

Body Size in Indigenous Oral Knowledge among the Yorùbá in Southwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

There is a pervasive assumption that African people revere large body size, although indigenous oral knowledge relating to body sizes has not been systematically studied. Hence, using a triangulation of qualitative methods, this study explores Yorùbá indigenous knowledge via Yorùbá concepts, *Ifá* literary corpus, Yorùbá proverbs, *oríkì* and sayings relating to body sizes. Findings indicate that the glorification of a large body size does not disregard small body size in Yorùbá culture and that Yorùbá knowledge acknowledges the health protectiveness of a small body, thereby eulogizing both large and small body sizes. And in addition, *Ifá* literary corpus did not suggest a preferential attitude to any body size, hence, Yorùbá indigenous oral knowledge is dispassionate towards body sizes.

Keywords: Africa; Yorùbá; culture; obesity; overweight; indigenous oral knowledge

Introduction

Modern discourses on human health emphasize the importance of body size. Indeed, body size related concepts such as obesity have necessarily drawn attention and remained primary among modern health issues. Obesity is simply the accumulation of fat in the human body. Obesity is globally pandemic (Egger and Swinburn, 1997). It heightens the chance of untimely death, increases the possibility of medical illness and complications and threatens quality of life (Villareal *et al.*, 2012).

Obesity is associated with cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes and several types of cancers (Wadden, Brownell and Foster, 2002). Using body mass index of 30 (a standard measurement of obesity), obesity increases the risk of mortality by up to 30% (ibid). Incidentally, people of color or people outside industrialized nations are often assumed to be favorably disposed towards increased body size. Such assumption appears to depict an insubstantial exposition of body size. This can only benefit from a scrutiny of the vast, indigenous oral resources of people of color, the Yorùbá inclusive. The philosophies of Yorùbá people, much like that of other African people, are subsumed in varieties of oral resources (this also includes non-verbal symbols e.g, Yorùbá images). The Yorùbá are a poetic nation. Spontaneous and unrehearsed oral performances are characteristic of everyday life, both by the professional and otherwise. Social functions like birth, marriage and funeral are remarkably marked with sonorous songs. In these oral performances lies the wealth of indigenous knowledge. “Right from the pre-colonial era, the Yorùbá nation has evolved sophisticated forms of indigenous philosophy which have guided beliefs about the environment and social relations up to contemporary times” (Omobowale, 2008:205). Interestingly, these oral philosophies are of varying categories, including *Ifá* literary corpus, proverbs, *oríkì*, *ràrà* chants, etc. However, sometimes they are hard to distinguish and can be interwoven such that a particular speech can resemble proverbs, sayings, chants, *oríkì* or incantations at the same time. For instance, Schwab (1955) stated that chronicles of a lineage are conserved in *ràrà* (ritual chants) and *oríkì*. Barber (1984) also asserted as follows:

Oríkì also make up the bulk of innumerable chants, each with its own name and vocal style: *iwi*, *rara*, *ijala*, *olele*, *alamo*, *ekun iyawo* are examples. Each chant can be considered a genre in its own right... Proverbs can be turned into *oríkì* if they were favorite utterances of the person being saluted, or if they can be interpreted in a way that sheds light on his/her character. *Oríkì* appear in *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ Ifá*, the poetry of divination, whenever a divination priest of an earlier age is named. Sometimes it is not possible to determine which genre is incorporating which: there are passages which appear both in *Ifá* verses and in *oríkì orilé*... Yorùbá oral literature in general appears like a vast stock of verbal materials- themes, formulas, stories, poetic idioms, which can float through the permeable boundaries of all the genres and be incorporated into them to fulfill different functions. Genres freely incorporate parts of other genres, with much sharing and borrowing of material.

The following sub sections are discussions of some of these oral resources:

Ifá Literary Corpus

Ifá literary corpus occupies a central position in the records of Yorùbá frame of reference and the channel through which other spiritual bodies express themselves (Abimbola, 1975; Harris, 1992). It is an embodiment of the “history of earth and heaven ..., the moral and physical laws with which Olódùmarè governs the universe” (Abimbola, 1975: 389). *Ifá* is “an ancient monument where the culture of the Yorùbá is encapsulated, enthroned and entombed. Also, *Ifá* is seen as a practice which embodies Yorùbá beliefs, history, sociology and ecology. ...Yorùbá practices and cultural paradigm could be discerned, studied and appreciated from many *Ifá* verses” (Olademo, 2009: 49).

