

**CONTEXTUAL USE OF PROVERBS IN YORUBA-ENGLISH
NOLLYWOOD FILMS OF SOUTHWEST NIGERIA AS REFLECTION
OF SOCIETAL VALUES NORMS AND BELIEFS**

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Abstract

Proverbs are cornerstone of Yoruba oral literature, rich in metaphors and symbolism, serving as vehicles for conveying cultural values, societal norms, and communal wisdom. This study examines the proverbs used in Jagun Jagun, Anikulapo, and Elesin Oba, focusing on their contextual dimensions and pragmatic usage in relation to societal values and beliefs, philosophical depth and resourcefulness for continuity Yoruba traditions. The study adopted a qualitative content analysis, systematically identifying and analysing proverbs through multiple viewings, transcription, contextual interpretation, and categorisation. Each proverb was examined for its literal and metaphorical meanings, its narrative function, and its broader cultural implications. Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory provided the theoretical lens study. This facilitates a detailed analysis of proverbs within their cultural, social, and communicative contexts. The findings reveal that the proverbs in Jagun Jagun emphasise bravery, loyalty, and communal unity and the repercussions of war. Those in Anikulapo centers on fate and destiny, the importance of focus and caution against greed, reflecting societal values of patience and singularity of purpose. Proverbs in Elesin Oba explores duty, tension between tradition and modernity, and the impact of cultural transitions. The study underscores the significance of proverbs in enhancing the richness of Yoruba storytelling, offering profound insights into the cultural, philosophical, and communicative practices of the Yoruba people.

Keywords: African oral literature, cultural beliefs, cultural transmission, societal values, Proverbs, qualitative content analysis.

Introduction

Proverbs, as encapsulated wisdom and traditional truths, form a cornerstone of oral literature across diverse cultures, particularly in Africa. Scholars such as Zakariyah (2013) and Mieder (1985) define proverbs as concise sayings that convey profound insights into human experience and societal values. Lawal et al. (1997) further highlight their role as repositories of collective wisdom, passed down through generations, offering crucial insights into pragmatic constraints in language use. These traditional expressions are not merely linguistic artifacts but dynamic tools that shape communication and reinforce cultural identity. In the context of Yoruba literature, proverbs are integral to both communication and the reinforcement of cultural values and societal norms. This study focuses on the analysis of proverbs within three prominent Yoruba-English Nollywood films: *Jagun Jagun*, *Anikulapo*, and *Elesin Oba*. The analysis will be conducted contextually, examining how these proverbs contribute to the portrayal of societal values and beliefs, integrating a socio-pragmatic approach with Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory.

Nollywood, the Nigerian video-film industry, has emerged as a significant cultural force on the African continent since its origins in the late 20th century. Usman & Joshua (2019) note that the use of proverbs in Nigerian Nollywood movies dates back to the industry's beginnings, serving to justify character actions, critique immoral behavior, and enrich the Yoruba worldview (Kelani, 2015). This study investigates into this phenomenon, exploring the lexical and contextual dimensions of proverbs in these selected films and their reflection of societal values, norms, and beliefs in Southwest Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The study of proverbs has garnered significant academic attention across various linguistic sub-fields, including semantics, pragmatics, syntax, sociolinguistics and rhetoric, as well as in broader disciplines such as history, politics, and power studies. For instance, Alabi (2009) provides a comprehensive understanding of the pragmatic functions of Yoruba proverbs within their socio-cultural context, highlighting their enduring significance in social interactions and their role in sustaining cultural continuity and cohesion. Similarly, Adejumo (2009) offers an extensive analysis of Yoruba proverbs in Nollywood movies, demonstrating their multifaceted roles in storytelling, cultural transmission, and moral education, thereby enriching African orature. Despite the acknowledged prominence of proverbs in Nollywood films as a powerful medium for cultural expression and

social communication, a critical research gap persists in fully understanding their socio-pragmatic functions within cinematic discourse. While existing scholarship has explored the linguistic and literary dimensions of proverbs, their dynamic role as communicative tools embedded within film narratives has largely been overlooked. Specifically, there is a need for deeper investigation into how these proverbs operate pragmatically to shape social interactions, reinforce cultural identity, and influence audience interpretation within the unique context of film.

