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EXPLORING YORUBA FIRE CULTURES THROUGH PROVERBS

Abstract: This article explores Yoruba proverbs as an essential source of popular wisdom on socio-environmental practices, in particular fire knowledge and practices. It suggests that popular wisdom around fire can be accessed through the creative reconstruction and interpretation of the historical contexts of Yoruba proverbs. Learning from the everyday knowledge and accumulated wisdom of ordinary people holds significant promise at a time of unprecedented socio-environmental crisis and widespread calls for transformative change across scales. Drawing on a collection of Yoruba proverbs, broader Yoruba oral literature, Yoruba popular culture, and a cross-disciplinary selection of academic literature, this article curates ten Yoruba proverbs on the theme of fire, using these as an entry point to interrogate aspects of ecology, local understanding and cultural practices of living with fire among the Yoruba people.

Keywords: Yoruba, fire, history, environment, proverbs

1. Introduction

There are complex and evolving debates about Yoruba proverbs and their roles in the Yoruba oral traditions and in the Yoruba culture more broadly (Raji-Oyelade 2012; Fayemi 2010; Adesoji 2006; Owomoyela 2005; Delano 1972). But at least there is explicit agreement that proverbs reflect something of the norms, experiences, philosophies, and practices of the Yoruba culture – a culture which is itself dynamic. As in other cultures, the Yoruba

proverbs are cherished for their moral value and their transmission of cultural wisdom and traditions (Fayemi 2010; Owomoyela 2005; cf. Akporobaro 2006). They infuse oral communication with efficacy, aesthetic qualities, and appositeness, aptly captured in Chinua Achebe's famous praise of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*: "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". The Yorubas themselves stress the critical role of proverbs in their oral traditions when they say "The proverb is the horse of speech. When speech is lost, the proverb is the means we use to hunt for it". Indeed, proverbs take such a central position in Yoruba oral tradition that the poet Niyi Osundare observed in his book, Midlife: "A thousand books may not total one strand of the beard of a quiet proverb" (Osundare 1993).

If Yoruba proverbs have long been treasured for their metaphoric meanings, the context of these proverbs and their basis in socio-cultural and place-based experiences (Ayinuola and Edwin 2014) suggest that they are also a source of the factual history of social practices. Adesoji (2006: 3) notes that some Yoruba proverbs are known to "recall particular events in the life of the community which created them and in which they are used… they sometimes contain historical information while at the same time a clue to facts". Because proverbs are in widespread and popular usage (compared to the sacred aspect of Yoruba oral traditions, which are reserved for priests and special occasions) and because they have been passed down from generation to generation, historical accounts derived from proverbs may be more reliable than those obtained from other forms of oral literature (Adesoji 2006; Delano 1972, 1973).

This article thus draws on the factual uses of proverbs and their relative reliability as a cultural source to respond to the growing need to reclaim indigenous and local environmental knowledge and practices in efforts to address the escalating environmental crisis. I ask how the Yoruba people conceived of, used, controlled and lived with fires, particularly in their southern Nigeria rainforests and savanna heartland. What can the historical contextual practices that gave rise to Yoruba proverbs on fire teach us about local uses of fires and the protection of communities against fire hazards? The article grapples with these questions by curating ten Yoruba proverbs from the compilation

by Oyekan Owomoyela (2005) of about 5,500 Yoruba proverbs and their meanings – the fruit of 40 years of research! In making sense of these proverbs, I situate them in the broader Yoruba oral tradition, Yoruba popular culture, and a cross-disciplinary selection of academic literature. In doing so I show how proverbs could be a veritable source of some of the vital fire knowledge and practices of the Yoruba people, along with their associated cultural and ecological contexts, which are essential for understanding those practices today. This piece thus contributes to what Bewaji (2015: 17) calls the "rediscovering [of] cultural intelligence" in relation to environmental sustainability and human wellbeing.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of relevant literature that ground the article in debates in both Yoruba paremiology and eco-cultural studies. This is developed alongside an argument for transdisciplinarity in the exploration of proverbs as a source of local ecological knowledge and popular wisdom. Next, each of the curated list of ten proverbs is presented, translated, and discussed. The article then concludes.

