



## **Paremiography and Paremiology: Implications for the School Curricula of Africans and Afro-Descendants in the Diaspora**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper is based on research that was conducted in both Africa and the Caribbean. Having first defined the two major terms, 'paremiography' and 'paremiology', the paper goes on to detail what implications that the collecting and researching into proverbs from Africa and the Caribbean, may have for the curricula of primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Africa and the Diaspora. Some of the other issues on which the paper throws more light are the role that culture plays building a curriculum, and the reasons why the desired impact in the socialization process are not being felt. The research is also expected to promote inter alia better transitional cultural relations and cooperation among the countries of Africa and the Diaspora.

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Pickney wey neh hear wha him mama say does have to drink  
hot water witout sugar.  
The child who does not listen to his mother will drink hot water  
without sugar.  
(Trinidadian ole time saying)*

One folklore genre that has interested many people is proverbs. Proverbs have provided a great source of community wisdom and have proved to be a genre that can stand research to a very high level. The scholarly study of proverbs is termed paremiology and the collecting and editing of proverb collections and dictionaries is known as paremiography. While both areas of endeavour are distinctly separate, in many cases, paremiologists are also

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paremiographers and vice-versa, as they both collect proverbs and research into the nature of proverbial language.

Proverb collections are of inestimable value. These collections are the reservoirs of rich folkloristic data, and apart from the preservation of proverbs, allow not only paremiologists but also researchers from other disciplines the opportunity to study proverbs from their own perspectives, further enhancing their value (Dundes 1968). It should not be surprising therefore, to find among others, philosophers, teachers, linguistics, psychologists, historians, jurists, literary scholars and philosophers – all claiming the importance of proverbs to their own area of expertise, by carefully citing and analyzing the most appropriate ones to shore up their arguments.

Paremiologists have revolutionized the study of proverbs. In a discussion on the value and function of the proverb, Mackenzie (1995) reminds us that proverbs “can help us to interpret our past, present and future.” Daniel (1987) notes that a study of Afro-American proverbs reveals that many contain a worldview which can be traced back to their origin or to the mentality which helped the American slaves to survive their inhuman conditions. Daniel, Donaldson and Jeremiah (1987), see proverbs as being an essential dimension of communication because they are an index of cultural continuity and interaction; significant in the socialization process; central to mental development and abstract thinking and reasoning; significant rhetorical devices in arguments, debates, verbal dueling and indices of cultural assimilation.

Because the proverb tells us a lot about the people who use them, paremiological studies often rely on other related disciplines in order to explain certain intrinsicities of the genre. For example, in order to ascertain whether proverbs are one of the constellations of African cultural traits that were brought to the Caribbean, using Trinidadian *ole time sayings* as a case in point, Olatunde-Ojo (2005) made use of other disciplines such as History, Geography, Sociology and Psychology, apart from relevant folklore theories, to buttress the argument. Comparative studies must also be very integral to the tracking of proverbs especially if they still resonate in groups who share similar experiences.

One of the greatest challenges for Africans and Afro-descendants in the Diaspora in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century lies in ensuring that our children are ushered into a responsible adulthood. In a world where the standard of success is measured according to middle-class values, there is always a point of departure between the reality of the life experiences of African youths and the expectations of a school system, where tests and examinations register these values. The result of this disparity is that the African child may not reach his optimal performance level. (Hamilton, 1993; Williams, 1998)

Years of enslavement and further colonialism have had an indelible impact on Africa and its people. African cultural practices which once sustained and protected the family and society were either distorted or totally destroyed in the face of social and biological assimilation. Traditional

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education was replaced by Western education and the oral tradition declined. In an effort to adapt, African youth globally seems to be under siege. Media representations perpetrating the image of young black people in the Diaspora on drugs and participating in violence, as well as statistics of their numbers in jails and on the unemployment rows paint a grim picture. On the continent we see African youth being endangered as music and its language, films, clothes and a lifestyle – all foreign and western – conflict with African traditional values and customs.

**Some samples**

Let us now look at an example of paremiological research as it pertains to African proverb retentions in the Diaspora, in order to season this discussion. We now present some proverb samples which the research has shown to be similar in presentation, sentiment and function in parts of the Caribbean, to those in West Africa. These samples would be of particular value to the youth in terms of developing their character and forming a world view of global Africans. Subjoined are the samples:

- |    |  |   |          |
|----|--|---|----------|
| 1. | One finger cannot remove (catch) a louse | - | Yoruba   |
|    | One finger can't catch a mother louse    | - | Cameroon |
|    | One hand can't tie a bundle              | - | Liberia  |
|    | One finger cannot drink soup             | - | Ewe      |

(Dahomey).