This study directly addresses this lacuna by investigating the socio-communicative strategies that govern the usage of proverbs in Nollywood films, and how these strategies reflect or reshape real-life Nigerian discourse practices. By applying Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Act Theory to selected films, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how proverbs function as situated communicative acts, contributing to character development, power dynamics, and cultural transmission. The findings of this research are expected to significantly advance knowledge in African sociolinguistics, film studies, and media pragmatics, thereby illuminating the intricate intersection of language, culture, and popular media in Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the research is to examine the use of Proverbs in *JagunJagun*, *Anikulapo* and *Elesin-Oba* lexically and contextually and the reflection on societal values and beliefs. The following objectives guided the study:

- i. to contextually and lexically examine the proverbs used in *JagunJagun*, *Anikulapo* and *Elesin oba*;
- ii. to analyse how the use of proverbs in *Jagun Jagun*, *Anikulapo*, and *Elesin Oba* reflects the socio-pragmatic functions of communication, highlighting how they convey societal values, beliefs, and social roles within the context of the films;

Literature Review

Proverbs, as concise and culturally rich expressions, serve as fundamental pillars of communication and cultural transmission across various societies, particularly in Africa. They encapsulate collective wisdom, moral codes, and societal norms, functioning as didactic tools that impart ethical guidance and foster social harmony (Finnegan, 2012 and Yankah, 2015). As Agyekum (2018) argues, proverbs offer a unique window into a community's collective psyche, revealing its priorities, fears, and aspirations. Olatunji (2020) further emphasizes their role

in articulating the moral and ethical foundations of a society, underscoring their significance in understanding cultural values and beliefs.

Odebunmi's (2006) work does deal with the context of meaning as it focuses on how meaning is shaped by contextual factors. Specifically, his work explores the pragmatic and discourse features of interactions, emphasising how meaning emerges from situational and cultural contexts. Odebunmi (2006) examines the concept of context in communication, emphasising its critical role in interpreting meaning. The work categorises context into linguistic, situational, psychological, and social dimensions. Linguistic context involves the surrounding text or discourse, situational context refers to the physical and environmental setting, psychological context pertains to the speaker's and listener's mental states, and social context addresses the cultural and interpersonal norms guiding interaction.

In the context of African cinema, particularly Nigerian Nollywood, proverbs are not merely linguistic embellishments but active communicative tools that shape narratives, define characters, and reinforce cultural identity (Akpati, et.al, 2025). The history of proverbs in Nigerian cinema dates back to its inception, with filmmakers intentionally incorporating them to justify character actions, critique societal behaviors, and enrich the Yoruba worldview (Adeniji, 2018). Despite their prominent use, a significant research gap exists in understanding the socio-pragmatic functions of proverbs within cinematic discourse, especially how they dynamically operate as communicative acts to influence audience interpretation and reflect real-life Nigerian discourse practices.

The Didactic and Cultural Role of Proverbs in African Societies

The scholarly discourse on proverbs in African societies has consistently emphasized their multifaceted roles as repositories of cultural wisdom and moral guidance. Finnegan's (2012) seminal work on oral literature in Africa establishes proverbs as fundamental components of cultural transmission, serving as vehicles for conveying collective wisdom across generations. This perspective is reinforced by Yankah (2015), who emphasizes the didactic function of proverbs, noting their crucial role in imparting ethical guidance and social norms within communities. The convergence of these scholarly views underscores the universal recognition of proverbs as more than mere linguistic expressions; they are cultural artifacts that embody the philosophical and moral foundations of societies.

Building on this, Agyekum (2018) provides a psychological dimension to proverb analysis, arguing that these expressions serve as windows into the collective

psyche of communities, revealing their priorities, fears, and aspirations. This perspective is particularly relevant to the current study, as it suggests that proverbs in Nollywood films may function as mirrors reflecting the contemporary concerns and values of Yoruba society. Olatunji (2020) further extends this understanding by emphasizing how proverbs encapsulate the moral and ethical foundations of societies, highlighting their significance in understanding cultural values and beliefs.

Proverbs in African Cinema: An Emerging Field of Study

The intersection of proverbs and African cinema represents a relatively nascent but rapidly growing field of academic inquiry. Recent studies have begun to explore how proverbs function within cinematic narratives, moving beyond their traditional oral contexts to examine their roles in visual storytelling. Akpati et al. (2025) provide a significant contribution to this field through their socio-critical discourse analysis of proverbs in “The King of Boys,” demonstrating how proverbs serve multiple functions including character development, social critique, and identity construction. Their findings reveal that proverbs in Nollywood films are strategically employed to demean, discredit, and characterize individuals while simultaneously portraying cultural values such as patience, strategic thinking, and meticulous planning.

This research builds upon earlier work by Adejumo (2009), who conducted an extensive survey of Yoruba proverbs in Nollywood movies, showcasing their multifaceted roles in storytelling, cultural transmission, and moral education. Adejumo’s work emphasizes the contribution of proverbs to the richness of African orature, establishing a foundation for understanding their cinematic applications. Similarly, Alabi (2009) provides analysis into the pragmatic functions of Yoruba proverbs within socio-cultural contexts, demonstrating their enduring significance in maintaining cultural continuity and social cohesion.

The anthropological perspective offered by recent studies on proverbs in feature films further enriches this discourse. Research on films like “Isakaba” has interrogated the usefulness of African proverbs in Nollywood narratives, revealing their capacity to enhance cultural authenticity and audience engagement. These studies collectively suggest that proverbs in African cinema function as cultural bridges, connecting traditional wisdom with contemporary storytelling techniques.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides a conceptual structure to understand and interpret the data. The theoretical framework integrates the Socio-pragmatic approach and Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory. This integration allows for a comprehensive analysis of proverbs within their cultural, social, and communicative contexts, providing insights into their functions and meanings in the selected Nollywood films, and promoting societal values and beliefs.