Ifá literary corpus is made up of sixteen major segments, referred to as *Odù*. “*A lè fi àwọn Odù wé iwé nlá kọọkan tí ó ní orí àti ẹsẹ púpọ*” (Abimbola, 2006:10), meaning that the *Odùs* can be likened to a big book each with many chapters and sections. Apart from these major sixteen *odùs*, there are two hundred and forty sub *Odùs*, resulting in two hundred and fifty six *Odùs* of *Ifá* (Olademo, 2009). The custodians of *Ifá* are the Babaláwo (male) or Iyanifa (female), who pass through scrupulous training in the form of memorizing the *Odùs* of *Ifá* (ibid). Many times, the contents of these *Odùs*, known as *ẹsẹ Ifá* (literarily meaning leg of *Ifá*) are recited in a song-like manner. Such songs are uniquely performed by *Ifá* worshippers, during which “nothing must be improvised, all is laid down by tradition and learned by heart. The *Ifá* worshippers are the keepers of the Yorùbá oracle” (Beier, 1956: 27). Meanwhile, Longe (1983) opined that errors might have occurred in the verbal conveyance of *Ifá* literary corpus.

Yorùbá Proverbs

A popular and much referenced Yorùbá proverb sums up the major essence of proverbs among Yorùbá people:

<i>Òwè l'ẹsin ọrọ</i>	Proverbs are the horses of words (or ideas)
<i>Ọrọ l'ẹsin òwè</i>	Words are the horses of proverbs
<i>B' ọrọ ba sọ̀nù</i>	If word are lost,
<i>Òwè la fì n'w a</i>	Proverbs are used to look for it

(Harris, 1992; Delano, 1979).

Proverbs make up the key “structural materials of the language” (Delano, 1979: ix). Explanation of attitudes, behaviors, motivations, ideas, salient issues, and other issues, is the hallmark of proverbs. Proverbs are also prescriptive, guiding human action in a variety of situations. Further:

Proverbs are sometimes used in order to avoid giving a blunt, direct answer which is a necessary thing to do when expressing one's opinion before elders, even when such opinion has been directly solicited. Most frequently, the proverb is used in bringing out clearly the meaning of obscure points in argument. Thus, to the Yorùbá, 'the proverb is the driving force in a discussion'. If an argument becomes entangled, the proverb is used to restore clarity (Fadipe, 1970: 302).

Proverbs possess the quality of "normative influence", they confer implications on social situations and they provide guidance on appropriate course of action (Omobowale, 2008: 213). "Proverbs reinforce the value systems of communities, and often were used by the African people to admonish community members through indirect messages that instruct but do not necessarily belittle ... proverbs function at much deeper levels and can provide the medium for the explication of esoteric concepts" (Harris, 1992: 311). Proverbs and proverbial sayings are used in different settings or circumstances. A recent account attests to such use even in highly literate and formal settings (McIntosh, 2009). However, the appropriateness of each proverb depends on the context. Each proverb is not to be used out of context (Ojoade, 1983). Among the Yorùbá, the use of proverb is prized so much that only elders have the original right to use them. Younger persons are obliged to seek permissions from older persons before they pronounce proverbs, especially where such elders are seated. The wealth of knowledge provided by Yorùbá proverbs certainly needs to be continually acknowledged, to avert monumental wastage of knowledge and understanding.

Oríkì

Oríkì is a combination of two words, *orí*— head and *kì*— praise. Hence, literally, *oríkì* is to praise one's head. However, the significance of *oríkì* goes beyond this. *Orí* itself attracts a lot of significance among Yorùbá people (Lawal, 2001; Barber, 1981; Adogame, 2000; Morton-Williams, 1960; Abimbola, 2004; Awolalu, 1973). *Oríkì* has been described as "attributive poetry" (Barber, 1981: 728-729); "African oral poetry" (Barber, 1984: 498); "attributive epithets" (Barber, 1984: 503); "head praise" (Lawal, 2001: 501). It is probably the most widespread variety of song, but not an uninterrupted form of song that pools characteristics of a person especially in the form of proverbial sayings (Beier, 1956). Indeed, *oríkì* assembles every possible dimension of an individual: lineage, spouse, children, preferred foods, behavioral tendency, attitudes, successes and even failures. Barber (1984) also concurred with this claim when he asserted that *oríkì* "can indicate undesirable qualities as well as desirable and which are seen as being in some way the key to a subject's essential nature", further, *oríkì* can refer to "qualities of character or physical appearance, which can be attributed to anyone to whom they are appropriate".

Interestingly, *oríkì* are not just about individuals, they can be about lineages, towns, *Òrìsà* (gods); even certain occupations have their peculiar *oríkì*. Animals, plants, and even lifeless items possess *oríkì*, although, those of people and *òrìsà* are most usually used (Barber, 1984). Hence, we have *oríkì idílé* (praise poem of lineages) and *oríkì ilú* (praise poems of towns), *oríkì òrìsà* (praise poems of *òrìsà*), etc. *Oríkì* plays significant psychosocially related functions in Yorùbá society even in contemporary times and will most likely continue to play such roles even in the distant future. More significantly, *oríkì*, especially at the time it is sung, spurs an individual or a group to great delights and readiness to act. It is not uncommon to see people demonstrate grand generosity at such occasions. The quote below further demonstrates the power of *oríkì*:

By uttering a subject's *oríkì*, one is calling upon or unlocking hidden powers; the activity of naming is thought of as being effectual. Human subjects react to the utterance of their *oríkì* with deep gratification and with an enhancement of their aura which is sometimes actually visible in their physical behaviour (Barber, 1984: 503).