One finger cyar ketch louse (flea) -Trinidad St. Vincent; St. Lucia; Grenada  
Martinique; Jamaica.

**COMMENT**

The proverb calls for cooperation and the reliance of family or community effort to succeed.

2. You haven't crossed the river, don't curse the crocodile's mother. -  
Ashanti

Yuh eh cross de river, doh cuss de crocodile mudder. Trinidad  
No cuss alligator long mout till you cross the ribber.  
Jamaica

Don't abuse the crocodile's offspring until you are out of the water.

Jukun (Nigeria)

**COMMENT**

The proverb which cautions one not to be overconfident is reminiscent of the English proverb which says "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched."

3. He who has no mother, sucks his grandmother. - Wolf (Senegal)

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If yuh cyar suck mammy, suck granny. - Trinidad  
If yuh cyar get grama yuh have to take grapa. - Trinidad  
If you no see mammy see grandy. - Jamaica  
You no see mammy, seek granny. - Grenada

**COMMENT**

The proverb advises a person to seek opportunities and be on a the lookout for opportunities.

4. The pig says to his mother “What makes your mouth so long?” She says “Ah never mind my child, the same thing that makes mine long will make yours too.”

Ashanti

Pig ask his mudder, “Mammy wat make yuh mout so long?” Mudder answers “Take time little one, take time.”

Trinidad.

Pig ax him mama say wha’ mek him mout’ long so; him say “A no mind, me pickney; dat somet’ing mek fe me long so wi’ meke fe you long so too”

Jamaica

Pig ask mumma wa’ mek him mout’ long so; mumma say, “No min’, if you no dead you wi’ see.”

Jamaica

Pig say, “Mummy, wha’ mek your mout’ long so” – “No min’, me pickney, you a grow you wi’ see.”

St. Lucia

**COMMENT**

All versions of the proverb advise the young to wait. Experience is the father of all teachers.

5. The Fowl in drinking water, raises its head to God in thankfulness.  
Ashanti

Fowl drink water, look up to God, say “Tank God”. Man drink water, he look a ground no say one word.

Trinidad./Jamaica

Chicken member God when him drink.

Jamaica.

**COMMENT**

Interestingly the main focus of the proverb is that even animals can be grateful. What about us human beings?

If you spit in the air, it will fall on you. Yoruba  
Trinidad  
Jamaica.

St. Croix

**COMMENT**

The proverb warns about the consequences of an action - that there will be a repercussion. For every action there will be a reaction.

7. Where the horse has reached, the jackass must reach.- Ngas (Nigeria)

Where horse reach, jackass will reach.-Trinidad/Grenada

**COMMENT**

This proverb is quoted to encourage a person (e.g. a student) to persevere in his endeavours.

8. Tho' the cow be in poor condition, she carries her horns. -  
Hausa  
Cattle horn never too heavy for he own head. -  
Trinidad  
Bull horn never too heavy for bull head. -  
Jamaica  
Bull horn never too heavy for him head. -  
Grenada

**COMMENT**

This proverb serves as an encouragement/advice to a person to shoulder his responsibility, particularly when faced with difficulties.

9. When you see your brother's beard on fire, rush and pour water on your own

-  
Hausa  
When yuh brodder beard ketch fire wet yours -  
Trinidad/Jamaica/Grenada  
When your neighbours house is on fire wet yours- Trinidad

**COMMENT**

The proverb serves as a warning to us that when someone close has a problem we too should be careful and take precautions.

10. All is never said. - Igbo  
Talk some, lef some. -  
Trinidad/Grenada/Jamaica

**COMMENT**

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This proverb is self-explanatory as there is wisdom in not revealing everything. This is perfect advice to young people who easily expose everything about themselves.

What these samples reveal is that there is an unbroken continuity of folk wisdom from Africa which is important in revealing the philosophy and the world view of the African. The didactic import of the proverbs cannot be underestimated. Because these proverbs are still very functional, they will definitely find a place in the curriculum as they will give African Diaspora youths a sense of humanity, identity and purpose by exposing them to the wisdom of our forebears, a heritage which still resonates in our own lives.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CURRICULUM**

Now, what are the implications for the school curricula of Africans and Afro-Descendants in the Diaspora? We are told that children learn best in an environment in which their own culture is included in the curriculum. (Lomotey 1992). If the curriculum must be seen as the deliberate systematic and planned attempt not only to change the behaviour of children and youth, but also to enable them to gain the social insight and power to build a better society. (Onwuka, 1984), then the following goals selected from Lee's (1992), African-Centred Pedagogy could form the necessary goals of the anticipated curriculum review. This curriculum would serve to achieve the following goals:

1. Legitimise African stores of knowledge
2. Extend and build upon the indigenous language.
3. Reinforce community ties and idealize service to one's family, community, nation, race and world.
4. Promote positive social relationships.
5. Impact a worldview that idealizes a positive, self-sufficient future for one's people without denying the self-worth and right to self-determination of others.
6. Support cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness.
7. Promote the vision of individuals and communities as producers rather than simply as consumers.
8. Lay emphasis on high academic achievement, transmission of culture, self-determination, and developing a strong African identity.
9. Promote a sense of commitment to global African people, a commitment to the belief that African people have a common ancestry and destiny.