2. Yoruba proverbs and paremiology

The literature on Yoruba paremiology is well established – from the pioneering work of such scholars as Isaac Delano (1972, 1973) and Oyekan Owomoyela (1981, 1988, 2005) to the recent advances in the field typified by such works as that of Raji-Oyelade (2012) on Yoruba postproverbials. Yoruba proverbs continue to be analyzed as a source of Yoruba history and culture (Adesoji 2006; Delano 1973). Yet as Owomoyela (2005) notes, Yoruba paremiology, despite its parallels with English paremiology, is sufficiently differentiated by the various peculiarities of Yoruba proverbs or *òwe*. For instance, while speech features that are regarded as false proverbs in English are also present in Yoruba speech practices, they are not considered to be proverbs or *òwe* in Yoruba. Rather they are called èébú. An example is the epithet *Sámúgà, eléyín okó* (Samuga, with hoes for teeth) which is further elaborated with the saying *kòróun fálejò ó wayín sáwo* (lacking the means to entertain a guest, he scoops teeth into a

dish) (Owomoyela, 2005). While English proverbs are typically expected to be "pithy, concise, succinct, brief, terse and so on", it is not uncommon for Yoruba *òwe* to be "long-winded" (Owomoyela 2005: 6).

Proverbs, like traditional oral materials in general, are living materials in that they refuse rigid fixity, but rather "respond to each occasion and each audience according to the dialectical, idiosyncratic, or any other particularity of the performer" (Owomoyela, 2005: 30). This continued performance of proverbs as a living material means that proverbs are not only affirmed over time; they may also be refined, transformed, or may fall out of use altogether in line with the dynamics of social norms, experiences and realities. Fayemi (2010: 4) observes that proverbs allow for the "storing and retrieving [of] any aspects" of the Yoruba cultural worldview. Yet, reconstructing historical knowledge and practices from proverbs entails more than "retrieving". It requires some degree of intersubjective meaning-making, cross-interpretation among related proverbs, and supplementation with historical and contemporary understandings of reality across bodies of knowledge and knowledge types. In this sense, reconstructing social practices from Yoruba proverbs typifies what Bewaji (2015: 13) describes as "epistemic responsibility [which] values the collective efforts, memory, and ownership of knowledge". Yoruba proverbs manifest attributes of popular African epistemology: interdependence, incompleteness and interconnectedness (cf. Nyamnjoh 2017). They also reflect both the rupture and limits of colonial rule since ancient origins of Yoruba proverbs and broader oral traditions of the Yoruba culture did not only survive the period of cultural imperialism and colonization, but many Yoruba proverbs were also forged through the peoples' experience of colonization.

The dynamic nature of Yoruba proverbs is perhaps best typified by one of the important aspects of Yoruba paremiology which Raji-Oyelade (2012) elaborated as postproverbials. Postproverbials signal the centrality of quotidian engagement with proverbs in ways that respond to prevailing social norms, expectations, and experiences which often differ from those that constitute the historical context of the proverbs. Revising long-held proverbs in such witty and sometimes provocative ways is

what Raji-Oyelade describes as "playful blasphemies". Postproverbials have now become common enough to deserve dedicated paremiological attention. Postproverbials are an invitation to take seriously the historical context and the ongoing relevance of Yoruba proverbs, in order to achieve the profound task of making proverbs reflect and respond to the moment – to the prevailing popular wisdom.

Despite the dynamic nature of Yoruba proverbs, "historical markers" are important elements of Yoruba proverbs that help to anchor proverbs in time, emphasizing proverbs as a source of history. "Historical markers" are the dating information embedded in proverbs indicating the approximate period when the proverb began to be used (Owomoyela 2005). For instance, the proverb *Olórun ò pín dógba. Sajiméjò-ó ju Kòròfo* (God has not apportioned things equally. The Sergeant Major outranks the Corporal) makes mention of British Military ranks, indicating that the British presence in the Yoruba land had been established by the period this proverb came into existence. This possibility of historically anchoring Yoruba proverbs to better appreciate the context in which certain proverbs developed is critical for unpacking Yoruba proverbs and decoding the factual practices to which they often refer.