Oríkì is a potent motivator for the average Yorùbá man or woman. They are used daily, especially the short versed, for casual greetings, to please a person or to calm a person especially at times of dispute. In addition, *oríkì* are highly featured at solemn ceremonies. Shared *oríkì* may not necessarily indicate ties of kinship, though it frequently produces unusual attitude of friendship (Schwab, 1955). The performance of *oríkì* takes cognizance of constituted social expectations such as respect for elders making the performer to recite the *oríkì* of older persons first.

At this point, the validity of oral resources, including *Ifá* literary corpus, proverbs and *oríkì* is of concern. This is the next point of discussion.

Cogency of Yorùbá Oral Traditions and Resources as Valid Knowledge

The fluid nature of oral traditions makes it open to distortion and makes its permanence questionable. Nevertheless, many scholars have studied and endorsed the cogency of oral traditions as valid knowledge (Vansina, 1985; Lawal, 2001; Irele, 2001 and Omobowale, 2008). Yorùbá oral traditions are rich sources of historical knowledge which is central to reconstituting society. Oral tradition symbolize communications from the ancient times and therefore can contribute to the reconstruction of the past, as long as they are employed with care and correlated with autonomous evidence (Vansina, 1985). Irele (2001: 11) asserted that “the tradition of orality remains predominant and serves as a central paradigm for various kinds of expression on the (African) continent” (bracket ours). Indeed, Yorùbá oral traditions are true reflection of shared positions of the Yorùbá society as majority of the people participate in its creation (Barber, 1984).

However, oral traditions have also been questioned by actors who undermine the capacity of African people to discern, logically assemble thoughts and attain cognitive clarity. Marzagora (2015: 1) concurred to this position with the assertion that “oral literature has been outright eliminated from the definition of world literature ... on the implicit assumption, it seems, that it is not ‘worldly’ or ‘global’ enough, or perhaps not ‘literary’ enough”. In another instance, proverbs have been described as “... tokens of vulgar knowledge” (Shapin, 2001: 753 qtd. in Omobowale, 2008: 206).

Much of this pessimism is the result of general science wars which presently reverberate through the social sciences and humanities. In addition, the social dynamics of philosophizing or theorizing leaves much to be desired. In a world dominated by metropolises, ideas of value cannot be said to have originated from a dominated, less metropolitan groups. This scenario probably motivated Connell (1997: 1511) to pose a big question: “Why is Classical Theory Classical?” With a narrowed concern about the discipline of Sociology, Connell (1997: 1518) answered this question by asserting that the canons of sociological theory were made out of a host of reasons unconnected with the content of the theories themselves: “...the time and place where the discipline of sociology was created take a new significance. The locales were the urban and cultural centers of the major imperial powers at the high tide of modern imperialism. They were the ‘metropole’... to the larger colonial world”. The relationship between the science of society and the social forces of colonialism and imperialism is a very strong one. Connell opined that “this fact is crucial in understanding the content and method of sociology as well as the discipline’s cultural significance” (ibid). These contentions by Connell (1997) may well explain the aversion towards African oral traditions and resources.

The resistance of Africa’s domination in the social sciences as advocated by several scholars makes it pertinent that African oral resources are maximally tapped and documented¹. Indeed, politics is dynamically related with the poor acknowledgement of African oral literature so far. These oral resources attract little or no review, a situation Barber (1984) similarly perceived as being borne out of African’s under-developed condition, and a manifestation of class struggles. According to Barber (1984: 497):

If there has been no developed criticism of African oral literature so far, the reason is to be found in the political situation of oral literature in general, and within this, more particularly, in the nature of the critical conventions applied to it. Oral literature everywhere has been or is being marginalized with the displacement and impoverishment of its bearers, the illiterate peasantry. In Africa, literacy and adoption of the language and culture of the metropolitan ex-colonial powers go together and are the means of access to the ruling class. The formal education system, which regulates the recruitment of this class, trains students in a tradition which places a higher value on written than on oral texts and which exposes them to only one critical tradition: that mainstream tradition which developed in metropolitan countries in conjunction with and to a large extent in justification of the establishment of written texts as the predominant literary form....

Indeed, Africa's indigenous knowledge ought to contribute significantly to the general pool of knowledge. Irele (2001: xvi) asserted that "the recognition of orality as a valid expressive medium can be seen ... to be a responsibility that is incumbent upon African literary scholars to promote". This is especially true of notions attributing African people. While the biomedical literature affirms obesity (arbitrarily, large body size) as a major risk factor in the development of chronic illnesses, paradoxically, it is popularly held, even in academic quarters, that African society culturally endorse large body size. Yet, the analysis of indigenous African (Yorùbá inclusive) knowledge relating to body size is seemingly nonexistent. Such anecdotal construction of reality can only benefit from contextually sensitive exploration of cultural perception, motives and philosophies. Hence, the general objective of this article is to describe the proclivity of Yorùbá indigenous oral knowledge towards body size. This objective was addressed by probing and elucidating:

- Yorùbá concepts used to denote body sizes,
- *Ifá* corpus relating to body sizes,
- Yorùbá proverbs and sayings relating to body sizes including the small and the large.