Socio-Pragmatic Approaches to Language in Film

The application of socio-pragmatic theories to film analysis represents a sophisticated approach to understanding how language functions within mediated contexts. Mey's (2010) definition of socio-pragmatics as "the study of how language use is embedded in social practices, and how these practices shape the meaning and function of language" provides a crucial theoretical foundation for analyzing proverbs in cinematic discourse. This approach recognizes that meaning is not inherent in linguistic structures alone but emerges from the complex interplay between language, social context, and communicative practices.

Recent developments in pragmatic theory, particularly Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory, offer valuable insights for understanding how proverbs function as situated communicative acts within film narratives. Mey's (2001) concept of the "pragmeme" – a basic unit of pragmatic action that includes both the speech act and its contextual embedding – provides a more holistic framework for understanding language use than traditional speech act theory. This theoretical advancement is particularly relevant for analyzing proverbs in film, where visual, auditory, and narrative contexts significantly influence meaning construction.

The application of pragmatic acts theory to African linguistic contexts has gained momentum in recent years. Studies examining pragmatic acts in various African languages and contexts have demonstrated the theory's versatility and relevance for understanding culturally specific communicative practices. For instance, research on pragmatic acts in alms begging language in Nigeria has shown how Mey's framework can illuminate the social and cultural dimensions of language use in specific African contexts.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach, examining the proverbs within *Jagun Jagun*, *Anikulapo*, and *Elesin Oba*. The study focused on the context in which these proverbs are used and the societal values and beliefs they convey. Each proverb is analysed for its literal and metaphorical meanings, and its role in the narrative and broader cultural context is considered. The primary research instrument is a content analysis checklist developed to identify and categorise proverbs based on their socio-pragmatic functions. The process of identifying and cataloging proverbs in the selected films involves several systematic steps to ensure a thorough and accurate collection of data. These steps include multiple viewings, transcription, contextual analysis, and categorisation. Data were collected from purposively selected Nollywood movies: *Jagun Jagun*, *Anikulapo*, and *Elesin Oba*. Relevant scenes containing proverbs were transcribed and subjected to socio-pragmatic analysis using Mey's Pragmatic Acts theory. Proverbs were analysed in terms of their contextual functions, illocutionary force, and socio-cultural implications.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the analysis and discussion of the findings derived from the study of proverbs in three selected Yoruba-English Nollywood films: *Jagun Jagun*, *Anikulapo*, and *Elesin Oba*. The discussion is structured to directly address the two primary objectives of this study: (i) to contextually and lexically examine the proverbs used in the aforementioned films, and (ii) to analyse how the use of these proverbs reflects the socio-pragmatic functions of communication, thereby conveying societal values, beliefs, and social roles within the cinematic narratives.

Objective I: Lexical and Contextual Examination of Proverbs

This section examines the lexical meanings and contextual adaptations of proverbs identified in *Jagun Jagun*, *Elesin Oba* and *Anikulapo*. Drawing on Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory (Mey, 2001), the study investigate how these proverbs function as pragmemes, where their literal (lexical) meanings are dynamically shaped and enriched by the specific filmic contexts in which they are uttered. This approach aligns with Odebunmi's (2006) assertion that the meaning of linguistic expressions, including proverbs, is multifaceted, encompassing linguistic, situational, psychological, and social dimensions (Odebunmi, 2006). The use of proverbs in Nollywood films, as noted by Adejumo (2009), serves not only as a storytelling device but also as a powerful means of cultural transmission and moral education (Adejumo, 2009).

Proverbs in Jagun Jagun: Lexical Meaning and Contextual Adaptation

In *Jagun Jagun*, a film steeped in themes of warfare, power, and justice, the identified proverbs are strategically deployed to underscore character motivations, societal expectations, and the consequences of actions. The lexical meanings of these proverbs, rooted in Yoruba oral tradition, are often straightforward, yet their contextual application within the film adds layers of pragmatic significance. For instance, the proverb "Gbogbo ogun ni l'á'ni l'òògùn, gbogbo ìjà ni kùn'ni l'ápá" (All battles make one sweat; quarrels make one incapacitated) lexically warns against the futility and debilitating nature of incessant conflict. Contextually, its utterance during the welcoming of warriors to a training school functions as a pragmeme of caution, tempering nascent aggression with a reminder of the toll of war. This reflects the didactic function of proverbs, which Yankah (2015) identifies as a key aspect of their communicative purpose.

Another significant proverb, "Wón ní kí olè kí ó sá..." (A thief was told to flee and he fled...), carries the lexical meaning that compliance should suffice, and excessive punishment is unwarranted. In the film, this proverb is contextually adapted when a character criticizes the King of Modede for his brutal execution of laborers. Here, the proverb acts as a pragmeme of critique, challenging the king's authority and highlighting a societal value against disproportionate retribution. This demonstrates how proverbs can be used to interrogate existing power structures and norms, rather than merely reinforcing them (Agyekum, 2018).