Factual historical practices, particularly those captured in eco-proverbs and proverbs relating to society's understanding of and interactions with nature, hold significant potential to revitalize sustainability practices at a time of unprecedented socio-environmental crisis, partly a product of modernity itself. Calls for socio-ecological transformation continue to centre the need for a plurality of knowledge, values, and perspectives. Scholars of democratization of environmental knowledge also foreground the role of citizens' knowledge in co-creating visions of more just and sustainable futures (Jasanoff 2004). Addressing the current environmental crisis will require the centring of a 'pluriversal politics', in which knowledge, philosophy and practices of Indigenous, Afro-descendants and other place-based groups are brought to the fore alongside many other philosophies and practices (Escobar 2020). Similarly, amid the sterility of 'colonizing' or what Fokwang (2012: 327) calls 'ready-made' epistemologies, which are incapable of fully nurturing African potentialities,

scholars like Nyamnjoh (2017: 4) call for a convivial epistemology that takes seriously the "popular African ideas of reality and social action" as revealed by the people. Yoruba proverbs reflect some of the most enduring aspects of popular African ideas of reality and social action. They offer generative potentials for understanding the Yoruba people's conception of and interactions with the natural world, contributing to a trans-disciplinary space in which a plurality of knowledge and values can be integrated.

In this piece, I approach the theme of fire by focusing on fire practices, emphasizing the practices and knowledge that help constitute the *socionatural* aspects of fires in Yoruba proverbs – that is, the entanglements of human and nonhuman natures in this specific coproduction of fire and society. An important strand of eco-critical work already takes Yoruba proverbs as a focus of analysis (see Ayinuola and Edwin 2014), re-assessing literary work through an eco-centric lens. In this paper, however, I focus on proverbs, an essential aspect of Yoruba oral tradition, partly to unsettle what Ignatov (2016: 76) calls the "colonization of the aural–oral by the literary" in ecophilosophy more broadly. I emphasize *fire cultures* (in plural) to recognize the inherent plurality and diversity of Yoruba culture in time and space. Yoruba communities, sub-cultures and practices have coevolved with different ecological zones and landscape types, as it is popularly held that culture sits in places, even if oral traditions are at the same time dynamic.

While there is some truth to the observation that "all peoples live their history; but those who do not write it down live it more consciously than those who do" (Biobaku 1956: 43), changing socio-ecological conditions within which the Yoruba people have always and continue to live out their history means that historical lessons also need to be (re)framed in the present considering changing realities. If invoking ancient Yoruba proverbs on the environment is an invitation to live out history, the contemporary environmental realities of the Yoruba people suggest an imperative to (re)make history through inventive practices which serve as a basis for new proverbs. The rest of this article takes the ten proverbs one after the other, providing two forms of English translations: the literal and the metaphoric, as given by Owomoyela (2005) with very few minor modifications. Based

on the literal translation, each proverb is then followed with an attempt to reconstruct and interpret the historical contexts and their constitutive social practices.

3. Analysis

1. *Iná kìíjó kí ògiri sá*

> Literal meaning: Fire does not rage and cause a wall to flee.
>
> Idiomatic meaning: this means that certain entities are invulnerable to certain dangers.

Walls have a fundamental significance in Yoruba society. Since ancient times, Yoruba societies have built their homes with earthen clay walls. Compounds surrounded by similarly constructed walls typically surround homes where the extended families lived. And in turn, many Yoruba towns and cities were historically surrounded by systems of walls, sometimes combined with ditches or moats.

Indeed, ancient Yoruba kingdoms were known for extensive systems of walls, earthworks and moats built around many Yoruba towns and cities. The earliest of them, Sungbo's Eredo in Ijebu-Ode, close to Lagos and Ibadan, Southwest Nigeria, dates back a thousand years (Darling 1998). The Eredo is a 160-kilometre-long and 20-meter-high defensive wall system and shallow moat winding through the rainforest (Darling 1998). Sungbo's Eredo was said to have been commissioned by *Oloye* (Chief) Bilikisu Sungbo, a wealthy woman and an Ijebu chief who had no children and was much revered among the Ijebu people. A much more extensive system of walls and earthworks with a combined length of about 16,000 kilometres was built over centuries to fortify and demarcate various sections of the Benin Kingdom in Southern Nigeria. These two walls (Sungbo's Eredo and Iya of Benin) are still standing and are currently on the Tentative List of the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage.