Methodology

The design of this work was ethnographic and descriptive. Participants were drawn from urban and rural areas in Oyo (Ìbàdàn, Tesi-Àpáta and Otámakùn) and Osun (Osogbo and Ilé- Ifẹ), two Yorùbá states in southwestern Nigeria. Inclusion criteria were being Yorùbá, 18 years and older, resident in the community and willingness to participate. Data collection featured 42 in-depth interviews (IDIs), 8 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 18 key informant interviews (KIIs). The major questions that participants were asked centered around the following:

- Words that Yorùbá people use in denoting body sizes.
- Yorùbá proverbs, idioms and sayings relating to body sizes.
- *Ifá* corpus relating to body size (this was enquired among Babaláwo only).

Participant's body size (small/large) was depicted through unobtrusive observation with the use of the six photographic silhouettes (Holdsworth *et al.*, 2004). This work was approved by the UI/UCH Institutional review board for ethical clearance (assigned number: UI/EC/10/0154). Data analysis began with repetitive reading of transcripts. Coding was done using Nvivo software (version 8). The coding was essentially inductive in character. The influence of participant's gender, structural location (urban versus rural) and body size on their contributions were interrogated using coding query but this did not reflect any considerable influence on participant's representations.

Findings

Characteristics of research participants

The range of participant's age was 25 to 70 while their mean age was 43.7. Males were 49.3% while females were 50.7% of participants. Urban residents constituted 52.1% while rural residents were 47.9% of total participants. These indicate a fair representation in terms of both gender and structural location. Participants categorized as having large body were 30.6% while 69.4% were classified as having small body size.

Concepts used to denote body sizes

There are quite a number of concepts employed to denote body sizes. The concepts used to refer to largely sized person are referenced in the following data from IDI:

The largely sized person is simply said to “sanra”— fat

People with large body size like me are called “ayilukọ”, that is what they call us. They will say see how he/she is, with a chubby (rùmú rùmú) body.

Some group discussants corroborated these concepts in the data below:

Ọrọbọ, arábámbí these are used to refer to fat people.

Participants were probed: are they derogatory languages?

That will depend on the context. If they say fine “ọrọbọ” or “ọrọbọ” t’o fine, that is honoring. But when you say you this ọrọbọ (ìwọ ọrọbọ yí), then it is an insult.

People who are fat are referred to as “abo mi lára bí aboyún” – as plump as the pregnant.

Some key informants also recounted some of these concepts:

The largely sized are called “alómilára”— someone who has water in his or her body. They call them as such, rather than say that they are fat.

There is “ayilukọ” for someone with big body size

These concepts, including *sanra*, *alómilára*, *abo mi lára bí aboyún*, *a yó bí o ní yá* and *ayíluko* are largely descriptive. *Rùmú rùmú*, like *sanra*, are adjectives meant to qualify fatness. The more recent concept is “*orobò*”, and it does hold meaning. Data shows that the meaning they imply will depend on the context. For instance, a group discussant reported the following:

My daughter comes home these days to say that she does not want to eat again. She claims that her fellow school mates call her orobò.

Concepts used to denote small sized persons were also accrued. The following data from IDI referenced these concepts:

“Opẹlẹṅẹ” is the Yorùbá name for slim persons

Slim people like me are usually referred to as “opẹlẹṅẹ”. Sometimes opẹlẹṅẹ may be used by a wife to address a young member of her husband’s family to avoid calling him or her by first name.

Some group discussants buttressed earlier data and identified another concept in the following data:

Others are “lepa”, “lepacious baby”. They are used to describe slim persons. Participants were probed: Is this derogatory? It will also depend on the context and intonation. Slim persons are referred to as “opẹlẹṅẹ”.

Some key informants corroborated these concepts in the data below:

The adage/name for slim people includes “opẹlẹṅẹ”, which simply means slim. They may also use it for a wife that is slim if members of her husband’s family do not want to call her by name. If it is a slim male, they call them “aterẹ máṣẹ”— one who is thin and does not break.

They may be called “oparun”, and they are usually stronger than fat people.

“Ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀nẹ̀” is a recurring concept as it was similarly identified by several key informants. For instance a key informant opined as follows:

There is “ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀nẹ̀ awẹ̀lẹ̀wà” for a slender person.

These names, *ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀nẹ̀* or *ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀nẹ̀ awẹ̀lẹ̀wà*, *atẹ̀rẹ̀ máse*, *ọ̀parun* are also largely descriptive. The more recent concept is “lẹ̀pa” or “lẹ̀pacious baby”, and it does hold meaning. Data shows that the meaning they imply will depend on the context. On the whole, it appears that *lẹ̀pa* is more appreciable name these days, when compared with *ọ̀robọ̀*.

