; both men and women navigate relational tensions through proverbial discourse. While this paper focuses on abusive proverbs in polygynous settings, other types of Yoruba proverbs play important roles in mediating conflict, calling for restraint, and promoting moderation and maturity. These deserve further academic exploration.

This dual nature of Yoruba proverbs - serving as vessels of wisdom and potential tools for harm - underlines the need for an in-depth understanding in contemporary Yoruba society. While proverbs remain culturally significant, their usage must be understood as conditioned by power relations, especially within polygynous settings.

As culturally significant as these proverbs are, their potential for harm should be recognized in discourses of gender equality and family dynamics. Further research may examine ways in which proverbs could be reinterpreted or contextualized to foster more equitable relations within polygynous and extended families, and perhaps in wider African cultural contexts. This calls for a balanced and reflective approach in understanding the role of proverbs in Yoruba society, appreciating those that support positive social norms while critically examining those that can be reshaped to further social change and gender equity.

The study further reiterates the traditional African knowledge transmission concept of handing down beliefs and cultures to future generation. Generally, African societies

have been dubbed oral societies where knowledge is transmitter verbally. This study, like the ones before it has started a revolution of codifying traditional belief and culture (proverbs) into written form for generations yet unborn.

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