So, what about walls and fire in these ancient Yoruba societies? These walls were built with clay, whether built around homes or cities. These clay walls were fire resistant and stood

firm in the face of fire, even if the thatched roofs on homes were often the first to burn, especially when struck by lightning which is abundant across Africa and Yoruba land. But the walls themselves, considered the most critical structure of a house since such walls were continuous with the foundation of the house, often stood firm and were even strengthened by urban or wildland fires. This is because of the unique property of clay made up of aluminum and silicon ions, which are bonded into tiny plates by interconnecting oxygen and hydroxide ions. These minuscule plates are tough and flexible when wet. They are, however, transformed into increasingly hard and strong mineral materials through dehydration, particularly by firing. This is terracotta on a large scale. With every successive fire on these clay walls, they got even stronger – strong enough to make them withstand the other main element of the rainforest heartland of Yoruba communities: rainstorms.

What's interesting, then, is how ancient Yoruba cultures built walls and structures which, at least, as far as withstanding the fire was concerned, became almost taken for granted to the point of being inscribed in proverbs. As architects, builders and city planners globally are now rediscovering the usefulness of clay as an important eco-friendly building material, appreciating its strengths in thermal insulation, soundproofing, and low-carbon properties compared to concrete, they may also have found a naturally fire-resistant material in their hands at a time of more intense, climate change-impacted mega-fires across regions of the world (Asiyanbi and Davidsen 2023; Tedim et al. 2018).

2. *Omo iná la ńrán síná*

> Literal meaning: It is the child of fire that one sends on an errand to fire.
>
> Idiomatic meaning: It is best to match the remedy to the problem.

This proverb suggests a historical context in which the Yoruba people sought to deal with large and out-of-control fires. And one of the ways the Yoruba people did it was to actively use (child

of, or small) fires to control fire on the landscape. The Yorubas had to learn how to deal with fires. As John Iliffe (1984, see also Smith 1962) rightly observed, the fire was historically common in Yoruba towns during the dry season. Also, given the various uses of fires among the Yoruba people – from farm preparation to hunting, from forest hygiene to biodiversity maintenance and the prevention of destructive fires, and from rituals and communication to crafts and food preservation – one could expect detailed knowledge of fire ecology and fire control to keep these practices ongoing for generations. Some of these long-standing African indigenous fire knowledge and practices have been highlighted by researchers (see, for instance, Laris and Wardell 2006; Kull 2004; Komarek 1972; Jeffereys 1945).

After all, Africa is often called the 'fire continent' (Komarek 1972) because more fires burn in the continent than any other. Even in current times, as NASA observatory recently estimated, about 70% of the land area burned by fires globally burned in Africa still (Voiland 2019). But these are relatively small-sized fires set regularly by communities to manage the landscape – a practice that goes back millennia. Colonial suppression of local fire uses on the landscape in Africa was largely unsuccessful (Laris and Wardell 2006). But this widespread use of fires on the landscape also meant that despite local expertise at timing and managing farm fires to avoid escalation, there was also the risk of fire occasionally getting out of control and extending into broader areas, including forests. Farms and forests often blended into each other in these settings. Strong fire control skills were, thus, needed to suppress fires whenever they escaped.

Another reason Africa is called the 'fire continent' is that it has the greatest occurrence of lightning, which is the leading cause of natural fires during fire weather periods (Komarek 1972). More than half, 283, of the top 500 places with the highest lightning frequency in the world are in Africa, followed by Asia with 87 places (Albrecht et al. 2016). So it's not surprising that the Yorubas (and many other African cultures) have *òrìsàs* (deities) for thunderstorms, lightning and fire. The most well-known of the Yoruba deities of thunder and fire is Sango. The fierce Sango was the legendary fourth king of the Oyo Empire – the most powerful of the ancient Yoruba Kingdoms for centuries.

Yoruba oral tradition has multiple accounts of Sango's life. One of the more popular ones (see Adamo 2017; Awolalu 1979) holds that Sango had gone to try out his new-found magical powers, which gave him the capacity to produce thunder and lightning. While he tried out his powers, he inadvertently caused thunder and lightning to strike his palace, killing his wives and children. In repentance, Sango left his Kingdom and went and hanged himself at Koso. Following this event, some of his enemies cast aspersion on his name, and they were struck by lightning. Seeing how Sango avenged the assault on his name even in death, his followers deified him. In addition to the religious deification of Sango, Sango also personifies the abundance and the power of thunderstorms, lightning and fire in Yorubaland.