Ifá Corpuses and Body Sizes

No *Ifá* corpus favored one body size over another. *Ifá* did not specify or even suggest that one size is better than the other. According to a notable *Ifá* priest:

What Ifá does is to describe a person. It describes the fat or the slim. Ifá did not tell us that being fat or slim is good or bad.

Ifá describes like this:

Tẹ̀rẹ̀ bí abẹ̀rẹ̀

slim like a needle

Gbalaja bí ìkòkùn

large like ìkòkùn

Yindinyindin bí rebe

really shiny like rebe

Another *Ifá* priest expressed a similar opinion, claiming that *Ifá* merely describes people but does not judge their sizes. *Ifá* corpus described people like this:

Ó ri tẹ̀rẹ̀e bi ọ̀pa ibọ̀n.

As slim as gun

Ó sanra bí odo iyán

As fat as mortar

Ó láyà bí òkè

As chesty as mountain

A connected issue that virtually all the *Ifá* priests referred was about height and dancing skills. These are reported below:

In one Ifá corpus (Odù Ifá)—ogbèlọtun, ògúndáloósì, also called ogbè ògúndá or ogbè ìyọnú:

<i>Èni kúkúrú ni jó yẹ</i>	<i>dancing is fit for the short person</i>
<i>Èyàn tógùn w'unaberẹ</i>	<i>the tall bends down</i>
<i>B'èyànbága lá gajù, wọn ki mọ jójó</i>	<i>if one is too tall, they do not know how to dance</i>

All the *Ifá* priests consulted referenced the corpus in the data above and clearly stated that *Ifá* is non-judgmental about any body size. Examples of their assertions are follows:

It is also in another Ifá corpus (Odù Ifá), ogbèlọtun and ògúndáloósì, we call it ogbègúndá/ogbèyọnú, where Ifá also said that dancing fits a short person. The tall person will bend, if one is too tall, they usually do not know how to dance. That is why they say dance fits the short person unlike the tall person that will have to bend before being able to dance which will not make the person's dancing skills to be obvious.

Ifá also said that dancing is more befitting for the short person. If one is tall, he or she has to stoop in order to dance

In one Ifá corpus, there is this saying that dancing fits the short but not the tall (èni kúkúrú ni jó yẹ, èyàn tógùn w'un a si tẹ)

An *Ifá* priest simply opined as follows:

It is the way we are created that we look, nobody recreates himself (bí abá se dání làárí, ẹnìkan e da ra ẹni)

Yorùbá Proverbs, Oríkì, Sayings and Body Sizes

Many Yorùbá proverbs and sayings were found to be neutral towards body sizes. *Oríkì* are indeed neutral, as they are meant to eulogize the person that is praised. Some group discussants referenced the following proverb:

Ọmọ ẹni o le se di bẹbẹrẹ, ka ko ilẹke si idi ọmọ ẹlomi

The buttocks of one's child cannot be so fat that we place beads on the waist of another person's child

This saying ordinarily refers to a large body part, the buttocks, but it is very neutral when considered idiomatically. It only shows that one's child should always be preferred, irrespective of the child's misdoing. Another Yorùbá saying referenced by an interviewee that partially sheds light on varying body sizes is as follows:

b'ọmọ ò jọ sòkòtò, y'ó jọ kījìpá

if the child does not resemble the trouser, he will resemble the wrapper

This saying simply states that if a child does not resemble his or her father then he/she will resemble his or her mother. Trousers and wrappers are used to refer to father and mother respectively. This is used to explain people's body sizes and it is in line with genealogical explanation of body size.

Yorùbá Proverbs, Oríkì, Sayings and Small Body Size

Many Yorùbá proverbs and sayings are neutral towards small body size. Sometimes they are merely descriptive. Some interviewees stated as follows:

People can say that a slim person is as lean as panla fish (o gbẹ bi ẹja panla).

I have seen slim people being referred to as being slim like a needle (tẹrẹ bí abẹrẹ).

These sayings merely describe the slim person with other usually slim materials— needle and a kind of fish. This is the style of *Ifá* corpuses, which also merely describes physical features. Another interviewee stated that:

Yorùbá people may say that a small sized person is stunted and did not fully develop (ó rán, ko yọ nle).

Perhaps, the most popular body size related saying in Yorùbá is what follows. When participants were asked to articulate Yorùbá sayings relating to body sizes, this was always the usual response. An interviewee stated as follows:

They will say the small person fell on the porcelain dish and the dish did not break but fell on the wooden mortar and the mortar was shredded into pieces (oṣeṣeṣe subú làwo àwo ò fọ, ó subú lodó odó fàya). This saying is used to honor the slender person.

Group discussants similarly buttressed this saying in the following sample of data:

There is a popular Yorùbá saying that the slim person falls on the breakable plate and the plate did not break, but the person falls on the mortar and the mortar broke (oṣeṣeṣe subú làwo àwo ò fọ, ó subú lodó odó fàya).