The proverb "Ewú orí l'ògbón irun, gbón lá, gbà" (Grey hair signifies wisdom) lexically equates age with wisdom and authority. When used by the King of Modede, its contextual function is to legitimize his authority and demand respect, framing his decisions as products of accumulated experience. This exemplifies how proverbs serve as normative tools that enforce cultural values, particularly the reverence for elders and their wisdom, a common theme in African societies (Finnegan, 2012). The proverb becomes a pragmeme of authority assertion, leveraging collective wisdom to bolster individual power.

Furthermore, the proverb "Òkà wón bí'mọ̀ sílẹ̀, ó bí ọ̀rọ̀..." (A boa constrictor gives birth to venom; a scorpion reproduces troubles) lexically conveys the idea that evil begets evil. Its contextual use by Ogundiji's subordinates during a war, as they witness the escalating violence, transforms it into a pragmeme of fatalism and a commentary on the cyclical nature of conflict. This proverb, in its contextual deployment, reinforces the thematic category of Consequences of Actions, illustrating how proverbs can encapsulate moral lessons and traditional ethical codes (Alabi, 2009).

The proverb "Àì fẹ'lẹ̀ k'ẹ̀bòsì ní ó ní ẹ̀ni jọ ọ" (What makes a bawling not danceable is that it was not made calmly) lexically speaks to the importance of a calm and diplomatic approach. Gbotija's utterance of this proverb, albeit initially a misunderstanding of the food situation, contextually highlights the value placed on diplomacy and careful deliberation (Ìtọ́jú) in resolving disputes. This demonstrates the proverb's function as a pragmeme advocating for peaceful and considered communication, aligning with the idea of proverbs as repositories of collective wisdom that guide social interactions (Lawal et al., 1997).

Proverbs in Elesin Oba: Lexical Meaning and Contextual Adaptation

Elesin Oba, a film rich in cultural ritual and the exploration of duty versus desire, employs proverbs to articulate complex moral dilemmas, reinforce social hierarchies, and critique individual failings. The proverbs here often carry a profound weight, reflecting the gravity of the narrative.

Consider the proverb "A kì í lu bàtá k'ẹ̀nikan dá'rin" (He who plays the bàtá drum does not lead a song). Lexically, this proverb underscores the concept of distinct roles and boundaries within a social structure. Its contextual use by Sergeant Amusa, when he is sent to arrest Elesin-oba to prevent the ritual suicide, functions as a pragmeme of critique against overreach and a reinforcement of established social roles. Amusa, a colonial figure, uses a traditional proverb to assert the boundaries of his authority and to implicitly criticize Elesin-oba's perceived transgression of his own role by delaying the ritual. This highlights how proverbs can be utilized to mediate conflict and reinforce societal expectations, even across cultural divides (Mey, 2010).

The proverb "Ajá ò ní sàré kí ó fì olówó rẹ̀ sílẹ̀" (A dog will not run past his owner) lexically signifies unwavering loyalty and adherence to hierarchy. Elesin-oba's use of this proverb to express his loyalty to the king in the afterlife is a powerful pragmeme of commitment to duty and the spiritual order. It underscores the deep-seated belief in the continuity of relationships beyond the physical realm and the importance of fulfilling one's obligations, even in death. This proverb directly reflects the thematic category of Hierarchy and Authority, demonstrating how proverbs serve as moral anchors guiding ethical behavior and reinforcing traditional values (Alabi, 2009).

Iyaloja's use of "Èni tí ó bá ẹ̀ ohun tí ẹ̀ni kan kò ẹ̀ rí..." (Whoever does what nobody has done will witness what nobody has witnessed) is particularly potent. Lexically, it warns against unprecedented actions and their unforeseen consequences, or conversely, justifies innovation. However, in its contextual application to Elesin-oba after his arrest, it functions as a chilling pragmeme of threat. Iyaloja employs it to underscore the severe repercussions of Elesin-oba's failure to fulfill his sacred duty, implying that his actions

have brought about an unprecedented and dire situation for the community. This illustrates the proverb's capacity to convey strong social pressure and to highlight the Consequences of Actions, aligning with Olatunji's (2020) view of proverbs encapsulating moral and ethical foundations.

Similarly, "Òkété gbàgbé ibòsí, ó d'élé alátè ó ká'wọ s'órí" (A rat forgets consequences and regrets) lexically critiques impulsivity and lack of foresight. Directed at Elesin Oba's failure to fulfill his duty, this proverb becomes a pragmeme of condemnation, highlighting the tragic outcome of his momentary lapse in judgment. It serves as a stark reminder of the societal expectation for careful deliberation (Ìtójú) and the severe consequences of neglecting one's responsibilities, thereby functioning as a normative tool to uphold communal values (Lawal et al., 1997).