The Yorubas have, thus, learnt how to manage landscape fires. Like many other African societies, the Yorubas fought fires by using fires to create fire breaks. They burned the landscape at appropriate periods before and after the dry seasons to reduce the risk of out-of-control fires. This reflects what fire scientists have recognized as "remarkable knowledge of fire ecology" among many African communities (Kolarek 1972: 498). Omo iná la ńrán síná is a reminder that fire is a suitable means of dealing with fire.

3. *Bí abá mu ina kuro loko, afi agbe ti yo jogédé; bí a bá mú ti Ìbíkúnlé Olókè kúrò Balógun Ògbórí Efòn, à di agírase.*

> Literal meaning: If one removed fire from the farm, only the farmers satisfied with a diet of bananas [and plantains] would be unconcerned. But for *Ìbíkúnlé Olókè,* General *Ògbórí Efòn,* we could achieve nothing.
>
> Idiomatic meaning: Deprived of their founts of power, people are ineffective

This proverb speaks to the historical context of the proverb and the centrality of fires to farming systems in Yoruba societies. Without fire, the farmer is reduced to a diet of bananas and plantain because fire is necessary for creating and sustaining the very diverse landscape (and these landscapes blended farm and

forest) that produced the range of food – plant-based and animal-based – that went into the diet of the Yoruba people. Fire was critical for farm preparation and management, the management and hunting of wildlife, and the maintenance of ranges for livestock. Fire was also necessary to cook and preserve a wide variety of food. Without fire, the landscape could not produce the rich diversity that the Yoruba people relied upon.

So, what does it mean for a farmer to be left with a diet of plantains and bananas? First, bananas and plantain are significant staple crops across sub-Saharan Africa. They are one of the easiest crops to grow. They require little land preparation and grow under a light forest canopy, which does not require significant land clearing using fire. Once planted, they regenerate naturally through suckers. Apart from the fruits, which have high calorific value, the large leaves are used locally in food packaging. Because of the ease of cultivation and high energy content, plantain and bananas were a kind of safety net for poor farmers. And bananas could also be eaten as a fruit without any processing, which often required fire.

Yet, there is also the need to understand the value of plantain and banana in the Yoruba food culture. Plantain and bananas are not favourably ranked on the Yoruba hierarchy of foods. Indeed, a Yoruba proverb says:

4. *Orí tó máa je ògèdè sùn kì í gbó; bí wón bá ńgbéyán bò wá fun, yó fòó ni dandan*

> Literal meaning: A head destined to eat plantains for supper will not escape that destiny; if pounded yam is being brought, it [the dish] will unfailingly break.
>
> Metaphoric meaning: There is no antidote or cure for ill luck.

Another proverb says of Bananas:

5. *Ògèdè mbàjé a ní ó ńpón*

> Literal meaning: The banana is rotting; people say it is ripening.

Metaphoric meaning: It does not help to rationalize a brat's behaviour with silly explanations.

Compared to a diet of Iyan (pounded yam), a plantain diet is considered relatively inferior in the Yoruba food hierarchy. Even the ripening of bananas is somewhat seen negatively as rotting. Without fire, plantain and bananas are one of the few food crops the farmer could keep going on the farm. And to be limited to a diet of banana or plantain is not only to be left with a monoculture but also an inferior one. The point here is that removing fires from the traditional landscape of the Yorubas was to put the community and the landscape in the most desperate situation. This points to the centrality of fire in maintaining traditional Yoruba farm-forest landscapes.