Several key informants also referenced the saying in question. One of them asserted as follows:

When Yorùbá people see slim persons, they have ways of praising or honoring them. Irrespective of size, Yorùbá have a way of honoring people. To slim persons Yorùbá will say the slim persons falls on the breakable plate and the plate did not break, but falls on the mortar and the mortar broke (oṣeṣeṣe subú làwo àwo ò fọ, ó subú lodó odó fàya)

Apart from this recurring thought, there are other proverbs which out rightly approves of small body size. An interviewee stated that:

Yorùbá people can also say that the dried fish does not breed maggot (eja gbígbe kii sè din)

A group discussion also yielded the following consensus:

When they see slim persons they say that dried meat does not grow maggot (ẹran gbígbe e tà din)

A key informant similarly asserted as follows:

Yorùbá also use to say that dried meat does not grow maggot (ẹran gbígbe e tà din)

The presupposition of this thought is simply that the slim enjoys better health when compared with the fat body. The usefulness of this thought was exemplified when a key informant related his lived experience about two oppositely sized women who verbally attacked each other with their sizes. The small sized woman was reported to have said that she was “dried meat that does not grow maggot”. Yet, another proverb proclaimed that the slim person’s nutrition is not the basis for his or her slimness. The proverb was referenced by a key informant as follows:

The fact that cat is not well fed is not why it is not as big as dog (a i jẹun kánú olóngbò kọ ní ó jo tá’já)

Yorùbá Proverbs, Oríkì, Sayings and Large Body Size

Many accrued Yorùbá proverbs and sayings applauded large body size. A key informant stated as follows:

In Yorùbá proverbs (owe) they say that fatness is not a disease

This proverb is self explanatory. It asserts that fatness is not a disease. This is a cause to take fatness for granted. Several interviewees referenced the following proverb:

The body does not get too heavy for the owner of the body to move it (ara kì tóbi kí a lára ma’legbe)

Some group discussants also recounted this proverb:

The Yorùbá have a saying that body does not get big to a point that its owner will not be able to carry it (ara k̀ t̀bí ḱ a lára ma'legbe)

This proverb favors fatness. Other accrued large body size applauding sayings include the following:

A musician once sang that money should be given to the person that has big stomach.

Some group discussants also recounted this saying:

They also use to say that money should be entrusted to the big bellied and not the flat belied person (ẹni tó bá yọkun ni kẹ gbówó fún, ẹ máse gbówó f'ẹni to se nu pẹlẹbẹ)

Contributions from key informants similarly applauded large body size:

The Yorùbá have an adage that money should be given to the fellow with a protruding tummy and not the person with a flat tummy. This is because they believe that someone with a protruding tummy is well fed, has more to give out and is wealthy.

When Yorùbá people see fat persons, they usually say some things like the elderly whose belly is not fat is stingy (àgbà tí o yokùn, ahun ló ní).

These sayings simply manifest the traditional wealth-related attitude towards large body size. Other large-body applauding sayings are referenced in the following data:

For the big, they can remark that he or she is plump like the python (kọropoto bí ọkà), the one who is being fed by the community (ẹni ti gbogbo ilú nbọ)

They may also say “kọropoto bí ọkà” (plump like the python), to show honor to the fat person

This saying, an *oríki*, simply compares the size of the fat with that of a python. Another large body applauding saying was mentioned by an interviewee:

When a person has large body size they can refer to that person as someone who is full-belied like a person who has a mother (a yó bí o ní yá), because the person has a big body.

This saying simply infers that a fat person has a benefactor, in this case a mother: a manifestation of the belief that feeding and other comforting conditions predisposes to fatness. Another large body applauding saying is referenced by a key informant in the data below:

Obìnrín tó sanra ló y'òkọ rẹ lojọ ìrìn àjò— the fat woman befits her husband when he is going on a journey. You know the big size gives some regard to the man.

Discussions

Concepts used to refer to largely sized persons are *sanra*, *alómilára*, *abo mi lára bí aboyún* and *ayílukọ*, which are largely descriptive. *Rùmú rùmú*, like *sanra*, are adjectives meant to qualify fatness. *Sanra* is the most usual name attached to a fat person. *Sanra* basically consists of two words: *san* + *ará* = *sanra*. *San* means to be better-off or to payoff. According to Microsoft Encarta dictionary (2009), better-off means “fairly wealthy”, “favorably placed” or “with plenty”. *Ará* means the body. Hence, lexically, to *sanra* means to have a fairly wealthy, favorable placed or plentiful body. *Sanra* also goes beyond the wealth thing. Apart from favorable placement and plentifulness, *sanra* also connote “that which has paid the body”. *San* also means pay off, “settlement” or “full payment”. Hence, the person that *sanra* has manifested food consumption on its body, *o san ará*— he or she has paid the body. The Yorùbá also remark to slim persons, especially those who eat a lot as “*ó jẹ jẹ, kò bun ara jẹ*”, literally meaning “he/she eats and eats but does not give the body”. This shows that to *sanra* as a word can connote some wealth, but it goes beyond wealth to also connote plentifulness, favorable placement and replenishment of the body. The descriptive nature of *sanra* is immanent but traditional, wealth related attitude to fatness reflects in *sanra*.