The proverb "Bí ọ̀gèdè bá kú, a fí ọmọ rẹ̀ rọ̀pò ní" (When banana plant dies, its suckers replace it) lexically speaks to the concept of legacy and continuity. Its use to justify the king's ritual suicide and the cyclical nature of life transforms it into a pragmeme of acceptance and affirmation of generational succession. This proverb encapsulates a philosophical understanding of life and death, where individual existence is part of a larger, ongoing cycle, and duty is passed down through generations. This aligns with the idea of proverbs as windows into the collective psyche, reflecting deeply held beliefs about existence and social order (Agyekum, 2018).

Proverbs in Anikulapo: Lexical Meaning and Contextual Adaptation

Anikulapo, a narrative that explores themes of destiny, ambition, and the consequences of defying fate, utilizes proverbs to foreshadow events, comment on character flaws, and reinforce traditional wisdom. The proverbs in this film often serve to highlight the intricate web of cause and effect that governs human existence.

The proverb "Wọ̀n ní ohun bọ̀ wọ̀n bọ̀ àwọ̀n l'a fí ní dèná rẹ̀" (The way to stop a fast-approaching animal is through a net) lexically emphasizes strategic preparedness and foresight. When uttered by the King of Ilu-oyo while discussing an impending threat from a neighboring town, it functions as a pragmeme of strategic planning and caution. This proverb underscores the importance of proactive measures in leadership and governance, reflecting a societal value that prioritizes collective security and intelligent anticipation of challenges. This aligns with the broader understanding of proverbs as didactic tools that guide practical decision-making (Yankah, 2015).

Similarly, "Igi gọ̀gọ̀rọ̀ má gùn mí l'ọ̀jú, àt'òkèrèrè l'a ti ní wò ó" (A tall tree that could stab the eye is best seen from afar) lexically advocates for foresight and the avoidance of potential harm. Its repeated use by the King when discussing threats reinforces its

function as a pragmeme of prudence and careful observation. This proverb serves as a moral anchor, guiding leaders to consider long-term consequences and to maintain a vigilant stance against potential dangers, thereby reflecting the thematic category of Wisdom and Experience (Olatunji, 2020).

The proverb "Ikú ara n'í n' pa odíḍẹ̀rẹ̀" (Plucking its own feathers kills the parrot) lexically warns against self-destructive behavior stemming from vanity or greed. Olori Wojuola, the King's second wife, employs this proverb to insult the fourth wife, Olori Arolake, out of jealousy. In this context, it acts as a pragmeme of condemnation and a veiled threat, highlighting the destructive nature of envy and ambition within the royal court. This proverb powerfully illustrates the Consequences of Actions and serves as a moral anchor against negative character traits, resonating with the traditional ethical codes encapsulated in Yoruba proverbs (Alabi, 2009).

Another proverb, "Eni tí kò bá j'owú, ọ̀bẹ̀ rẹ̀ kì í dún" (One who lacks envy will never cook delicious soup), presents a more nuanced perspective. Lexically, it suggests that a certain degree of rivalry or ambition can drive excellence. Olori Wojuola uses this proverb to express her displeasure about the king favoring Olori Arolake, transforming it into a pragmeme that justifies her competitive spirit and ambition. This proverb reveals a complex aspect of societal values, where ambition, even when fueled by rivalry, can be seen as a catalyst for achievement. It functions as a power negotiation tool, allowing characters to rationalize their actions and assert their positions within a hierarchical structure (Mey, 2010).

The proverb "Má gùn igi s'áré kojá ewé" (Don't climb a tree beyond its leaves) lexically advises against overreaching or exceeding one's limits. Awarun uses this proverb to warn Saro about boundaries, making it a pragmeme of caution and a reminder of social decorum. This proverb underscores the importance of understanding and respecting one's place within the social order, reflecting a normative tool that reinforces communal harmony and prevents disruptive individualism (Lawal et al., 1997).

Finally, "Ohun ọ̀wọ̀ mi ò tó m'á fí gògò fà á" (What my hand can't reach, I'll use a hook) lexically speaks to ingenuity and resourcefulness in overcoming obstacles. Awarun uses this to warn Saro about not reaching for what isn't his, transforming it into a pragmeme of warning against illicit ambition and a subtle threat. While lexically it suggests resourcefulness, contextually it implies that illegitimate means will be used to reclaim what is rightfully hers, highlighting the complexities of power negotiations and the lengths to which individuals might go to protect their interests. This demonstrates the dynamic interplay between the literal meaning of a proverb and its pragmatic function within a specific communicative act (Odebunmi, 2006).

Through this lexical and contextual examination, it becomes evident that proverbs in these Nollywood films are not mere decorative linguistic elements. Instead, they are potent pragmemes that actively shape meaning, influence character interactions, and reflect the intricate tapestry of Yoruba societal values, beliefs, and norms. Their adaptive nature allows them to convey both explicit and implicit messages, making them invaluable tools for understanding the socio-pragmatic landscape of the narratives.