The second part of the proverb refers to a famous war chief of Ibadan in the nineteenth century. Ibadan, Nigeria's largest city by area, was recognized for being the leading Yoruba city-state that once competed with the longer-established Oyo Kingdom. Balogun *Ògbórí Efòn* was said to have valiantly defended Ibadan and its allied towns against several aggressions. As such, the proverb likens the usefulness of fire on the farm to the benefit of this war chief at the war front. At the same time, the reference to this particular war chief is also a historical marker in the proverb (Owomoyela 2005). It points to the likely period when the proverb was first used after the reign of *Balogun Ògbórí Efòn* in the late 19th century. Given the central role of fires in Yoruba farms, this contemplation of the possibility of removing fire from the farm may well have been in the context of challenging European attempts to control the use of fires in Yoruba farms from the early 20th century when colonial administrators and foresters began to regulate timber and rubber extraction, and when forest conservation and plantation agriculture began to be introduced (Grove and Falola 1996; Egboh 1985). Komarek (1972: 500) pointed to the widespread documentation in Africa in the 1920s of "the attitudes that sprung from anti-fire attitudes of European forestry".

6. *Omodé kì ní iná nìlé kí tòde má jo*

> Literal Meaning: A child does not have fire at home and therefore escapes being burned by the one abroad
>
> Metaphoric meaning: Being secured and respected in one's home does not secure one from vicissitudes outside the home.

This proverb speaks to a historical context in which a child might expect not to be burned by fire elsewhere because they had become accustomed to dealing with fire at home or in familiar territory. The proverb stresses the difference that context makes in understanding and handling fire. It speaks to how geophysical and socio-cultural contexts matter for how the Yorubas understood and lived with fires. Failure to grasp and respond to fire context appropriately could result in danger. It also speaks to fire as both familiar and strange across geographies. Fire is projected as both domesticated and wild, which is experienced in the known past and will be experienced in the unknown future.

To ignore fire's geographies of difference is to be a child about fire. And to ignore these contextual differences in wildfires is to court danger. The proverb suggests that a child – the immature, the untrained and the inexperienced – falls into such danger. This proverb notes the place of training, experience, and maturing in the embodiment of the knowledge of fire ecology and behaviour. Moreover, it points to the importance of caution and openness to learning in apprehending unfamiliar fire terrains.

7. *Bí iná kò bá l'áwo nínú, kìí gun òkè odò*

> Literal meaning: If a fire is not endowed with mysterious powers, it does not jump rivers
>
> Metaphoric meaning: When matters take a mysterious turn, they are driven by unusual forces

The historical context of this proverb relates to the Yoruba people's keen observation of fire behaviour and their acknowledge-

ment of the powers and mysteries of fire. It speaks to the unusual fire behaviour that was probably observed from time to time which had become common knowledge critical for understanding, predicting, categorizing, preparing for, and responding to fires. The proverb speaks to one category of fire, which has an unusual quality – the capacity to jump rivers. This refers to large and intense fires, which can jump large rivers through their dispersal of long-range fire embers or spread by tree crowns or climbers growing over small rivers or streams.

The proverb also points to the productive tension between familiar and unusual fires. This can be extended to capture the trusted accumulated knowledge of fire behaviour, on the one hand, and a sense of curiosity, openness and wonder at unusual, surprising fire behaviour, on the other hand. Acknowledging the mysterious in fire behaviour is, in a sense, a declaration of the tentative, incomplete, and thus dynamic nature of traditional fire knowledge – and indeed all knowledge in Yoruba culture. It is an invitation to explore and seek new understandings in the interactions of human and nonhuman nature. Indeed, as Bewaji (2015: 14) notes, "the Yoruba culture celebrates wonder and inquisitiveness, encouraging evidence-gathering efforts, as means of gaining knowledge". One could also think of this in terms of what Nyamnjoh (2017) describes as the 'in-between' nature of popular African knowledge, where, in this case, fire is both known and mysterious at the same time. This attitude of anticipating and responding to the mysterious, to the yet unknown, would have been an important aspect of the adaptiveness and dynamism of the Yoruba fire knowledge.

8. *Ina kì í wo odò ko rójú sayé*

> Literal Meaning: Fire does not enter a stream yet retain the opportunity to live.
>
> Metaphoric meaning: Whoever ventures into dangerous situations deserves the repercussions.

This proverb complements the preceding one to demonstrate further the knowledge of fire behaviour among the Yoruba people.