Rùmú rùmú is a related concept that is used to describe the fat. It is simply an adjective meant to drive home the point that a person is plumb. The closest English word to it is chubby. Other concepts employed to describe fat persons are *alómilára* (one who has water in his or her body), *abo mi lára bí aboyún* (one who has water in his or her body like a pregnant woman); *ayó bí oníya* (one who is full like a person who has a mother) and *ayílukọ* (one who slumps unto her husband).

All these are descriptive or attributive. *A yó bí o ní yá* is somewhat fascinating because it reflects that a fat person has a mother who naturally feeds him or her well, a verity corroborating the earlier story of *sanra* as someone whose food consumption reflects on his or her body.

The more recent concept used to denote large body size is *orobò* which holds contextual meaning that could be admiring or derogatory. Data showed that the meaning it implies will depend on the context, sometimes reflecting praise or insult. This is correct, given that “the Yorùbá pattern is purely tonal” (Pulleyblank, 2004: 422). “Yorùbá is a tonal language, so that the same word may have different meanings depending on how it is pronounced” (Lawal, 2001: 498). However, it appears that these days *orobò* is more of a derogatory language than praise.

Concepts used to denote small body sizes are *opelenge* or *opelenge awelewa*, *aterè máse*, *oparun*. These are also largely descriptive. However, “*lengè*”, from *opelenge* may reflect frailty, as reflected in saying “*o ri lengè lengè bi eyi tí ò le jẹkọ kan tán*” (he/she looks “*lengè lengè*” like one who cannot finish one wrap of solid pap). Notwithstanding, *opelenge* as a word is mostly used as a descriptive name for a slim person. The name may also be used by in-laws to refer to a new slim wife in a family to avoid calling her by her first name, since this may be offensive. Another recent concept is “*lepa*” or “*lepacious baby*” which also hold contextual meaning as “*orobò*” stated earlier. The recency of this word shows in the later half of the word— *cious*, the suffix usually used in English words to make a word an adjective. Data showed that the meaning they imply will depend on the context. On the whole, it appears that *lepa* is a more appreciable name these days when compared with *orobò*.

The quest for attitudinal data relating to body sizes in *Ifá* corpuses yielded a straightforward answer: the non-existence of strongly related data. It is impossible to find any *Ifá* corpus placing one body size over another. *Ifá* does not specify or suggest that one size is better than the other. What *Ifá* does is merely to describe people but does not judge them. *Ifá* corpus may assert like this: as *slim as a gun*, as *fat as a mortar*, as *chesty as a mountain* (Key informant interview, male, Babaláwo, large body size). A slightly connected issue for which almost all the interviewed Babaláwos referred was about height and dancing skills. According to them, *Ifá* asserted that: *dancing is fit for the short person, the tall bends down, if one is too tall, they do not know how to dance*. The non-existence of relevant body size related data in *Ifá* corpuses tacitly indicate lack of importance in the conception of body sizes among Yorùbá people. This is given that *Ifá* literary corpus occupies a central position in the records of Yorùbá frame of reference (Abimbola, 1975; Harris, 1992). As recounted in the introductory part of this article, *Ifá* is revered, venerated and held with great regard and awe. It captures the Yorùbá essences. Without data specifying attitudes to body size in *Ifá* literary corpus, it is certain that body size lacks importance among the Yorùbá.

Many Yorùbá proverbs and sayings are neutral towards body sizes. *Oríkì* are indeed neutral, as they are meant to eulogize the person that is praised. *Oríkì* assembles every possible dimension of an individual including successes and even failures. A proverb reads as follows: *omọ eni ò le sè dí bẹbẹrẹ, ká kó lẹkẹ sí idí omọ ẹlomi* (the buttocks of one's child cannot be so fat that we place beads on the waist of another person's child). This ordinarily refers to fat buttocks, but idiomatically, it shows that one's child should always be preferred, irrespective of the child's misdoing. *Sè dí bẹbẹrẹ* (literarily meaning largeness of buttocks) here is used to describe a situation where a child does a socially unacceptable thing, e.g., disrespecting an elder. In the event that such a child requires the attention or help of his or her parent, the parents should still oblige. It must be noted however, that the literal meaning of *sè dí bẹbẹrẹ* ordinarily shows that Yorùbá may not appreciate largeness of body. *Sè dí bẹbẹrẹ* is used here as a metaphor to describe socially unacceptable situations. Nevertheless, this saying is largely neutral to large body size. Another Yorùbá saying that reflects neutrality about varying body sizes is: *b'omọ ò jọ sòkòtò, y'ó jọ kǐjìpá* (if the child does not resemble the trouser, he will resemble the wrapper). This saying simply states that if a child does not resemble his or her father then he/she will resemble his or her mother. Trousers and wrappers are used to refer to father and mother respectively. This genealogically explains people's body sizes.