Objective II: Socio-Pragmatic Functions of Proverbs and Reflection of Societal Values

This section examines how the contextual use of proverbs in *Jagun Jagun*, *Elesin Oba*, and *Anikulapo* reflects the socio-pragmatic functions of communication, thereby conveying deeply embedded societal values, beliefs, and social roles. As Mey (2010) posits, socio-pragmatics examines language use in its social context, highlighting how linguistic choices are shaped by and, in turn, shape social interactions (Mey, 2010). Proverbs, in this regard, function as powerful pragmeme units of pragmatic action that perform specific communicative acts within the filmic narratives, often serving as normative tools, moral anchors, conflict mediators, and instruments of power negotiation.

Proverbs as Normative Tools: Reinforcing Hierarchy and Authority

Proverbs frequently operate as normative tools, enforcing cultural values and reinforcing established social structures, particularly those pertaining to hierarchy and authority. In Yoruba society, respect for elders and those in positions of power is a fundamental value, and this is vividly reflected in the cinematic deployment of proverbs (Adejumo, 2009).

In *Jagun Jagun*, the proverb "Ewú orí l'ógbón irun, gbón lá, gbà" (Grey hair signifies wisdom) serves as a potent pragmeme for legitimizing authority. When uttered by the King of Modede, it is not merely a statement about age; it is a performative act that demands deference and respect, framing his leadership as inherently wise and deserving of obedience. This aligns with the thematic category of Wisdom and Experience, where elders are positioned as custodians of knowledge and tradition (Lawal et al., 1997). The proverb, in this context, functions to uphold the societal value of respecting seniority and established leadership, acting as a subtle yet firm directive for compliance within the social hierarchy. This resonates with Finnegan's (2012) observation that proverbs are crucial for cultural transmission, embedding societal norms and expectations within communicative acts.

Similarly, the proverb "Èni bá rán ni ní'sé l'á bèrù..." (Fear the one who sends an errand, not the messenger) from *Jagun Jagun* explicitly reinforces the principle of hierarchy and authority. Used in a scene addressing insufficient food for warriors, this proverb functions as a pragmeme of indirect admonition. It redirects potential discontent from the

immediate issue or messenger to the ultimate authority, thereby safeguarding the hierarchical structure. This proverb underscores the societal belief in respecting the source of command, even when its directives lead to hardship, highlighting a value system that prioritizes order and obedience within a chain of command. Usman and Joshua (2019) note that such proverbs in Nollywood often reflect the deep-seated cultural reverence for authority figures.

In Elesin Oba, the proverb "Ajá ò ní sáré kí ó fi olówó rẹ̀ sílẹ̀" (A dog will not run past his owner) is a powerful *pragmeme* affirming loyalty and hierarchy. Elesin-oba's use of this proverb to express his unwavering commitment to the king, even in death, reinforces the societal value of fidelity and the acceptance of one's designated role within the social order. This proverb encapsulates the belief that one's allegiance to a superior, whether earthly or spiritual, is paramount. It serves as a normative tool that reinforces the traditional social contract, where individuals are expected to honor their commitments and maintain their positions within the established hierarchy. This reflects the broader cultural emphasis on collective responsibility and adherence to traditional roles, as discussed by Olatunji (2020).

Proverbs as Moral Anchors: Guiding Ethical Behavior and Consequences of Actions

Beyond reinforcing social structures, proverbs also serve as moral anchors, guiding ethical behavior and highlighting the consequences of actions. They encapsulate traditional ethical codes, such as *Ìwà Pelú Ìtẹ̀* (good character with patience) and *Ìtọ́jú* (careful deliberation), which are central to Yoruba philosophical thought (Alabi, 2009).

In Anikulapo, the proverb "Ikú ara n'í n' pa odíderẹ̀" (Plucking its own feathers kills the parrot) functions as a strong moral anchor against vanity and greed. Olori Wojuola's use of this proverb to insult Olori Arolake is a *pragmeme* of moral judgment, implying that Arolake's perceived vanity will lead to her downfall. This proverb reflects a societal belief that excessive self-indulgence or covetousness is self-destructive, a warning against hubris that resonates deeply within Yoruba moral philosophy. Agyekum (2018) argues that proverbs serve as windows into the collective psyche, revealing deeply held moral principles. This proverb, therefore, not only critiques individual behavior but also reinforces a communal value system that champions humility and moderation.

Another proverb from Elesin Oba, "Òkété gbàgbé ibòsí, ó d'élé alátẹ̀ ó ká'wọ̀ s'órí" (A rat forgets consequences and regrets), acts as a poignant moral anchor against impulsivity and a lack of foresight. Directed at Elesin Oba's tragic failure to fulfill his sacred duty, this proverb is a *pragmeme* of condemnation, underscoring the severe repercussions of neglecting one's responsibilities. It reflects the societal value of *Ìtọ́jú*, emphasizing the importance of careful deliberation and understanding the long-term implications of one's

choices. The proverb serves as a stark reminder that actions have consequences, and a failure to consider them can lead to profound regret and societal disapproval. This highlights the didactic function of proverbs, which Yankah (2015) identifies as crucial for moral education.