While the preceding proverb recognizes the unusual attribute of particular kinds of fires – fires that can jump rivers – this proverb reflects a generality in fire pattern. It precisely reflects the understanding among the Yorubas of the role of water bodies as natural fire barriers. Yet, this is a qualified understanding, given the clear awareness of kinds of fires that 'jump' rather than 'enter a stream'. The differences in the verbs 'jump' and 'enter' also matter here. These two action words point to the different mechanics of fire spread. The verb 'enter' reflects fire spread through direct contact with the head fire. Such direct contact of the head fire with rivers and streams on the ground causes the fire to be extinguished. Yet, fires can jump rivers by sending far-reaching firebrands or by spreading overhead through the contact among tree crowns and climbers, which are abundant in the tropical rainforest heartland of the Yorubas.

These understandings of fire are crucial in everyday uses and control of fires. They are also important in distinguishing different types of fires and in predicting fire behaviour based on landscape features. Confident of the capacity of rivers and streams to serve as fire barriers, it is not unreasonable to imagine that the Yoruba people probably deployed all kinds of strategies to harness this natural barrier for fire management and control. For instance, fires to clear farm debris may have been set close to water bodies to serve as natural fire stoppers and to grant easy access to water in case a fire had to be put out by people. Preventing the spread of fire in landscapes with overhead climbers may have meant managing some of the climbers to limit fire spread. People may also have strategically used litter and other biomass to lead ground fires toward rivers to extinguish them, mainly when the prevailing wind was favourable to doing so. "Fire does not enter a stream and yet retain the opportunity to live" may not have been an inert truism for the Yorubas but one borne of experience and performed through fire practices.

9. *Iná kú feérú bojú; ògèdè kú fomo è ropò*

> Literal Meaning: The fire dies and covers its face with ashes; the banana tree dies and replaces itself with an offshoot.

Metaphoric meaning: When a person dies, survivors inherit their property.

When a fire is not extinguished by entering a river or any other means, it eventually dies by itself when it runs out of one of the fire triangle elements – heat, air (oxygen) or fuel. For the Yoruba people, it matters that one is sure of the end of a fire. Ashes tell the end of a fire. But ashes reveal more than that. They sometimes reveal the nature of the fuel (i.e. trees) and the nature of the landscape. While ashes reveal the dynamics of fire, they at the same time hide the dynamics of heat. That is why another Yoruba proverb says

10. *Ìkókó omo tó towó bo eérú ni yó mò bó gbóná.*

Literal Meaning: The little child who thrusts their hand into ashes will find out for himself if they are not

Metaphorically, this means that experience best teaches that one should avoid dangerous ventures.

In this instance, ashes are shown to be dangerous because mere visual inspection is insufficient to know for sure whether a pile of ashes is still hot. And it is not worth finding out with bare bodily contact. Only the untrained and the inexperienced would take that risk. But this proverb also reflects Yoruba's appreciation for the transformative power of fire – its capacity to change materials from one form into another. This capacity is valued for its productive and valuable purposes. Given the widespread use of ashes of various kinds in Yoruba land, the power of fire to produce ashes is also actively harnessed. Burning forest litter to produce ashes is one of the popular processes of soil enrichment. Ashes of various plant materials are also used in soap making and medicinal practices.

11. *Bí iná bá jó lóko, màjàlà a fò wá sílé.*

Literal Meaning: When there is a fire in the forest, the soot flies home.

Metaphoric meaning: Events that happen afar send their news back home.

This proverb, like the preceding ones, reflects the Yoruba awareness of fire behaviour. Aside from embers, forest fires also produce soot. The Yorubas distinguish between the embers and the soot with respect to their effects and the responses each of them calls for. Unlike embers which are responsible for the spreading of fires for instance across streams and rivers (as in Proverb No. 7), soot goes further to the 'home', not spreading fire but only giving the indication that a fire burns somewhere not too far from home. As such, the distance over which the soot travels matters here, and so is the rather passive response that the presence of soot commands – the soot merely indicates that there is fire burning at a distance. Yet, the soot may also have served as an early warning sign of an approaching but distant fire. This proverb also reflects an awareness of the wider, 'home-bound' air pollution caused by the particulates of forest fires.

12. *Iná jó lóko kò jó erùpè ilè; òràn ti ńseni ò solùkù eni*

Literal Meaning: Fire consumes the forest but not the earth; what plagues one does not plague one's friends.

Metaphoric meaning: Nobody shares one's fate.