Some Yorùbá proverbs, *oríkì*, sayings relates to body sizes more specifically. Considering the small body size, many of them are still neutral. Some data showed that a slim person may be said to be “lean as panla fish” or “slim like a needle”. These sayings merely describe the slim person with other usually slim materials— needle and a kind of lean fish (*panla*). This saying also reflects the style of *Ifá* corpuses, which also merely describe physical features.

Perhaps, the most popular body size related saying in Yorùbá is *ọpẹlẹngẹ subú làwo àwo ò fọ, ó subú lodó odó fà ya* (the slim person fell on the breakable plate and it did not break, but fell on the mortar and the mortar broke). During data collection this saying/*oríkì* dominated participant's responses whenever they were asked to articulate Yorùbá thought relating to body sizes. The literal meaning of this popular saying is quite clear, but counter-intuitive. A person whose fall did not break a breakable plate cannot be expected to break a mortar simply by falling on it. This thought is more like a jest, or something said to make the slim person feel powerful. This is quite significant, considering its large contribution to the notion that body sizes are neutrally represented in Yorùbá oral resources.

Apart from this recurring thought, there are many other proverbs which out rightly approves of small body size. For instance, *ẹran gbígbe kii sè din* (dried meat does not grow maggot); *ẹja gbígbe e tà din* (dried fish does not breed maggot). The thesis of this thought is simply that the slim enjoys better health, at least when compared with the fat. This singular thought is a reason to show that Yorùbá understands the health implication of large body size. Yet, another proverb or saying excused the slim from poor nutrition as the basis for his or her slimness: *a i jeun kánú olóngbò kọ ní ó jọ tá'já* (that the cat is not well fed is not why it is not as big as dog).

Meanwhile, Yorùbá proverbs and sayings have also been found to approve large body size. A saying reads that *ara sísan kì s'àrùn* (fatness is not illness). This proverb is a cause to take fatness for granted. Another proverb reads that *ará kì tóbi kí alára ma'le gbe* (body does not get big to a point that its owner will not be able to carry it). This proverb is also like a sign post telling people to grow as big as they could, since it holds that they will always be able to carry their body. It is a saying asserting that there will always be some way or some means to solve a problem. Other large body size applauding sayings include the following: *eni tó bá yọ kun ni kẹ gbó wó fún* (money should be given to the fellow with a protruding tummy). This saying, with the traditional assumption that large body size is associated with wealth, simply shows that money is safer with the largely sized. *Kọrọpọtọ bí ọkà* (plump like the python) is another saying showing honor to the fat person. A python is a very large snake. This saying, an *oríkì*, simply compares the size of the largely sized or the fat with that of a python. However, it is usually used in such a way that makes the fat person to feel important. Another saying reads that *obìnrín tó sanra ló y'ọkọ rẹ lojọ ìrìn àjò* (the fat woman befits her husband when he is going on a journey). This saying imply that such largely sized or fat women will reflect the care provided by the husband, so, it will be more gratifying to travel along with such a wife.

On the whole, a review of Yorùbá sayings, proverbs and *oríkì* related to body sizes showed a glorification of large body size, but this does not necessarily result to humiliation of small body size. These oral resources largely eulogize large as well as small body sizes. Therefore, the body of traditional oral resources is out rightly non-aligning towards the large or the slim body size.

Conclusions

Yorùbá concepts reflect the attitude of positivity, neutrality and negativity towards large body size. *Ifá's* silence on body size is a reflection of its neutrality. Yorùbá proverbs, *oríkì*, sayings can be neutral or glorify large body size, while not humiliating small body size. Hence, Yorùbá oral traditional resources are mainly dispassionate towards body sizes.

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¹ Park (1988), Gareau (1988), Loubser (1988) and Sanda (1988) have unanimously expounded the need to expunge the domination of social sciences through universalism in the positivistic tradition. Park (1988: 163), while concentrating on emancipating sociology in particular, argued that the pursuance of universalism in sociology prevents the gathering of socially relevant knowledge, as people are denied "the sense of tradition, culture and community, and reduced to homogenized atoms accorded only abstract qualities recognized in the objective world of science". Park further asserted that this trend is probably harmless in the physical sciences whose subject matter is inanimate. Gareau (1988: 171-173) traced the history of social science and opined that it "bears a striking resemblance to the evolution of the international economic order". He thereafter advocated "strategies of domestication" — "an attempt to make what is foreign more relevant to local conditions and needs". Loubser (1988: 179-181) attempted a conceptual framework to aid organizations or groups who take it upon themselves to effect the enthronement of indigenization. Sanda (1988: 197) advanced the point that there is nothing immanently ethnocentric about focusing conceptual and empirical activities on one's society as effort directed at indigenization might even be viewed as ethnocentric itself. As long as "claims of universal applicability" are not made prior to testing in different social contexts. He further opined that "such an initial orientation toward particularism and indigenization in sociological theory is bound to be productive in both the short and long run. To do otherwise is to continue to revel under the yoke of discredited received theories, and to promote the interests — ideological, imperialistic or otherwise — of theoretical capitalists, whose logic and criteria of universalism in theory building are inseparable from their logical domination" (ibid).