Furthermore, the proverb "Gbàmígbà mí ẹranko kò yẹ ọdẹ" ("Save me from animals" does not befit a hunter) from *Elesin Oba* functions as a moral anchor that shames cowardice and reinforces the expectation of courage and responsibility. Iyaloja's use of this proverb to mock *Elesin-oba's* failure to perform his ritual duty is a powerful pragmeme of social shaming. It highlights the societal belief that individuals, especially those in positions of honor or responsibility, must face their duties with fortitude. The proverb critiques the deviation from expected social roles and reinforces the value of bravery and steadfastness in the face of adversity, aligning with the traditional emphasis on character and integrity (Alabi, 2009).

These examples demonstrate how proverbs, as pragmemes, are not merely descriptive but prescriptive, actively shaping and reinforcing the moral fabric of the society depicted in the films. They serve as constant reminders of the ethical boundaries and behavioral expectations that govern communal life, reflecting a deep-seated cultural commitment to moral rectitude and accountability.

Proverbs and Gender and Social Roles: Challenging and Reinforcing Norms

Proverbs in Nollywood films also engage with the complex dynamics of gender and social roles, sometimes reinforcing traditional expectations and at other times subtly challenging them. This dual function highlights the nuanced ways in which cultural narratives both preserve and interrogate societal norms.

In *Jagun Jagun*, the proverb "Wón ní k'òkùnrin t'átòrìn, k'òbìnrin t'átòrìn..." (Let a man and woman urinate to see who soaks more) is a striking example of a proverb used to challenge gender stereotypes. Lexically, it is a provocative statement designed to assert capability regardless of gender. Contextually, its use as a threat by the king to his brother functions as a pragmeme that questions traditional gendered assumptions about strength and dominance. While the immediate context is a power struggle between men, the underlying message challenges the notion that one gender is inherently superior or more capable than the other. This reflects a progressive aspect of cultural discourse, where proverbs can be repurposed to advocate for more equitable social roles, aligning with the broader societal shifts observed in contemporary Nollywood narratives (Akpati et al., 2025).

Conversely, in Elesin Oba, the proverb "Ọmọ ti di bàbá, bàbá ti di ọmọ" (The child has become the father) speaks to role reversals and power shifts, particularly in the context of Elesin Oba's failure and his son Olunde's assumption of responsibility. Lexically, it describes a situation where the natural order of authority is inverted. As a pragmeme, it underscores the profound disruption caused by Elesin Oba's dereliction of duty, where the son is forced to embody the responsibility traditionally held by the father. This proverb, while descriptive of a specific event, reinforces the societal expectation of filial duty and the grave consequences when traditional roles are not upheld. It highlights the importance of maintaining social order and the continuity of generational responsibility, a core aspect of Yoruba communal values (Olatunji, 2020).

Proverbs as Conflict Mediators and Tools of Persuasion

Proverbs are frequently employed as conflict mediators and powerful tools of persuasion, offering guidance for resolving disputes and influencing behavior. They provide a culturally sanctioned means of expressing dissent, offering advice, or de-escalating tension.

In Jagun Jagun, the proverb "Àì fẹ'lẹ k'ẹ̀bòsì ní ó ní ẹ̀ni jọ ọ" (What makes a bawling not danceable is that it was not made calmly) functions as a pragmeme advocating for diplomacy and careful approach in conflict situations. Gbotija's utterance, even if initially misapplied, highlights the societal value placed on Ìtọ́jú (careful deliberation) and peaceful resolution. This proverb serves as a conflict mediator, suggesting that the manner in which an issue is raised or addressed significantly impacts its outcome. It underscores the belief that calm and diplomatic communication is essential for achieving harmonious results, reflecting the collective wisdom embedded in proverbs for navigating social interactions (Lawal et al., 1997).

Another proverb from Jagun Jagun, "T'áşẹ bá di méjì a dá'bà..." (When order becomes two, it turns to suggestions), serves as a pragmeme of critique against divided leadership. Uttered by Ogundiji when infuriated with his subordinates, it articulates the societal belief that clear, unified leadership is paramount for effective action, especially in times of conflict. This proverb functions as a conflict mediator by implicitly urging a return to singular authority, thereby preventing the chaos that can arise from conflicting directives. It reflects a societal value that prioritizes cohesion and decisive leadership, particularly in situations demanding collective effort (Usman & Joshua, 2019).