This proverb bears on the Yoruba peoples' appreciation for both the capacity of fire and its limit. Fire did consume the forest in Yoruba land. There was such regularity to fire consuming the forest that this proverb and others acknowledged the fact. But it is the limit of fire with respect to the earth, the soil, that the proverb highlights even more. Like water, the earth stops the raging fire by denying it air and fuel. When the fire has consumed all the litter and fuel on the land, it comes in contact with the earth itself. The solidity of the earth limits the powers of a raging fire, no matter how intense. This was why sand was also used to put out fires.

But this understanding of how earth protects from the power of fire also underpins the use of earth in particular kinds of burn-

ing. As Olorunnisola (2023) notes, charcoal production has a long history among the Yorubas, particularly in the northernmost savanna regions of the Yoruba heartland. The process typically involves wood charring using the earth as a barrier. This could take the form of an open pit in which dried wood is layered into a pit and covered up with earth and fire is introduced through a whole. It could also take the form of a mound in which dried wood piled on the earth's surface is covered with sand and allowed to char. As such, the liminal cognitive zone where fire is known as capable of consuming the forest yet unable to burn the earth is where productive activities like charcoal making are carried on. Charcoal making at this boundary of the capacity and limit of fire is another reflection of the experiential and performative attributes of Yoruba knowledge of fire.

13. *Nnkan méta la kì í pe ni kékeré: a kì í pe iná ni kékeré; a kì í pe ìjà ni kékeré; a kì í pe àìsàn ni kékeré.*

> Literal Meaning: three things one must never treat as of little consequence: one must never treat a fire as of little consequence; one must never treat a quarrel as of little consequence; one must never treat an illness as of little consequence.
>
> Metaphoric meaning: Attend to every potential problem early before it gets out of hand

One must never treat a fire as of little consequence. Like illness or quarrel, fire can easily grow beyond one's control. And even little fire can have irreversible consequences. This is the power of fire to change whatever it touches – judged as destructive or productive by humans. For all their uses of fire and their extensive body of knowledge and practices on fire ecology, the Yorubas still caution against underestimating the capacity of fire to get out of control. But asking that one "never treats a fire as of little consequence" speaks not only to fire behaviour as observed over time, it also relates to psychological and social entanglements with fire, which determine how one responds to an unwanted fire. It calls for preparedness at the individual and

collective levels, and the readiness to attack an unwanted fire while it is still small.

4. Conclusion

This article has taken Yoruba proverbs as an important source of popular Yoruba knowledge and practices on fire. By emphasizing the factual and historical character of these selected Yoruba proverbs, the article shows that Yoruba proverbs offer more than moral and aesthetic functions. They provide a window into some contexts in which the proverbs were forged, used, circulated, and passed down to generations. However, like all historical work, decoding the factual historical essence of Yoruba proverbs is an invitation to engage in a necessarily incomplete, interconnected, and creative interpretive process. This article has pursued such by bringing together insights from the broader Yoruba oral literature, popular Yoruba culture, geographies of Yoruba heartland, and a cross-disciplinary selection of academic literature.

Changes in the socio-ecological landscapes, cultural landscapes, and social lives of the Yorubas mean that a linear transposition of these proverbs or the practices and knowledge they relate to would be inappropriate. For instance, forests have declined, and populations have grown in and around many Yoruba towns. While many rural homes are still built from clay, homes in Yoruba towns are made from concrete and other materials. Dedicated fire-fighting squads now fight urban fires. In short, as the last proverb in the collection indicates, context does matter in understanding and living with fire, whether as a tool for landscape management or as an untamed force of nature on the landscape. As such, while the principles underlying these Yoruba fire knowledge and practices are worth contemplating across other contexts, the knowledge, and practices themselves – like all practical and indigenous knowledge – are rooted in *place.*

Nevertheless, learning from the everyday knowledge and accumulated wisdom of ordinary people holds significant promise at a time of unprecedented socio-environmental crisis that calls for cultivating diverse, more sustainable ways of living. The rise of more intense, climate change-impacted mega fires calls for renewed interest in exploring ways of living well with fires which

are increasingly severe in regions such as the Mediterranean, North America, and Europe. Popular and Indigenous sources of knowledge, particularly Yoruba fire proverbs, have something to offer in this respect.

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