These goals would therefore spark off a number of short, medium and long term curricular activities which include:

1. Reviewing the existing textbooks in order to identify areas where proverbs can be inserted to illustrate specific activities.

2. Reorienting teachers in the direction of understanding the place of proverbs as a vehicle of cultural values, beliefs and functional living. Giving teachers the pedagogical skills they need to enable them to integrate the use of proverbs in their instructional activities.

3. Sensitizing the textbooks and curriculum planners to see the importance of proverbs so that as students learn content they also learn cultural values.

4. Rewriting the existing books/curricula materials to build in proverbs for purposes of illustrating important concepts or ideas.

We need to remind ourselves that in the continent for example in Nigeria, children are familiar with proverbs. A study by Daniel (1978) also revealed that Afro-Americans appear to have a high frequency for using proverbs in everyday conversation. These similarities present an advantage as collecting and studying proverbs would be a happy task for both teachers and students in Africa and the Diaspora.

At this point, some suggestions of the content to be included at the various levels of instructions would be given. It would be dependent on individual teachers to construct individual teaching units with specific objectives and tasks.

**A. The Primary Level**

The general aim here would be to sensitize children to the proverb genre within the African context and to begin to use proverbs.

Telling stories, folktales, singing folksongs etc with proverbs included could be good openers at this level of instruction. These can be accompanied by curricular materials like maps to show where places are, people live and other pertinent details in order to make connections. Proverbs will be identified as Meider (2006) believes that when young people study proverbial wisdom it helps them develop intellectual virtues and a commitment to moral values. Students can now be encouraged later on to copy proverbs and use them in other contextual events as they may encounter. This also teaches them to remember the proverbs and hopefully to quote on apt occasions.

**B. The Secondary Level**

The basic goal of this level is to appreciate the contributions proverbs have made to literature and other arts. Their ability to unravel the wit and wisdom of the proverbs and also their functions will be a part of the process. At this level, the proverb will be studied within its literary and cultural context. Novels written by African authors and other Diasporan authors will be read and compared. In identification of the literary elements of proverbs, students will be able to analyze the different poetic and stylistic devices. Proverb themes, functions and other concepts of universality and internationality would be introduced to show the similarity of ideas and experience of people as well as the psychic unity of mankind.

The language of the proverb will be explored as this builds oratory skills in students. This is a good time to involve them in the collecting of proverbs according to themes and so on as it will also avail them the

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opportunity to interact with the older members of their community to collect a variety of interpretations, thus bridging the generation gap. Proverb parallels could also be investigated and the role of proverbs in music e.g. reggae, rap, pop music can be explored.

### **C. The Tertiary Level**

At this level the goal of the curriculum is to further academic excellence by being able to recognize, analyse and interpret the socio-cultural contexts of proverbs and to make possible prediction in Diasporan issues. The ways in which proverbs affect other disciplines, their historical and literary value could also be investigated. By way of information all university students in Nigeria, must undergo a compulsory General Studies programme which includes (GS-102) Nigerian Peoples and Culture. But more proverbs could be used in GST 101 Use of English.

Students at this level should have a strong sense of their cultural identity. They should be able to trace certain pathways for comparative studies of folklore (proverbs). Student projects should cover a variety of cultural issues and should spark off inquiry on issues pertaining to unity and collaboration in the Diaspora, in the area of proverbs, as survival strategies. Students should also be able to have access to large collections of proverbs and create ongoing ones to use as a basis for further study for parallel proverb studies and variants within the Diaspora. Those interested in linguistics can investigate the morphology, semantic and idiomacity of proverbs in early times. They could also study the evolution of proverbs.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the forgoing discussion we can see that proverbs by their very nature can provide a worldwide black consciousness necessary for our survival and the reshaping of our collective destiny. This would ensure that the youth in being exposed to the practicality of proverbs would certainly benefit from the impact as a survival tool to their very existence. Also, this according to Badejo (2005) would be one of the ways in which the legacy and culture of Africa can be transformed into a viable modality for the survival and the reclamation of our humanity, purpose and identity.

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