In Anikulapo, the proverb "Wón ní ohun bọ wón bọ àwòn l'a fi n dèna rẹ" (The way to stop a fast-approaching animal is through a net) is used by the King of Ilu-oyo when discussing an impending threat. This proverb, functioning as a pragmeme of strategic preparedness, acts as a persuasive tool to advocate for proactive measures in the face of

potential conflict. It emphasizes the importance of foresight and intelligent planning to mitigate harm, thereby serving as a form of conflict mediation by promoting preventative action rather than reactive engagement. This aligns with the didactic function of proverbs in guiding practical decision-making and ensuring communal safety (Yankah, 2015).

Proverbs as Instruments of Power Negotiations

Proverbs are also potent instruments in power negotiations, used to legitimize or challenge authority, assert dominance, or subtly influence social standing. They allow characters to navigate complex social hierarchies and assert their will within established norms.

In Jagun Jagun, the proverb "Èni bá jù'ni lọ lè jù'ni nù" (Whoever is superior can overpower another) is a direct pragmeme warning about power dynamics. This proverb, while seemingly a statement of fact, is used to assert dominance and remind others of the existing power imbalance. It functions as a tool in power negotiation, signaling that resistance to a superior force is futile and potentially dangerous. This reflects a pragmatic understanding of social realities, where power differentials are acknowledged and often reinforced through linguistic means (Odebunmi, 2006).

Another powerful example from Jagun Jagun is "L'ójú tá l'ẹwúré rẹ fẹ má gbó bí ajá?" (At whose front does your goat want to bark like a dog?). This proverb, used by Ogundiji when his warriors were losing, is a pragmeme of defiance and an assertion of dominance. It challenges the perceived weakness of his own forces and reasserts his authority, implying that his subordinates should not act out of character or show weakness in the face of adversity. This proverb is a clear instance of power negotiation, where a leader uses traditional wisdom to rally his troops and re-establish control, leveraging cultural metaphors to convey a strong message of resolve (Usman & Joshua, 2019).

In Anikulapo, Olori Wojuola's use of "Èni tí kò bá j'owú, ọbẹ rẹ kì í dùn" (One who lacks envy will never cook delicious soup) is a subtle yet effective pragmeme in power negotiation. While lexically suggesting that rivalry can drive excellence, in context, it justifies her ambition and displeasure over the king's favoritism towards Olori Arolake. This proverb allows her to articulate her competitive stance and assert her desire for influence within the royal court, framing her ambition not as a flaw but as a necessary ingredient for success. This demonstrates how proverbs can be employed to rationalize personal motivations and negotiate one's position within a social hierarchy (Mey, 2010).

Furthermore, Awarun's warning to Saro in Anikulapo with the proverb "Ohun ọwọ mi ò tó m'á fi gògò fà á" (What my hand can't reach, I'll use a hook) serves as a pragmeme of veiled threat and a clear act of power negotiation. While lexically it speaks to ingenuity,

its contextual application implies that Awarun will use any means necessary to protect her interests and reclaim what she perceives as hers. This proverb underscores the complex interplay of resourcefulness and assertion of power, highlighting how individuals can leverage traditional wisdom to navigate disputes and protect their social or material standing (Odebunmi, 2006).

Conclusion

Across all three films, the proverbs function as dynamic pragmemes that not only reflect but also actively shape the socio-pragmatic landscape of the narratives. They serve as a rich tapestry through which the societal values, beliefs, and social roles of the Yoruba culture are both upheld and interrogated. The consistent application of Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory reveals that the communicative significance of these proverbs extends far beyond their literal meanings; they are performative utterances that enact social functions within their specific contexts (Mey, 2001).

The analysis demonstrates a clear tension between communalism and individualism, a recurring theme in Yoruba thought. While many proverbs reinforce collective responsibility, hierarchy, and adherence to traditional roles, others, like those challenging gender stereotypes or critiquing leadership, suggest a dynamic cultural space where norms are constantly negotiated. This aligns with Akpati et al.'s (2025) socio-critical discourse analysis of proverbs, indicating their role in both maintaining and questioning societal structures (Akpati et al., 2025).

Proverbs consistently serve as moral lessons, reinforcing traditional ethical codes such as *Ìwà Pelú Ìtẹ́* (good character with patience) and *Ìtọ́jú* (careful deliberation). They provide a framework for understanding the consequences of actions, guiding characters and audiences towards behaviors deemed virtuous within the cultural context. This didactic function, as highlighted by Yankah (2015), is central to their communicative purpose.

Ultimately, the contextual use of proverbs in *Jagun Jagun*, *Elesin Oba*, and *Anikulapo* reveals them to be more than mere linguistic embellishments. They are vital communicative acts that encapsulate the collective wisdom, moral philosophy, and social dynamics of the Yoruba people, offering profound insights into their worldview and the intricate ways in which language shapes social reality. The films not only entertain but also educate, using proverbs to transmit cultural knowledge, instill ethical principles, and provoke reflection on the human condition. This study affirms the significant role of proverbs in Nollywood as a dynamic medium for cultural expression and a profound commentary on the philosophical underpinnings of Yoruba society.

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